



Media Influence and Eating Problems: The Mediating Role of Body Appreciation in Young Adults

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ABSTARCT

Media plays a significant role in the lives of young adults in terms of shaping social and cultural standards for physical appearance, which may lead to eating problems. The current study aims to explore the relationship between media influence, body appreciation, and eating problems in young adults. The sample consists of 200 university students, with an age range of 18-24 years who were sampled purposively. Participants completed the Multidimensional Media Influence Scale, Body Appreciation Scale, and Binging Eating Scale. The data was analyzed through Pearson Product Moment correlation and mediation analysis using SPSS and AMOS. The findings of the study showed that there is a significant negative relationship between media influence and body appreciation and a significant positive relationship between media influence and eating problems. Body appreciation partially mediates the relationship between media influence and eating problems. We conclude that media influence and body appreciation are important factors influencing eating problems and we need counseling services for youth enrolled at universities to prevent eating and related health and social problems from rising in the country.

Keywords: Media Influence, Body Appreciation, Eating Problems, Young Adults.

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INTRODUCTION

Young adults are in the age of progression from adolescence to adulthood, and due to this transition, they experience many psychological problems, including anxiety, depression, and insecurity related to their appearance, leading to a high risk of eating problems (Sander et al., 2021). Eating problems include avoidant or restricted food intake skipping meals and binge eating (Bourne et al., 2020). The prevalence of eating disorders in young adults is between 5.5-17.9% for women and 0.6-2.4% for men (Yasmina & Anna, 2022). Eating problems are a trigger for susceptible populations, fostering a society that prioritizes thinness over holistic health and well-being, due to media exposure. Research shows that mass media engagement can put youth at risk of developing eating disorders, such as anorexia nervosa, binge eating disorders, and bulimia nervosa (Uchoa et al., 2019).

Social media has become the need of the time whether it is to connect with loved ones or in the pursuit of progress in individual careers, hence having a widespread effect on modern society and influencing millions of people (Kulandairaj, 2014). Young adults usually dedicate most of their time to social media platforms, as they are of an age in which they are compelled to explore the world through media (Lim et al., 2022). Furthermore, social media platforms have a significant role in their lives as they not only access these platforms exclusively for networking, connecting, and keeping abreast of the newest fashion trends but they tend to make decisions based on the information available on these websites (Jan et al., 2017). Conventional media, which includes television, commercials, and magazines, along with social media platforms, hold the power to shape cultural norms, beliefs, and views (Hjarvard, 2008). Media influences all aspects of human life, one of which is the perception of one's body image. Modern media

content praises extreme thinness or slimness, consequently encouraging harmful weight management behaviors (Rounsefell et al., 2020; Valkenburg et al., 2016).

Feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction with one's own body are further worsened by social media comparison (Jarman et al., 2021). People compare themselves to unrealistic beauty standards. With ever-increasing media access, users are feeling more and more inadequate and unhappy about their bodies. It is very difficult for an average user to meet the standards of beauty and weight projected by the media, even with diet control. This constant comparison leads to body appreciation issues (Chen & Lee, 2013). Although the influence of media on the minds, especially young minds, cannot be negated, culture also holds a significant value in shaping the norms of society (Nazir et al., 2022). South Asian countries, like Pakistan with primarily *collectivistic cultures*, put a great emphasis on appearances, especially on females, which compels them to adopt the lifestyle of celebrities and social media influencers leading to an emotionally and mentally confused state of mind. In the pursuit of ideal body figures and body weight, females from a young age indulge in diets to the extent of obsession (Spettigue & Henderson, 2004).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Tripartite Influence Model is a theoretical background used to comprehend the progress of body image dissatisfaction and eating disorders in individuals and is a version of the Social Ecological Theory (Thompson et al., 1999). This model pinpoints the origins of social influences, which include the media, peers, and family. Social media is a special kind of media where viewers are exposed to information generated mostly by their friends and, to a lesser extent, by their family. Nonetheless, social media networks expose viewers to media content that

features models and other celebrities; much like conventional mass media does (Prieler & Choi, 2014). According to the Tripartite Influence Model, regardless of the source of sociocultural influence, the process of comparing oneself to others socially plays a crucial role in the change of body dissatisfaction, leading to eating problems. Consequently, it is critical to evaluate social comparisons, specifically body comparisons, and their implications on body-related outcomes, particularly in the understudied setting of social media (Prieler & Choi, 2014).

