

Mass media and its influence on the adolescent mind

Literature



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A study of student perceptions of body image and magazine advertisements
Benjie Achtenberg Macalester College 2006 Abstract: America's mass media produces, creates and promotes multitudes of ideas and theories that have enormous influence on the American adolescent population and their perceptions of themselves. The following study and its results will examine 9th grade students' perceptions of their own body image and self-image as they relate to the media. This study is intended to show how 9th grades are affected by the media's presentation of the ideal male and female body and the potentially negative effects that ensue.

The ultimate goal of this study is to inform educators of the importance of a comprehensive education in media literacy, especially for students entering high school. I plan to accomplish this study with the use of student and teacher surveys, a poster/collage presentation and student reflective journals. The surveys will serve as a basic quantitative analysis of student perceptions while the presentations and reflection journals will serve as a means of qualitative analysis.

As this action research will show, the media does present male and female bodies in unrealistic ways that in effect lead young people to believe that those bodies are the norm and are what all should strive to achieve. These unrealistic images and stereotypical norms can and sometimes do lead young people, especially girls, to make unhealthy decisions, and cause confusion about how to correctly care for one's body during adolescent development. These unhealthy decisions can and do manifest themselves in forms such as diets, dieting pills and solutions, excessive exercise and in extreme cases; eating disorders.

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Research Questions: How does the media, specifically popular magazines and print media, affect or influence the body images and self-images of adolescent boys and girls? The following questions are come from the first part of the student survey. 1. Who influences your body image/self image more... your parents? Your friends? Your Teachers? The media? 2. What types of male bodies does the media present? 3. Do you think that these images directly affect how males feel about themselves and how males take care of themselves?

Please explain briefly. 4. What types of female bodies does the media present? 5. Do you think that these images directly affect how females feel about themselves and how females take care of themselves? Please explain briefly. 6. Are these images the ideals in our society? 7. Are these images realistic? How many people do you know who have body types like those presented in the media? 8. What misconceptions of how men/women are “supposed” to look are most prominent in the media?

Where do you see these “ideal” “stereotypical” male/female bodies the most in the media? Magazines? Movies? TV shows? What types of TV shows? The second part of the student survey includes questions about students’ individual perceptions of their own body, based on a body size chart (as pictured below in the appendix). The following questions come from the teacher survey. 1. Are students concerned with body image? If so, in what ways do student show their concern about their body images? How are their concerns manifested? Eating disorders?

Exercise issues? 2. Is there pressure on students to have/maintain a certain type of body image? 2 3. Please explain where the majority of this pressure comes from? The media? Parents? Peers? Coaches? 4. In what ways do you believe that teachers can have an impact on students' body images? What can you as a teacher do to help/support students who are suffering from low self-esteem and a negative body image? Literature Review: Within the past two decades there have been multiple studies done on the media's effect on adolescent body image and self-image.

Many of these studies, done in the past 6 years, have shown that the media, especially advertisements and articles both in print and on screen play a significant role in the development of adolescent's perceptions of their own body image and self-image. From *The Relationship between Reading Beauty and Fashion Magazines and the Use of Pathogenic Dieting Methods among Adolescent Females (Study #1)*, we learned that, Teenagers are believed to be among the heaviest users of many forms of mass media, particularly, specialized magazines.

Recent circulation figures reported by the Standard Rate and Data Service indicate that more than 6. million adolescent females read *Seventeen*, *Teen*, and *YM*, three of the most popular magazines targeted at teenage females, each month. Additionally, this study, among many others analyzed a number of magazines targeted at adolescent females and have suggested that their content supports the idea that female happiness and success are tied to physical appearance. More specifically female happiness and success are tied to the normative constructions of the female body, which promote

ultrathinness as the preferred state of health and beauty as well as the most important form of selfimprovement.

