

Unfiltered: The Effect of Media on Body Image Dissatisfaction

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Abstract—With the onslaught of marketing and media – especially now being widely available and seen to youth, the idea of what is an ideal body type is widely being reported. With youth already facing many challenges of trying to understand and come to terms with the new online world, youth are taking often dangerous measures to fit a prototype. The focus of this study examines young dancers to determine the methods by which they form their idea about body image. As shown by the results, these children face significant challenges and often utilize unsafe health practices. This study examines and identifies potential issues and steps to build resiliency among children.

Index Terms—Body image, eating disorders, child health issues, social media.

I. INTRODUCTION

It is undeniable that in recent decades the number of messages related to body image in the media has increased considerably. This mediatization of the body illustrates the prevailing social stereotypes that dictate and strengthen the standards by which an individual can catalog a body as desirable or not.

One of the most important consequences - as well as one of the most dangerous effects - of the media on body image is that social success is directly linked to the body image that the person possesses. Television, magazines and social media strive to present idealized characters, thus promoting an unattainable epitome of beauty. The canon of beauty is the set of those characteristics that a society considers conventionally attractive or desirable.

The saturation of images representing “perfect beauty” is spread all over the world everyday across multiple channels. It invades other cultures and their perception, where more than products, a feeling of inadequacy and insecurity is sold. The anxiety caused by even skin tone and body shapes that abound in ads in the streets, magazines, on television, in movies and any platform where companies advertise, has become standard. It is difficult to combat stereotypes that govern a society, as these are portrayed as necessary for social survival.

It has becoming easier for individuals to access the tools that may allow them to shorten the discrepancy between themselves and the glorified beauty ideal. Health has taken a secondary role in society as individuals are conditioned to focus on outward appearance rather than in their own

well-being.

What may commence with photo retouching, flash diets, and even cosmetic surgeries, may lead to all forms of diseases, eating disorders and even death.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Society is an ever changing entity. The media is a catalyst that influences society’ way of acting, thinking, lifestyles, customs, consumption, and opinions. With constant exposure, these factors are slowly internalized and thought of as need. The media has constructed idealized portrayals of beauty that have led people to believe they can attain an appearance that is not natural but constructed. This beauty ambition is unreachable and thus, will lead to several health and mental complications such as low self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, anorexia, and unhappiness regardless of the individual’s actual physical state.

A. Self Esteem

Self-esteem is recognized as an indicator of personal development founded in valuation, positive, negative or neutral, that each person makes of their cognitive, physical and psychological features. This assessment is built on the basis of the opinion that each person has about themselves, from the attributes that these individuals grant to the the aforementioned characteristics. This self perception is confirmed from each individual’s perception of how and how much they are valued by those around them and particularly anyone who is relevant to them in their daily lives [1].

Armstrong, Phillips and Salin (2000) [2], who investigated if low self-esteem was related to the increased social media interaction, reported that there is a correlation between an individual’s negative self assessments and the time they invested online. However, they stated that even if the relationship is unclear, malusing the web leads people to isolate themselves and then not have the same ability to socialize offline. For these individuals, constant social media usage, between 3 to 5 daily hours, becomes part of a vicious cycle. People that have a low opinion of themselves, more often than not, find it difficult to socialize face-to-face because they experience shyness and feelings of inaptitude due to lack of self-esteem. As offline socialization seems far too intimidating, they turn towards the Internet as an alternate socialization milieu, as it may can be used to portray their better self in the form of an idealized online persona which will lead to a gain in confidence without the need for in-person interactions [3]. However, research associates constant exposure to social media with higher levels of body dissatisfaction, eating disorders and beauty ideals internalization. Tiggemann (2003) [4] concluded that

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knowledge of unrealistic sociocultural ideals can be correlated to lower self-esteem.

