The Effect of Media Images on Caribbean and Canadian Women's Body Satisfaction

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This study examines the effect of exposure to female media images on the body satisfaction of women of either Canadian or Caribbean nationality. The purpose of this study is to determine if there is a significant cultural difference in the way the two groups of women judge their own body satisfaction after being exposed to either very thin or voluptuous female images from the media. The hypothesis of this study is that Canadian women will show the highest level of body dissatisfaction after being exposed to the thin media images. The thirty-two female participants were randomly chosen from the Caribbean Student's Organization at the University of Western Ontario and from around the University and affiliated colleges for the Canadian participants. The participants' ages ranged from eighteen to twenty-five years. Each participant was given one of two sets of images of females and asked to study the images carefully and then asked to rate their body satisfaction immediately afterwards using a modified version of the Body Shape Satisfaction Scale. The results of the study did not support the hypothesis and there was no significant difference between the Canadian and Caribbean women on body satisfaction ratings.

In this day and age the media has become a very difficult thing to ignore. The bombardment of images, ads and ideals have become a part of everyday life whether driving in your car or checking out at a grocery store. Although many people try not to give in to this pop culture craze, many do. A large part of this culture has much to do with the ideal human body. There are constant headlines detailing how to get more beautiful or shed pounds and look your best in the least amount of time, accompanied, of course, by the rail thin cover model in a bikini. It is quite understandable to assume that this ideal woman sets a new universal standard for women to conform to. It has been shown that this may be the case.

A recent study done by Hawkins, Richards Granley and Stein in 2004 examined the effect of exposure of thin-ideal female images on women's affect, self-esteem, body
dissatisfaction, eating disorder symptoms and the level of internalization of the thin ideal. In this study women were either exposed to magazines containing thin-ideal women or exposed to neutral images of ads from the same magazines including cars, jewelry or perfume. The neutral control group did not include any images that contained humans or any diet and weight-loss advertisements so that there could be no reference to the body and evoke any feelings about the participant’s own satisfaction. The results of this study showed that the females who were assigned to the magazine with the thin-ideal models displayed an increase in body dissatisfaction, negative mood state and eating disorder symptoms as well as a decrease in self-esteem (Hawkins, Richards, Granley & Stein, 2004). Overall the exposure to the thin-ideal images had a very negative effect on the women and they also reported higher levels of eating disorder symptoms.

Another study that highlights the effect of media images on body satisfaction is that done by Van den Berg, Paxton, Keery, Wall, Guo and Neumark-Sztainer in 2005. This study examined media body comparison and its function in sociocultural and psychological pressures to be thin (Van den Berg et al., 2005). The participants were both male and female but at the end of the study there was no significance between body dissatisfaction and media body comparison in males. There were no images presented in this study, but instead participants were asked to complete a modified version of the Body Shape Satisfaction Scale (Pingitore, Spring & Garfield, 1997), the Sociocultural Attitudes Toward Appearance Questionnaire-III (Thompson, van der Berg, Roehrig, Guarda, and Heinberg, 2004) a shortened version of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory (Rosenberg, 1965) and the Depressive Mood Scale (Kandel & Davies, 1982). It was found that there was a significant effect between media body comparison and
body dissatisfaction. It was reported that media exposure (magazines), self-esteem and depressive mood had a direct effect on media body comparison, and thus body dissatisfaction (van den Berg et al., 2005).

The present study aims to borrow the ideas from the past studies mentioned and modify them into a cross-cultural study between Canadian and Caribbean women. The Caribbean culture puts a lot of emphasis on special cultural events such as ‘Batabano’ in the Cayman Islands, which includes a festive parade with a lot of dancing and Caribbean food stalls lining the streets. During festivals such as this and many others around the Caribbean Islands it is truly evident about what the culture values about its women. Women in the Caribbean are celebrated for their voluptuous bodies. This type of body is seen as a signature of health and fertility and is looked upon favourably by Caribbean women and men alike. The ‘curvy’ body is praised in Caribbean songs and especially accentuated in the sensual style of dancing. In this way there is a vast difference between the Canadian and Caribbean culture as a whole.

The purpose of this study is to determine if the cultural differences between Canadian and Caribbean women will have an impact on their body satisfaction when exposed to media images of thin and curvy women. It is proposed that the Canadian women will show greater body dissatisfaction after being exposed to the thin females images than the Caribbean women.
Method

Participants

The participants for this study were randomly chosen from the Caribbean Student's Organization (at the University) and in and around the University of Western Ontario and affiliated colleges. There were 32 female participants altogether and they were between 18 and 25 years of age. It was also required that the participants be Canadian or Caribbean born in order to take part in the study.