These ideals, however unrealistic and unhealthy, are the ideals in our society and thusly drive many adolescent females to make dangerously unhealthy choices with regard to their appearance and weight. “ Conservative estimates suggest that 1 out 100 females is anorexic and 3 out of 100 are bulimic,” as quoted from Renee A Botta’s study, Television 3 Images and Adolescent Girls’ Body Image Disturbance. The media’s affect on adolescent body image is not solely associated with females but with males too. “ Body image issues for males have focused on increasing weight and shoulder/muscular shape.

In particular, the desire to develop muscularity has emerged as an important issue among men and adolescent boys,” from Body Image and the Appearance Culture among Adolescent Gils and Boys. These studies brought to my attention the phenomenon of adolescents being heavily influenced in a negative way by the media targeted at them. My study looked at many of the same factors as these previous studies, but at the same time took it one-step further by asking the students to write and reflect on their own personal experiences as well as how the study itself affected them and their perception of the media.

My research and results will show that the media plays a large role in the creation of body type ideals for both males and females. Additionally this study will show that the media affects how adolescents think about their own body images whether that be indirectly through types of characters and

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actors on TV and in magazines or directly thought exercise advertisements/shows and dieting advertisements. Though significant, these studies all concluded that the media played a secondary role in influencing adolescents' perceptions.

This influence was second only to peer influence, which was reported to be the most powerful. Data Collection: My study population was a class of 27 ninth graders of mixed gender enrolled in a single trimester of health education at a Midwestern private Catholic high school in an urban area.. The students were predominantly white (91%), while 7% were African American and 3% were Latino. My research was part of a unit on body image and self-image, which was a main component of the health class's curriculum.

Each student was required to participate in the study, as each part of the study was incorporated into the daily lessons, although all 4 students had the ability to omit answers whenever they so desired as well as write whatever they wanted in the free response portions of the unit. The three primary methods of data collection were a survey given to each student, a collaborative poster/collage project and presentation and a one page written response about the unit.

The survey was administered first and consisted of two parts; the first included general questions about body image, gender and the media and the second included more personal questions about weight, body shape and size. The surveys were all completed anonymously. Additionally there was a teacher survey, which was given to the facilitating health teacher and the <https://assignbuster.com/mass-media-and-its-influence-on-the-adolescent-mind/>

two school counselors. The second part of the data collection was the poster and presentation. The poster project was completed in pairs or triads.

It was an open-ended project where students were given a blank poster board and asked to look through a multitude of popular magazines (provided by the students and the teacher) to select images that were stereotypes of body images, or that presented males and females in unnatural or unrealistic ways. Other than the stereotypes of bodies theme, students were given the freedom create their poster-collages in any way they wanted. The next part of this portion of the study was the presentation to the class of the poster boards.

Students were given approximately two to three minutes to share and discuss their posters and any insightful ideas they had with their classmates. The third and final aspect of the data collection was a one page written reflection on the in-class discussions, the poster/presentation part and the survey results, which were synthesized and given back to the students the day they began to write the responses. Data Analysis and Interpretation: As was noted in each of the previously referenced studies, the media does play a significant role in the development of body and self-images of adolescent boys and girls. Unlike the 5 conclusions of the previous studies, my data showed that the media is the single most influential source in these students' lives with respect to their perspectives of body image.

As quoted from a selection of student surveys: " more muscles = sexier;" " without muscles you won't get the girls," " the images make you want to take steroids and get super jacked:" " girls don't eat because they want to

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look like the famous women in the media, girls want to get plastic surgery to fit in;" " they want to be able to share clothes with their friends;" " always worry about carbs and eating too much;" " and many girls have eating disorders. These were just a few of the responses from the survey of the media's affect on boys and girls. Many of the students correctly noted that the stereotypical images in the media were not typical of the general population or of the people, they know. Another interesting piece of data was that both boys and girls agreed that magazines were the most influential of all of the media outlets. The second part of the survey data, which lead me to my most prominent conclusions, was the analysis of body types as seen below in the appendix.

