



# The Multidimensional Media Influence Scale: Confirmatory factor structure and relationship with body dissatisfaction among African American and Anglo American children

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## ABSTRACT

The Multidimensional Media Influence Scale (MMIS; Cusumano & Thompson, 2001). Media influence and body image in 8–11-year-old boys and girls: A preliminary report on the multidimensional media influence scale. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 29, 37–44) is a child-appropriate, 3-factor scale designed to assess perceived media influence on body image. It has been used in studies exploring the relationship between the entire scale as well as its subscales (awareness, internalization, and pressure) and variables related to body image. However, the 3-factor structure of the scale has never been confirmed via confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), nor has the scale been evaluated with a racially diverse sample of children. This paper reports the results of CFAs establishing the multidimensionality of the scale and the unidimensionality of its subscales among a sample of 661 girls and boys aged 7–12 years, primarily African American and Anglo American. The pressure factor of the MMIS predicted the idealization of a thinner current (child) and future (adult) body both cross-sectionally and one year later for girls and for Anglo American children.

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## Introduction

The detrimental effects of media exposure on the body image of adolescents and young adults of both genders have been widely documented (for meta-analyses see Barlett, Vowels, & Saucier, 2008; Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002). Research on prepubescent child samples is scarcer, but it too points to negative correlations both cross-sectionally and over time between exposure to print and electronic media and satisfaction with the body among both girls and boys (Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006; Harrison & Bond, 2007; Harrison & Hefner, 2006).

It is sometimes assumed that consciousness of the media's effects on one's own cognitions and emotions should make one impervious to those effects, but the acknowledgement that media effects on body image are occurring in one's own life (a concept also known as perceived *media influence* and indicated by agreement with such items as "Watching TV or reading magazines makes me want to diet or lose weight") does not decrease body dissatisfaction. Indeed, media influence appears to

increase body dissatisfaction. Cusumano and Thompson (2001) reported that media influence was associated with a significant increase in body dissatisfaction among a sample of 8–11-year-old girls and boys. More recently, Allen, Byrne, McLean, and Davis (2008) reported that media influence predicted increased concern about weight and shape among 8–13-year-old Australian girls; and Peterson, Paulson, and Williams (2007) reported that perceived pressure from media to look "perfect" among a sample of male and female adolescents predicted increases in body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness for both genders. For girls in the study by Peterson et al. (2007), the predictive power of media pressure was even larger than that for pressure from peers and mothers.

### The Multidimensional Media Influence Scale

The study by Peterson et al. (2007) described above employed a measure of sociocultural influence called the Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire (SATAQ; Heinberg, Thompson, & Stormer, 1995), a widely used instrument that was originally intended to measure two dimensions of sociocultural influence: internalization and awareness of cultural body ideals. Following the introduction of the SATAQ, Cusumano and Thompson (2001) set out to validate a new 11-item child-appropriate measure of

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media-specific sociocultural influence, the Multidimensional Media Influence Scale (MMIS), and test its relationship with body dissatisfaction. The MMIS differs from the SATAQ in that it is composed of items representing three dimensions: *awareness* of the thin ideal as a body-shape standard (e.g., “Clothes look better on people who are thin”); *internalization* of the media-presented body ideal as one’s own personal ideal (e.g., “I would like my body to look like people who are on TV”); and perceived *pressure* from media to lose weight (e.g., “Watching movies makes me want to diet”). Cusumano and Thompson (2001) developed the MMIS in part because media influence has been described conceptually in terms as varied as “internalization, awareness, pressures, comparison, and importance” (p. 38), and their aim was to develop a comprehensive measure of media influence that was short and simple enough to be used with children. Cusumano and Thompson’s (2001) validation of the scale consisted of procedures establishing acceptable internal consistencies (above or close to .70), testing gender differences, and documenting expected positive correlations between the MMIS and body dissatisfaction. Their data with a sample of children averaging 10 years 3 months old indicated that all three dimensions of the scale predicted increased body dissatisfaction among girls, whereas two of the dimensions (internalization and pressure) predicted increased body dissatisfaction among boys.

The addition of the pressure dimension makes the MMIS particularly useful for media effects researchers because it provides information about the extent to which children recognize the effects of media messages on their own cognitions, emotions, and motivations. Studies on adolescent girls by Milkie (1999) and Gentles and Harrison (2006) suggest that, far from being oblivious to the extent and quality of the media’s influence on them, adolescents have a keen sense of their own responses to ideal-body media: they report feeling pressured by media to achieve a thin body ideal, and feel frustrated that their attempts to resist this pressure are undermined by pressure from peers who have themselves embraced the media-portrayed thin ideal.

