The Struggle Between the Real and Ideal: Impact of Acute Media Exposure on Body Image of Young Indian Women

Itisha Nagar and Rukhsana Virk

Abstract
Media, in its diverse forms, has become a powerful tool for construction and portrayal of the “shoulds, oughts, and musts” of a woman’s body. As a result of “thinning” of beauty ideals in the media, the real woman finds the representations of ideal woman to be increasingly unattainable. This exploratory study examined the effect of acute media images for a sample of young adult Indian woman (N = 60). A 2 (intervention group) × 2 (time) mixed-group design was used where half the participants were presented with thin-ideal media images, whereas the other half were presented with control images. The participants were examined on body image dissatisfaction, thin-ideal internalization, and self-esteem. Results of the study indicate a significant increase in thin-ideal internalization and body dissatisfaction and a significant decrease in self-esteem scores as a result of exposure to the thin-ideal media images. The findings of the study indicate that, similar to their counterparts in Europe and North America, young urban Indian women experience body image disturbances when exposed to thin-ideal images. The findings have been examined in light of the spread of global media and homogenization of beauty standards among non-Western countries.

Keywords
thin-ideal internalization, self-esteem, body image, Indian women, body dissatisfaction, media and society, mass communication, communication, social sciences

Introduction
All cultures recognize idealized images by which men and women are judged as worthy members of their sex. These images form an essential component of our body image, that is, how we think, feel, and behave with regard to our physical attributes (Grogan, 2007). The images we hold of our bodies are not always accurate nor are they static; sensitive to changes in mood, environment, and experiences, these images are ever changing. Among the variety of social experiences that potentially influence an individual’s body image, mass media has been most extensively studied. Media technologies (magazines, newspapers, television [TV], movies, and now social networking websites) provide a platform to portray, communicate, and construct how an ideal body looks like. Although, both genders are exposed to ideal body media images, studies report that women are more vulnerable to body image disturbances than men (Makowski, Mnich, Angermeyer, Löwe, & von dem Knesebeck, 2015).

Over the years, the Western media has propagated almost unattainable body images as ideal for women. The unattainability of the images is evident in the omnipresence of “size 0” models and celebrities in media who often resort to extreme measures such as unhealthy diet, exercise or even use of drugs or plastic surgery to maintain almost “sickly-thin” body shape and size. Furthermore, the images we see are often artificially enhanced by use of excess makeup and computerized tools such as Photoshop (Field et al., 2005). Unfortunately, these images are readily consumed by women often without any awareness of the artificial nature of these images, that is, women tend to engage in upward social comparisons processes (Festinger, 1954). Consequently, negative self-evaluations made through social comparisons with media dictated ideals often leads to self-deprecation, reduced self-esteem, and in extreme cases, even eating disorders (Thompson & Stice, 2001). Thus, ideal body images and objectification of women as is done in the mass media, puts women at risk for negative affect, body shame, body image disturbance, eating disorders, and depression (Fredrickson &...
Western women is a special case that merits close attention. In the context of globalization and the consequent proliferation of Western cultural ideals through global media, an important question arises: How does the thin-ideal body image affect women in non-Western countries such as India? Previous studies examining the body image of urban and educated Indian girls/women present a dismal picture. Although epidemiological evidence is lacking with respect to prevalence of eating disorders in India, a survey among psychiatrists in Bangalore found that two thirds of psychiatrists reported seeing at least one case of eating disorder, indicating that eating disorders are not uncommon in urban India (Chandra, Abbas & Palmer, 2012). Furthermore, emergent studies indicate that an increasing number of women in India display body image disturbances. For instance, Goswami, Sachdeva, and Sachdeva (2012) reported high body image dissatisfaction in a sample of college-going young adult women. They found that overweight students with high body mass index (BMI) had a significantly higher prevalence of dissatisfaction relative to students with low BMI. Bodily dissatisfaction was also reported in urban adolescent Indian girls aged 14 to 19 years; not only were the overweight girls dissatisfied with their bodies but also many normal-weight girls perceived themselves as overweight and attempted to lose weight (Som & Mukhopadhyay, 2015). In a study that examined both school- and college-going girls/women (16-21 years), researchers found that 86% of the participants desired to be “slim.” Furthermore, they reported that a perception of a weight problem but not BMI contributed significantly to higher scores on General Health Questionnaire, a psychiatric screening tool (Latha, Hegde, Bhat, Sharma, & Rai, 2006). Dixit, Agarwal, Singh, Kant, and Singh (2011) examined the role of age and urban living as variables influencing bodily dissatisfaction in adolescent girls (10-19 years); younger age groups and urban residents expressed significantly more dissatisfaction relative to older age groups and rural residents.

