Media Effects on Body Image, Self-Esteem, and Gender Stereotypes

Final Research Project

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Introduction

The primary goal of this research project is to determine the effects that media exposure has on body image, self-esteem, and gender roles. Through this research, the main theory that may be extended is the Cultivation Theory, which was developed by George Gerbner in the 1960’s. The most familiar version of “the cultivation hypothesis” is that “those who spend most time watching television are more likely to perceive the real world in ways that reflect the most common and recurrent messages of the world of fictional television” (Morgan, M., & Shanahan, J., 2010, p. 335-337).

Another theory that may be tested through this research project is the Third-person Effect, which predicts that people will overestimate the effects that media has on others and believe that it has a lesser impact on their own self (Banning, S., & Sweester, K., 2007, p. 451). This theory is commonly used when describing media effects on society.

Literature Review

Media Effects

Theoretical Definitions

Media effects have been studied by many different researchers and have been defined in an array of different ways, in addition to being explained by multiple theories. A very basic definition of media effects is when exposure to media and other images influences perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors (Guimera, Levine, Carracedo, & Faquet, 2010, p. 389). According to Westerwick and Hastall (2010), media effects can also be theoretically defined slightly more in depth as small media impacts that can accumulate...
to substantial consequences over time, and that media use primarily reinforces an individual’s predisposition over time (p. 515).

Media effects can also be described as effects of direct exposure to media and the information environments created, and are most often stronger on those with wavering opinions than on those with firm opinions (Hopmann, Vliegenthart, Vreese, & Albaek, 2010, p. 390). Another theoretical definition of media effects presented by Jeong, Hwang, and Fishbein (2010), is when exposure to media content affects the audience’s cognitions and behaviors. Aspects such as belief, attitude, and behavior change increase as a function of attention to messages and the systematic processing of the information (p. 222).

Media effects can be theoretically defined by a number of different theories. Three of the most prominent are Third-person Perception, Agenda-setting, and Cultivation. Third-person Perception states that media effects are effects that may not be due to audience reactions to the message itself, but to their perceptions or anticipation of how others react to the same message. Agenda-setting defines cognitive media effects as media setting the audience’s agenda through increasing salience and greater coverage. The Cultivation Theory displays media effects as creating a mean world syndrome as a result of long-term media exposure to violent media (Jeffres, Neuendorf, & Bracken, 2008, p. 473).

Operational Definitions

Just as media effects have been defined by researchers theoretically in a variety of different ways, there are also many ways to define them operationally. Jeong, Hwang, and Fishbein (2010) define media effects as the amount of time exposed to media, the
level of change in the individual, and the number of situational factors involved (p. 222). A second operational definition of media effects is the number of mediating and moderating factors involved in media exposure and the amount of source and receiver/perceiver factors (Guimerra, Levine, Carracedo, & Faquet, 2010, p. 387). For example, if an individual already has a thinness schema, they will be more vulnerable to media effects regarding body image.

A study was performed by Hopmann, Vliegenhart, Vreese, and Valbaek (2010) concerning media effects and political affiliation, where central conditions for the strength of media effects were identified. They operationally define media effects as the amount of visibility, the media’s tone, and the number of positive and negative media exposures. They also define it as the amount of direct exposure and level of the information environment.

**Body Image**

**Theoretical Definitions**

Body image is a topic very popular in present society. With this popularity comes “a wide variation of definitions” (Holsen, Kraft, & Roysamb, 2001, p. 614).

The most widely used definition of body image is that it is “a multidimensional self-attitude towards one’s body, particularly its size, shape, and aesthetics” (Clarke & Griffin, 2008, p. 1084). This demonstrates that body image has many facets and it deals with the attitude of the individual in regards to their body’s characteristics. Williams and Currie (2000) agree saying “body image, incorporates attitudes toward and representations of physical attributes” (p. 130).
Another study shows that “body image is a multifaceted construct referring to people’s subjective perceptions of and attitudes about their own body, with an emphasis on physical appearance” (La Rocque & Cioe, 2011, p. 397). These three studies support the definition that body image is a multidimensional concept that represents someone’s attitude toward their own appearance.