B. Body Image

Body image was described as the image forming our mind of our own body, that is, the way our own body appears to us [5]. This is the first definition that does not focus solely to neurological criteria. Personal body image may be negative or positive. It will be positive when the individual has a properly integrated body scheme, and thus will be comfortable and content with their appearance. On the other hand, body image will be negative when the person does not feel satisfied with his or her own physique. Several authors [6] [7], recognize that body image is constituted at least by two components: a perceptive one that refers to the estimation of one's appearance, and an attitudinal one which includes feelings and attitudes toward the own body.

Young people are part of the most vulnerable population to fall into that corporal overdetermination as a result of a somatic culture. The physical and psychological changes that occur in adolescence make them subjects of constant pressure, both from the media and advertising, as well as their immediate surroundings [8]. The formation of self-image is a dynamic process, in which alteration of one factor can change the others. Throughout life, this image may change towards greater acceptance or, on the contrary, to partial or complete rejection. The factors affecting the valuation of body image can be categorized into three levels: social, interpersonal and individual. The social factor, is configured mainly by the media and advertising, as these have a leading role in continuously imposing and depicting an aesthetic ideal, through the use of characters and models that meet the expectations of certain canon of physical beauty.

The discrepancy between the valuation on the body and the physical attractiveness influences the low self-esteem and thus a negative self-image. The mass media of communication offer body images that encourage behaviors that can trigger eating disorders or somatic distortions in vulnerable populations as desired and idealized body styles go hand in hand with advertising and fashion. Various studies such as Mukai, Kambara and Sasaki (1998) [9] show that the media images may be particularly important in the production of changes in the way we perceive and evaluate the body as well as psychological disorders resulting from these influences. They believe this may have resulted from the heightened usage of models portraying the epitome female beauty ideal. The increased prevalence of these idealized images coerced viewers to warp their self-concept of attractiveness giving rise to negative self-comparisons.

The interpersonal level reflects sensitivity to the praise or criticism of others on the body. it influences body image greatly [10]. All Social Media Platforms measure, to some extent, an individual's level of popularity with their online community. Whether it is by tweets, likes, comments, or shares, social media can either boost self-esteem or diminish it. However, sociocultural ideals presented in these online platforms, are influential only if they are internalized. The acceptance of sociocultural ideals of attractiveness is largely due to media's ability to spread idealized body standards. Thus, it can be concluded that increased media consumption leads to increased internalization [11].

At the individual level, self-esteem is the core; this assessment made of one's physical attractiveness is influenced by the interactions that are maintained with others. The degree of self-esteem will also depend on the degree of dissatisfaction with the body itself.

C. Social Comparison Theory

In Festinger's book of Social Comparison Processes (1954) [12], he illustrates that humans are believed to possess an innate drive to compare themselves with other individuals. This social assessment serves a variety of purposes such as self-evaluation, making behavioral decisions based on their social environment [13], and modifying cognitions in order to enhance self-esteem [14]. We compare ourselves in order to favor ourselves; by comparing with people who have not performed well we define ourselves as better by contrast.

Traditionally two directions in social comparison can be distinguished: upwards and downwards. The direction of upwards or ascending social comparison occurs when other individuals who are in better circumstances, have fewer problems, or behave better than oneself. On the other hand, downward comparison occurs when the individuals used for comparison are in worse circumstances, have more problems, or behave worse than oneself. This contrast effect can have two effects. If the comparison is upwards it triggers negative emotions, such as envy, dissatisfaction, or frustration; if the comparison is downwards, then positive emotions, such as relief or satisfaction, are expected to sprout.

Notwithstanding, comparison may also have an opposite effect: identification. In the case of upward social comparison, it may be accompanied by positive emotions such as optimism or inspiration;. Likewise, with downwards comparison, it may coincide with negative emotions such as fear and anguish [15], [16].

Even though upward comparison can be advantageous when it is a medium to motivate a person to become like their comparison targets [17], more often than not it causes people to feel lacking. This sense of inadequacy leads to poorer self-evaluations [18], [19].

