

Media influence on dietary practices of college going girls

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■ **ABSTRACT :** This study aimed to research into the effects of media exposure to slimming and fitness advertisements on body dissatisfaction, eating disorder symptomatology and weight loss behaviour and the relations between body dissatisfaction and extreme weight loss behaviour. A random sample of 250 students all of them belonging to Allahabad university completed a set of questionnaire body shape questionnaire, eat-26 and weight loss behaviour scale result indicates that fashion or beauty magazines, social comparisons, overall appearance dissatisfaction and critical body image processing are important predictors of body image and eating disturbances for adolescent girls the result highlights the need for media activism to help change the current normative body discontent of women in India.

■ **KEY WORDS:** Mass media, Eating disorder, Body dissatisfaction, Weight loss behaviour

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People are exposed to innumerable mass media images in the form of billboards, television and magazines. Although not all advertising images are idealized and some advertising show relatively ordinary people in everyday situations, most advertising present on unrealistic or idealized picture of people and their lives. The use of technology and special effects allows for images to be yet more perfect and idealized images play a significant role in facilitating self comparisons among women, resulting in an upward shift of individual personal image expectations. In this way images in the media are problematic for women. especially adolescent and pre adolescent women viewing thin and beautiful models in advertisements create self doubt and body dissatisfaction among many young women concerning their bodies and faces and can undermine their self confidence. As a result, they indulge in unhealthy eating disorder (anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge) and also to engage in strategies aimed at modifying the appearance of the body including dietary restraint.

Literature review :

The purpose of this literature review is to outline theoretical framework for this study and to present current

research on factors responsible for development of eating disorder in adolescent girls. Body image is the mental image we hold of our bodies (A.Faloon). It encompasses both how we see ourselves(perceptual) and how we feel about what we see (affective).body image is a multidimensional construct, that involves internal biological and psychological factor as well as external cultural and social factors (Cash and Pruzinsky, 1990) Stice and Shaw (1994) observed that college women who were exposed to attractive image from magazines become less confident, more depressed, more ashamed, and more dissatisfied with their bodies than those who were not exposed to the images, therefore college women who are frequently exposed to media images may be less satisfied with their bodies and physical appearance. Harrison (2001) found that exposure to thin-ideal TV was associated with a rise in eating disorder symptoms in adolescent girls; this effect was partially mediated through increasing perceived discrepancies between actual and ideal body shape. Stice *et al.* (1994) found that among young college women, greater media exposure was linked directly with more eating disorder symptoms and indirectly through stronger internalization of the ideal-body stereotype with greater body dissatisfaction. Studies suggest that comparison processes may be triggered automatically for

women as soon as attractive media models are presented (Cattarin *et al.*, 2000; Dittmar and Howard, 2004) Harrison and Cantor (1997) found that exposure to thinness portraying and promoting media, especially magazines, showing anorexia, wish for thinness, dissatisfaction with the body and in effectiveness in females is rising. During the past 50 years content analysis (Wiseman *et al.*, 1992; Silverstein *et al.*, 1986; Garner *et al.*, 1985) suggests that since the birth of television, females models have become considerably thinner to the extent that presently more than half of them meet the criteria for anorexia. Anne and Debra (2003) have proposed a link between the thin female beauty ideal portrayed in the media with a range of psychosocial symptomatology including body dissatisfaction and eating disorders. Media exposure has been implicated in enhancing risk for the development of an eating disorder. Much of the literature and theory on how cultural context promotes risk for disordered eating and poor body image has emphasized how social pressure to be thin are internalized and there by contribute to body dissatisfaction and ultimately disordered eating in vulnerable individuals (Garner *et al.*, 1985). One of the ways by which disclosure to idealized images has an impact on body image is inspiring through social comparison (Festinger, 1954) and body dissatisfaction (Heinberg and Thompson, 1992) Eating disorders theorists and feminist scholars have long indicate fashion magazines, movies, television and advertising for their advocacy of disordered eating (Levin and Smolak, 1996) Freedman (1986) explains that the impact of today's print visual media is different from the effect of the visual arts of the past. Print and electronic media images blur the boundaries between a fictionalized ideal and reality, and often the sub textual, if not the overt, message is that one need only comply with provided guidelines to achieve that ideal. Photographic technique such as air brushing, soft focus cameras, composite figures, editing, and filters may blur the realistic nature of media images but also create realistic representations of actual people, rather than carefully manipulating the artificial image. (Stormer and Thompson, 1998) Each form of media serves a different purpose and it seeks to inform us, convince us, entertain us, and change us. The media also search for to engage large group of people so that advertisers can sell their products or services by making them more attractive.