Researchers also define body image as ‘the mental image we hold of our bodies” (Kim & Lennon, 2007, p. 3). These researchers go on to say that this mental image “encompasses both how we see ourselves and how we feel about what we see,” (p. 3).

An additional study shows that it is not only perception of appearance that is body image, but also feelings about those perceptions. “It is perceptual in that it reflects our perceptions of our bodies and it is affective in that it reflects how we feel about those perceptions,” (Lennon, Rudd, Sloan, & Kim, 1999, p. 193).

The last view on body image is found in the dictionary, Marian-Webster’s online (2011) defines body image as “a subjective picture of one's own physical appearance established both by self-observation and by noting the reactions of others.” This definition varies from the first two, because it mentions comparing oneself with the people around them, and the reactions of others.

**Operational Definitions**

Body image is essentially the same as self-esteem, so it is reasonable to conclude that the two terms can be measured using the same strategies. An array of scales have been developed to measure body image and self-esteem.

The Rosenberg scale “is one of the most widely used self-report methods for assessing global self-esteem.” This scale evaluates self-esteem using a set of 10 questions
pertaining to “one’s overall sense of worth as an individual.” (Sinclair, Blais, Gansler, Sandberg, Bistis, & LoCicero, 2010, p. 61). It has been divided into two sections of five questions each. One section evaluates self-liking and the other self-competence.

Another measurement is the “Gecas and Schwalbe Self-Esteem Scale.” “Self-esteem was measured by a 12-item, 5-point semantic differential scale” (Lanza-Kaduce & Webb, 1992, p. 5). Each question is a pair of adjectives along with a ranking system with seven possible ranks. For example, one of the pairs is worthy and worthless, a seven on the scale would mean very worthy, however, a one on the scale would mean very worthless. Participants are asked to rate how they feel about themselves. Some of the pairs “include powerful-powerless, confident-lack confidence, strong-weak, wise-foolish … happy-sad” (Qingwen & Xiaobing, 2006, p. 669).

The final form of measurement is based on a study done by Ingrid Holsen, Pal Kraft and Roysamb (2007). They measured body image by a scale consisting of four items. The items dealt with the overall satisfaction level of their appearance and body.

The four items were, “(a) I would like to change a good deal about my body; (b) By and large, I am satisfied with my looks; (c) I would like to change a good deal about my looks; (d) By and large, I am satisfied with my body” (2007, p. 617). The answers to those questions ranged from “does not apply at all” to “applies exactly.” The result revealed that a higher score showed a “more positive body image.”

**Gender Stereotypes**

**Theoretical Definitions**

Take the concept of gender stereotyping and it can not only be defined, but it can be broken up into subcategories that support those definitions as a whole. Wu and Kurylo
(2010) define stereotyping to be one form of biased perception (attributes, characteristics, and behaviors or members of a specific “group”) (p. 69). Bringing it more on par, gender stereotyping is defined in the same text by Wu and Kurylo as the overgeneralization of male or female behaviors. These behaviors being accurate and inaccurate as often as not, and have the possibility to cause negative consequences in daily social interaction (p. 69).

If humans were asked to tell their first initial thoughts about the broadened term of male or female, most likely some of their answers would fall under the category of gender stereotypes that have been set; adding up to the key word “mental” in Merriam-Webster’s (2011) definition of stereotype.

Another theoretical definition describing gender stereotypes is the trend set that gender is conceived as merely a social construction, rather than a “given social category” (Sung, 2011, p. 87). Gender is therefore something that is performed (actions), something that we do. In Sung’s words, gender is something that is enacted and accomplished. Gender “does not pre-exist the individual,” but is an on-going negotiation and constructed in the action of gender identities, which is present continuing process (p. 87). This shows what is perceived as simple deciphering between male and female, is actually more complex in the way it is established in society.