Social comparisons used to gyrate around face-to-face interactions. However, in this digital age, people are foregoing personal intercommunication for social media platforms. This conversion has been followed by a shift about the information individuals receive in a daily basis. Social Networking Platforms (SNP) create a stage for careful self-presentation. SNP allow Individuals to be very selective with the content they post, whether it is pictures or descriptions, thus presenting themselves in an ideal light [20]. The creation of these strategically idyllic online personas has lead individuals to believe that others are more fortunate and overall more successful than themselves [21]. This phenomenon has led people to compare their real offline life to the idealized online version of others. The aforementioned behavior is extremely harmful to these individuals' well-being and self-appreciation [22], [23].

D. Cognitive Dissonance Theory

This theory was developed by Festinger (1957) [24] and has as a main concept that the existence of cognitions that are not coherent within themselves producing a psychological state of inconsistency that is highly uncomfortable and that the person will strive to alleviate by altering their attitudes,

beliefs or behaviors order to avoid dissonance. Dissonance is a component of physiological arousal that causes unpleasant sensations motivates change to find consistency or dissonance reduction . The choice between two feasible but mutually exclusive alternatives is one of the situations in which dissonance appears.

The motivation to reduce dissonance depends directly on the degree or intensity with which it manifests. The greater the experience of psychological concern , the greater the interest in restoring balance . Once the subject is decided that a particular conduct is dissonant its corresponding attitude , there are 3 main ways to reduce dissonance. The first one is to change one element so as to be more consistent with each other. Behavioral elements are rarely changed; the simplest to change is the cognitive element. The second one is to change the importance of the elements; the ones that are most important to consider in order to support a chosen behavior. The third one is to simply add new cognitive elements consonant with a given behavior.

E. Attribution Theory

In his 1958 book " The Psychology of Interpersonal Relationships [25]," Fritz Heider says that all behavior will be determined by internal or external factors . This theory can be used to assess how people perceive the behavior of self and others. This refers to how people generate causal explanations. There are two main factors that behind individual's different explanations: External and internal attributions.

External Attribution (situational): causality is assigned to a factor , an agent or an external force . External factors go out of control. Individuals perceive they have no choice . Consequently, their behavior is influenced , limited or even completely determined by influences outside their control. Therefore, people feel like they are not responsible for their own behavior.

Internal Attribution (dispositional): causality is assigned to a factor, an agent or an inner strength. The internal factors fall within the realm of their own control. Individuals can then choose to behave in a particular way or not . Their behavior is not influenced, limited or completely, by factors outside of their control. Therefore, they feel responsible for their own behaviours.

This is relevant because individuals believe that they can explain everything. People are predisposed to judge who or what is responsible for an event or action. Furthermore, they tend to attribute the successes of others and their own failures to external factors. Moreover, people tend to attribute their own successes and the failures of others as a result of internal factors.

III. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The idealized beauty portrayals depicted in the media negatively affect individual's self-perception and self-esteem.

This induced body pathology has led these individuals to see themselves as unattractive and lacking which has been the root to poor self-esteem. Consequently, this acted as a catalyst for these individuals to take part in unhealthy behaviours in order to diminish the disparity between

themselves and the unrealistic images.

In order to mend this matter, people need to be aware that the images represented in the media are not to be taken as a realistic model as they have been altered to appear as they do in the final product.

IV. METHODS

A. Participants

Participants in the current study were 175 children and adolescent females between the ages of 9 and 16 ($M = 14.22$, $SD = 1.93$). Almost all participants were Caucasian ($n = 153$, 87.4%). Smaller numbers of Hispanics ($n = 13$, 7.43%) and other ethnicities ($n = 9$, 5.14%). The Caucasian majority is simply reflective of the community where the Dance Academy is located; the subjects were not recruited deliberately.

B. Major Constructs and Measures

In order to answer our objectives put forth in this study, the following major constructs and measures were utilized in our data collection.

