

Relationships amongst body dissatisfaction, internalisation of the media body ideal and perceived pressure from media in adolescent girls and boys

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Abstract

Sociocultural factors that underpin gender differences in body dissatisfaction have not frequently been explored. We examined the relative contribution of internalization of media body ideals and perceived pressure to achieve this ideal in explaining body dissatisfaction in adolescent boys and girls. A sample of 819 boys and 791 girls completed measures of internalization of body ideals, perceived pressure, body mass index (BMI) and body dissatisfaction. As expected, girls showed higher body dissatisfaction, internalization and pressure than boys. Internalization, pressure and BMI contributed to the prediction of body dissatisfaction in boys and in girls although these variables explained less variance in body dissatisfaction in boys. In addition, for girls the strongest predictor of body dissatisfaction was internalization, whilst for boys the strongest predictor was pressure. Differences in extent of internalization and pressure may contribute to higher body dissatisfaction in girls than boys. These sociocultural factors may affect girls and boys differently.

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Introduction

Many studies have shown that body dissatisfaction is highly prevalent during adolescence (e.g., Kostanski, Fisher, & Gullone, 2004; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001). Moreover, there has been substantial empirical evidence indicating that girls show greater body dissatisfaction than boys (e.g., Barker & Galambos, 2003; Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Paxton, 2006; Kostanski et al., 2004; Muth & Cash, 1997). Muth and Cash (1997) found in their study focusing on gender

differences in body image that 40% of females and 22% of males were not satisfied with their body. Results from a representative sample of 7420 adolescents in the Swiss Multicenter Adolescent Survey on Health (Narring et al., 2004) showed that nearly 50% of girls and 18% of boys were not satisfied with their body. Wardle and Marsland (1990) found similar results with 47% of girls and 72% of boys being satisfied with their body.

Whilst body dissatisfaction in girls is mostly related to a desire to be thinner (Kostanski et al., 2004; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001; Wardle & Marsland, 1990), in boys, body dissatisfaction is related either to a desire to lose or gain weight or to be more muscular (Cohane & Pope, 2001; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001; Smolak, Levine, & Thompson, 2001; Smolak & Stein, 2006). Although gender differences in frequency and

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intensity of body-image concerns are widely recognized, few studies have examined attitudes and beliefs that might contribute to these differences or the manner in which they operate. To address these issues, the present study aimed to compare the extent of internalization of media body ideals, and the pressure to conform to these ideals, in adolescent girls and boys.

One explanation for gender differences in body dissatisfaction is that there is greater sociocultural emphasis placed on physical attractiveness for girls and women in Western society (McKinley, 1999), and Switzerland is no exception in this respect. Media images create a beauty standard for girls in which a perfect, thin, body is central. However, the thin ideal propagated in media is generally unattainable (Wiseman, Gray, Mosimann, & Ahrens, 1992). It has been suggested that the discrepancy between actual and ideal body can result in body dissatisfaction (Durkin & Paxton, 2002; Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). Not surprisingly, under these circumstances, larger body size has consistently been observed to predict greater body dissatisfaction in girls (e.g., Barker & Galambos, 2003; Jones, 2004; Paxton, Eisenberg, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2006; Presnell, Bearman, & Stice, 2004).

In recent years, boys too have been presented with a proliferation of images of the ideal male body by media (e.g., Rohlinger, 2002). Rather than a very thin ideal, boys are presented with a lean, muscular ideal body and this ideal has become more muscular over time (Leit, Pope, & Gray, 2001; Pope, Olivardia, Gruber, & Borowiecki, 1999). It has been suggested that exposure to the muscular ideal has contributed to greater body dissatisfaction in boys (Arbour & Ginis, 2006; Grogan, 1999; Labre, 2002), and Stanford and McCabe (2005) have shown in their study of boys' body image that muscularity is very central to the masculine body ideal. Thus, whilst girls have reported they wish to lose weight and be thinner, boys have indicated that they either wish to lose or gain weight and develop muscularity (Cohane & Pope, 2001; Kostanski et al., 2004; Narring et al., 2004). Notably, physical changes during puberty are likely to bring boys closer to, whilst taking girls further away from their body ideal (Labre, 2002). In boys, higher body mass index (BMI) is not as consistent a predictor of body dissatisfaction, some studies supporting this relationship (Jones, Vigfusdottir, & Lee, 2004; Paxton et al., 2006; Ricciardelli, McCabe, Lillis, & Thomas, 2006), while others have not (Barker & Galambos, 2003; Jones, 2004; Presnell et al., 2004). Although body mass is related to body dissatisfaction, for both genders sociocultural influences seem to have a

stronger influence on body image than biological factors such as BMI (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003).

Although there are distinct body ideals for males and females presented in media and it has been suggested that both girls and boys are influenced by these ideals (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003; Smolak et al., 2001), research suggests that boys and girls do not respond to the media presentations with the same intensity (Presnell et al., 2004). Adolescent girls frequently report an increase in body dissatisfaction following exposure to idealised female images (Durkin & Paxton, 2002; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2004), whilst boys show no increase in body dissatisfaction after exposure to idealised images of young men (Arbour & Ginis, 2006; Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2004; Humphreys & Paxton, 2004).

In addition to media exposure, more subjective indicators of the influence of media such as internalization of the body ideal and perceived pressure from media have been shown to be directly related to body dissatisfaction (Thompson et al., 1999). Internalization of media ideals can be understood as the adoption of socially defined ideals as presented by media as a personal standard (Jones, 2004). The internalization of externally presented images and the acceptance and adoption of these societal body ideals can affect attitudes and behaviour (Thompson et al., 1999). Self-concept research has indicated that although body image is relatively stable, it can be influenced by the internalization of images presented by media (Deusinger, 1998; Grogan, 1999). Furthermore, body image is a central part of the self-concept, especially during adolescence (Flammer & Alsaker, 2002; Levine and Smolak, 2002). Thus, it can be assumed that the successful integration of the changing body into the self-concept is an important task for personality development during adolescence. Reasons why girls and boys respond differently to exposure to media images may relate to differences in the extent to which girls and boys internalize media ideals and the extent to which they feel pressure to conform to these ideals.

Research that has examined the relationship between internalization of the media body ideal and body dissatisfaction has been extensive in girls (Cafri, Yamamiya, Brannick, & Thompson, 2005). Cafri and colleagues (2005) have shown in a meta-analysis of cross-sectional studies that internalization has medium-to-large associations with body dissatisfaction. Several longitudinal studies have also provided empirical evidence that internalization of the thin ideal predicts increases in body dissatisfaction among girls (Jones, 2004; Stice & Bearman, 2001; Stice & Whitenton, 2002).

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