

Lidia Perenc¹, Anna Radochońska²

Influence of media on shaping of body image in adolescents

¹From Institute of Physiotherapy University of Rzeszow

²From the Faculty of Biology and Agriculture University of Rzeszow

This study investigated the nature of body image and body change wishes, as well as the influences of media on these variables, among a group of 462 adolescents (276 girls and 186 boys. In particular, it investigated weight gain and increased muscle, as well as weight loss. It was found that girls were less satisfied with their bodies and were more likely to adopt strategies to lose weight, whereas boys were more likely to adopt strategies to increase mass and muscle strength. Respondents with higher body mass index (BMI) evidenced greater body dissatisfaction and more weight loss strategies, but there were no differences between BMI groups in weight gain or strategies to increase muscles. Weight gain and strategies to increase muscles were more likely to be undertaken by older adolescents, but there were no grade level differences in weight loss. Media influences to alter satisfaction with the body and wishes to change some of its characteristics. The importance of these findings in terms of providing a better understanding of factors which may lead to a disturbed body image and body change disorders, particularly among adolescent boys, is discussed.

Key words: *body image, BMI, satisfaction with the body.*

Wpływ mediów na kształtowanie się obrazu własnego ciała u młodzieży

Badania omawiane w tej pracy zostały przeprowadzone w 462-osobowej grupie młodzieży szkół średnich z terenu Rzeszowa. Ich celem było określenie wpływu mediów na kształtowanie się obrazu własnego ciała oraz motywacji do zmiany niektórych jego cech, jak np. wagi czy siły mięśni. Analiza wyników wykazała, że dziewczęta na ogół były mniej zadowolone ze swego wyglądu oraz wykazywały silniejszą tendencję do stosowania strategii zapewniających zmniejszenie masy ciała, podczas gdy chłopcy bardziej byli zainteresowani wzrostem masy i siły mięśni. Badani z wyższymi wartościami BMI wykazywali większe niezadowolenie ze swego wyglądu i częściej stosowali strategie ukierunkowane na zmniejszenie wagi ciała. Z kolei strategie zapewniające wzrost masy i siły mięśni częściej występowały wśród starszej młodzieży. Okazało się, że media, zwłaszcza telewizja, wpływają na poziom zadowolenia z własnego ciała i chęć zmiany jego cech. Uzyskane wyniki służą głębszemu rozumieniu roli czynników, które mogą wpływać na powstawanie zaburzeń obrazu ciała, szczególnie u chłopców w okresie dorastania.

Słowa kluczowe: *obraz ciała, BMI, zadowolenie z wyglądu.*

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a period of intensive growth and development in three basic dimensions: physical, psychological and social. Psychologist and

pediatricians always have referred to the adolescence as a time of trial and turmoil; a period in which young people seek to establish their identities and their roles within society. It is also a time

in which they have to make psychological and emotional adjustments to accommodate the physical and physiological changes that occur to the body. As a result of biological, psychological and social changes during the adolescence there are fluctuations and alterations in the way that individuals evaluate themselves. It relates also to the body image – an important component of human personality.

Psychological research has identified that development of positive self-concept and body image is both encouraged and desired. It influences some important aspects of the individual functioning. For instance, the research conducted within the developmental and educational psychology disciplines confirm the positive role of the development of the self in learning [5], academic achievement [4] and student motivation. The results indicate that a positive self-concept is not only a desired outcome, but also an important mediating variable for other positive and desired outcomes.