In addition to Indian sample of women, dissatisfaction with body shape and size has also been reported for other non-Western countries such as Fiji (Becker, Burwell, Herzog, Hamburg, & Gilman, 2002), Croatia (Rukavina & Pokrajac-Buljan, 2006), UAE (Eapen, Mabrouk, & Bin-Othman, 2006), and Korea (Jung & Lee, 2006). Given that many underdeveloped and developing countries face severe nutritional challenges affecting their physical and mental health, existence of eating disorders and body image disturbances in non-Western context is surprising. In addition, “thinness” is usually not a traditionally ideal physical characteristic for many Eastern cultures including India. This is because being thin is seen as sickly, indicative of poverty, and a lack of privileged upbringing. Thus, body image disturbance in non-Western women is a special case that merits close attention.

Present Study

Indian magazines, movies, TV shows, and social media have bombarded the 21st-century Indian women with Western beauty ideals: fairness and thinness. For instance, in spite of having a range of skin color, almost all Indian actresses and models are (portrayed) overwhelmingly fair skinned (Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009). Kapadia (2009) interviewed 26 Indian women who reported that social comparisons with friends and family members as well as Bollywood actresses play a role in their dissatisfaction with theory body shape and size. They also revealed that they have noted a trend for women in Bollywood to become slimmer over time. Indian media overwhelmingly portray Western ideals when it comes to images of women. For instance, even though MTV aimed to “Indianise” its programming after it was introduced in 1994, Cullity (2002) found that the channel promoted many Western values notably the beauty ideal of thinness.

The link between proliferation of Western beauty ideals and rise of body image disturbances in non-Western (Indian) women makes for an important topic of research. Given the role played by this socioculturally acquired vulnerability on the general well-being of women, the need to address this topic becomes pertinent. Therefore, the present study aimed to explore the effect of exposure to acute thin-ideal media images on college-going urban Indian women’s body image. Especially, the study examined the effect on (a) thin-ideal internalization, (b) body dissatisfaction, and (c) self-esteem of young Indian women. It was hypothesized that the thin-ideal media images would lead to increase in internalization of the thin-ideal, increase in body dissatisfaction, and decrease in self-esteem of college-going urban Indian women.

Method

Participants

Sixty female students from different colleges in Delhi between the ages of 18 and 22 were selected for the study. All participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: media intervention and control group. As can be seen, the participants in the two treatment conditions were matched on the following self-reported variables: age, education, BMI, and social media consumption (Table 1). An effort was made to minimize the influence of these variables.

Design

A 2 (intervention group) × 2 (time) mixed-group design was used. All participants were assessed twice: once before exposure to the treatment condition (pretreatment) and once after the treatment condition (posttreatment).
Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants in Media Intervention and Control Group.

|                    | Media intervention group | Control group |
|--------------------|--------------------------|---------------|
| Age                | M 19.77  (SD 1.33) Range 18-22 | M 20.13 (SD 1.52) Range 18-22 |
| Education          | M 14.47 (SD 0.90) Range 13-16 | M 14.50 (SD 1.01) Range 13-16 |
| BMI                | M 20.55 (SD 1.97) Range 18-24 | M 20.63 (SD 2.35) Range 17-26 |
| Social media       | M 7.28 (SD 3.12) Range 2-14 | M 6.97 (SD 2.20) Range 3-13 |
| Consumption        |                          |               |

Note. BMI = body mass index.
*Operationalized as number of hours spent during the day watching television (TV) shows and movies and reading magazines (noneducational) and using social networking portals such as Facebook and Instagram.