Materials

A modified version of the Body Shape Satisfaction Scale (Pingitore et al., 1997) was used for measuring the body satisfaction of each participant. The items were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from (1) Very Satisfied, (3) Indifferent and (5) Very Dissatisfied. Higher scores therefore were indicative of greater body dissatisfaction (van den Berg et al., 2005). The original scale included body aspects that could be applied to males as well as females and were therefore excluded and replaced by body aspects that were more suitably applicable to females such as ‘bust’ and ‘buttocks.’ Cronbach’s alpha for the original scale was .92 for females. There were also female images used which were obtained from Google image searches on the internet. One page included four black and white images of very thin female bodies in swimwear and the other page included four black and white images of voluptuous female bodies in swimwear. All of the images were cropped to not include the head of the female in order for the participant to not be distracted by, or judge the image according to anything other than the body. The images were printed in black and white to avoid drawing attention to any colour (clothing) or skin colour of the participants.
Procedure

The participants were randomly selected and approached around the University of Western Ontario, primarily in the University Community Centre. They were first asked kindly if they would care to take part in a study, and upon agreeing, were given the letter of information detailing the information about the study. The participant was asked to sign a consent form stating that they had given permission for their information to be used in the study and reminded that all information would be strictly confidential. After the participant had signed the consent form she was given a page of images to look at for approximately 3-5 minutes. The participant was either given a sheet with thin female images or voluptuous female images. The modified version of the Body Shape Satisfaction Scale was then given to the participant to complete. Once finished, the participant was given a debriefing statement which informed them of the present study which they had just taken part in and gave references to related studies.

Results

The scores of the Body Shape Satisfaction Scale were calculated a 2 x 2 ANOVA. There were eight participants in each cell and the highest group mean was obtained by the Canadian/Thin Image group, (M= 27.50) which can be seen in Figure 1. The critical value (F(1,28)= 7.7) was not exceeded and there was no significance between the rows (F(1,28)= .80, p < .01), columns (F(1,28)= .50, p < .01) or in the interaction (F(1,28)= .0002, p < .01).
Figure 1. Represents the group means for Body Shape Satisfaction Scores. 1.) Voluptuous Female Images, 2.) Thin Female Images
Discussion

The results of the $2 \times 2$ ANOVA indicated that there was no significant effect between Canadian and Caribbean women's body satisfaction after being shown images from the media. Although Canadian women did show a higher level of dissatisfaction after being exposed to the thin images than any other group it was not a significant enough difference in any of the groups. These results do not support the previous research but this may be due to quite a few differences in the way in which the present study was conducted.

Whereas the previous study looked only at females as a group in itself the present study aimed to examine cultural groups among females. There are several confounds within the present study which may have impacted the results. The first of which is the sample of participants that were chosen. Although the Caribbean participants were all born in the Caribbean many of them have likely been in Canada for many years for their tertiary education and many, of whom, may have experienced a lot of acculturation since leaving their home. Some of the Caribbean participants were born in the Caribbean and but moved to Canada in their childhood. This lessens the actual difference between the two cultural groups and may have affected the results.

The images used in the present study also may not have been sufficient in evoking any body dissatisfaction because there were only four and most of the participants spent very little time looking at them. To truly examine the effects of the images on body satisfaction the participants should have been exposed to many images and given ample time to look at all of them. Some women are very dissatisfied with their bodies without having seen images immediately before. To get a better understanding of what types women are dissatisfied, there should also have been a Body
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Mass Index (BMI) measure that each of the women had to complete. The modified version of the Body Shape Satisfaction Scale (Pingitore et al., 1997) was a valid measure but there could have been other tests that could have accompanied it such as the Sociocultural Attitudes Toward Appearance Questionnaire-III (Thompson et al., 2004) in order to examine other sources of body dissatisfaction.

It would definitely be interesting to see the cultural effects of body satisfaction with exposure to the media done again, but with more measures (questionnaires and scales) and more variable control. A much larger sample would be most advisable and careful screening and criterion for participants should be put in place.
References


APPENDIX A

The female Images of Thin Women
The Female Images of Voluptuous Women
APPENDIX B

This is the modified version of the Body Shape Satisfaction Scale (Pingitore et al., 1997).

Body Satisfaction Questionnaire

Please rate the following aspects of your body honestly and to the best of your ability. You can choose on a scale from 1 to 5 with (1) being “very satisfied”, (3) being “Indifferent” and (5) being “very dissatisfied.” Please choose your response by circling the number corresponding to your answer.

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