THE IMPACT OF MASS COMMUNICATION ON THE BODY IMAGE: TRADITIONAL MEDIA VERSUS NEW MEDIA

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Abstract: Many studies have proven the existence of a connection between the body image dissatisfaction and the exposure to images of an ideal body which is highly promoted in traditional mass media. The consumption of media content has grown exponentially lately due to the outburst of new media which allow the access to these whenever and wherever. Therefore, the exposure, as duration and volume, to such messages that promote ideal of the human body has grown. Does this growth have a significant impact on the level of dissatisfaction towards one’s self-image? Are the new media a higher risk factor compared to the traditional media in developing certain disorders regarding the body dissatisfaction? The present study, based on a review of the existing data, tries some possible answers to these questions.

Keywords: Mass communication, New media, Body image dissatisfaction, Social media, Appearance comparison, Facebook use

Among the population, as well as at academic level, there is an increased concern regarding the impact of mass media on the behavior and on the physical and psychological well-being of the individual. One of the effects most often brought up into discussion as a topic is the one on the satisfaction towards one’s own body image, especially among the young female population. The body image dissatisfaction is associated with the emergence of certain physical and mental imbalances (eating disorders - anorexia and bulimia, depression), which have consequences not only at individual level, but also at societal level. The factors identified to cause this dissatisfaction are the exposure to media, the messages coming from family and also from peers\(^1\), some studies suggesting that the media is the most powerful factor in this tripartite paradigm of influence\(^2\), having a major socio-cultural influence on the development of one’s individual body image.

The consumption of media content has grown exponentially in recent years mainly due to the development of new technologies that allow access to this content from anywhere and at any time (Internet, mobile phones, social networks - Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.), due to lower costs for reaching media content and for its production. Therefore, the percentage of media influence (measured as duration and volume of exposure) is increasingly higher, or it should be so, regarding the development of one’s attitude towards body image.

The concept of “body image” has been defined in many ways and from different points of view. One of the most frequently mentioned viewpoints is the one proposed in the socio-cultural paradigm developed by K. Thompson, M. Heinberg, M. Altabe and S. Tantleff-

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Dunn who speak of the existence of three dimensions of “body image”: a perceptual dimension, which refers to the mental representation of body image, representation resulting from one’s perception of his/her own appearance; an evaluative dimension, aimed at the attitude towards one’s own body and a third one which concerns the impact that body image perception and the attitude towards one’s own body have over one’s behavior. The development of one’s body image is influenced by three main factors: parents, peers and media and by two mechanisms that mediate the influence of these factors: the internalization of the ideal of the body image and the tendency of comparison with others³.

According to the socio-cultural paradigm of the body image, the body image dissatisfaction may occur and may develop by comparing their appearance with the appearance of others. People feel the need to evaluate themselves and, in the absence of some objective references, they do it by comparison to other individuals, as stated by Festinger’s social comparison theory (1954). Studies show that people compare themselves not only with other persons but also with images from media⁴. The increased tendency of self-appearance comparison is often associated with a high level of body image dissatisfaction.

Forming one’s body image is not only the result of social factors influences, but also of those individual factors. Among the individual factors fall the biological factors (age, gender, body mass index etc.) and the psychological ones (social skills, perfectionism, level of acceptance etc.), and within the social factors one can distinguish between factors with direct influence (the feedback coming from significant others like peers, parents) and those influences of mass-media (the exposure to images of an idealized body)⁵.

A meta-analysis, based on 77 studies, conducted by Grabe, Ward and Hyde, in 2008⁶, shows that both experimental research, as well as correlational research maintain a positive relationship between the consumption of traditional media (newspapers, magazines, television) and the body image dissatisfaction. Most of the research in the field, regarding the relationship between the body image and the media, have investigated and still investigate the influence of the exposure to some idealized images of the body that are mainly spread by the traditional forms of media (magazines, television and music videos). In movies, magazines and on television shows there are present, almost exclusively, thin bodies, the overweight or the full bodied people are missing or are presented in a somewhat negative perspective.

According to the theories on communication, repeated exposure to media content makes the viewers start accepting the images in media as being representations of reality or even being the reality itself (see, for example, the theory of cultivation by George Gerbner which argues that the consumption of media messages makes the individual adopt certain beliefs, ideas about a some sort of an ideal society, as well as the models and stereotypes presented in TV programs)⁷. Thus, the images broadcast by media containing thin and idealized bodies (often processed, improved by using certain computer programs or by using various photo or video techniques) cause women (and also men, to some extent – in their case the ideal body is the over muscular one) to see in these images the pattern of attractiveness,
and the expectations of the others which lead these women to have a certain behavior meant to bring them closer to this ideal.

Exposure, even for a short period of time, to images containing ideal representations of the body, leads, most studies show, to the occurrence of some negative emotions towards the way one looks and to the increase of the body image dissatisfaction. But the amount of the effect is small to moderate\textsuperscript{8}, as media has a significant impact only on people who have already developed some eating disorders or are already dissatisfied with their own appearance\textsuperscript{9}.

Along with the explosive development of communication technologies (in late 1980s, in particular) and due to the digitization of media content, new forms of media have appeared (called in the specialty literature \textit{new media})\textsuperscript{10}. Their occurrence has led to two major changes in terms of mass communication. On one hand, new media have “democratized” the media content, meaning that it has become much more accessible to the consumer by reducing the costs of its production and distribution, but especially due to the change in the manner of consumption: the consumer is no longer a passive one – as in the case of the traditional media (in this case he is called, somewhat suggestively – a receiver), but he became a producer and distributor of media content.