Another well-established and validated theory is the Social Ecological Theory (Leahey et al., 2011), which explains that some of the mechanisms of body dissatisfaction and eating behaviors in women can be attributed to various social factors that contribute to their development. This theory posits that social factors have a detrimental impact on people's body image through the mediation processes of internalization of the thin ideal and social comparisons. The body dissatisfaction caused by these societal factors is a source of worry because a link has been shown between body dissatisfaction and undesirable physical and psychological consequences, such as depression and disordered eating behaviors (Lindberg et al., 2006).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Fardouly and colleagues (2015) highlight that young women who spend time on Facebook express a negative mood than those who spend time on appearance-neutral websites. Likewise, women with a high tendency to compare their appearance reported greater face, hair, and skin-related problems after browsing Facebook than the control website. Another study discovered a link between the frequency with which people utilize social media platforms and their internalization of a slender ideal body type. This suggested that increased usage of social

networking sites was related to considerably higher internalization of a slender ideal in women. Furthermore, in the same study, the utilization of appearance-related features had a stronger positive link with the internalization of a slender ideal than the extensive use of social networking sites. The findings imply that a tendency to connect with appearance-related attributes online and actively getting involved in media creation is linked to body image concerns (Mingoia et al., 2017).

Media has a significant impact on eating habits and body image. Research has consistently demonstrated a correlation between media exposure and body image concerns, with individuals, particularly women and adolescents, vulnerable to internalizing and idealizing these media-driven beauty ideals (Xie, 2024). According to a study on adolescent girls, the amount of time spent on social media platforms was strongly linked with internalizing the slim ideal, body monitoring, and the desire to be thin (Scully et al., 2023). Whereas the girls who spent an average of one and a half hours each day on Facebook had considerably higher scores on body image concerns than non-users (Tiggemann & Slater, 2013). According to a study, the constant experience of media portrayals of the slender model figure does play a role in creating an environment within society that contributes to the development of eating disorders (Spettigue & Henderson, 2004).

Innovations in media have transformed individual lives and standards of society, prompting a reevaluation of modern techniques of socialization and lifestyle expectations in the digital era. In modern society, both men and women find themselves drawn to the continuous pursuit of beauty ideals (Blowers et al., 2003). Often centered around idealized body images, these standards have become synonymous with modern beauty ideals. The rapid increase of media content showcasing conventionally attractive men and women on media platforms magnifies the pressure to conform

to these unrealistic standards consequently leading to dissatisfaction with body image and the development of eating abnormalities (Freedman, 1984).

The influence of media on body image and the risk of eating disorders is not limited to a specific geographical region or culture but its implications are seen worldwide. Literature has revealed that consuming media content that idealizes specific body images can exacerbate dissatisfaction with one's body image, which will further lead to disturbance in eating behaviors (Blowers et al., 2003). Furthermore, different societal norms along with expectations concerning lifestyle, specifically body image, have been revolutionized due to the diverse range of digital media platforms. Due to the constant increased exposure of idealized body images on mainstream media like television and social media platforms, there is an increase in pressure on individuals to conform to unrealistic beauty standards, which consequently leads to dissatisfaction with one's body (Freedman, 1984).

These unrealistic beauty standards not just influence women but also men, triggering a persistent pursuit of an illusory ideal body shape. Women and men are usually affected by these ideal body image standards, escalating the pursuit of the "ideal" body shape. Literature highlights that exposure to media is usually associated with feelings of dissatisfaction regarding one's own body, highlighting its detrimental effects on the body image perception of individuals (Geller et al., 2002). The measures taken by individuals suffering from eating disorders such as Anorexia Nervosa which is characterized by limiting food intake to obtain thinness, are extreme. Eating disorders are a byproduct of dissatisfaction with one's body image (Lindberg et al., 2006).

Increase in the trend of thinness has become a major trend as it not only increases the pressure for individuals to attain the perfect body but has also been linked to success which in turn increases the risk of eating disorders and the influence of media on diverse demographic

groups not on just one (Parker & Harriger, 2020). Through literature, it has been evident that body appreciation also serves as a protective factor against eating disorders, in the face of pervasive media influence. Body appreciation is defined as an acceptance of one's body and respecting it, regardless of the influence of media and the standards of society. Research indicates that those individuals who have high levels of body appreciation are less likely to experience the negative effects of media on their body image and consequently they will engage more in healthy eating behaviors (Sanzari et al., 2023).

To sum up the above literature it is concluded that media affects body image and eating habits, and that there is a need to understand the reasons behind this influence and how it may have a negative influence on body appreciation. Therefore, the present study aimed to study the relationship between media influence, body appreciation, and eating problems. The objective of this study was also to explore the mediating role of body appreciation in the relationship between media influence and eating problems. The following are the hypotheses of the current study:

H₁: There would be a significant positive relationship between media influence and eating problems in young adults whereas a negative relationship between media influence and body appreciation in young adults.

