

The Rise of Obesity in Young Women: Does the Media Have An Impact?

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Abstract

Previous studies have examined adolescent girls' body dissatisfaction in relation to ideals and media exposure (Tiggeman, 2006; Vandereycken, 2006; Grogan, Knott, et al., 1996; McCarthy, 1990). However, a newer and equally important issue may also be related to media exposure in the rise of obesity among women. Five focus groups were conducted, with a total of 31 participants ranging in age from 18-25, over the course of an academic year at a northeastern Liberal Arts College. The focus groups explored media exposure and its relationship to the rise of obesity in recent years. Participants in each of the five focus groups completed the Body Shape Questionnaire. Results indicated six consistent themes across all groups: media images, age of media influence, quick fixes, women and exercise images, lazier lifestyle and views of obesity. Directions for future research are discussed.

Introduction

The media has perpetuated a "thin" body ideal for women for the past several decades. The cultural ideal of thinness negatively impacts women's body image (Richins, 1991; McCarthy, 1990). Previous studies have examined adolescent girls' body dissatisfaction in relation to ideals and media exposure (Tiggeman, 2006; Vandereycken, 2006; Grogan, et al., 1996; McCarthy, 1990). Many of these studies have focused on dieting and weight loss as a negative outcome of the media ideal and girls' attempt to meet it.

While many women are attempting to meet the media ideal of thinness, there are also those women who are struggling with weight gain. Two-thirds of all adults in the U.S. are above normal weight, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2001). A recent Center for Disease Control and Prevention report indicates that obesity rates have risen over the past decade for women and have held steady over time, a trend that has not occurred previously for women (Study Snapshot, 2006).

The status of being overweight is defined by calculating Body Mass Index (BMI), or a calculation of the ratio of weight relative to height. The World Health Organization defines overweight as a BMI of over 25 kg (Obesity and overweight fact sheet, 2006). Obesity is defined as a BMI of over 30 kg. Obesity has been studied over the years, with specific interest in its health implications, such as heart disease, type II diabetes, musculoskeletal disorders, and some cancers (Obesity and overweight fact sheet). The risk for these health implications increases along with increases in BMI. Due to the significant health concerns associated with obesity, there has been interest in the medical community to determine etiology.

The cause of obesity has largely been focused on physical or behavioral concerns. One behavioral concern identified is healthy eating habits. A recent study by Neumark-Sztainer, Wall, et al (2006) has found that not only are adolescents dieting across gender and racial groups, but their method of dieting actually led to an increase in body mass index over five years. Their study found that adolescents using unhealthy techniques such as restricting and bingeing, combined with lack of physical activity experienced a rise in both obesity and disordered eating (Neumark-Sztainer, et al, 2006). Neumark-Sztainer, Story, et al (1999) also found that adolescents are not making healthy food choices today, in

part because there are too many unhealthy food choices available. Approximately 20% of Americans eat fast food every day (Nichter & Nichter, 1991). According to the Food and Drug Administration and National Institutes of Health, "A primary concern is consuming too much saturated fat and too few vegetables, fruits, and grain products that are high in vitamins and minerals, carbohydrates (starch and dietary fiber), and other substances that are important to good health" (FDA/NIH, 2007). The problems of diet and nutrition are impacting women at a very young age.

Another physical cause attributed to the rise of obesity is the decline in physical activity. In one study, it was found that 48% of adolescent girls in 12th grade report very low levels of physical activity (Miller, 2004). A decrease in physical activity among girls has been associated with an increase in body mass index over time (Kettaneh, Oppert, et al, 2005). Similar to the poor body image in females with eating disorders, obese adolescents find their poor body image as one barrier to getting involved in physical activity (Dwyer, Allison, et al., 2006). Peer victimization has also been found to have a negative effect on physical activity (Storch, et al, 2007). Not only does peer victimization affect a woman's level of physical activity, it can also contribute to an increase in poor eating habits and clinical eating disorders (Neumark-Sztainer, 2005).

Technology is contributing to the lack of physical activity that is associated with obesity today. "American children spend more time watching television, videotapes, and video games than any other activity except sleeping" (Fleming-Moran & Thiagarajah, 2005, 307). This change in physical activity levels may contribute to a lack of motivation to increase physical activity. Many young people who prefer to engage in passive activities may not like physical activity.

