

The Relationships between Socio-Cultural Attitudes towards Appearance Inherent in Media and Preoccupation with Body Shape among University Students

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Current study was an attempt to explore the underlying dynamics of eating disorders by measuring the relationships between an individual's preoccupation with body shape and attitudes towards socio-cultural ideals. It was hypothesized that socio-cultural dimensions of information, perceived pressure, general internalization and the internalization of athletic body would be associated with higher concern over one's body shape. A sample of 280 students (140 male, 140 female) was assessed using the Social Cultural Attitude Towards Appearance Questionnaire (SATAQ-3, Thompson, van den Berg, Roehrig, Guarda, & Heinberg, 2004), and Body Scale Questionnaire (BSQ, Cooper, Taylor, Cooper, & Fairburn, 1986). Statistical analysis reveals significant associations between socio-cultural dimensions of information, perceived pressure and general internalization. However, no significant relationship was found regarding the internalization of athletic body shape. These findings suggest that the socio-cultural attitudes towards appearance are associated with preoccupation with body shape.

Keywords: eating disorder, self-image, media, perceived pressure, social influence

Eating disorders are one of those conditions that are considered most distressing psychological disorders which have marked impairment in physical and psychosocial life (Davison & Neale, 2010). Anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa are two types of eating disorders. Anorexia nervosa involves a fear of being fat, refusal to eat and a distorted negative self-image amongst other symptoms and bulimia nervosa is a condition in which there are episodes of binge eating that is followed by compensatory actions to avert weight gain (for instance vomiting), and an obsessive attitude towards food and eating (Davison & Neale, 2010). Preoccupation or dissatisfaction is a cognitive-affect aspect of body image disturbance, which is one of the essential features of an eating disorder (Pook, Tuschen-Caffier, & Brähler, 2008).

The etiology of eating disorders is multi-factorial. There are a number of factors that are found to be playing some parts in the development and increase of eating disorders. A number of researches point towards socio-cultural factors as its etiology. According to social psychologists, there are primarily four theoretical dimensions which help explain the vulnerability to eating disorders. The cultivation theory (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 1994) posits that the degree of exposure of a person to the elements of media is directly proportional to the turning of these elements into a part of the person's reality. When media barrages an individual with images of a thin and perfect body, the individual will increasingly believe that particular body type is wanted and realistic to achieve, ultimately conforming to these unattainable ideals. The second socio-cultural dimension is explained by the uses and gratification theory, which proposes that although mass media has an effect, it is mediated by a woman's own body image worth (Hesse-Biber, 2005). This helps explain why not all women develop eating disorders. Thirdly comes the social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), that claims individuals compare themselves to others, these comparisons also involve eating habits and physical appearance (Morrison, Kalin & Morrison, 2004). As individuals compare themselves to unattainable standards of beauty, these comparisons cause negative self-perceptions about one's self which creates pressure to conform to idealized versions of beauty. Lastly, the objectification theory (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997) states that the propagation of a message through media regarding appearances causes a woman to objectify themselves and believe their success in their social, personal and professional lives depends on people's evaluation about their attractiveness. Collectively, psychologists have attempted to apply these theories by understanding the interaction of certain variables or factors, especially the influence of media and body dissatisfaction's on the symptomatology of eating disorders.

The presence of media is pervasive in everyday life, and it directly and indirectly influences the schemas, cognitions and beliefs from media sources such as movies, magazines, commercials, film stars and so on. This exposure inculcates societal norms and ideals in people, telling them how to behave, act and think like, especially on matters concerning physical appearance. This influence can be highly negative on self-perceptions. For instance, Irving (1990) conducted an experimental study on 167 women with bulimic symptoms by showing them slides of thin, average and over-sized models and then measuring its impact on their self-evaluations. Results showed that in spite of the levels of bulimic symptoms, exposure to thin models negatively affected their self-evaluations.

However, what is crucial in this aspect is the degree to which individuals compare themselves with the media models. And this affects the extent to which their cognitions and

behaviors are influenced by the media. According to the Social scientists this ‘thin-ideal internalization’ is the degree to which a person cognitively accepts socially defined attributes of attractiveness and involve into behaviours to attain them (Thompson, van den Berg, Roehrig, Guarda, & Heinberg, 2004). This results in body dissatisfaction which is when one has negative thoughts and feelings about their body, such as believing parts of their body are not thin enough.

The interaction between these factors, i.e. (pressures to be thin, thin-ideal internalization and body dissatisfaction) become risk factors for developing pathology and there is mounting evidence for it in numerous longitudinal, prospective and experimental studies (Thompson & Stice, 2001).