H₂: Body appreciation would mediate the relationship between media influence and eating problems.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The quantitative research design that was used in the current study was correlational and data collection was carried out through survey methods.

Ethical Considerations

Initially, permission was taken from the Institutional Review Board of the Department of Clinical Psychology, University of Management and Technology. Permission was also taken from the authors of the tools used in the research. Then informed consent was taken from the participants and the confidentiality of participants and their data was maintained. Participants were allowed to withdraw from the study whenever they wanted, and they were assured about their safety physically as well as psychologically.

Sample and Sampling Strategy

The sample included young adults taken from two universities in Lahore between the ages of 18 to 25 years; consisting of 200 participants who were selected through a purposive sampling technique. The inclusion criteria were that the participants should be active users of social media platforms and the exclusion criteria were adults with any physical disability.

Assessment Measures

Multidimensional Media Influence Scale, (MMIS)

Cusumano and Thompson (2000) developed the MMIS, an 11-item scale, to measure the various components of media's effect on body image. Every item on the scale is rated on a 3-point Likert scale of 3=disagree, 2=not sure, and 1=agree. The scale was divided into three subscales that are Internalization, Awareness, and Media Pressure, as well as an overall total. For scoring the questionnaire, the items that correspond to each subscale are added together and then all the items are scored together for an overall total. The reliability of the scale was $\alpha=.84$ using Cronbach alpha. The reliability of the scale in the current research was $\alpha=.75$.

Body Appreciation Scale (BAS)

This scale was developed by Avalos et al. (2005) and measures the positive aspect of the body. It contains 13 items, and is rated on a 5-point scale, where 1 means "never," 2 means "seldom," 3 means "sometimes," 4 means "often," and 5 means "always." The scores obtained from the scale are used to calculate an overall body appreciation score. The Cronbach alpha reliability of the scale was $\alpha=.94$. The reliability of the scale in the current research was $\alpha=.85$.

Binge Eating Scale (BES)

Gormally et al. (1982) developed the BES, a 16-item self-report measure designed to examine the emotional, cognitive (e.g., obsession with eating limitation, humiliation, guilt), and behavioral expressions of binge eating (e.g., consuming fat, eating in secret, amount of food ingested) on a 3-point rating scale from 0-3 (0= not severe and 3= severe). The reliability of the scale was $\alpha=.83$. The reliability of the scale in current research was $\alpha=.70$.

Data Collection

In phase one, pilot testing was done to check if participants were comfortable in filling or understanding the assessment measures. No problems were found in pilot testing. Then in phase 2, the main data collection was done by approaching participants in person. Completing the questionnaire took about 15-20 minutes. Following this step, forms were rechecked by the researcher for missing data. Following data collection, questions were scored and analyzed using SPSS.

Data Analysis

For data analysis, SPSS version 23 was used. Descriptive statistics were used to check the demographics. Then correlation and regression analysis were used to check relationships and

predictions among study variables respectively and mediation analysis was done through PROCESS with model 4.

RESULTS

Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the study participants. Out of 200 participants, 100 participants were males and consequently, 100 participants were females. The participants were further divided into three age groups, the results revealed that 54 % of the participants were between the ages of 18-21 years, and 46% of the participants were between 22-25 years of age. Moreover, the family systems were divided into two categories- 49.5% of the participants belonged to the nuclear family system and 50.5% of the participants belonged to the joint family system. As far as education levels were concerned 32.5% of participants were at the intermediate level and 67.5% of participants were at the bachelor’s level. Pearson Product-Moment Correlation was used through the SPSS 25 version to explore the relationship among media influence, body appreciation, and eating problems in young adults.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Participants (n=200)

Variables	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Male	100	50
Female	100	50
Age of Participants (years)		
18-21	108	54
22-25	92	46
Education		
Intermediate	65	32.5
BS	135	67.5
Family Structure		
Nuclear	98	49
Joint	102	51

Table 2 depicts the findings of the correlation analysis. The results of Pearson product-moment correlation analysis depict that the media influence was significantly and negatively associated

with body appreciation ($r=-.19, p<.01$). Furthermore, media influence was shown to be strongly and positively related to binge eating ($r=.23, p<.01$) Body appreciation was also shown to be strongly and adversely linked to binge eating ($r=-.24, p<.01$).

Table 2

Pearson Product-Moment Correlation among Media Influence, Body Appreciation, and Eating Problems. (N=200)

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>a</i>	MMIS	BAS	BES
MMIS	21.29	5.10	.75	-	-.19**	.23**
BAS	49.45	10.14	.84		-	-.24**
EP	13.78	6.74	.69			-

Note: MMIS = Multidimensional Media Influence Scale, BAS= Body Appreciation Scale, EP= Eating Problem.