In addition to behavioral trends that have linked to obesity, researchers have studied the relationship of body image to obesity. While all females do not develop eating disorders in response to mass media ideals, most adolescent girls do experience appearance anxiety and shame about their body (Vandereycken, 2006), which may contribute as well to a decline in physical activity and maintaining proper diet. Females also report lower self-esteem after viewing photos of female models (Grogan, et al., 1996; Grogan, Williams, et al., 1996 ; Groesz, Levine, et al., 2002; Turner, Hamilton, et al., 1997).The negative emotion that results from body dissatisfaction can be related to disordered eating patterns (Edman, Yates, et al., 2005).

Obesity for young women can have a negative impact psychologically (Stice, Presnell, et al, 2005; Storch, Milsom, et al, 2007). There is significant evidence that states that women whose bodies mirror that of the media's ideal image have a much healthier body image than those whose bodies do not conform to that ideal (Monteath & McCabe, 1997). It may also be a self-fulfilling prophecy, as one study found girls' depressive symptoms may be related to obesity onset (Stice, et al, 2005).

The goal of this study is to explore the issue of obesity and its relationship to a sociocultural phenomenon: the media. Previous research have discussed the health concerns associated with obesity, some of the physical and behavioral causes of obesity, as well as some of the psychological factors of obesity. However, there has been little emphasis in the current literature on how the media directly impacts the rise of obesity in the same way it was studied for its relationship to eating disorders. A qualitative method of analysis was chosen for this study because of the lack of information in this area. Qualitative methodology will allow for the most amount of information to be obtained from participants and will allow future research to have more direction. Focus groups were conducted at a suburban college campus and traditional aged college females were selected for participation. Participants were asked to explore the media's impact on body image and its possible relation to obesity. Questions regarding sexuality, fitness, availability of food choices and dieting, as well as questions regarding women's body esteem were discussed. The hypothesis is that young women will identify specific aspects of media and advertising that has an impact on girls' who experience obesity as well as other eating disturbances.

Methods

Participants

Participants were selected for this project based solely on gender and age. The requirements for participation were college students between the ages of 18-25. This population was selected as being representative of young adulthood and therefore was able to reflect on pressures of young women today. The participants were not asked to reveal any personal information for the study. Five focus groups were conducted, with a total of 31 participants. Of that sample, 13% were African American and 3% were Asian American.

Materials

Moderators of the five focus groups were given a list of questions to begin the focus groups. They were able to draw upon the questions and also ask questions freely based on the responses of participants. Examples of questions asked during the focus groups include: "what are some of the barriers to maintaining a healthy body for young women today?", "how are obese women treated in our culture?" and "how are women portrayed in the media today?"

Body Shape Questionnaire

Each of the five focus groups completed the Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ) (Cooper, Taylor, et al, 1987), to examine what level of body shape dissatisfaction existed among focus group members. The BSQ is designed as a measure of body image concern, a central feature in eating disorders (Cooper, et al, 1987). The scale consists of 34 items on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from never to always. Scores on this scale range from 34-204. Examples of items from this scale include "have you been afraid that you might become fat?", "Have you avoided running because your flesh might wobble?", and "Has feeling full made you feel fat?"

The mean score on the BSQ for participants in the focus groups was 78.91 (sd=30.29, min=36, max=139). This is below the mean score on the BSQ in a non-clinical population (85) as reported during its initial development (Cooper, et al, 1987). While there was variation in scores, the mean for the focus groups were slightly below average. Therefore, the focus groups that were given the BSQ had adequate confidence in their own body shape. The focus groups members are seen as a representative sample of the average young woman who experience media images. There was no evidence of any clinical diagnoses, such as a clinical eating disorder.

Procedures

Students voluntarily participated in the study and were able to sign up for study times using online scheduling software. Focus group members were introduced to the study and given consent forms and the BSQ to complete. The sessions were tape recorded and moderators began asking questions of the participants. Groups lasted for approximately 45 minutes each. The groups were conducted over the course of several months.

The sessions were then transcribed for analysis and any personal information given during the session was removed from the transcript. The data analysis chosen for this study was qualitative due to the limited amount of information in this area of research. Using a constructivist perspective, more data can be collected and analyzed by using participants' thoughts, feelings, and behavior without relying on forced selection. Data was analyzed using the grounded theory method of qualitative data analysis.

Using the systematic approach, originally designed by Strauss and Corbin (1990), data was coded line by line and the compiled into discrete categories. Once five groups had been completed and analyzed, it was determined that the saturation point was reached. Six main themes emerged from each focus group: media images, age of media influence, quick fixes, women and exercise, lazier lifestyle, and views of obesity.