Eating disorders is primarily supposed to be a Western phenomenon, one which is uncommon in other Non-Western cultures. In fact, a study conducted in Pakistan in 2008 reported to have found only one published case report of Anorexia nervosa in Pakistan (Imran & Ashraf, 2008). Whether eating disorders go unreported or are presented in a lesser degree, they do not match the clinical classification; the cause for the lack of prevalence rates may be many. However, it cannot be doubted or denied that adolescents and young adults in Pakistani culture constantly encounter body image issues and engage in risky and unhealthy eating behaviors. For example, a study conducted in seven private universities across Karachi, one of the most populous cities in Pakistan, showed that 54.45% of males and females had a negative score of body image satisfaction (Khan, Khalid, Khan, & Jabeen, 2011). It is likely that eating disorders may not be present clinically, but the dynamics underlying them are present and may be having a silent detrimental influence.

Thus, in the current study, it is aimed to investigate the relationship between socio-cultural influences and preoccupation with body shape among university students. The following hypothesis was generated: sociocultural attitudes, which were broken into four categories; information, perceived pressure, internalization-General and internalization-Athlete will be correlated with preoccupation with body shape.

Method

Participants

A convenient sample of two hundred and eighty students (N = 280, males 140, females 140) from different departments of the University of Karachi was obtained. The mean age of the sample was 21.48 years (SD = 1.939) with the age range being 18 to 24 years.

Measures

Socio-Cultural Attitudes towards Appearance Scale-3 (SATAQ-3). This scale measures the media related socio-cultural attitudes towards appearance. To measure the multiple factors of societal influence, participants completed the 30 item research scale (SATAQ-3, Thompson, van den Berg, Roehrig, Guarda, & Heinberg, 2004). Excellent convergent validity with measures of body image and eating disturbance are reported by Thompson, van den Berg, Roehrig, Guarda, and Heinberg (2004). The five-point Likert scale has four sub-scales which pertain to different dimensions of media influence

Internalization-general: Internalization general is the extent to which general media messages presented to people are internalized and include items such as “I would like my body to look like the people who are on TV”, “I compare my appearance to the appearance of TV and movie stars” etc

Internalization-athletic: Internalization-athletic measures the extent messages present in media related to a clear athletic body are internalized and include items such as “I wish I looked as athletic as the people in magazines”, “I compare my body to that of people in “good shape” etc.

Perceived pressure: It measures the degree to which the participant feels inclined to conform to the idealistic media images and includes items such as “I’ve felt pressure from TV or magazines to lose weight” and “I’ve felt pressure from TV and magazines to be thin”

Information: It measures how participants perceive the media as an important source of information regarding appearance, and include items such as “TV programs are an important source of information about fashion and “being attractive”, and “Movies stars an important source of information about fashion and “being attractive” etc.

Body Scale Questionnaire-BSQ 8. The Body Scale Questionnaire (BSQ-8, Cooper, Taylor, Cooper & Fairburn, 1986) is an 8 item self-report scale that is utilized to measure one’s concern about body weight and shape. It asks participants to report on a six point continuum from never to always on items such as “Have you been so worried about your shape that you have been feeling you ought to diet?” etc. Study by Pook, Tuschen-Caffier and Brähler (2008) report excellent internal consistency of the scale and reliability of the scale.

Procedure

After the consent, each participant completed the research scale with 2 psychometric scales examining their socio-cultural attitudes towards appearance and preoccupation with body shape. Test instructions were given and participants worked at their own pace. The participants took approximately 20 minutes to complete all the scales.

Results

The scored data was tabulated and Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was utilized to calculate the inferential (Pearson Product Moment Correlation) and the descriptive statistics for this research.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics

	Min	Max	M	SD
Preoccupation with body shape	8	44	16.99	7.585
Information	5	49	29.49	6.633
Perceived pressure	7	36	17.59	5.505
Internalization-General	8	42	23.14	6.632
Internalization-Athlete	5	25	14.13	4.480

N=280

Table 2

Correlations between Information, Perceived Pressure and Internalization-General and Internalization-Athlete with Preoccupation with Body Shape

	Preoccupation with body shape	P
Information	.133	.026*
Perceived pressure	.247	.000**
Internalization-General	.196	.001**
Internalization-Athlete	.107	.074

*P< .05, ** P<.01

Table 2 indicates significant relationship between all variables except preoccupation with body with internalization of athletic ideals. Table 2 shows a summary of all data calculated. Furthermore, a higher preoccupation with body shape correlated with an internalization of information and gave a weak but significant correlation of $r = .133$, $p < .026$. Similarly, a significant but small relationship was found between perceived pressure ($r = .247$, $p < .000$) and internalization-general ($r = .196$, $p < .001$). In other words, participants who had a greater tendency to be over-concerned about their weight also tended to feel greater pressure to internalize socio-cultural influences and internalized information regarding appearances, weight, thinness portrayed in the media. However, no significant relationship was found between preoccupation with body shape and internalization of athletic ideals with a p value being higher than .05 ($r = .107$, $p > .074$).

Discussion

The present study was an attempt to investigate the relationship between socio-cultural influences with preoccupation with body shape. Results show significant, albeit small relationships amongst the variables.

