



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 high 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-Wroblewski, 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,

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Forbes, Grigorian, & Jarcho, 2007) than European Americans. The need for additional research on Asian Americans is evident, particularly 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 studied with regard to the development of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (Kawamura, 2002).

The literature on development of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating in European American females suggests that pressure to be thin derives from various sources including the media, parents, 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, Ward, & 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 American 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 association (e.g., Grabe et al., 2008; Groesz, 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 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 association between exposure to thin ideal media and the development of body dissatisfaction in Asian Americans, or whether internalization 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 & Tylka, 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 these 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 internalization 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 department. This posting listed age (18–25 years), sex (female), and race eligibility (European American or Asian American) as inclusion criteria. 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) representing 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 perceived 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 provided 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 circled 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: Fashion/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 Fashion/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, convergent 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 subscales (*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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