Findings

Media Images

Many participants felt that media images and expectations of women to be thin continue to be extreme. "Girls are expected to look like or resemble a Barbie doll" and "Paris Hilton is thought of as an example of what is considered the ideal body type" were just some of the comments that reflected the theme of thinness as being most valued in our culture. This was not a new finding and was expected. What was unique for the purpose of this study was the perception of "ease" that celebrities lose weight. Many people in our focus groups insisted that celebrities stay thin because of personal trainers and nutritionists and that it is frustrating for young women to try and follow their image.

One group mentioned a specific ideal with regards to the media: Barbie doll-like, slender, tan, long hair, exposed skin, flawless, made-up, nice clothes and confidence. They went on to discuss that no matter how close women, and especially young women, come to this ideal, they are not satisfied. The frustration with media images and the expectation of the "perfect" body resonated with each of the focus groups conducted. There also were many women among the groups who expressed that the frustration that young women feel may also lead to poor eating habits or even eating more due to emotional eating. Many women stated, "I'd just give up" or "why bother" in response to attempting to meet the media ideal of thinness. This was seen as part of the cause of a rise in obesity in recent years. The frustration that was described coincides with previous research that states some women may experience depressive symptoms prior to the onset of obesity (Stice, et al, 2005).

Age of media influence

Almost all participants felt that younger girls are the most susceptible to media images and expectations for diet and fitness. Many women stated that between the ages of 13-14, girls are more likely to engage in crash diets and other risky behaviors. Unfortunately, many women also felt that older women lack motivation to lose weight the correct way and "give up" because they are unsuccessful at the quick fixes they are exposed to in the media.

Another similar theme that was mentioned with regards to adolescents was the "sexualizing" of young women in our society. Girls are exposed to sexier clothing lines at a much earlier age, and icons such as Lindsay Lohan and Britney Spears have a strong influence on young women. This can lead to body dissatisfaction and struggles with weight for girls that appear much earlier than in previous generations. The implication is that adult women will continue to struggle with their weight throughout their lives, because weight and attractiveness is emphasized at such an early age today. The expectations for women in terms of body image have become ingrained.

This finding was similar to previous studies (e.g. Brown, Halpern, et. al., 2004) that found that the media is serving as a "sexy peer" to young women, especially those who mature early. The media is portraying young women who are not only thin, but have sex appeal. Some aspects of women that are typically missing in the media are physical fitness and healthy diets. Instead, young women are bombarded with images of thinness and diet products.

Quick fixes

Many participants throughout the groups discussed the "quick fix" approach to weight loss. Because women see celebrities losing weight almost instantaneously and without much time or effort, this can lead to an unrealistic expectation that they too can lose weight without any effort. Some participants stated that "starving" and "excessive exercise" have become acceptable ways to lose weight. These women believe that dieting can be viewed as a positive means of losing weight, however, most diets lead to fad diets when results are needed quickly. When girls realize that these body images of celebrities are unattainable they may feel like they have failed and go in the opposite direction, turning to food as a coping method. Most participants in our study mentioned that plastic surgery, liposuction, and gastric

bypass surgery have all become acceptable behaviors to achieve immediate weight loss. Unrealistic expectations coupled with the stress of unhealthy dieting and excessive exercise can create not only low self esteem, but serious physical problems as well. No mention was made of lifestyle changes or of the simple calculation of reducing intake and increasing exercise.

Women and exercise images

The participants in this study felt that exercise images are different for men and women. Men are (stereotypically) fitness trainers and tend to lift weights as opposed to women who are typically seen engaging in such “passive” activities as yoga, jogging, or other cardio exercises. Cardiovascular exercises are good ways to lose weight, but not necessarily to build muscle. Many participants felt that this may be a barrier to women engaging in exercise, because they felt if they could not lose weight by running, why bother exercising?

The participants in this study have also observed that most women who attend gyms are already thin and go only to show off their bodies, which may or may not have been the result of healthy exercise. When overweight or obese women see thin women at the gym, they become discouraged and may avoid the gym altogether for fear of feeling ashamed or embarrassed because of their size. This can have serious implications on their health, as obese women need to exercise to help them with lifestyle changes needed to lose weight.

Lazier lifestyle

The majority of our participants believe that Americans today are living in a consumer-driven society, and have become reliant on such modern advances as the internet and television. Unfortunately, modern advances have made it easier for Americans to put little effort into daily activities, including exercise and diet. People are more apt to reach for whatever food is available (often fast food) and not go to the gym. Many food commercials today emphasize quick and easy, and many do not discuss healthy options. Many participants pointed out the fact that pre-packaged or fast food was cheaper and easier to consume in a short amount of time.