C. Body Mass Index

Subjects were asked to report on their height and weight in order to calculate body mass index (BMI). The formula used was $(\text{weigh in lbs} \times 703) / (\text{height in inches}^2)$. Consequently subjects were separated in four different categories according to their body mass index: Underweight, Normal, Overweight and Obese)

D. Advertisements

Two different videos were used. Both were put onto a DVD for the participants to watch and lasted approximately 8 minutes each. The first one, watched by the experimental group, was an excerpt of the Victoria's Secret Fashion Show, which focus idealized female models and referred to them as "The Perfect Body". The second one, watched by the control group, was a compilation of 3 Dove's advertisement: Dove's True Colors, Dove Selfie and Dove Real Beauty Sketches which are part of Dove's real Beauty Campaign [26].

E. Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM)

Gibbons and Buunk's developed a 11-item measure in 1999 [27] that was created in order to determine the level of social comparison for each participant. Participants were asked their level of agreement with statements such as " I often compare myself with others with respect to what I have accomplished in life." A 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (I disagree strongly) to 5 (I agree strongly) was used. The higher the score, the higher the level of social comparison.

F. State Self-esteem Scale (SSS)

This is a 20-item scale developed in 1991 [28] in order to measure a participant's self-esteem at a given point in time. These 20 items are further subdivided into 3 components of self-esteem: performance self-esteem, social self-esteem, and appearance self-esteem. Subjects answered using a 5-point scale (1= not at all, 2= a little bit, 3= somewhat, 4= very much, 5= extremely). The higher the score, the lower the self-esteem level.

G. Sociocultural Attitudes towards Appearance Questionnaire (SATAQ)

This is a revision of two previous scales [29][30]. This questionnaire is meant to assess internalization (general, athlete), pressures, and information. Subjects were asked to answer 22 questions designed to measure the societal and interpersonal aspects of appearance ideal [31]. Subjects answered using a Likert 5-point scale (1= definitely disagree, 2= mostly disagree, 3= neither agree nor disagree, 4= mostly agree, 5= definitely agree).

H. The Body Shape Preference Test

This test was developed by Stunkard, Sorenson and Shulsinger in 1983 [32]. This self-report test consists of nine drawings that originally depict varying body types of men and women; however, due to the subjects of this particular experiment only the female drawings were utilized. The body types had a number underneath each; the body types ranged between 1 which represents “very thin”, to 9 which refers to “very obese”. Additionally, in order to determine whether the subject had a negative, positive or neutral body image at the time the test was taken, three questions were stated below the figures. (Annex D)

I. Final Interview

The following three questions were asked at the end of the experiment: “How happy are you with yourself at this moment?”, “Do you consider yourself a healthy person?”, “Do you believe thin people are happier in general and why?”

V. RESULTS

The mean age of the experimental group was 13 years old and that of the control group was 11 years old. There were 88 participants in the first group and 88 in the second one.

The first hypothesis states that temporary exposure to body related media leads to social comparison thus negatively affecting self-esteem and self-perception. The goal was to provide experimental evidence, through a correlational approach, that media exposure is likely to prime subjects to perceive and compare their reality with the idealized images depicted in advertisements.

As it can be seen in Table I, the control group had a lower mean for both the INCOM and SSS scores. Thus, the subjects that watched the Victoria’s Secret advertisement, the experimental group, exhibit higher levels of upward social comparison and lower self esteem. The fact that the young girls that had a score that was significantly higher in comparison to that of their control group peers brandishes the immediate influence level certain types of media have on its viewers.

TABLE I: SCORES FOR THE IOWA-NETHERLANDS COMPARISON ORIENTATION MEASURE AND THE STATE SELF-ESTEEM SCALE FOR THE CONTROL AND EXPERIMENTAL GROUPS

| | Control (N=87) | | Experimental (N=88) | |
|-------|----------------|------|---------------------|------|
| | Mean | SD | Mean | SD |
| INCOM | 35 | 1.96 | 44 | 1.22 |
| SSS | 69 | 2.1 | 82 | 1.91 |

For many individuals, especially young women the saturation of idealized images of beauty with all its aura of benefits and unconscious associations translates into a heavy pressure fragmenting individuals’ personality, causing dissatisfaction and insecurity due to a perennial discrepancy between how they look and how they want to look [33][34]. This discrepancy draws a gap often insurmountable, as the ideal to which they aspire is virtually unattainable - whether by genetic issues or because the same images used as inspiration are digitally altered or are part of a production and an environment that magnifies its aesthetic value.