Thin models and actresses appear to be the standard in today's media, ever present on television and in magazines, movies and internet sites. Advertisements targeting young women features thin and beautiful models in desirable circumstances in order to sell clothing, accessories and other products. There is a mediated norm for body image in present day culture and it is characterized by bodies that are extremely thin (Hendriks and Burgoon, 2003). This mediated thin ideal is present in mainstream media and mainstream media are a source women turn to for information about how to look (Hendriks, 2002). Attractive people achieve more in our society; they are

viewed as more successful happier with their lives, therefore, some women may see their body shape and weight as a sort of "measuring stick" of social value (Hesse-Biber *et al.*, 2006). Media promote the idea that thinness is an advantageous attribute and ascribe the attribute to the most "beautiful, desirable and successful protagonists" (Harrison, 2000). Therefore there is enough evidence to link relationship between ideal image in media and development of eating disorder in adolescent females.

Two types of eating disorder recognized by the diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (DSM-IV-TR:-American psychiatric association, 2000) are bulimia nervosa and anorexia nervosa. bulimia nervosa defined as "An emotional disorder involving the distortion of body image and obsessive desire to lose weight, in which bouts of extreme overeating are followed by depression and self induced vomiting, purging or fasting, similarly anorexia nervosa is defined as "An emotional disorder characterized by an obsessive desire to lose weight by refusing to eat and a distorted image of the body". The diagnostic criteria for bulimia nervosa and anorexia nervosa, according to the DSM-IV-TR, include an intense anxiety about gaining weight becoming fat and a disturbance of body image. Both disorders are associated with wide spread psychopathology that eventually disrupts normal activities at school or work. Among young women, various eating related problems such as use of laxatives or diuretics, strict eating restraints, and binge eating are associated with dissatisfaction.

Hypothesis :

This study hypothesized that exposure to unsolicited weight loss and fitness advertisement (media exposure) does affect body dissatisfaction, eating and dieting behaviours among adolescent college going girls.

Objective :

The main objective of this study was to investigate the relationships among four continuous variables; the independent variable-the media exposure scores (ME); and the dependent variables-eating disorder symptomatology, body dissatisfaction and weight loss behaviour. The research design was a co relational design utilizing survey methodology.

■ RESEARCH METHODS

A questionnaire packet was distributed to 250 college going girls during class time and returned within the half an hour from the department of home science and centre of food technology at a university of Allahabad. Ranging in age from 17 to 27 years (M=22 SD= 3.3)

Only 241 students completed the questionnaire rest of the questionnaire had to be eliminated. This study targeted female college students because (a) physical attractiveness is especially important to them (b) thin and beautiful idealized

images in media play a significant role in influencing self confidence and(c) these types of images have been associated with eating related problems.

Material used :

- Media exposure questionnaire- 16 items measuring the frequency of exposure to slimming and fitness advertisements and the source of such exposure.
- Eating attitude test-26 -Garner and Garfunkel’s (1979) eating attitude test was used to measure eating disorder tendencies. The eat is one of the most widely used self-report instruments that assesses eating disorder tendencies. The eat was originally developed to screen for anorexia nervosa and has proven to be a reliable and valid objective measure of the symptoms of eating disorder.
- Body shape questionnaire –The visual analogue scales developed by Heinberg and Thompson (1992) were used in this research to measure two aspects of body image; body dissatisfaction and overall appearance dissatisfaction.
- Weight loss behaviour scale-21 questions on weight loss behaviour (O’Dea *et al.*, 1996) as well as 7 items on important criteria for selection of weight loss methods and 7 items on demographic and general information such as age, gender, height and weight of participants.

Instruments :

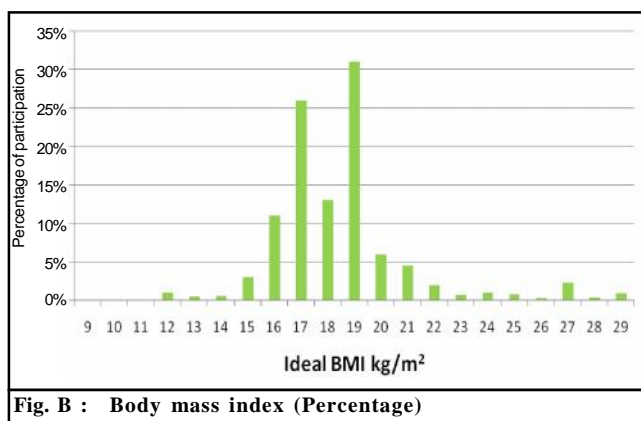
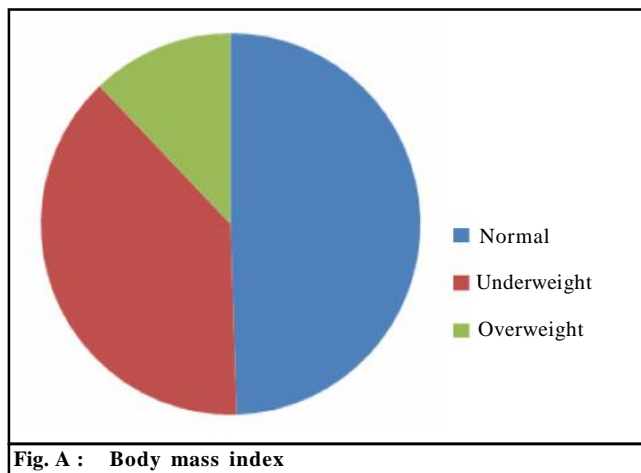
The principal independent variable in this study is media exposure and body dissatisfaction, weight loss behaviour and eating disorder symptomatology used as dependent variable

