Exploring the Antecedents and Consequences of Physical Appearance Concern

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By using a US national sample, this research explores the relationship between media consumption, physical appearance concern, consumption behaviors related to clothes and apparel, and health related behaviors. Our results showed that consumption of certain type of media leads to high physical appearance concern, which in turn has negative consumption-related consequences and positive health-related consequences.

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Extended Abstract

In today’s Westernized and competitive environment, both women and men experience increasing pressures of physical appearance. For most people, the discrepancy between ideal body image and actual body image enlarges as the media continually endorses “thinner” and “sexier” bodies. For instance, previous studies demonstrated that heavy TV viewers are more likely to perceive unrealistic thin female bodies as a standard (Hendriks 2002) and have biased perceptions of body images (Eisend and Moller 2006).

The idealized images conveyed by media vehicles also create a sense of displeasure in consumers with their current personal appearance (Hirschman and Thompson 1997), which in turn affects their consumption behaviors. For instance, as people become more concerned with their physical appearances, they become more interested in clothes and apparel (Burton, Netemeyer, and Lichtenstein 1994), their likelihood of purchasing apparels online decreases (Rosa, Garbarino, and Malter 2006), their attitudes toward cosmetic surgery becomes more positive (Burton, Netemeyer, and Lichtenstein 1994), their usage of cosmetics increases (Netemeyer, Burton, and Lichtenstein 1995), and their usage of tanning salons increases (Burton, Netemeyer, and Lichtenstein 1994).

Physical appearance concern can also affect health-related behaviors. For instance, excessive physical appearance concern might lead to excessive exercise (Tiggemann and Lynch 2001) or unhealthy eating behaviors (Armstrong and Mallory 1992). However, it can also be argued that some types of healthful behaviors are practiced because people are concerned with their appearance as much as their health (Hayes and Ross 1987). Moreover, people who are highly concerned with their concern might want to look healthy.

In this study, we explore the relationship between media consumption, physical appearance concern, cloth/apparel consumption, and health-related behaviors. It is hypothesized that people who read certain magazines (e.g. InStyle, People, and Vogue) and watch particular types of TV programs (e.g., awards shows, celebrity interviews, and news magazine shows) will be more likely to be concerned with their physical appearance (H1). High physical appearance concern, on the other hand, will be associated with both negative outcomes (related to cloth/apparel consumption–H2: amount of money spent on clothes, apparel, and luxury items; and frequency of cloth/apparel shopping) and positive outcomes (health-related behaviors–H3: healthy food consumption; consumption of foods that help weight-management; and frequency of exercising).

To test the proposed hypotheses, data from a national survey conducted by Universal McCann-Ericson in 2005 were used. The survey, called Media in Mind, is conducted each year and focuses on lifestyles, media consumption, and other consumption related attitudes and opinions. Of 4,990 adults who completed the survey, 40% were male, 50% were older than 50-years-old, 83.5% were White, and 65% were married. Measures related to media consumption (TV programs that portray thin and sexy body images, and favorite magazines that are related to fashion and celebrities), physical appearance concern, amount of money spent on clothes/apparels and luxury items, frequency of cloth/apparel shopping, and consumption of healthy food, consumption of food that help weight-management, and frequency of exercising were used to test proposed hypotheses. Also, because there is a significant difference between men (Mean=3.36) and women (Mean=3.65; t=-12.830, p<.001) in terms of physical appearance concern, gender was treated as a control variable in all analyses.

To test the impact of media consumption on physical appearance concern, a blocked multiple regression analysis was conducted by entering gender in the first step and entering media consumption variables in the second step. The inclusion of media consumption variables in the regression model resulted in a significant F change (Fincrement=190.503; df=2, 4983; p<.001; ΔR²=.07). The predictors explained 10% of the variance in physical appearance concern in the second step (F=186.044; df=3,4983; MSR=.561; p<.001; R²=.101; adjusted R²=.100). Both media consumption variables have positive and significant effects on physical appearance concern, meaning that as people watched more TV programs that portrayed thin and sexy bodies (β=.184, t=12.593, p<.001) and as people read more fashion-related magazines (β=.138, t=9.480, p<.001), they become more concerned with their physical appearances. Therefore, H1 was confirmed.
A series of blocked multiple regression analyses were also conducted to examine the impact of physical appearance concern on proposed dependent variables. In all of these analyses, gender was entered in the first step and physical appearance concern was entered in the second step. The inclusion of physical appearance in the second step resulted in significant F changes in all analyses.

The results showed that as physical appearance concern increases, people spend more money on clothes and apparel ($\beta = .193$, $t = 12.773$, $p < .001$) and luxury items ($\beta = .208$, $t = 14.679$, $p < .001$). Also, they go shopping for clothes and apparel more frequently ($\beta = .222$, $t = 16.145$, $p < .001$). These results provided support for H2.

Our results also showed that people who are highly concerned with their physical appearance are more likely to consume healthy foods ($\beta = .196$, $t = 13.934$, $p < .001$) and more likely to consume foods that help them manage their weight ($\beta = .192$, $t = 13.571$, $p < .001$). However, no significant relationship between physical appearance concern and frequency of exercising was found ($\beta = -.009$, $t = -.443$, $p = .658$). Therefore, H3 was partially supported.

Overall, our study shows that, as the cultivation theory suggested (Gerbner et al. 1977), media consumption affects the level of physical appearance concern. People who consume certain types of TV programs and magazines are more likely to be concerned with their physical appearances. Similar to previous studies, our study shows that physical appearance concern has negative impacts on clothes/apparel-related consumption behaviors. As opposed to previous studies, on the other hand, our study provides some evidence that physical appearance concern might lead to healthy behaviors, such as healthy food consumption. Future studies should examine these issues through experiments and longitudinal studies in order to establish direct cause-effect relationships between media, physical appearance concern, consumption behaviors, and health-related behaviors.

References

Don’t Go to the Grocery Store Hungry?
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The focus of the current research, is to identify whether consumers show preference for hedonic and utilitarian food and non-food items when hungry, explain why such differences exist, and demonstrate the relationship between hunger and self-control (manipulated through cognitive load) on our consumption of hedonic and utilitarian items. Research on palatability and preference ratings (Rolls et al. 1981), the role of external cues (Cornier et al. 2004), and variety seeking behavior (Menon and Kahn 1995) have explored how hunger affects our preferences and choices. This literature shows that consumers are not very good at understanding their body, instead they respond to external cues like time of day or the smell of pizza (Schachter 1968). Additionally, they tend to seek items that will satiate their hunger (Goukens et al. 2007), which results in increased attractiveness of the items when hungry. Only after they have eaten a large amount of one item does the attractiveness of that item decrease (Rolls et al. 1981). However, research does not offer predictions regarding cases of consumption where the most attractive item is not the most consumed. We hypothesize that while self-control does not affect the attractiveness of an item, self-control is in effect when the individual is ready for consumption, thus extending previous work on the effects of hunger in consumption settings and self-control in general. We extend this research by gaining a better understanding of the effects of self-control as a moderator between hunger and consumption. Specifically, we consider the case where consumers report their individual levels of hunger, then participate in consumption of utilitarian and hedonic foods. This leads us to propose a theory of hunger that demonstrates that when hungry, consumers have a tendency to eat more than they should, therefore, they tend to employ self-control tactics, which stop them from eating excessive quantities of the hedonic foods, but allows them to eat the utilitarian foods. Research on self-regulation has investigated cases where consumer impose measures of self-control (restrained eaters), but has not examined cases where consumers are “normal” eaters and impose measures of self-control when presented with hedonic food items in a hunger situation.