Media exposure, internalization of the thin ideal, and body dissatisfaction: Comparing Asian American and European American college females

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ABSTRACT

Internalization of the thin ideal mediates the media exposure–body dissatisfaction relation in young adult European American females. There is little related research on Asian Americans. We used structural equations modeling to test: (1) whether media exposure was associated with body dissatisfaction in Asian American young adult females, (2) internalization of the thin ideal mediated any such association, and (3) whether the mediational model provided equivalent fit for European American and Asian American samples. Participants were 287 college females (154 Asian Americans, 133 European Americans). Internalization of the thin ideal explained the media exposure–body dissatisfaction association equally well for both groups. Results suggest that Asian Americans may be employing unhealthy weight control behaviors, and may be prone to developing eating disorders, at rates similar to European American young adult females. Clinicians need to screen carefully for body dissatisfaction, unhealthy weight control behaviors, and eating disorders in Asian American females.

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Introduction

Eating disorders predominantly target females, typically strike during late adolescence and young adulthood, and increasingly cross-cut racial/ethnic and socioeconomic lines (Hudson, Hiripi, Pope, & Kessler, 2007). A recent study using a nationally representative sample found no group differences in the prevalence of anorexia nervosa and binge eating disorder among non-Latino Whites, Latinos, African Americans, and Asian Americans, and greater prevalence of bulimia nervosa among Latinos and African Americans as compared to non-Latino Whites (Marques et al., 2010). These findings underscore the need for research to examine the risk factors and mechanisms involved in the development of eating disorders in racial/ethnic minority groups. Although there is a substantial literature on risk factors and mechanisms involved in the development and maintenance of eating disorders, the preponderance of this literature focuses on European-American samples. It cannot be assumed that this literature applies equally to U.S. racial/ethnic minority groups. In the present study, we compared Asian American and European American young adult females on three key constructs important in the development and maintenance of eating disorders: media exposure, internalization of the thin ideal, and body dissatisfaction. We also tested whether associations among these constructs operate similarly in each group.

European American females exhibit higher levels of body dissatisfaction and are doing so at increasingly younger ages (e.g., Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006). For ethnic minorities, the literature on body dissatisfaction is limited, and much less clear. A recent review of the literature on body image concerns and eating pathology in African American, Latino, Native American, and Asian American youth concluded that the most noteworthy aspect of this literature was the “consistent inconsistencies” across studies, with certain studies showing differences from, and other studies showing similarities to, European Americans (George & Franko, 2010, p. 236).

Indeed, studies on body dissatisfaction in Asian American females are few and have yielded contradictory findings. Certain studies have shown higher body satisfaction and a lower incidence of disordered eating in Asian Americans relative to other racial/ethnic groups (e.g., Cachelin, Rebeck, Chung, & Pelayo, 2002; Nicdao, Hong, & Takeuchi, 2007), suggesting that Asian ethnicity/culture may serve a protective role. Other studies have shown negative body image attitudes similar to European Americans (e.g., Gluck & Geliebter, 2002). Recent research suggests, moreover, that there is a growing trend of Asian females who aspire to the Western “thin ideal” (e.g., Luo, Parish, & Laumann, 2005; Stark-Wrblewski, Yanico, & Lupe, 2005). It has even been suggested that Asian American females have thinner body ideals (Barnett, Keel, & Conoscenti, 2001) and greater body dissatisfaction (Frederick, 2000).
Forbes, Grigorian, & Jarcho, 2007) than European Americans. The
need for additional research on Asian Americans is evident, par-
ticularly because Asians are the second-fastest growing immigrant
group in the U.S. (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2005), may be at high
risk for aspiring to the thin ideal, yet are among the least stud-
ied with regard to the development of body dissatisfaction and
disordered eating (Kawamura, 2002).

The literature on development of body dissatisfaction and disor-
dered eating in European American females suggests that pressure to
be thin derives from various sources including the media, par-
ents, and peers (e.g., Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn,
1999; Thompson & Stice, 2001). The media may be most potent
and insidious because of pervasive messages that propagate the
thin ideal as the sociocultural standard of beauty (e.g., Thompson &
Heinberg, 1999). A recent meta-analysis of 77 experimental
and correlational studies, with 90 independent effect sizes (Grabe,
Burr, & Hyde, 2008), has demonstrated convincingly that media
exposure is positively related to body dissatisfaction. As Grabe et al.
(2008) pointed out, although persuasive, a major shortcoming of
this literature is that samples were predominantly European Amer-
ican and findings cannot be generalized to minority populations
(Grabe & Hyde, 2006; Grabe et al., 2008). The upshot is that, for
Asian American young women, very little is known about either
the extent of their exposure to thin ideal media or whether any
such exposure adversely affects their body image.