Materials

For the media intervention condition, the participants were exposed to a video of models displaying the famous lingerie brand, “Victoria’s Secret.” The video lasting a minute was chosen to facilitate the aim of the study, that is, to examine the role of Western thin-ideal media on body image of Indian women. The video chosen shows lingerie models thereby prominently displaying the thin beauty ideal. For the control condition, a cartoon video was deliberately selected to avoid any references to body image. Control participants were exposed to a cartoon movie also for duration of 1 min.

Measures

The effects of intervention were observed on body dissatisfaction, thin-ideal internalization, and self-esteem. The measures used in the present study have also been used in previous studies examining media-related body image disturbances.

Body dissatisfaction. The Figure Rating Scale (Stunkard, Sørensen, & Schlusinger, 1983) is an instrument used to determine body dissatisfaction in males and females. The scale comprises nine male or female schematic silhouettes of varying shapes, ranging from extreme thinness to extreme obesity. The respondent is required to select the silhouette that she feels is reflective of her current body size and the silhouette that represents her ideal body size. The discrepancy between the two is considered the quotient of the respondent’s dissatisfaction with his or her body. As the scale only makes use of figures and is nonverbal, it has been effectively used to assess body dissatisfaction with non-Western samples (e.g., Swami et al., 2010; Thomas, Khan, & Abdulrahman, 2010).

Thin-ideal internalization. Thin-ideal internalization was assessed using the Ideal Body Stereotype Scale–Revised (Stice, 2001). It is an eight-item instrument that asks participants to indicate their level of agreement with six statements concerning what attractive women look like, on a 5-point scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. For example, “Tall women are more attractive” and “Women who are in shape are more attractive.”

Self-esteem. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965) is a 10-item Likert-type scale that assesses global self-esteem of an individual. The responses are answered on a 4-point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Examples of items include “I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others” and “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.” High scores on this scale suggest grater self-esteem.

Procedure

Informed consent was taken from all participants at the beginning of the study and confidentiality and privacy were ensured and maintained. Pretreatment data for all three measures—Figure Rating Scale, Ideal Body Stereotype Scale, and Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale were collected from all participants. After 1 week, participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. They were then shown the video clippering associated with the condition. After a 5-min interval, posttreatment measures were collected. The entire procedure was done in person, in laboratory setting. Finally, debriefing was done for all. It was ensured that there were no long-lasting effects of the media intervention.

Statistical Analysis

First, preliminary information regarding, age, education, BMI, and social media consumption, collected from the participants across two conditions, was compared to make sure that there were no significant differences across the participants (Table 1). Second, descriptive statistics were obtained noting ranges, means, and standard deviations for the dependent variables. After which the data was screened for normality, outliers, fit between distribution and assumptions of parametric statistics. Next, a 2 (intervention group) × 2 (time) mixed-group ANOVA was used to determine effects of exposure to the different treatment conditions on level of body satisfaction, thin-ideal internalization, and self-esteem. Additional analysis using paired samples t test was performed individually for both conditions (control and intervention) to check for significant differences between the pretreatment and posttreatment scores on each of the three measures.

Results

The 2 × 2 mixed-group ANOVA (Table 2) shows that group by time interaction was significant for all the three measures, indicating that the pattern of responses to media exposure differed according to whether the participants were in the media intervention group or the control group.
Table 3 shows paired samples t test indicative of a statistically significant increase in thin-ideal internalization and body dissatisfaction along with a significant decrease in self-esteem scores from pretreatment to posttreatment for the media intervention group. That is, after viewing the images of attractive models (thin-ideal), participants felt significantly worse about their body. Furthermore, the significance of difference across treatments was associated with large effect sizes for all the three measures (Table 3). However, there were no significant differences between pretreatment and posttreatment on the three measures of body image for the control group.

