



A correlational and experimental examination of reality television viewing and interest in cosmetic surgery

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 24 June 2009

Received in revised form 20 October 2009

Accepted 26 October 2009

Keywords:

Cosmetic surgery

Media influence

Body image

Reality television

ABSTRACT

Two studies are presented that examine the influence of media messages about cosmetic surgery on youths' interest in altering their own physical appearance. In Study 1, 170 participants (59% female; M age = 19.77 years) completed surveys assessing their impression of reality television shows featuring cosmetic surgery, appearance satisfaction, self-esteem, and their interest in cosmetic surgery. Results indicated that participants who reported favorable impressions of reality television shows featuring cosmetic surgery were more likely to indicate interest in pursuing surgery. One hundred and eighty-nine participants (51% female; M age = 19.84 years) completed Study 2. Approximately half of the participants were exposed to a television message featuring a surgical make-over; the other half was exposed to a neutral message. Results indicated that participants who watched a television program about cosmetic surgery wanted to alter their own appearance using cosmetic surgery more than did participants who were not exposed to this program.

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Introduction

The importance of physical beauty to individuals' perceptions of themselves and others begins early in life (e.g., Goldfield & Chrisler, 1995; Hawley, Johnson, Mize, & McNamara, 2007) and may result in behavioral and mental health consequences (Lu & Hou, 2009; Markey & Markey, 2009; Ogden, 2003; Polivy & Herman, 2002; Sarwer, Magee, & Clark, 2004; Stice & Shaw, 2002; Wertheim, Paxton, & Blaney, 2009). Although there is evidence that perceptions of attractiveness are guided by innate preferences for symmetry and evolutionarily adaptive features (e.g., small waist-to-hip ratios among women; see Markey, Tinsley, Ericksen, Ozer, & Markey, 2002; Singh, 1993, 1994), there is also substantial evidence that social experiences – including media experiences – contribute significantly to perceptions of attractiveness (e.g., Markey, 2004; Markey et al., 2002; Posavac, Posavac, & Posavac, 1998; Strahan, LaFrance, Wilson, Ethier, Spencer, & Zanna, 2008). The potential effects of media messages on men's and women's body image have been examined in past research, with various forms of the media (e.g., music videos, television, magazines) appearing to have the potential to impact body image via different

processes (e.g., Botta, 1999; Lew, Mann, Myers, Taylor, & Bower, 2007; Mazzeo, Trace, Mitchell, & Gow, 2007; Nabi, 2009; Strahan et al., 2008; Tiggemann, 2003, 2005; Tiggemann & McGill, 2004; Tiggemann & Slater, 2004). However, as new information is gained from this research, new media messages about techniques for changing one's physical appearance are continually being made available to the public. The present study examined one of these new media messages (reality television shows featuring cosmetic surgery) in relation to young adults' interest in changing their physical appearance using cosmetic surgery.

Because of the importance of their physical appearance to individuals' psychological and physical well being (especially youths, see Harter, 1989, 2006) and the relative lack of objective criteria for evaluating physical beauty, it is likely that individuals assess their own appearance using every source of information available. According to Festinger (1954), social comparison provides individuals with a means to evaluate their own qualities when objective or unambiguous criteria for evaluation are not available. Body image research suggests that the media have the potential to influence appearance satisfaction via the process of social comparison (Lew et al., 2007; Tiggemann & McGill, 2004). The majority of media messages are directed at women and these messages appear to result in negative self-evaluations; the vast majority of women cannot achieve the ideals presented by the media (Henderson-King, Henderson-King, & Hoffman, 2001; Lew et al., 2007). In contrast, when individuals are asked to compare themselves with unattractive media images, they report feeling

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better about themselves (Brown, Novick, Lord, & Richards, 1992). Women who report greater media contact not only report lower self-concept, but evidence also suggests links between women's health-related behaviors (e.g., eating disorders) and their exposure to unrealistic media messages (Field, Cheung, Wolf, Herzog, Gortmaker, & Colditz, 1999; Moriarty & Harrison, 2008). Recent research further suggests that exposure to depictions of beauty ideals is particularly detrimental to women who are invested in their appearance, prone to body dissatisfaction, and suffering from low self-esteem (Bessenoff, 2006; Heinberg & Thompson, 1995; Henderson-King et al., 2001; Ip & Jarry, 2008).

Research examining links between men's exposure to idealized media images and their feelings and behaviors related to their bodies is less extensive than is the research examining women and presents less consistent findings (e.g., Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2009; van den Berg, Paxton, Keery, Wall, Guo, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2007). However, men have been found to report greater levels of body dissatisfaction, depression, and interest in enhancing their bodies following exposure to ideal male bodies (Agliata & Tantleff-Dunn, 2004; Hatoum & Belle, 2004). One recent experiment (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2009) suggests that social comparison may be the mechanism linking exposure to images and men's body-related concerns and that men with body-related concerns may be more vulnerable than others to media messages. Consistent with research focusing on women, men's exposure to ideal media images may not just impact their dissatisfaction with their appearance but their global sense of self and interest in changing their appearance (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2009).