Procedure :

A set of questionnaire packet was distributed during class time and returned within half an hour. Participants were 250 girls between the ages of 17 to 27(M= 22) SD=3.3 The self reported heights of respondents ranged from 4ft 10inch to 5ft 8inch with an average of 5ft 4inch the range of self reported weights was 40 to 75kg with an average of 55.5kg. Based on these values body mass index was calculated as the ratio of weight to height squared (kg/m^2) for each participant. According to the BMI charts, lower than 20 is categorized as underweight from 20 to 25 is categorized as normal normal weight and higher than 25 is categorized as overweight. Body mass index for the respondents ranged from 16.3 to 29.16 (M=19.94) S.D. =3.49 Nearly 49 per cent of respondents were categorized normal, about 38 per cent were categorized underweight, and 12 per cent were categorized overweight. Therefore, a majority were in the normal and under weight.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The result of this study supported that exposure to



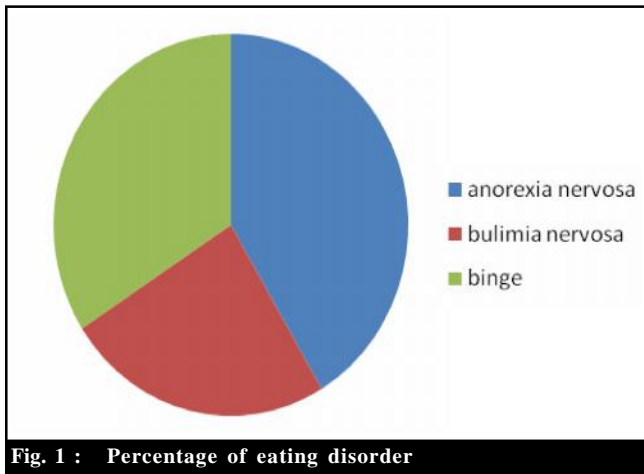
unsolicited slimming and fitness advertisement was associated with body dissatisfaction, eating disorder symptomatology and weight loss behaviours for girls media exposure was positively associated with body dissatisfaction, eating attitude test-26 and weight loss behaviour. Although the effect sizes were moderate to small. It was noted that the association between media exposure and body dissatisfaction was stronger than the association with the two remaining variables, eating attitude test and weight loss behaviour. These results suggested that media exposure to idealized body images trigger certain psychological processes, which contributed to the psychological state of body dissatisfaction, which in turn affect the eating disorder symptomatology and weight loss behaviours. The researcher observed that the BMI of 40 per cent students fell much below the standard BMI of 25 and on a paradox they believed that they were fat and needed to further slim down. Images in the media are more camera adjusted and improved upon on photoshop and other software’s. They leave an impact on the minds of young women, who start idealizing and wish to conform to those images as a result those young women are famished, and often fall prey to fertility problems and other long term diseases

which are caused due to deficiency of essential amino acids, essential fatty acids and minerals.

Statistical analysis of data :

Media exposure :

The media exposure scores had a mean of 47.97 (S.D.=14.18). Media exposure was positively associated with body dissatisfaction, eating attitude test and weight loss behaviour.



	N	M	S.D.	Min.	Max.
AGE	241	21.5	1.83	18	27
ME	241	47.97	14.18	16	90
BSQ	241	62.75	9.60	38	90
EAT	241	16.29	6.39	7	29
WLB	241	58.2	18.08	33	86
BMI	241	19.94	3.49	16.2	29.9

Body perception and ideal BMI :

Most respondents perceived themselves to be larger than they really were; over 38 per cent girls described themselves as normal or overweight when they were in fact underweight or normal in weight, respectively.

Eating disorder symptomatology :

20 (8.2%) of the respondents had an eat score over 20 which is indicator of disturbed eating behaviour but not necessarily have clinical anorexia nervosa or another eating disorder.

Weight loss behaviour :

58.2 per cent respondents had engaged in at least one weight loss behaviour and 39.7 per cent (extreme weight loss behaviour) respondents had used some kind of laxatives or diet pills and tried to fast and starved themselves.

Conclusion :

The use of realistic models in the media could reduce perceived pressure to be thin and construct positive attitudes of self and thus, counteract the possible negative influences of idealized media images. From a social responsibility point of view, the concept of feminine beauty in our society is in need of change. Parents, teachers, and college counseling services have a responsibility to help female college students develop individuality and value their personal uniqueness and believe in themselves, rather than seen after false images. Thus avoiding the trap of eating disorders and suffering nutritional deficiency disorders leading to serious health problems.

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