

Physiological indices of the deleterious effects of unrealistic media images on body satisfaction: A cross-cultural investigation

ABSTRACT:

Background

Digital modification aiming to modify the appearance of images represents a common practice in the traditional mass media industry (fashion magazines, television, movies) to make models appear thinner and more attractive. The widespread dissemination of images that thus promote unrealistic and unattainable standards of beauty has become a public health concern due to their impact in the health of youth.

Aims

The aims of this study were (1) To explore the relationship between emotion dysregulation and body image; (2) To analyze the relationship between self-report and psychophysiological measures; (3) To evaluate the impact of two strategies aiming to decrease the deleterious effects of media on body image; and (4) To evaluate the impact of race in on exposure to media and body perception.

Method

This project employed a mixed-methods approach to investigate the objectives outlined above. Firstly, a quantitative survey was administered to collect self-report data on emotion dysregulation, body image, social cognition, and media exposure. Young women's responses were analyzed using statistical techniques to identify relationships and patterns. Psychophysiological measures, including heart rate, respiratory frequency and skin conductance, were recorded during a laboratory session to assess participants' physiological responses to emotional stimuli and media exposure. A task was designed to assess women's emotional response and acceptance of two specific strategies aimed at mitigating the negative impact of the thin-ideal portrayed in social media. These objective measures were synchronized with self-report data to provide a deep understanding of participants' emotional experiences and their relationship with social cognition and body image. This mixed-methods approach allowed for a holistic examination of the research questions, incorporating both objective physiological data and subjective self-report measures.

Results

In general, the different results from the studies conducted under the CAPSULE project showed a significant association between emotion regulation and body image, demonstrating that effective emotion regulation skills (as measured by the peripheral neurophysiological measures), have been associated with higher levels of body satisfaction. Conversely, difficulties or poor emotion regulation skills, such as engaging in maladaptive coping strategies, negative rumination, or higher levels of physiological stress have been linked to lower levels of body satisfaction in the three countries. This, in turn, can perpetuate a cycle where negative emotions contribute to body dissatisfaction, and body dissatisfaction contributes to difficulties in emotion regulation.

Conclusions

It is anticipated that these skills and the emotion regulation strategies enable individuals, specifically young women, to manage negative emotions related to body image concerns, fostering a more positive perception of their bodies. Significant findings demonstrating this result pattern were observed in two of the countries included in the data collection process: the United Kingdom and Portugal. However, it is important to note that similar significant results were not observed in the American sample.

Keywords

Body satisfaction, Emotion regulation, Psychophysiology, Social media, Cross-cultural

Published Work:

Penalba-Sánchez, L., di Gregorio, E., Moreno, A. F., Machado, B. C., Dias, P., & Oliveira-Silva, P. (2022). “Antibodies”: Investigating the effects of social media usage and psychological distress on body dissatisfaction during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Psychology & Neuroscience*, 15(4), 320-331. doi: 10.1037/pne0000298

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