A way to explain the above would be the simple act of speaking. Speaking in Sung’s research was found to be gendered in of itself. As seen in gender research, masculine styles of interacting are labeled as competitive and challenging ways (conversational dominance and interruptions), while the feminine style of speaking is labeled as smooth, helping, and cooperative (polite, avoiding confrontation, and relational) (p. 87). Tying gender and conversing together into something that is
“expected,” makes the mind stretch to the very basics of everyday life when identifying with this concept.

Another common way of looking deeper at gender stereotypes is through that of social roles. Lauzen, Dozier, and Horan (2008, p. 201) break social roles by their own research into the things/actions “people do in daily life.” These roles grabbing hold of gender stereotypes that have been set for quite some time (domestic chores, workplace activities, etc).

In the study done by Signorielli (1982) of prime-time programming airing on major networks, it was found that those in female roles were immensely found to be in programs about home and family (Lauzen, Dozier, & Horran, p. 202). Further, the spousal status of males was less likely to be known than that of the females in the television shows (p. 202). Though the daily life expectations, so-to-say, of both male and female are slowly evolving from the intensity they used to have in the past, it is still carved into nature today.

**Operational Definitions**

Though the theoretical definitions broken down equate for a lot of what gender stereotypes are known to be, research done by scholars to show the operational side as well.

Behm-Morawitz and Mastro (2008) acknowledge social cognitive theory and its suggestion that a “number of factors influence the outcomes of exposure to media-modeled, gendered behaviors.” Repetition is key here. The brain repetitively taking in messages, liking and identifying with the media models, and motivation by what’s placed before you are all factors that influence the “adoption” of those behaviors (p. 137).
Additionally, the social cognitive theory suggests that the more the consumer (how many times it occurs) identifies with the characters within the movies, the more likely the consumer is bound to adopt what is portrayed in them (p. 137). With what is already seen with social cognitive theory, in a text by Eisend (2010), cultivation theory goes hand-in-hand. According to cultivation theory, television (one form of media) has long-term effects on viewers. Though these may be small, gradual, and indirectly aimed at viewers, they are nevertheless cumulative and significant (p. 421). With both terms defined as they are, it seems clear that with consistency that the consumer can and very possibly will discover a wishful desire to be like or act like the roles/characters they view; both male and female.

Another operational look at this concept comes from a study done by Aubrey and Frisby (2011) when they took Mulvey’s (1975) idea of the “gaze,” invoked when camera shots linger on bodies or certain body parts instead of focusing on the subject as a whole or their face (p. 480). The “gaze” represents an “asymmetric power relationship” between both the gazer and the gazed (one imposing an unwanted look at the other), where the emphasis on the body sets the subject more as an object and without a doubt denies human importance (p. 480). While reading this study, an immediate connect is had to a range of daily interactions, from advertisements and music videos, to everyday reality. While researching this previous study themselves, Aubrey and Frisby (2011) did a study themselves. Culturally it’s evident that males have more power to be the gazer and therefore regulate females to be the object (p.480), which may or may not come as a surprise.
The way Aubrey and Frisby measured “attractiveness” is not to point the blame at these scholars themselves, but merely proves what is already set as “ideal” and considered attractive for both genders. Muscle tone, how slender the waist of the artist or character was, hour-glass figures for females, and V-shape figures for males were all ways attractiveness by gender was measured in various scales by the research done. Gendered body types are also evidently stereotyped and set in and by society. When commercials were studied by Aronovsky and Furnham (2008), it is argued that the core of depicting younger and more “attractive” women in advertising is economic (p. 172). In presenting an ideal that is difficult to achieve or maintain profitable growth for cosmetic and diet industries is assured (p. 172). This is where self-esteem is added onto the pile of various factors dealing with gender stereotypes.

