



## Effects of gender, media influences, and traditional gender role orientation on disordered eating and appearance concerns among Latino adolescents<sup>☆</sup>



Vera Lopez<sup>a,\*</sup>, Rosalie Corona<sup>b</sup>, Raquel Halfond<sup>b,c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Justice & Social Inquiry, School of Social Transformation, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85287, USA

<sup>b</sup>Department of Psychology, Virginia Commonwealth University, USA

<sup>c</sup>Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Harbor-UCLA Medical Center, USA

### A B S T R A C T

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This study examined the main and interaction effects of gender, traditional gender role orientation, and media-influenced sociocultural values and ideals about appearance in a sample of 96 Latino adolescents controlling for age, country of origin, and BMI. Girls and less traditionally oriented youth reported significantly more disordered eating and appearance concerns than did boys and more traditionally oriented youth. Gender moderated the relationship between traditional gender role orientation and disordered eating and appearance concerns. Contrary to our hypothesis, media-influenced sociocultural values and ideals about appearance did not significantly predict disordered eating and appearance concerns. However, the interaction between gender and sociocultural values and ideals about appearance was significant. Our findings highlight the importance of continued research on gender, media, and cultural influences as they relate to disordered eating and appearance concerns among Latino youth.

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From a young age, youth are bombarded with media images about what types of bodies are considered attractive. For some girls, thinness is featured as the ultimate mark of beauty (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008) whereas for boys, a lean muscular physique represents the ultimate ideal (Labre, 2002; Warren, Schoen, & Schafer, 2010). Adolescents who internalize these sociocultural ideals are at heightened risk for developing eating disorders and associated problems such as body dissatisfaction (Ata, Ludden, & Lally, 2007; Grogan & Richards, 2002; Labre, 2002). The literature on disordered eating and associated health outcomes is relatively less developed for minority adolescents, particularly Latino youth. Whether associations found in other samples (e.g., media-influenced beliefs predicting disordered eating) hold true for Latino youth is less known and relatively few studies have examined how cultural factors (other than acculturation) predict disordered eating and appearance concerns. The current study attempts to fill this gap in the literature by examining how gender, media-influenced sociocultural values and ideals about appearance, and traditional gender role orientation relate to disordered eating and appearance concerns among Latino adolescents.

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\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 602 796 3999.  
E-mail address: [vera.lopez@asu.edu](mailto:vera.lopez@asu.edu) (V. Lopez).

## Disordered eating and appearance concerns among youth

Disordered eating and appearance concerns such as overeating, unhealthy weight loss behaviors, and concerns about weight and shape are of growing concern. A national study found that 44% of high school students reported trying to lose weight and 61.5% reported exercising to lose weight or not gain weight in the 30 days prior to the survey (CDC, 2010). These data indicate that many youth are concerned about their weight. For some, these concerns can lead to more extreme weight loss behaviors such as bingeing, vomiting, laxative abuse, and skipping meals to lose weight (Croll, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Ireland, 2002; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2002).

Disordered eating behaviors are quite prevalent among adolescent girls. Slightly more than half (57%) of adolescent girls (mean age 14.9 years) in one large-scale study reported using unhealthy weight control behaviors (e.g., fasting, smoking cigarettes or skipping meals) in order to lose weight during the past year (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2002). Unlike girls, boys typically want to gain muscle or weight to conform to a sociocultural standard of attractiveness for males that emphasizes strength and muscularity (Labre, 2002). Boys who seek to achieve this ideal are at risk for developing weight and body concerns. A representative statewide survey of Connecticut youth found that adolescent boys engage in several eating-related behaviors (e.g., dieting, vomiting, laxative use) to control their weight and body shape with approximately 21.2 percent of them reportedly eating more food and/or using food supplements to gain weight or muscle (Neumark-Sztainer, Story, Falkner, Beuhring, & Resnick, 1999).

Eating disorder behaviors also vary by race/ethnicity (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2002). One group that merits concern is Latino youth. Several large-scale studies indicate that while Latina and white girls demonstrate equivalent rates of eating disorder behaviors, Latinas exhibit more eating disorder behaviors than Black girls (Granillo, Jones-Rodriguez, & Carvajal, 2005; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 1999, 2002). In contrast, other studies suggest that Latinas are at increased risk relative to both white and Black girls (Croll et al., 2002; Story, French, Resnick, & Blum, 1995).

Most of the research on disordered eating behaviors as they vary by race/ethnicity has focused on girls. However, two of the large-scale studies described above also examined these behaviors among boys and reveal that Latino boys are at increased risk relative to other boys (Croll et al., 2002; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 1999). Croll et al. (2002), for example, found that 43 percent of Latino boys reported any eating disordered behavior (fasting or skipping meals, smoking cigarettes, using diet pills or speed, vomiting on purpose after eating, laxative use) during the past 12 months compared to 28 percent of White, 28 percent of Black, and 34 percent of Asian boys.

A better understanding of the predictors associated with disordered eating and appearance concerns among Latino youth should be a public health priority for several reasons. First, they are the largest ethnic minority group in the U.S., and one of the fastest growing groups of youth (Fry, 2008). As a result, identifying factors that place them at risk for negative health outcomes is important. Second, as noted above, Latino youth engage in disordered eating behaviors, which can lead to more serious health problems, as they grow older. Exposure to and pressure to subscribe to unhealthy messages about body attractiveness in the media represents one potential avenue for the development of disordered eating and appearance concerns among Latino youth.

## Media, gender, disordered eating, and appearance concerns

The media represents a powerful socializing force that shapes how young people view themselves in relation to cultural ideals of beauty and physical attractiveness (Grabe et al., 2008). According to Cultivation Theory, when people are “exposed to media content or other socialization agents, they gradually come to cultivate or adopt beliefs about the world that coincide with the images they have been viewing or messages they have been hearing” (American Psychological Association, 2007, p. 3). This can be especially detrimental to young people who are constantly exposed to unrealistic expectations about beauty and physical attractiveness.

For girls, the dominant media image of beauty or physical attractiveness is thinness (Goodman, 2002; Grabe et al., 2008). Research indicates that thin women are overrepresented in television, magazines, and movies while overweight women are underrepresented (Goodman, 2002). Furthermore, these media representations of women are often much thinner than the average U.S. female (Wiseman, Gray, Mosimann, & Ahrens, 1992). Boys, on the other hand, are constantly exposed to images of lean muscular men. They face a lot of pressure to be muscular. This muscular ideal is rooted in social-cultural views of masculinity, which dictate that men be powerful and strong (Grogan & Richards, 2002; Labre, 2002; McCreary, Saucier, & Courtenay, 2005; Mishkind, Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1986).

As predicted by Cultivation Theory, exposure to media images has been found to be related to body image and eating concerns among girls and young women in both experimental and correlational studies (see Grabe et al., 2008 for meta-analysis). In a recent nationwide survey of over 1000 adolescent girls, 88 percent said that the media puts a lot of pressure on them to be thin, 65 percent believe that the body image represented by the fashion industry in the media is *too skinny*, and 81 percent said they would rather see *real* or *natural* photos of models rather than airbrushed ones (Girl Scouts of the USA, 2010). Despite this, 48 percent of girls said they wish they were as skinny as the magazine fashion models; 47 percent said fashion magazines give them a body image to strive for; and 60 percent said they compare their bodies to fashion models. Recent studies suggest that boys are also susceptible to unrealistic media images, which in turn, can contribute to body image issues, weight concerns, and disordered eating (see Labre, 2002 for review).

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