As a result, the obesity rate has begun to rise. What was often quoted from our participants is that obese people are considered “lazy”. There is more leisure time for adolescents in North America (Larson & Verma, 1999) and leisure activity is sometimes associated with “lazy” (Tudor-Locke, 2003). Whether or not they know this to be a fact does not seem to matter to the general public. This is a problem for many overweight or obese people who due in fact exercise or eat well but may have a medical issue that is preventing them from being the “ideal” size Americans have come to admire. Feelings of discouragement and low self esteem can come as a result of these opinions.

Views of Obesity

The participants in this study offered numerous views of how obese people are looked at and treated in our society. There is agreement that obesity is on the rise in the United States. According to the women in the study, those who are obese in this country are viewed as lazy, unmotivated, and not self-driven. Obese women are looked down upon, especially when they are eating unhealthy food. They are also not respected according to the participants in the study. They reported seeing pictures of obese women as purposely unflattering; exaggerating their “flaws” more than their attractive attributes. Because there is a prejudice towards those who are obese, unlawful treatments can occur. Obese people have already found it difficult to land successful jobs, and with intense scrutiny from the general public, obese people face isolation and may lack a healthy support system in their life. Having a healthy support system, gaining access to successful careers and life options were all reported as ways to assist a person to stay healthy. Without these advantages, once again obese women are facing an uphill battle against the media and society to lose weight.

Discussion

Conducting the focus groups proved to be insightful into the minds of young women and their reflections on the difficulties of women. Many of the findings were consistent with previous studies. Many women, for example, felt that the abundance of media (television, video games, internet access) were contributing to a society of laziness and that many young women today do not engage in physical activity because they are easily distracted by more passive activities. Many participants talked about their own childhoods and how they played outside more often than they see teenagers playing today because of increased technology. As mentioned previously, the decline in physical activity has been linked to an increase in obesity (Miller, 2004).

One interesting finding was the idea that women are not portrayed as being engaged in physically “active” exercise, and instead are shown in the media to be engaging in passive forms of exercise and in forms that focus on calorie burning instead of strength training. Many women commented that they did not exercise because they did not like to run. This coincides with some literature that suggests cardiovascular fitness is significantly lower in both overweight and obese women (Pullen, Walker, et. al., 2005).

It may be that many women are unable to run because of their limited fitness even when they are not considered obese. Running has become associated with women’s attempt at weight loss, and it seems appropriate to provide more diverse images of women exercising. It would also be beneficial for women to be exposed during their education to different forms of physical activity, perhaps especially those that are strength building. Increasing awareness of types of physical activity and providing images of women of various sizes exercising may help to increase self-satisfaction while exercising, which has been shown in previous literature to be a barrier for obese women (Edman, Yates, et. al., 2005).

One final theme of importance was the age of influence of media personalities and negative consequences of those images. Most women agreed that women who have just emerged from puberty (13-14) were the most susceptible to media influence. This supports previous research in which early-adolescents experienced lower self-esteem than pre-adolescents (Conner, Martin, et. al., 1996). Young women today are exposed to media images that not only emphasize losing weight to fit the ideal, but also feature women who appear to do so effortlessly. Young women are also exposed to new fashion that is sexualizing them at a much younger age. As a result, women are experiencing weight gain rather than weight loss, as a reaction to trying to attain the ideal.

One limitation of this study is the limited age group that was selected for participation. Future research should include a replication of focus groups using the target population 13-17 years old to determine if similar themes are found. Another possible study could examine focus groups across developmental stages. A cross-sectional study of media influences on obesity will provide a great deal of information about how women are struggling with their weight in the face of unattainable media ideals.

Another possible limitation of this study was using the Body Shape Questionnaire prior to the focus group. Although this measure was used to rule any clinical eating disorder or body image disorder, the scale may have produced some heightened awareness of their body. In a focus group setting, the goal of research is to find out as much information as possible. In the particular study, it does not appear that the findings were negatively influenced by the BSQ. Future research may want to elect participants who are screened prior to the study, and then engage in the focus groups after some time. This effort may ensure that there was not any error or bias from the participants.

Future studies may also include quantitative analysis to find out more detailed information on dieting techniques among women who are struggling with obesity, as well as to find out information about specific images of females engaged in exercise. Perhaps the most insight can be found by exploring society’s images of active women and whether they provide young women with a positive example.

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