Main Findings for Further Research

After studying previous theoretical and operational definitions regarding body image, gender stereotypes, and media effects, it can be seen that these three concepts are closely related. The overall research rationale for this project is to find out how much time one spends with various media outlets and compare this information with other variables such as gender, the way they view themselves, what they think is attractive, and the way they view the roles of both a male and a female. This will help to further determine the types of effects media has on society. The literature review has assisted in forming the following research questions and hypothesis.

Research Questions

*RQ1: Does gender have an effect on how often one reads entertainment magazines?*

*H1: Gender does have an effect on how often one reads entertainment magazines.*
RQ2: Do those who spend the most time with electronic media (movies, television and internet) have a positive or negative view on their own attractiveness?

H2: Those who spend the most time with electronic media will have a negative view of their own attractiveness.

RQ3: Does the amount of media usage have an effect on the way individuals view their own level of attractiveness?

H3: The more one is exposed to media, the less attractive they will find themselves.

RQ4: Does one’s amount of media exposure affect their view of gender and leadership roles?

H4: The consumption of media does affect one’s view of gender and leadership roles.

RQ5: Does the time one spends getting ready in the morning reflect how much they care about their appearance?

H5: The more one spends getting ready in the morning, the more they care about their personal appearance.

RQ6: Does one’s income correlate with how often one reads entertainment magazines?

H6: The higher one’s income, the more often they read entertainment magazines.

RQ7: Does the amount of media consumption per day effect one’s view of a healthy body image?

H7: Those who are less exposed to media hold a healthier view of body image.

Method

A. Sample

The population being studied is college-aged media consumers. The sample size is 45 students. Over half (66%) of the sample is female and nearly a third of the sample
(33%) is male. The mode of the sample is relatively young (Mo= 18-24). The sampling method used in this project is convenient volunteer sampling.

B. Procedures

The time frame for data collection is October 20, 2011 to November 10, 2011. There are no ethical issues involved in this project, the survey instrument is formulated as to not offend or make any of the participants feel uncomfortable.

C. Measures

The independent variable in this research project is media exposure and the dependent variables are body image, self-esteem, and gender roles. The type of instrument used is a survey which measured demographic information, amount of time spent with various media outlets, personal feelings towards oneself, views regarding gender roles and body image, and time spent on daily activities. These items were measured via open-ended, close-ended, likert scale, and semantic differential scale type questions.

Factors that will affect the study’s internal validity are the truthfulness of participant’s answers and the environment in which the survey is taken. Factors that will affect the external validity are that a small population was surveyed and the majority was female. Another threat to external validity is that all the participants were college students, making it difficult to expand results to all of society.

Results

The statistical tests used in this research project are Chi-Squared, ANOVA, and Pearson’s Correlation.
The hypothesis for research question one was supported. It has been found that gender does have an effect on the amount of time one spends reading entertainment magazines. Females spend more time reading them than males. These results prove to be very significant, \( F(1,43)=6.81, p<.05 \).

The hypothesis for research question two was rejected. Of those who spent the most time with electronic media, less than half of them found themselves to be less
attractive. The results generated from this question did not prove to be significant, \( x^2(4, N=45) = 2.15, p > .05 \).

The hypothesis for research question three was supported. It has been found that those who spend the most time under some sort of media influence consider themselves to be less attractive. The results were insignificant, \( F(1, 43) = 1.30, P > .05 \).
The hypothesis for research question four was rejected. It was discovered that those who were highly exposed to media thought that gender is irrelevant when it comes to leadership roles. However, it was found that the majority of those responding that men should lead were male. The results stemming from this question were also insignificant, \( x^2(16,N=45)=26.03, p> .05 \)

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The hypothesis for research question five was rejected. The results show that there is no correlation between how much time one spends getting ready in the morning and how much they care about their appearance, and they are insignificant, \( R(43)= .146, p>.05 \).
The hypothesis formulated for research question six was supported. The ANOVA & Chi-Square both show that those with the highest incomes did prove most likely to read entertainment magazines. However, those in the lowest income groups were more likely to read than with those with middle of the road incomes. The results for the ANOVA prove to be significant while the Chi-Square is insignificant, $F(3,41)=3.08, P<.05, x^2(9,N=45)=14.35, p>.05$.