Recently, cosmetic surgery has become increasingly popular as a means of appearance-enhancement. Cosmetic surgery has come to be conceptualized as an approach to physical improvement that is accessible, relatively affordable, and appropriate for all ages. In 2008, 12.1 million cosmetic surgery procedures were performed, a 63% increase since 2000 (American Society of Plastic Surgeons [ASPS], 2009). Although the increase in procedures in the last decade is due in part to the increase in minimally invasive procedures (e.g., Botox), the demand for cosmetic surgery is unquestionable. There is a strong gender bias in this demand, with 91% of cosmetic surgery procedures performed on females, but cosmetic surgery patients are increasingly ethnically and socio-economically diverse (ASPS, 2008) and the appeal of cosmetic surgery is international (International Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery [ISAPS], 2008).

Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) have suggested that increasing exposure to messages about the importance of attractiveness should lead to individuals' increasing concerns about their own appearance and openness to using various means through which cultural standards can be achieved. However, little research has examined the extent to which media messages about cosmetic surgery influence individuals' desire for self-change, and the research that is available is limited in its focus on women and/or its correlational approach (e.g., Crockett, Pruzinsky, & Persing, 2007; Markey & Markey, 2009; Mazzeo et al., 2007; Nabi, 2009; Sperry, Thompson, Sarwer, & Cash, 2009; Zuckerman & Abraham, 2008). Perhaps most relevant to the present study is research suggesting that television shows featuring cosmetic surgery do not necessarily influence body satisfaction, per se, but may influence attitudes toward cosmetic surgery and interest in acquiring cosmetic surgery (Crockett et al., 2007; Nabi, 2009; Sperry et al., 2009). Further, Mazzeo et al. (2007) suggest that media messages featuring cosmetic surgery may impact eating disordered attitudes and behaviors among women. The present studies extend this research by using both correlational and experimental data to examine the influence of reality television

shows featuring cosmetic surgery on individuals' interest in altering their own physical appearance.

Study 1 aims

The present study builds on past research examining predictors of cosmetic surgery, media influences on body image, and the desire for self-change by examining the potential role that impressions of television shows featuring cosmetic surgery may have on individuals' desire to pursue surgery. Social comparison theory would suggest that reality television shows featuring cosmetic surgery make-overs may be particularly appealing to viewers as they compare themselves to "average" (i.e., similar) looking individuals who become "attractive" individuals across less than an hour of TV time.

This study is unique from past research in several ways. First, in an effort to extend research focusing almost exclusively on women, we examine a sample of both men and women. Second, we examine both face and body satisfaction. Although cosmetic surgery to alter the body (e.g., "tummy tucks" and liposuction) is popular, facial procedures (e.g., rhinoplasty) are consistently among the top procedures performed in any given year (ASPS, 2009). Thus, we will consider both face and body satisfaction and cosmetic procedures designed to alter both the face and body. Third, in addition to examining body and face satisfaction as predictors of interest in cosmetic surgery, we also examine global self-esteem. Given that past research indicates that media exposure has the potential to influence not only women's feelings about their physical appearances but their feelings about themselves more generally, we include self-esteem as a potential predictor of interest in cosmetic surgery (see Sarwer et al., 2004). Finally, perhaps the most distinguishing feature of this study is our focus on participants' perceptions of reality television featuring cosmetic surgery as a possible correlate of their interest in pursuing cosmetic surgery.

There are four hypotheses we address in this study. Our first hypothesis is that gender will uniquely predict interest in cosmetic surgery, with women being more interested in cosmetic surgery than men. Our second hypothesis is that body image (i.e., face and body satisfaction) will uniquely predict interest in cosmetic surgery; those who are less satisfied will be more interested in cosmetic procedures. Our third hypothesis is that self-esteem will uniquely predict interest in cosmetic surgery, with lower self-esteem being related to greater interest in surgery. Our fourth hypothesis is that positive impressions of reality television shows featuring cosmetic surgery will be uniquely associated with participants' interest in cosmetic surgery.

Method

Participants and procedures

One hundred and seventy participants (101 females; M age = 19.77 years, $SD = 4.38$) completed this study. Participants were all students from a Northeastern university and they represent a diverse group in regards to ethnicity and other demographic traits. About half (58%) of the sample self-identified as Caucasian/Euro-American, 12% of the sample was African American, 15% Asian American, 10% Hispanic/Latino and 5% indicated that they were of an "other" ethnic background.

Participation took place in small groups of two to six participants. Participants completed the measures used in this study along with other measures to mask the true intent of this study. Administration of the questionnaires was performed by trained research assistants in a private laboratory setting. All procedures were designed in accordance with the American

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