The ability to draw conclusions about the media’s effects on the self as well as inferences about the media’s effects on others is usually fully developed by adolescence, but do prepubescent children have the same capacity? Developmental theory and research on children and media, particularly work inspired by the cognitive structural theory of Jean Piaget (Scheibe, 2007; Singer & Revenson, 1978; Valkenburg & Cantor, 2001), suggests that the recognition that another entity (e.g., media) has an agenda and is influencing or attempting to influence the receiver of the communication to meet this agenda requires the capacity for abstract thought and perspective-taking, abilities that generally do not develop fully until after age 7 or 8 (Oates, Blades, & Gunter, 2002; Singer & Revenson, 1978). Thus it was appropriate for Cusumano and Thompson (2001), when they first tested the MMIS, to set the lower boundary of their sample’s age range at 8 to ensure that the items in the pressure subscale would be properly understood. In the present study, the same developmental rationale applied, and the lower end of the age range was set at 7.

With its child-friendly brevity, clarity, multidimensionality, and inclusion of a pressure dimension, the MMIS appears to be a highly useful tool for researchers interested in studying the effects of perceived media influence on body image among children entering the “tween” years, when body image disturbances left unchecked may go on to blossom into subthreshold eating disturbances or full-blown eating disorders by adolescence (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Unfortunately, Cusumano and Thompson’s (2001) report on the MMIS represents only a preliminary test of the measure. The data in their study were collected via cross-sectional survey methods; thus, the predictive capability of the MMIS for body dissatisfaction over time needs

confirmation. It is possible that pre-existing body dissatisfaction predicts perceptions of media influence simply by increasing youngsters’ awareness of media body ideals and their own sensitivity to them. Thus, longitudinal research investigating correlations between the MMIS and body dissatisfaction both immediately and over time is indicated. Furthermore, Cusumano and Thompson (2001) tested the factor structure of the MMIS using exploratory factor analysis. Confirmatory factor analysis is indicated for further establishing the unidimensionality of the three subscales and the multidimensionality of the scale overall.

The purpose of this paper was to satisfy these indications by (a) presenting confirmatory factor analyses testing the multidimensionality of the MMIS and the unidimensionality of its three subscales, and (b) testing the utility of the MMIS and its subscales in predicting body dissatisfaction both immediately and one year later among a sample of prepubescent children. Additionally, because research on prepubescent children (e.g., Harrison & Hefner, 2006) shows that media variables predict current (child) body ideals differently from future (adult) body ideals, this study uses two measures of body dissatisfaction, one involving appraisals of child figure drawings and the other involving appraisals of adult figure drawings. Lastly, because media effects on body image can differ by race/ethnicity, with the most deleterious effects for White/Anglo participants (Schooler, Ward, Merriwether, & Caruthers, 2004), the present study employs a sample of children from varied racial backgrounds, chiefly African American and Anglo American.

## Method

### Participants

Following approval from the author’s university’s Institutional Review Board, a sample of 685 children (50.5% female) in grades 2–4 were recruited from 8 elementary schools in districts in which parental socioeconomic status ranged from lower to middle class. The sample consisted of 68 (9.9%) 7-year-olds, 218 (31.8%) 8-year-olds, 214 (31.2%) 9-year-olds, 153 (22.3%) 10-year-olds, 29 (4.2%) 11-year-olds, and 3 (.4%) 12-year-olds. Thus the majority of participants were between the ages of 7 and 10, and their average age was 8.80 ( $SD = 1.05$ ). Forty-six participants were unable or unwilling to report their race/ethnicity. Of the remainder, the majority identified themselves as Black or African American (53.1%), followed by White or Anglo American (36.8%), Latino/a (3.9%), “Other” (2.8%), Native American Indian (2.2%), and Asian American (1.2%). In analyses involving race, Anglo American participants were compared to African American and Other participants combined.

### Procedure

All participants obtained parental consent and signed their own assent forms at the start of testing. Trained graduate and upper-level undergraduate research assistants administered questionnaires to single-gender groups of 2–5 children, separated by visual barriers to keep their responses private. The research assistant sat opposite each group and read each item aloud, pointing to a questionnaire to indicate the item along with its response options. To reduce primacy and recency effects, the order of response options was alternated across questionnaires. *t*-Tests confirmed that there were no effects of order. When they had completed their questionnaires, children received a novelty pencil and were escorted back to their classrooms.

One year later, the same participants were recruited to participate in a follow-up survey identical to the first survey in content, procedure, and compensation. Data for body dissatisfaction

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