A growing number of data indicates that media strongly influence the ideal body appearance for adolescents, both for girls and boys. In the countries with dominating Western culture, the media portrays the ideal body for girls as very slim, and the ideal body for boys as muscular [9]. Adolescents of both genders are fully aware of these media ideals. This kind of awareness strongly influence their levels of body satisfaction and behavior, including such forms like disordered eating in girls and strategies directed to increases [7]. However, these findings largely apply to Caucasian populations, with less investigation of body image ideals of other racial groups. For example, Abrams and Stormer [1] have suggested that other racial groups who live in Western societies are less likely than the White population to adopt the body image ideal portrayed within these societies. It is not clear if the differences in the levels of body satisfaction and disordered eating between different racial groups are due to the fact that the media messages are different for respondents from different ethnic backgrounds, that the media messages are not detected, or that the messages do not impact on the body image or eating behaviors of some groups. Since about 3 decades we can observe an increase of research and promotion programs aimed at healthy development within the

adolescent population, possibly in response to increased incidence of mental health issues such as depression and particularly eating disorders. The ever-increasing rate of eating disorders amongst the adolescent population (particularly in girls) is due to the increased emphasis that society has placed on beauty and the value of physical attractiveness [3, 10]. Researchers have found that over the last 3 decades the shape of the ideal body being presented to society through the media has become progressively thinner, whereas the average person today is larger than that of three decades ago [8, 2].

AIM OF THE STUDY

The current study was designed to examine shaping of the body image and media influences among adolescent boys and girls. Also satisfaction with body shape, as well as body change strategies to decrease weight, increase height, and increase muscles were explored. It was predicted that boys and girls would differ in their levels of satisfaction with their bodies and would view their body shape in different ways. It was also predicted that young people feel some pressure from the media which influences their body image and need to lose weight or increase muscles.

METHOD

1. Participants

In this study participated 462 adolescents, aged 16–18 years. All of them were drawn from the secondary schools located in Rzeszów (South-Eastern Poland). The research group was matched on gender and age. Among the participants there were 276 girls and 186 boys.

2. Measures

Some basic anthropological were performed. They provided with some important information on physical development of the participants (e.g. body mass, height, BMI). Also a questionnaire was applied which included several questions containing such issues as body image, level of satisfaction with the body, and body change wishes influenced by media.

RESULTS

TABLE 1. Body height (cm)

Age	Gender	N	M	SD	Min.	Max.
16	Girls	93	164,5	5,91	153,0	185,0
	Boys	62	175,8	5,96	160,2	190,3
17	Girls	89	166,3	6,21	150,5	183,0
	Boys	61	176,6	8,38	140,7	194,5
18	Girls	94	166,8	5,30	153,0	178,5
	Boys	63	178,4	7,43	159,0	194,5

TABLE 2. Body mass (kg)

Age	Gender	N	M	SD	Min.	Max.
16	Girls	93	58,2	9,81	40,3	87,5
	Boys	62	67,1	8,20	50,4	92,7
17	Girls	89	58,1	9,74	42,7	95,7
	Boys	61	70,2	10,40	40,1	104,1
18	Girls	94	59,0	8,68	31,4	87,2
	Boys	63	71,4	7,99	54,9	90,5

TABLE 3. BMI values

Age	Gender	N	M	SD	Min.	Max.
16	Girls	93	21,40	3,49	16,40	31,60
	Boys	62	21,47	8,46	16,30	22,50
17	Girls	89	21,44	3,16	15,30	32,70
	Boys	61	22,80	3,28	17,30	34,50
18	Girls	94	21,22	2,17	15,90	29,80
	Boys	63	22,49	2,48	18,40	29,40

TABLE 4. Satisfaction with the body (%)

Age	Satisfaction		Dissatisfaction	
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
16	66,0	88,5	34,0	11,5
17	42,2	85,0	57,8	15,0
18	55,8	87,1	44,2	12,9

TABLE 5. Daily hours spent on watching TV (%)

Age	Less than 1 hour		1–3 hours		3–5 hours		More than 5 hours	
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
16	46,7	29,5	51,1	44,3	1,1	14,7	1,1	11,5
17	38,9	26,7	52,2	50,0	8,9	8,3	–	15,0
18	33,8	38,7	54,3	48,4	11,9	8,1	–	4,8

