

Effects of a reality TV cosmetic surgery makeover program on eating disordered attitudes and behaviors

Suzanne E. Mazzeo^{a,b,*}, Sara E. Trace^a, Karen S. Mitchell^a, Rachel Walker Gow^a

^a Department of Psychology, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA, USA

^b Department of Pediatrics, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA, USA

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Abstract

Objective: To evaluate the effects of a reality TV cosmetic surgery program on eating disordered attitudes, behaviors, mood, anxiety, and self-esteem.

Method: Participants ($N=147$ women) completed baseline surveys and were subsequently randomly assigned to one of two conditions: one in which they watched a reality TV cosmetic surgery program (*The Swan*) and one in which they watched a reality TV home improvement program (*Clean Sweep*). Assessments were conducted immediately post-video and two weeks later.

Results: Women in the cosmetic surgery program group who reported higher internalization of the thin-ideal at baseline manifested lower self-esteem at posttesting. Among White women, those who watched the cosmetic surgery program reported greater perceptions of media pressures to be thin and stronger endorsement of their ability to control their body's appearance after watching the video. These differences persisted over a two-week follow-up period.

Discussion: Reality TV cosmetic surgery makeover programs may contribute to eating disordered attitudes and behaviors among young women, particularly those who have internalized the thin body-ideal. These findings seem to be especially applicable for White women; however, they should be further investigated with more diverse and international samples.

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1. Introduction

Sociocultural theories highlight the role of the media in the development of eating disordered behaviors (Levine & Harrison, 2004; Stice & Shaw, 1994). In addition, empirical investigations have examined the influence of magazine and television exposure, and, although findings have differed somewhat across modalities, exposure to media images of the thin-ideal is generally associated with adverse consequences among college-age women (Irving, 1990; Stice & Shaw, 1994; Tiggemann & Pickering, 1996).

* Corresponding author. Department of Psychology, Virginia Commonwealth University PO Box 842018 Richmond, VA 23284-2018, USA. Tel.: +1 804 827 1708.

E-mail address: semazzeo@vcu.edu (S.E. Mazzeo).

A newer form of media exposure is the “reality TV” cosmetic surgery makeover program. These programs appear regularly on U.S. network and cable television and are very popular; for example, as noted by Sarwer and Crerand (2004), *Extreme Makeover* was the second highest rated program for adults under age 50 in 2003. The popularity of these programs coincides with the overall rise in cosmetic surgical procedures. In the U.S., the number of cosmetic medical treatments performed increased 1600% between 1992 and 2002 (Sarwer & Crerand, 2004); an estimated 8.3 million individuals in the U.S. underwent cosmetic medical procedures in 2003 (Sarwer et al., 2005). Cosmetic medical procedures are also becoming more widely accepted, particularly among college women (Sarwer et al., 2005).

Despite the increased prevalence and acceptance of cosmetic surgery, as well as the popularity of cosmetic surgery makeover programs, there have been no investigations of the impact of these programs on viewers. One concern about these programs is that they actively promote the idea that a “perfect body” is attainable. On the typical reality makeover program, women undergo a full body critique, in which numerous surgeries are recommended to address multiple (perceived) flaws. Given the pervasiveness and popularity of this form of media, we decided to examine the impact of one of these programs, *The Swan*, on college women. *The Swan* presents the story of two women per episode who undergo an extensive transformation involving multiple plastic surgeries, an intense diet and exercise program, and counseling. The program’s title refers to the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale in which an “ugly duckling” is revealed to be a beautiful swan. The study design was informed by previous investigations of media exposure and eating disorders, which are briefly reviewed in the following sections.

1.1. Magazine and television exposure studies

Numerous experimental studies have exposed college women to pictures of fashion models and found that this exposure was associated with adverse psychological consequences (Irving, 1990; Stice & Shaw, 1994; Tiggemann & Pickering, 1996). The impact of the media has also been assessed using self-report measures of exposure. For example, Stice and colleagues (Stice, Schupak-Neuberg, Shaw, & Stein, 1994) found a moderate, direct effect of magazine exposure on eating disorder symptoms. However, this association was also mediated by ideal-body stereotype internalization, gender role endorsement, and body dissatisfaction.

1.2. Importance of assessing moderators

Studies have found that although the direct effects of media exposure on viewers were generally moderate, individuals with pre-existing body dissatisfaction and thin-ideal internalization manifest more negative outcomes than individuals without these characteristics (Joshi, Herman, & Polivy, 2004; Stice, Spangler, & Agras, 2001). For example, Stice et al. (2001) randomly assigned girls to either a fashion-magazine subscription group or a no-subscription control. There were no main effects on outcomes. However, girls with higher baseline scores on measures of pressure to be thin and body dissatisfaction manifested greater increases in negative affect. The authors concluded that the negative effects of magazine exposure are short-lived, except for those individuals who are initially vulnerable. Nonetheless, they recommend that future studies conduct follow-up testing to clarify the duration of adverse effects.

Highly restrained eaters may actually experience increased self-esteem following exposure to thin-ideal media. For example, Joshi et al. (2004) found that restrained eaters exposed to thin images reported higher social self-esteem at posttesting, compared to restrained eaters in a control group. They concluded that restrained eaters may be more invested in their appearance and believe that achieving the thin ideal is attainable.

Feminist identity has been hypothesized to protect women from body dissatisfaction and thin-ideal internalization (Berel & Irving, 1988). Research has provided support for this hypothesis (Snyder & Hasbrouck, 1996), although results are mixed (Cash, Ancis, & Strachan, 1997). Finally, researchers have also recommended including self-esteem in studies of media exposure (Berel & Irving, 1988), as women with lower self-esteem are more likely to compare themselves negatively to models in advertisements (e.g., Martin & Kennedy, 1993).

1.3. Purpose of this study

To our knowledge, this is the first study of the effects of a cosmetic surgery reality TV program in which multiple body parts are transformed to meet Western society’s ideal of feminine physical attractiveness. This newer form of media may have different effects than magazine or more traditional TV programming, as its primary emphasis is on

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