**Qualitative Research**

The majority of the data collected for this research project was quantitative, although some qualitative results have been found as well. The survey participants were asked to estimate how much time per day they are exposed to some sort of media influence. To contribute to qualitative research, they were also asked what they considered a healthy body image.

The hypothesis for research question seven was that those who were less exposed to media would have a healthier view of body image. This hypothesis was rejected after
analyzing the participant’s responses. Even those who believed they were under the influence of media all the time still held a very healthy view of body image. It was a trend among almost all participants to state that a healthy body image consists of being physically active, maintaining a healthy diet, and appreciating yourself for who you are. Rather than describing an actual image, most participants described a lifestyle and/or state of mind.

Some qualitative results were also found regarding media usage and gender stereotypes. Some common trends resulting from the survey question that asked participants what it meant to be ladylike were that ladies should be gentle, classy, use good language, and be modest and well-mannered. Many of the participants described what it meant to be masculine as hiding emotions, acting macho, and being the leader and protector.

**Discussion**

Several significant findings resulted from this research project. It was determined that gender does have an effect on how often one reads entertainment magazines. It has been found that females read them more often than males. According to the ANOVA testing to see if income effects how often one reads entertainment magazines, it was shown that those with a higher income are more likely to read them. At the same time, those with lower incomes are more likely to read them than those with middle of the road incomes.

Through the quantitative results, no other significant findings came from this research project, although the qualitative results did aid in extending the Cultivation Theory regarding gender roles. Most survey participants who were highly exposed to
media replied with stereotypical responses that are often used to represent what it means to “be ladylike” or what it means to “act like a man.” While the quantitative results regarding gender roles did not show to be significant, the qualitative results certainly extend the ideas outlined by Gerbner.

The Third-person Effect may also be implied through the research performed. Survey participants may have underestimated the effects that media has on their self-esteem and perceptions of body image. The responses given on the survey may not have been completely accurate due to the Third-person Effect.

Conclusion

The limitations of this study are that the sample size was small and the population was specific. This could have caused the results to be somewhat skewed. In the future, a larger and more diverse sample could make the results more significant, as well as accurate, in extending them to a larger group of people.

Also, testing different factors against each other could have resulted in further findings. For example, analyzing age or family upbringing and the effects on media usage or self-esteem may have yielded significant results. Another suggestion for future research could be to find more factors than just media that may affect self-esteem and body image.

A different way of formulating new information regarding media effects, body image, and gender stereotypes could be to do observations rather than surveys. Focus groups could also be used to and may result in more accurate feelings of the population as well as being more time efficient.
References


Appendix A

Survey Instrument

1. Age?
   - 18-24
   - 25-35
   - 36-49
   - 50 and above

2. Gender?
   - Male
   - Female

3. Race?
   - African American
   - Caucasian / White
   - Hispanic
   - Asian
   - Other

4. What is your annual income?
   - Below $25,000
   - $25,000- $75,000
   - $75,000-$150,000
   - Above $150,000

5. What is your highest completed level of schooling?
   - Some high school
   - Graduated high school
   - 1-3 years of college
   - Bachelor's degree
   - Some graduate school
   - Graduate degree or above

6. Are you living/or did you grow up in a single parent household?
   - Yes, with mother
   - Yes, with father
   - No, both parents is home
   - Other, please explain______________________________

7. Relationship Status
   - Married
   - Divorced
8. How often do you think you are exposed to some sort of media influence? (Advertising, TV, Magazines, etc.)
   - Rarely
   - 1-2 times a day
   - 3-5 times a day
   - 5-7 times a day
   - All the time without realizing it

9. How much time do you spend getting ready in the morning?
   - Less than 15 Minutes
   - 15-30 Minutes
   - 30 Minutes – 1 Hour
   - More than 1 Hour