The positive relation between exposure to thin ideal media
and body dissatisfaction appears to be robust and consistent for
European American females; however, as several reviews of the
literature have noted, the data suggest that it is not a direct asso-
ciation (e.g., Grabe et al., 2008; Greesoe, Levine, & Murnen, 2002).
A key social–cognitive mechanism in this association is theorized
to be internalization of the thin ideal. Internalization of the thin ideal
refers to the extent to which an individual “buys into” and attempts
attempts to adhere to societal ideals of attractiveness (Thompson,
Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). Individuals who subscribe to this
thin ideal are likely to discover that it is unattainable for them
and to experience body dissatisfaction (Thompson & Stice, 2001).
There is empirical evidence in support of this theoretical model
across several populations including adult females (Calogero, Davis,
& Thompson, 2005), adolescent females as young as 11 (Keery,
van den Berg, & Thompson, 2004), and even young adult males
(Karazsia & Crowther, 2008). Notably, the samples in these studies
were predominately European American.

We found no published study that has considered the associa-
tion between exposure to thin ideal media and the development of
body dissatisfaction in Asian Americans, or whether internaliza-
tion may account for any such association. A small pilot study on
Asian American college females found a positive relation between
internalization of the thin ideal and perceived pressure to be thin
and body preoccupation (Phan & Tyllka, 2006). This study neither
examined exposure to thin ideal media nor tested a mediational
model. Another study found that Asian American women tended
to adopt mainstream beauty ideals, compare themselves to these
unattainable standards, and strive to meet those ideals (Evans &
McConnell, 2003). More recently, internalization of the thin ideal
was shown to mediate the media exposure–body dissatisfaction
relation in a sample of Japanese undergraduate women (Yamamiya,
Shroff, & Thompson, 2008). These studies, taken together, suggest
that Asian American females may be susceptible to the influence of
mainstream thin ideal media. It is also possible that mechanisms of
influence operate in ways similar to European American females.

In the present study, we used structural equation modeling
(SEM) with cross-sectional data to test a model positing that, like
European American females, media exposure is associated with
body dissatisfaction in Asian American females, and that internal-
ization of the thin ideal mediates this association. Using structural

equation modeling also allowed us to test whether this mediational
model applied equally to Asian American females and European
American females.

Method

This study was approved by the institutional review board of
the University of California, Berkeley. Participants were recruited
via an electronic posting on the website of the psychology depart-
ment. This posting listed age (18–25 years), sex (female), and race
eligibility (European American or Asian American) as inclusion cri-
teria. Participants received course credit. Once consented, the 299
participants completed surveys independently.

Measures

Subjective socioeconomic status (sSES). The MacArthur sSES
scale (Adler, Epel, Castellazzo, & Ickovics, 2000) was used to
measure participants’ sSES, and has good test–retest reliability
(Operario, Adler, & Williams, 2004). Respondents mark a rung on
an image of a ladder with 10 rungs (rated from 0 to 9) represent-
ing an ascending sSES scale. Thus, sSES was reported and used as
a continuous variable.

Self-reported weight and height. Participants reported their
height and weight. Body mass index (BMI) was calculated as per-
ceived weight in pounds per height in inches squared, multiplied by
703 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2007).

Media exposure. Television and magazine exposure served as
the observed indicators of the latent underlying construct of media
exposure. A list of TV programs with lead characters judged to be
representative of the thin ideal (e.g., Botta, 1999) selected from
TV Guide’s 100 top rated shows in 2006. Participants were pro-
vided a list of these shows/channels (e.g., America’s Next Top Model,
the “E” Entertainment channel) and asked to circle the television
shows/channels they watched regularly. The number of shows cir-
cled was summed to create a continuous index of thin-ideal TV
shows watched.

Participants were also asked to list the magazines to which
they subscribed or which they purchased or read regularly
(e.g., Stice, Schipak-Neuberg, Shaw, & Stein, 1994). Magazines
were then classified as one of the two categories: Fash-
ion/Entertainment/Lifestyle (e.g., Vogue, Fitness, People, and Shape)
or Other (e.g., Time, Newsweek, Home and Garden). Extent of
thin-ideal print media exposure was defined as the count of Fash-
ion/Entertainment/Lifestyle magazines that participants listed.

Internalization of the thin ideal. The 30-item Sociocultural
Attitudes Toward Appearance Scale–3 (SATAQ-3; Thompson,
van den Berg, Roehrig, Guarda, & Heinberg, 2004) has been shown
to have good internal consistency, test–retest reliability, con-
vergent and divergent validity, as well as predictive validity
(Thompson et al., 2004). It is comprised of four subscales that
measure various aspects of media influence: information, pressures,
internalization–general, and internalization–athlete. The information
subscale measures the extent that the media is believed to be an
important source of information; the pressures subscale measures
the level of perceived pressure to be thin; the internalization–general
subscale measures overall internalization of the socially prescribed
thin-ideal; and the internalization–athlete subscale measures the
extent of internalization of the athletic look. For the mediational
models in this study, we used each of the two internalization sub-
scales (general and athlete) as indicators of a single underlying
latent variable, internalization of the thin ideal. Participants rated
their agreement with items (e.g., “I would like my body to look
like the models who appear in magazines”; “I compare my body
to that of people who are athletic.”) on a 5-point Likert-type scale

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