Most of the data was not surprising, except for questions 1, 2 and 5. Almost 75% of female respondents said they saw themselves as body type #3 or #4, but when asked what body type they wanted to be, almost 70% reported body type #2 and #3. This to me speaks volumes to the influence of the media and the perception that young females have about their own bodies. As a participant and observer in the class, I noted than none of the females looked overweight or were of notably different sizes than other females in the class.

Nevertheless, to see that 70% of the girls in this class wanted to be skinnier than they were already was disturbing. As one can see in the body size scale, pictured below, #2 and #3 of the females are both extremely skinny. Given this data, I made the correlation between the students' responses saying that the media influenced them and the desire to be skinnier.

From the poster presentations, that data gathered merely reinforced already understood notions of what the stereotypes were in the media. It was interesting to see the differences between boys and girls. Most of the boys selected and highlighted images with bulging muscles and curvy women in scantily clad clothing while many girls focused on smaller details such as facial complexion, hair color and style and messages about dieting and weight loss programs. One insightful comment made by one of the female students during her presentation was that of all of the popular magazines viewed; it was the ones geared toward young women that had the most exaggerated stereotypes and pervasive/overt messages.

The media's constant barrage of slender, scantily clad women and buff, muscular, tan and half-naked men reinforced the notion of the "ideal" male and female bodies, which is exactly the type of imagery that has a negative affect on adolescents. Adolescents, especially teenagers give lots of power and credibility to many of the popular magazines used in this study. They read them daily, and in many ways use them as signifiers of what is "cool" and what is "hot" at any given time.

Many students commented during their presentations and in their journals that they read the magazines and enjoy seeing the images because their favorite celebrities were featured. The draw that magazines and print media have for young people is very strong and consequently, influential. This powerful influence is derived from the media's ability to present such images in ways, which seem normal and acceptable, when in actuality; many of the images of perfect bodies have been airbrushed or digitally altered. The

images that infiltrate the minds of young people effectively manipulate their sense of self, especially with regard to their physical appearance. When young men and women are constantly, seeing “ skinny, big breasted, tall, tan, and sexual” women and “ muscular, tan, tough, trim, and sexy men” they begin to think that those images of the male and female body are the ideal and are the only acceptable and attractive body types.

I am presenting the media’s power to influence the youth of America in a negative light as I see it because these ideas, stereotypes and notions of a healthy body can be detrimental to adolescents’ psyche and their sense of self. This negative effect is especially harmful to adolescent females, as they tend to be the primary target of these types of stereotypes.

In my view, the media is promoting these unrealistic and unattainable body types so that negative self-images will be fostered in young people leading them to buy the products being advertised and thusly promoting and supporting the consumerist, mentally unhealthy dynamic life style in which we currently live. They will never be able to look like the made up famous people in the media or the idealistic models in advertisements, therefore the cycle of unhappiness and disappointment in themselves continues.

Finally, with the journals I was able to glimpse into the minds of the students and actually read what they each personally thought. It was interesting to see that most of the students felt like they understood that they media was portraying stereotypes of male and female bodies. The majority of the students wrote that they enjoyed seeing the survey results of their class and were surprised that so many people felt like the media was a big influence.

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I would attribute this discrepancy between the survey results and journals to the fact that I asked the students to write about their opinions and put their names on their journals whereas the surveys were anonymous. Most of the boys wrote that the media does not influence them in a very powerful way, just subtly in that they should get stronger in order to succeed more in the world, i. e. with women and athletically. A common response in female journals was that they constantly see and hear messages about how they should be skinny and fit in order to be popular.

Though many of these messages are subtle, they seemed to be plainly overt to many of these 9th grade girls. They noted that most advertisements in the media did not explicitly say, “ be skinny” or “ you must not be fat” but that because of the clothes women wore and how there was not variation in body shape and size in the media, they inferred that that was how they should look. It is clear that the media does influence adolescents (some more than others) with regard to their body images and it is usually in a negative way. The teacher survey served the purpose of an outsider’s perspective to the media influence on students.