Discussion

The objective of the exploratory study was to investigate the effect of acute media interventions on body dissatisfaction, thin-ideal internalization, and self-esteem of urban Indian females. The findings were in line with our hypothesis, that is, acute exposure to thin-ideal media images was related to body image disturbances. Furthermore, the findings replicated previous work done on Western sample (e.g., Cattarin, Thompson, Thomas, & Williams, 2000; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Tiggemann & McGill, 2004) and helped in empirically linking body dissatisfaction, self-esteem, and thin-ideal internalization with media’s endorsement of the thin-ideal on an Indian sample.

Homogenized beauty ideals, specifically the hegemony of Western beauty standards in non-Western countries (Brewis, Wutich, Falletta-Cowden, & Rodriguez-Soto, 2011; Yan & Bissell, 2014), has been attributed to be the reason behind the increase of bodily dissatisfaction and increase in global prevalence rate of eating disorders (Gordon, 2001). In an interesting study, Becker and colleagues (2002) examined impact of the introduction of TV in a rural community in Western Fiji. They reported that prior to the advent of TV, “thin” people were considered to be sickly, incompetent, but advent of TV has led to discontent with being “fat” in adolescent ethnic Fijian girls. A recent large-scale study that surveyed over 7,000 individuals from 10 major world regions including India, reported that BMI and Western media exposure predicted body dissatisfaction among women. Furthermore, the study found that body dissatisfaction and desire for thinness is commonplace in high socioeconomic status (SES) settings across world regions (Swami et al., 2010). Erskine, Whiteford, and Pike (2016) predicted that eating disorders are going to “potentially rise” even in low- and middle-income countries as a result of the cultural changes.

Today, an increasing number of young Indian women are routinely exposed to Indian and Western media, which embody the iconic thin-ideal and communicate uniform “you cannot be too rich or too thin” belief (Cullity, 2002; Talukdar, 2012). Thapan (2004) examined samples of advertisements, fashion photography, and selected textual material from the
Indian women’s magazine *Femina* and found that the “new” Indian woman is being rapidly constructed, shaped, and redefined as a commercialized product along the lines similar to the images of women in the Western media. Negative self-evaluations made as a result of upward social comparisons (Festinger, 1954) with these unattainable (Western) ideals—in the case of present study, extremely thin and beautiful lingerie models—can lead to dissatisfaction and reduced self-esteem (Engeln-Maddox, 2005). The Western beauty ideals unattainable even for the Western women are exceptionally challenging for Indian women. Biological differences in terms of body shape, size, and skin color of their ethnicities are often overlooked when an Indian girl compares herself with a “size-0 White” model. Consequently, a number of recent studies examining body dissatisfaction in Indian adolescents and young adults have found that increasing number of Indian women tend to experience negative thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about their body size, shape, appearances, and so forth (e.g., Goswami et al., 2012; Latha et al., 2006; Som & Mukhopadhyay, 2015).

The findings are indeed disturbing in a society where traditionally being thin was related to lower SES and being fat communicated financial prosperity. Beauty ideals are rapidly undergoing a change in response to the idealized images of global womanhood. Thus, once thought to be a “culturally bound syndrome” limited to Western population, body dissatisfaction and eating disorders has become a major concern for women across the globe. Any woman falling short of the unrealistic ideals often finds herself rendered psychologically vulnerable, struggling between the real and ideal as the lines increasingly become blurred. Thapan (2004) regarded this struggle as “recolonisation of Indian woman’s embodiment.”

**Limitations**

The findings of the study need to examined in light of the fact that the exploratory study had a small sample size consisting of English speaking, university-educated representative of the urban middle-class population of Delhi National Capital Region (NCR). Future researches should focus on investigating the long-term effect of media images on different population samples such as adolescent and preadolescent girls from both urban and rural settings. In addition, the measures used have not been standardized on Indian population.

**Implications and Conclusion**

The findings of the study indicate that young urban Indian women experience body dissatisfaction and reduced self-esteem when exposed to Western thin-ideal images to the same extent as their counterparts in Europe and North America. Furthermore, the findings suggest that media images of duration as little as a minute can lead to increased acceptance (internalization) of socially defined ideals. Although, the sample of the study was small, it is the first in empirically linking media exposure and body image concerns for an Indian sample.

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