There was a 50.0% difference in regards of the amount of young women belonging to the Experimental Group (n=34, 38.63%) who felt “Not at all attractive” in comparison with their Control group Peers (n=17, 19.54). Both groups responded similarly in the “I feel a little bit attractive” option; the percentages obtained were 37.50% (n=36) and 37.93 (n=33) for the Experimental and Control Group respectively. Only 17.05% of the subjects in the Experimental Group said that they felt “Somewhat attractive” (n=15) in comparison to 31.03% (n=27) respondents in the Control group. Under the “I feel very much attractive” category, the control group surpassed once more the experimental group with a 11.49% (n=10) over the latter’s 3.41% (n=3)

The second hypothesis states that the higher the subject’s BMI the lower their self-esteem will be. The average BMI of all the subjects was 17.13, which is considered as underweight in the BMI scale; the normal range being within 18.5 to 24.9 (See Annex E). 69.71% (n=22) participants were underweight and only 30.28% (n=53) were barely within the normal range.

The pressure exerted by regulatory models proposed by the media, can seriously affect particularly sensitive people at critical times in their development, creating the need to alter their image to reach a desired ideal of beauty [35][36]. There are certain groups that are at increased risk, such as adolescents and women, but the risk increases when body dissatisfaction converges determined criteria by unachievable thinness and competition with high levels of perfectionism and high pressure to reach rigid standards of beauty. The results shown in Figure 3 reflect a slight relationship between a lower BMI and greater self-esteem. Most subjects with BMIs in the 16 to 17 range (45.14%, n=79) scores reflected a have higher self-esteem (M=0.643) than those in the 18 to 19 range (36.00%, n=63; M= 0.782). However, a considerable amount of subjects with a BMI score between 16 and 17 had extremely low self-esteem with SSS scores between 0.75 and 0.94 (12.57%, n=22). Subjects with BMI values exceeding 19 (18.86%, n=33) were the group that had the lowest level of self-esteem.

When there is a large discrepancy between perceived self-image and the body ideal, there is a high probability that it will generate a high level of anxiety to the individual which will, more often than not, lead to the creation of a truly negative self-concept and a worrying depressive state. This particular condition can be aggravated if the ideal self-concept of the subject coincides with that of other significant individuals (ie. peers, parents, icons). The situation becomes truly untenable when the person sees himself or herself as the sole of this discrepancy. Therefore, there is great importance in the image that the person has of

himself or herself in the formation of a certain level of self-concept, but so is the value of that self-image, as this will modulate the level as well as the effects of the possible discrepancy between the that the individual wants to be, and what they currently are [37].

VI. CONCLUSION

The "beauty myth" is an ideal beauty that conveys an imperative imitation that spreads primarily in the media. The media not only seeks to communicate images that suggest what is beautiful, but also strongly dictates references of how an individual should look. These fabricated cultural expectations have created the deeply rooted illusion that it is possible to look like fabricated people shown on advertisements. Consequently, many people are not satisfied with their physical appearance and the beauty industry knows how to take advantage of these insecurities. Regardless of the variety of products or procedures people acquire or endure they are still unable to eliminate the disparity between the beauty depicted in the media and their own beauty. The reason for this heading discrepancy is that the beauty illustrated in the media is unattainable because it is not real. The consequences on the individuals' health can be dire, from negative self-evaluation, feelings of inadequacy, body dissatisfaction to depression, anxiety, and destructive addictive behaviours. These complications are all by cause of a hope that is simply not true.

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