TABLE 6. Body change wishes influenced by media (%)

Age	Gender	Physical traits wanted to be changed							
		Face	Body mass	Nose	Chest	Height	Legs	Abdomen	Muscles
16	Girls	3,3	40,2	5,7	–	9,2	4,6	4,6	–
	Boys	22,2	16,7	16,7	11,1	11,1	–	–	5,6
17	Girls	4,6	15,0	9,2	4,6	7,4	5,6	15,7	–
	Boys	4,7	33,3	4,7	19,1	4,7	–	9,5	9,5
18	Girls	7,4	25,9	7,4	8,3	7,4	9,3	–	–
	Boys	14,3	14,3	7,1	14,3	28,6	–	7,1	14,3

Also body mass values of the participants fall within the range of norm calculated for Polish adolescents.

In most cases (over 50,0%) the BMI values appeared in the range of norm, which is between 19,1–22,3 for girls and 19,5–23,0 for boys. In group of girls, 24,3% participants displayed traits of overweight and obesity, and 13,5% were classified as underweight. In group of boys 12,0% were in range of overweight and obesity, and only 3,8% – underweight.

The overall dissatisfaction with the body, as a whole, expressed – in average – 45,3% of girls and 13,1% of boys. In both subgroups the most critical attitude in this matter show participants who are 17-year-old. Much more persons express

the overall satisfaction with the body: 54,6% of girls and 86,8% of boys (in average). The highest number of satisfied persons occurs in the group of 16-year-old adolescents (66,0% of girls, 88,5% of boys).

Most of the participants (average 52,5% of girls and 47,5% of boys) spend 1–3 hours per day on watching TV, including programs concerning sport, fashion and entertainment. Much less number (average 39,8% of girls and 31,6% of boys) reports that they watch such programs below 1 hour daily. In the range “more than 5 hours” daily boys prevail over girls.

Most of adolescent admit that they were affected by media messages concerning the body image. Because of dissatisfaction with some phys-

ical characteristics of their body, many of them would like to change it, e.g. body mass or shape of face and nose. There are substantial differences between girls and boys in their attitudes and expectations. Girls are mostly concerned with change of body mass, especially in age of 16 years, and height. In group of boys the body change wishes are connected with such physical characteristics as size of chest, body height, body mass (especially in 17-year-old) and strength of the muscles. Consequently, both groups expressed different strategies aimed at gaining those definite goals. Girls are mostly interested in reducing the body mass while the boys expressed their wish to increase the muscle strength.

DISCUSSION

The present study was designed to examine the extent to which there are differences in body image and body change wishes, as well as awareness of media messages related to body image for Polish adolescents from typical urban areas. The study was also designed to examine the extent to which these media messages predicted body image for girls and boys separately. The results show that girls were more likely to be dissatisfied with their weight and strongly motivated to use a strategies improving their appearance. At the same time boys were more likely to engage in strategies to increase muscle mass and strength. These findings are consistent with some of the main gender differences on perceived media messages found in the present study. Girls reported more perceived media messages about weight loss while boys reported more perceived media messages about increasing muscles and chest characteristics.

It should be mentioned that further research is also needed to examine other factors that may explain why adolescents of different gender differ in their attitudes concerning body image and its change. It may be that these adolescents are receiving messages regarding their body from other sources. These may be coming from parents, peers or from engaging in higher levels of social comparisons. Certainly, previous research has demonstrated the role of these sociocultural influences on shaping both body dissatisfaction and body change strategies among non-indigenous adolescents [e.g., 7, 8]. It is also possible that in some

adolescents there is correlation between body change wishes and their higher BMI and/or larger body build.

In conclusion, the present study has found more differences than similarities in body image, body change strategies, and the perceived impact of the media on these behaviors among Polish adolescents. However, further research is needed to replicate the present findings with a larger sample size.

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Lidia Perenc
Institute of Physiotherapy
University of Rzeszow

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