10. Based on your daily activities, rank the following items in time order, 1 being the smallest amount of time and 5 being the largest amount of time.
    __ Personal hygiene
    __ Schooling/Working
    __ Electronic Entertainment (Movies, Television, Internet, etc)
    __ Socializing with Friends
    __ Spending time with Family

11. How often do you read Entertainment Magazines?
    Never Rarely Sometimes Often Always

12. I would consider myself an attractive person
    - Yes
    - No

13. I am very aware of how I look to others.
    Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

    Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

15. I care about my appearance.
    Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

16. I often wish I had someone else’s body.
    Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree
17. I accept myself regardless of what people think.
   Strongly Disagree  Disagree  Neutral  Agree  Strongly Agree

18. I often look in the mirror and dislike what I see.
   Strongly Disagree  Disagree  Neutral  Agree  Strongly Agree

19. How do you feel about gender and leadership roles?
   ○ Men should typically lead
   ○ Women should typically lead
   ○ It should be about equal
   ○ It shouldn’t matter at all

20. Which of the categories describe your experience when shopping for clothes?
   Pleasant  Unpleasant
   Satisfactory  Unsatisfactory
   Exciting  Boring
   Confidence Boosting  Embarrassing


22. How would you describe an attractive person?

23. Describe in a few words what it means to “Act like a man.”

24. Describe in a few words what it means to “Be ladylike.”

25. What do you think is a healthy body image?
Appendix B

Interview Schedule for Classmate

I. Opening

A. (Establish Rapport) [shake hands] Hello our names are Priscilla Brooke, Emily Greene and Chelsea Kingsmill.

B. (Purpose) We are here to ask you a few questions regarding media, body image, self-esteem, and gender role stereotypes.

C. (Motivation) We hope to use this information to measure the effect that media has on body image, self-esteem and gender roles.

D. (Time Line) The interview should take about 15 minutes. Would you be willing o take the time to answer several questions for us?

(Transition: Let me begin by asking you some basic questions about yourself to gather background information.

II. Body

A. (Topic) General Demographic Information

1. Where were you born and raised?
   a. How long have you lived in Florida?
   b. Do you enjoy living in Florida? Why or why not?

2. How many members are in your family?
   a. How many brothers and sisters do you have?
   b. Would you say you have a strong relationship with your family?
c. What do you do together that strengthens your relationships?

(Transition)

B. (Topic) Education

1. How long have you attended University of North Florida?

2. What is your major?
   a. Why did you choose this major?
   b. Would you recommend this major? Why or why not?
   c. Have you changed your major?

3. What career path do you see yourself taking?
   a. What interests you about this career?
   b. What areas of the field are you interested in specializing? Why?

(Transition)

C. (Topic) Body Image/Self-Esteem

1. Do you think other people consider you attractive? Why?

2. How much effort do you put into your personal appearance?
   a. Do you enjoy shopping for clothes? Why or why not?
   b. Do you consider yourself high maintenance when it comes to personal hygiene? Why?

3. Would you say you have a high self-esteem? Explain.
   a. Do you often compare yourself to others?
   b. Does your self-esteem vary from day to day?
4. How do you think the media affects your personal body image?
   a. How often do you consume various types of media in a day?
   b. What is your most used media outlet?

(Transition)

D. (Topic) Gender Role Stereotypes

1. Do you think gender should be taken into consideration when selecting a leader? Why or why not?
   a. What do you look for in a leader?

2. What makes you feel the most feminine/masculine?
   a. What are some activities you think are specifically masculine?
   b. What are some activities you think are specifically feminine?

3. How would you say the media affects gender roles and stereotypes?
   a. What common stereotypes do you see the media put on men and women?
   b. What media outlet do you think has the most influence on gender stereotypes? Explain.

(Transition: It has been great talking with you and learning more about this topic.)

III. Closing

A. (Summarize Information Collected)
B. (Maintain Rapport) We thank you for your time and willingness to participate.

C. (Action to be Taken) We should have all the information we need to further our research. Would it be okay to contact you with any future questions? Thank you so much again. Have a wonderful day.