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Abstract

Impacts of self-discrepancy and media exposure on body image perception among females: An integrated cognitive processing approach

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In body image research to date, most studies have employed surveys or experiments to measure immediate, rational responses to mediated messages conveying thin, idealized images. Affective and intuitive evaluations of media influence, such as internal feelings, personal/social values and underlying modeling motives, are not studied. To address this gap, this thesis employed two projective measurements to reveal how adult females, aged between 18 and 40 living in Hong Kong, associate their body and self-image with mediated imagery on an unconscious level. The assumption is that an individual’s rational, conscious evaluation of media images may or may not match his or her unconscious inner awareness of self and body. For example, some people may claim, on a conscious level, to be satisfied with their body, but they may still internalize, on an unconscious level, the ideal image depicted in the media.

The first projective assessment was a role-play cloning exercise. Participants were asked to create a clone version with their desired body image based on their initial, spontaneous instinct. The second projective assessment was a word association exercise adopted from an instrument called Personal Impact Assessment. Participants were asked to list some associative words in response to media stimuli and describe how those words reflect their inner self and body perception.

In study one, results of the role-play cloning exercise showed that although the idealized thin body images conveyed by the media do lead to perceived body image discrepancies, individuals do not necessarily compare themselves upwardly with an exemplar, as previous studies have suggested they do. Intriguingly, idealized body images were found to adhere closely to individuals’ real selves.

In study two, two sets of media stimuli (commercial-look versus casual-look) were manipulated as the independent variable while body self-discrepancy was used as a moderating variable. Results showed that no statistically main effect of the stimuli condition on all dependent variables. However, there was a main effect of body image self-discrepancy for social comparison. Results showed a significant stimuli condition x self-discrepancy interaction effect on social comparison only. No significant interaction effect was reported on self-esteem, belief in the value of having a good body figure and body modification intention.
More importantly, this study employed a word association exercise to explore the gap in cognitive processing between how females perceive themselves on the conscious level and how they think of themselves on the intuitive level. This study proposes two additional categories of body self-discrepancy—high and low inner-self discordants. Both groups showed opposite moderating effect in self-esteem and body image, as past research has suggested. For instance, high inner-self discordants who perceived high self-discrepancy comparing with thin-ideal media imageries were found to possess positive self and body perception. In contrast, low inner-self discordants who perceived low self-discrepancy comparing with thin-ideal media imageries were found to possess negative self and body perception. These relationships posit a new perspective for interpreting body image disturbance. A new model accounting for the gap in cognitive processing and media influence on body image and its relationship between body discrepancy, internalization of thin and beautiful ideal, body schema, social comparison, self-esteem, and intention to body modification was delineated.

This thesis suggests that supermodels and the thin beauty ideal portrayed in the media were perceived as unrealistic and unapproachable. No close bonding was identified from the comparison targets. Media was too biased to promote only the potential gain from having a good figure (such as social recognition or admiration). Peers and family were shown to be more significant than the mass media as the socializing agents to diffuse body image ideology. People in general are under high pressure to reveal their true feelings toward their body.

The significance of this research lies in its ability to provide social marketers guidelines for developing intervention programs in order to strengthen females’ critical thinking about their self-perception. It has successfully un-delved a gap women perceive between their self-conception and body satisfaction on conscious versus unconscious levels via projective measurements. More importantly, women can benefit from these insights because they promote the pursuit of positive aesthetic self-appreciation.
Table of Contents

Declaration i
Abstract ii
Acknowledgements iv
Table of Contents v
List of Figure vii
List of Tables viii

Chapter 1 INTRODUCTION 1
1.1 Significance of the research 7
1.2 Purpose of the research 9

Chapter 2 LITERATURE REVIEW 11
2.1 Social learning theory 12
2.2 Social learning theory and media influence on body image 15
2.3 Body image, body satisfaction/dissatisfaction and self-discrepancy 18
2.4 Relation of social comparison and vicarious modeling 23
2.5 Intuitive and unconscious cognitive processing of media messages, and its effect on total body image 28

Chapter 3 STUDY ONE: EXPLORATORY STUDY 37
3.1 Research background 37
3.2 Research objectives 39
3.3 Research questions 39
3.4 Methodology 40
3.4.1 Subjects 40
3.4.2 Procedure 41
3.4.3 Measures 43
3.5 Findings 44
3.6 Discussion 52
3.7 Limitations 54
3.8 Conclusion of study one and implications on study two 55

Chapter 4 STUDY TWO: EXAMINATION OF INNER-VISION OF SELF AND BODY IMAGE 59
4.1 Research background 59
4.2 Significance of the study 61
4.3 Research objectives 62
4.4 Research questions 63
4.5 Methodology 64
4.5.1 Subjects 65
4.5.2 Stimuli 65
4.5.3 Measures 68
4.5.4 Procedure 72
4.6 Findings 77
4.7 Discussion 91
4.8 Limitations 99

Chapter 5 PROPOSED NEW BODY IMAGE MODEL TO MEDIA INFLUENCE 102

Chapter 6 CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS 106
6.1 Conclusions 106
6.2 Implications 117

References 123

Appendix I Pictorial instrument that measures body image self-discrepancy by Stunkard, Sorenson and Schulinger (1983) 136
Appendix II Sample questionnaire for study one 137
Appendix III Tested stimuli for study two 140
Appendix IV Sample pre-test and post-test questionnaire for study two 142
Appendix V Sample PIA interviews 150

Curriculum Vitae 158