The new media have greatly increased the consumption, the individual is almost continuously in contact with the messages transmitted through the medium of communication. The broadcast forms of the traditional media (radio, television, theater, cinema etc.) are dependent on time - the public may listen to or watch the shows at the time and for the duration determined by the producers and by the space - the broadcasting of these messages is done in some specially designed places for this kind of thing. The new media have removed these barriers, the public having control over the moment and the place of consumption is no longer conditioned by the space-time proximity to access the media content. Thus, media content can be consumed at anytime and anywhere: at work, on the street, on public transport etc. Therefore, in the case of this analysis, the impact of these medium of communication on one’s body image, people are much more exposed (as duration and volume) to images of the human body, many of which being idealized.

The changes in communication have determined a reorientation of research regarding the impact of the media on body image, monitoring the impact of social media (particularly Facebook - this being the most popular social media platform with over 1.71 billion active users worldwide, of which 1.03 billion daily users on average in June 2016\textsuperscript{11}) on the satisfaction towards one’s own body image, due to the large number of users and due to the fact that it is the preferred medium of communication amongst the young.

Facebook allows users to create a public or semi-public personal profile and to personalize their pages with photos and information about themselves. Just like in magazines, the images can be edited and “improved” before being published. Moreover, users can monitor their self-presentation and can promote an idealized version of their selves.

\textsuperscript{8} S. Grabe, L. Ward, J. Hyde \textit{Op. cit.}
\textsuperscript{10} For more details see our article \textit{Media, multimedia and new media – notes on comprehending certain terms from the theory of communication}, Communication, Context, Interdisciplinarity, Studies and Articles, Volume III, Section: Communication,"Petru Maior" University Press, 2014, p.346-351, http://upm.ro/ccci/?pag=CCI-03/v0103-Com
Because over 300 million new photos (much of which having as subject persons and the way they look) are uploaded daily onto the platform\textsuperscript{12}, Facebook provides a favorable environment for engaging in various comparisons with others, including comparisons regarding body image. Furthermore, due to its nature, the new medium of communication allows the fusion of two of the factors identified as being responsible for the occurrence of the body image dissatisfaction, namely the media and the messages from peers. Therefore, there should be a much greater impact of the new media and of Facebook in particular, on the development of one’s body image than in the case of the traditional media.

Several studies (mostly of correlational type) have investigated the association between the usage of Facebook and the concerns towards their own body image of young women. Tiggemann & Slater (2014)\textsuperscript{13} analyzing the relationship between the Internet and the concerns of young girls of 10-12 about their own body image have concluded that the time spent on social networks has a closer correlation with the concern towards body image than an overall exposure to the Internet. Thus, the authors conclude that social networks (mainly Facebook) are a powerful socio-cultural force in building their body image at preteenagers.

To similar conclusions have come other studies, as well: Meier & Gray (2014)\textsuperscript{14}, Kim & Chock (2015)\textsuperscript{15}, Eckler, Jr. & Paasche Kalyango (2016)\textsuperscript{16}, studies attended by teenagers, female students and / or young women: there is a positive correlation between the usage of Facebook and the body dissatisfaction.

There are few studies investigating in an experimental manner Facebook’s impact on one’s body image and they often focus on particular aspects of body image. Mabe, Forney, & Keel (2014)\textsuperscript{17} have experimentally investigated the impact of Facebook on the preoccupation with one’s body shape and weight and the data obtained showed that the concern of those exposed to Facebook was low even compared to the group who were exposed to a neutral site. Even if one can speak of an association of the usage of Facebook with eating disorders, it is rather reduced. The usage of Facebook can sustain the concern for body weight and shape and increase the degree of anxiety - both regarded as risk factors in the nutrition pathology, but still more research is needed (especially longitudinal and ecological) for a better understanding of the effect that social media have in maintaining the risks of eating disorders.

There is no significant effect on the body dissatisfaction - in terms of body shape and weight – as a result of the usage of Facebook is the conclusion of another experimental study (Fardouly, et. all, 2015)\textsuperscript{18}. According to this study, women have a negative state of mind after their exposure to Facebook as compared to their exposure to a neutral site, but this state of mind is not exclusively linked to the comparison regarding their body image. Facebook offers a variety of dimensions (other than appearance, body image) for comparison, such as social status and life experiences. Women can judge other females or others on Facebook as being "likers" of their photos, and this preference can influence their body image satisfaction.

happier or having a better life than them, which can lead to the induction of a negative state of mind. The mentioned study states that exposure to Facebook is associated with the dissatisfaction towards other dimensions of one’s body image than those analyzed in the traditional way: body weight and shape, namely is associated with the dissatisfaction with one’s face, hair and skin - probably this is due to the fact that Facebook has more portrait type images than those of the entire body, scientists believe.

Given these data (even if they are relatively few) we can say that the increase of the consumption of media messages (especially by the contribution of new media) has no significant impact on the growth of the dissatisfaction with one’s own body image. Moreover, even new media seem to be a lower risk factor than the traditional media in the development of the body dissatisfaction. Before the outburst of new media, women were confronted, in the media, almost exclusively with unrealistic images of the beauty promoted by magazines, movies and television. With the emergence of new media, women have more diversified images available regarding the appearance and a greater control over the content they consume.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: