



## Mediators of the relationship between media literacy and body dissatisfaction in early adolescent girls: Implications for prevention



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### ABSTRACT

This study examined in young adolescent girls the fit of a theoretical model of the contribution of media literacy to body dissatisfaction via the mediating influences of internalisation of media ideals and appearance comparisons. Female Grade 7 students ( $N=469$ ) completed self-report assessments of media literacy, internalisation, appearance comparisons, body dissatisfaction, and media exposure. Strong, significant inverse associations between media literacy and body dissatisfaction, internalisation, and appearance comparisons were observed. Path analysis revealed that a slightly modified revision of the model provided a good fit to the data. Specifically, body dissatisfaction was influenced directly by appearance comparisons, internalisation, and body mass index, and indirectly by media literacy and media exposure. Indirect pathways were mediated by appearance comparisons and internalisation. Thus, a relationship between media literacy and eating disorder risk factors was observed. Findings may explain positive outcomes of media literacy interventions in eating disorder prevention.

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### Introduction

Body dissatisfaction affects a high proportion of adolescent girls and has a range of psychological and physical health implications. More than 75% of girls want to be thinner (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001) and over 35% report undue influence of body image on self-esteem (Ackard, Fulkerson, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2007). Body dissatisfaction is a prospective risk factor for eating disorders (Stice, Marti, & Durant, 2011), disordered eating (Ferreiro, Seoane, & Senra, 2011), overweight (van den Berg & Neumark-Sztainer, 2007), engagement in unhealthy weight control behaviours (Neumark-Sztainer, Paxton, Hannan, Haines, & Story, 2006), and low self-esteem and depressive symptoms (Paxton, Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, & Eisenberg, 2006).

Factors that contribute to the development of body dissatisfaction include sociocultural pressure to conform to a thin body ideal from a variety of sources (Wertheim & Paxton, 2011), including parents (Rodgers, Paxton, & Chabrol, 2009), peers (Jones, Vigfusdottir, & Lee, 2004), and media (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002); as well as biological factors, particularly body mass index (BMI; van den Berg, Thompson, Obremski-Brandon, & Coovert, 2002). The study

reported here focussed particularly on media influences. A factor we propose that may mitigate the negative influence on body image of exposure to idealised media images is *media literacy*, which may be defined as the ability to access, analyse, evaluate, and understand media (Thoman & Jolls, 2003). Although a relationship between media literacy and body dissatisfaction has been assumed in previous studies that include media literacy training, research to date has not looked at whether media literacy is associated with body dissatisfaction, nor whether any variables mediate this relationship. This was the goal of the present study.

Media exposure contributes to the development of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (Harrison, 2000) as demonstrated by research using cross-sectional (Harrison, 2000; Jones et al., 2004; Tiggemann & Miller, 2010), prospective (Schooler & Trinh, 2011), and experimental (Durkin & Paxton, 2002; Groesz et al., 2002) designs which have found positive relationships between exposure to idealised images and body dissatisfaction. However, variation exists in the extent of change in body dissatisfaction following media exposure (Durkin & Paxton, 2002). Pre-existing participant characteristics and the ways in which media images are internally processed may moderate and/or mediate the impact of media exposure on body dissatisfaction.

A well-researched model linking sociocultural influences to body dissatisfaction is the tripartite influence model proposed by Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, and Tantleff-Dunn (1999). This model portrays two variables that mediate relationships between sociocultural influences and body dissatisfaction: internalisation of the thin ideal and appearance comparisons. Internalisation of the thin

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ideal is the process of adopting sociocultural standards for thinness as personal standards. Appearance comparisons involve making a judgement about one's appearance in comparison with others' appearance. The tripartite model proposes that the social environment (parents, peers, and media) affects body dissatisfaction by influencing individuals' tendency to internalise thin body ideals and by promoting frequent comparisons between one's own and others' bodies. The tripartite model posits that when individuals internalise thin, unattainable body ideals, such as those presented in the media, and repeatedly compare themselves to unattainable bodies, these processes foster body dissatisfaction.

Considering media exposure as the source of influence and consistent with the tripartite model, internalisation (Jones et al., 2004; Tiggemann & Miller, 2010) and appearance comparisons (Durkin, Paxton, & Sorbello, 2007; Tiggemann & Miller, 2010; van den Berg, Paxton, Keery, Wall, Guo, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2007) have both been shown to mediate the effect of experimental or natural exposure to thin-ideal images on body dissatisfaction in adolescent girls. In addition, in specific investigations of the tripartite model, these variables have been shown to mediate the relationship between media influence and body dissatisfaction in adolescent samples (Keery, van den Berg, & Thompson, 2004; Shroff & Thompson, 2006). These results suggest that negative evaluation of appearance following media exposure is the likely consequence of comparing oneself to others, which could include media images, and internalising sociocultural standards for thinness that are for most, unattainable. Thus, internal processing of images may be crucial to the ultimate effect of media exposure on body dissatisfaction.

Engaging in media literacy by actively responding to images using critical examination and analysis, rather than passive viewing, has the potential to influence the degree to which exposure to media contributes to body dissatisfaction. Critical processing has received attention through media literacy based prevention interventions. The intent of these interventions is to foster the ability to take an active, critical perspective of media (Bergsma & Carney, 2008), with the assumption that images are then perceived to be inappropriate for appearance-related comparisons and less acceptable as standards of beauty to be internalised, thus limiting the persuasive impact of media (Berel & Irving, 1998; Halliwell, Easun, & Harcourt, 2011).

Media literacy programs and brief experimental interventions have shown promise in the prevention of body dissatisfaction. Evaluations in high school settings of multi-session prevention programs that include media literacy components produce positive effects for internalisation of the thin ideal, appearance comparisons, and body dissatisfaction in girls (Richardson & Paxton, 2010), and body dissatisfaction in boys and girls (Wilksch & Wade, 2009). Experimental studies have shown that brief media literacy interventions can prevent adverse body image outcomes from media exposure (Halliwell et al., 2011; Quigg & Want, 2011). The changes produced in body image, appearance comparisons, and internalisation suggests that media literacy interventions may produce effects on body image by interrupting the comparison and internalisation processes. However, media literacy has not been assessed in experimental or multi-session interventions, so it is not possible to deduce the amount of change attributable to media literacy. It is also difficult to separate media literacy induced effects from those that may have resulted from other factors addressed in multi-session programs. These findings hint at a relationship between media literacy and body dissatisfaction, but a direct examination is lacking.

Analyses of mediation effects from cognitive dissonance interventions may provide insight into the relationships assumed to underlie the association between media literacy and body dissatisfaction. Cognitive dissonance programs encourage participants to question sociocultural appearance ideals in order to reduce internalisation of the thin ideal, in a similar manner to the way in which

the media literacy approach is proposed to reduce internalisation by critically analysing thin-ideal images in media. Examination of mediation effects in the cognitive dissonance prevention interventions found that change in internalisation of the thin-ideal mediated program outcomes in relation to body dissatisfaction and bulimic symptoms (Seidel, Presnell, & Rosenfield, 2009; Stice, Presnell, Gau, & Shaw, 2007). Such findings provide direction for examining mediation effects in media literacy interventions. Understanding the direct and indirect relationships between media literacy and body dissatisfaction, as proposed by the current research, would provide preliminary support for potential mediators in media literacy interventions.

Further indirect support for the contention that engaging in critical processing, an integral part of media literacy, can mitigate the effects of media exposure on body image has come from qualitative studies. Holmqvist and Frisén (2012) found that adolescents with positive body image reported strong criticism of media images, describing them as unrealistic and reporting that people in real life do not look like those portrayed in media. Furthermore, girls recognised that advertisers and media project underlying messages, such as "buy this top and it will make you look this thin" (Holmqvist & Frisén, p. 391). These findings suggest that adolescents are able to resist the persuasive influence of media by recognising the unrealistic nature of the images and examining the underlying purpose of the advertisements in using images of very slim models. College age women with positive body image also recognised the unrealistic nature of media images and extended this recognition by actively "filtering" potentially harmful media influences which prevented pressures to be thin from being internalised (Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, & Augustus-Horvath, 2010). Consolidation of these qualitative findings with quantitative studies guided by an explicit theoretical model would strengthen conclusions that can be drawn.

The need to directly investigate the degree to which critical processing undertaken when viewing images is related to body image has been recognised by Engeln-Maddox and Miller (2008) who developed a measure for this purpose. Somewhat surprisingly, in young women, engagement in the critical thinking aspect of media literacy was either not associated with body image or was associated with higher levels of concerns. However, media literacy skills may be more important during adolescence, when body image is less stable (Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Paxton, 2006).

The influence of BMI on the relationship between media exposure and body dissatisfaction is unclear. Body mass index has not been included in investigations of the tripartite influence model in female adolescent samples (Keery et al., 2004; Shroff & Thompson, 2006), and examination of simple correlations within these samples has indicated that the association between BMI and media influence was negligible. In addition, direct pathways from BMI to thin-ideal internalisation or to appearance comparisons have in some studies not been supported (Knauss, Paxton, & Alsaker, 2008; Kroon Van Diest & Perez, 2013; van den Berg et al., 2002), whereas in other studies direct paths have been demonstrated from BMI to internalisation (Jones et al., 2004), and from BMI to appearance comparisons (van den Berg et al., 2007). Further examination of these relationships is warranted.

Our research aimed to investigate in adolescent girls the relationships between media literacy, media exposure, and three risk factors of eating disorders: internalisation of media ideals, appearance comparisons, and body dissatisfaction. A substantial amount of literature suggests that the key element of body dissatisfaction which predicts disordered eating pathology is weight and shape concerns (Wertheim, Paxton, & Blaney, 2009). For the purposes of the current study, we use the term body dissatisfaction to refer to concern about, and dissatisfaction with, body weight and shape.

It was hypothesised that media literacy would be inversely associated with appearance comparisons, internalisation of media

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