This finding is in congruence with the plethora of researches done on eating disorders, especially supporting the concept that the internalization of the thin-ideal is correlated with negative affect, dieting, and increases in body dissatisfaction (Stice, 2001). The internalization of the Thin-ideal is also correlated with the commencement of binge eating and bulimic symptoms (Stice & Agras, 1998). It is also correlated with the rise of the symptoms of eating disorder (Wichstrom, 2000), as well as the maintenance of the symptom of bulimia (Stice & Agras, 1998).

Stice (2001) explains the relationship and inter-linkage between these risk factors quite effectively. According to this model (The dual pathway model) the internalization of the thin ideal promoted to women contributes to body dissatisfaction as this body prototype is almost unattainable. Moreover, other factors like, pressure to be thin by family, peers and media elevates the element of body dissatisfaction because recurring messages that one is ideally thin, will increase dissatisfaction with one's own body. As a result, body dissatisfaction leads to dieting and negative effect, which may theoretically pave way to eating disorders (Stice, 2001).

The etiology of eating disorders has a multi-framework approach, with a variety of biological, psychological and socio-cultural factors being involved. There is no one reason which is large enough to account for the disorder (Stice, 2002). Current study indicates that media's perception as a vital source of information concerning appearance is correlated with preoccupation with body shape. This finding is in consonance with the previous conclusions of researches (for instance the study by Harrison & Cantor, 1997). This finding has serious

implications as media has become an essential part of the everyday life. Even the content of entertainment material is filled with information. And current study indicates that this information is affecting the attitudes pertaining to the body shape.

The feeling of inclination to conform to the idealistic images presented in media (i.e. perceived pressure) and Internalized media messages, were also found to be significantly correlated with preoccupation with body shape. It implies that the ideal bodies presented in media images are associated with an obsession with body shape. The entertainment media is full of actors/actresses that attempt to carry an ideal body. To attain this prototype body, models/actors opt for cosmetic surgeries and other body modification techniques. In the statistics issued by the American Society of Plastic Surgeons (2013) it is reported that only in USA 290,000 people went through breast augmentation surgery, 221,000 people opted for nose reshaping, 216,000 people opted for eyelid surgery, 200,000 went through liposuction and 133,000 people opted for facelift surgery. According to this report, there was an overall 3% increase in year 2013 when compared with 2012. Although no similar compiled statistics are available in context of Pakistan, but an increase with preoccupation with an ideal body/face is now a common experience. Although body modification through surgical procedures is a different phenomenon from eating disorders, it can be speculated that continuous exposure to media images that present ideal bodies might be creating a sense of dissatisfaction with body and a pressure to conform to the urge to attain a similar body. As individuals have a tendency to compare their eating habits and physical appearance with others (Morrison, Kalin, & Morrison, 2004) media becomes a continuous source of comparison. Eating disorders are one of the ways in which people experience this urge to conform to an ideal body in order to decrease the anxiety of not being according to the perceived ideal.

One variable which did not have a significant relationship with body image was the internalization of athletic ideals. This may be due to numerous reasons. Firstly, there is a dearth of athletes in Pakistan, which may be the cause there are no role models to compare themselves too. This can be viewed in the construct of the exposure theory, which states that a greater amount of exposure leads to greater internalization. In Pakistan only, cricket is left as a sport for masses. All other sports (that were once very applauded by masses) like hockey, tennis and squash have lost their attraction for masses. The sports that are famous in Pakistan are not those which require a muscular body like rugby, or football etc. So it can be speculated that the exposure to the prevalent sports in Pakistan does not induce any specific body ideal in the viewer.

This study also points out that although eating disorders may not be clinically significant, the phenomena is nevertheless present which could have a severe effect on the mental health of individuals. Body image issues could lead to depression, unhealthy eating habits, self-esteem, and the well-being of individuals. Mental health professionals, parents, the government, media institutions and all relevant stakeholders must take measures to inculcate a healthy value and belief system in society.

Conclusion

The relationship between socio-cultural attitudes towards appearance (i.e. information, pressure and internalization both general and related to an athletic body) and preoccupation with body shape were studied in this research. Information, pressure and general internalization were found correlated with preoccupation with body shape. This study

has implications pertaining to the growing phenomena of eating disorders and other forms of manifestations of dissatisfaction with body.

Limitations

The present study has some limitations which must be considered before generalizing the results. First, we didn't screen the sample for a diagnosis of any eating disorder and we might have eating disorder cases in our sample. Secondly, data has been collected from one University's students and our finding could only be relevant for this specific population.

Implications

Current study is an initial attempt to explore about the important phenomena of socio-cultural attitudes towards appearance inherent in media and preoccupation with body shape, in Pakistan. The results indicate that information, perceived pressure and general internalization are associated with preoccupation with body shape. These findings have implications for primary prevention of disorders that are caused by the preoccupation with body shape (i.e. eating disorders) and also these findings have implications for clinical psychologists who treat people suffering from these disorders, as they can make better strategies to deal with their client keeping in mind the socio-cultural influences inherent in media also.

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