**= $p<.01$.

Regression analysis was conducted to investigate whether the influence of media and body image dissatisfaction predicted eating problems or not as one of the main hypotheses of the study was influence of media, and body image dissatisfaction would be good predictors of eating disorders. Table 3 depicts the results of the regression analysis. The results revealed that the influence of media ($\beta=.30, p<.001$) was found to be a significant positive predictor whereas body appreciation ($\beta=-.29, p<.001$) was found to be a significant negative predictor of eating problems.

Table 3

Regression Analysis of the Media Influence, Body Appreciation, and Eating Problems. (N=200)

Variables	Unstandardized		Standardized	t	P	95% CI	
	Coefficient		Coefficient			LL	UL
	B	SE	β				
MMIS	.38	.08	.29***	4.44	.000	-.57	-.22
BAS	-.19	.04	-.30***	-4.33	.000	-.28	-.10

Note: The B is for the unstandardized coefficient β is for the Beta value and the effect of Media Influence predicts the significant effect on Binge Eating and Body Appreciation at $p<.001=***$

Next, the study explored the role of body appreciation as a mediator in the relationship between media influence and eating problems, through PROCESS with the bootstrapping approach macro v 4.2 (Hayes, 2022). Hayes' conditional process analysis requires establishing a relationship

between X and Y through M in a mediation model. The results in Table 4 revealed that the total effect of media influence on body appreciation was found to be significant. The results depicted that pathway c had a direct effect of media influence on eating problems ($\beta=-.29, p<.05$), and the result was significant (Figure 1). Moreover, the pathway “a” which was the direct effect of media influence on body appreciation ($\beta= -.19, p<.05$) was found to be significant. Furthermore, pathway “b” which was the direct effect of the mediating variable i.e., body appreciation on eating problems ($\beta=-.30, p<.00$) was also found to be significant whereas media influence and eating problems as indicated by the pathway “c” ($\beta=-.23, p<.05$) was small, but was still found to be significant. Hence, it was concluded that body appreciation partially mediates the relationship between media influence and eating problems in young adults.

Table 4
Mediation Analysis of Media Influence, and Eating Problems (N=200)

Antecedent	Consequent							
	BAS (M)			Y (EP)				
	β	SE	$P<.05$		B	SE	$P<.05$	
MMIS(X)	a	-.19	.13	.00***	c'	.29	.08	.00***
BAS (M)	---	---	---	b	-.30	.04	.00***	
Constant	i	57.66	3.03	.00***	i	31.95	3.20	.00***
$R^2=.03; F(1,198)=7.76, p>.00***$				$R^2=.14; F(2,197)=16.34, p<.00***$				

Note: MMIS = Multidimensional Media Influence Scale, BAS= Body Appreciation Scale, EP=Eating Problems
*** $p<.001$.

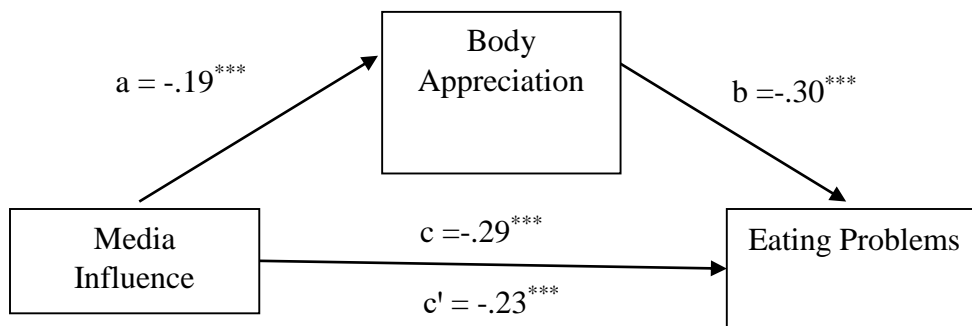


Figure 1
Mediation of Media Influence, Body Appreciation, and Eating Problems (N=200)

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that there is a significant positive association between media influence and eating problems in young adults whereas there was a negative relationship between media influence and body appreciation in young adults. Geller et al. (2002) also conclude that media exposure correlates with feelings of body dissatisfaction, and media adversely affects an individuals' ability to appreciate their bodies. Lindberg and colleagues (2006) found a negative correlation between media influence and the development of Anorexia Nervosa, a type of eating disorder characterized by conscious efforts to restrict food intake in pursuit of weight loss and thinness. Parker and Harriger (2020) demonstrated that media influence results in the pursuit of thinness, particularly among females, but astonishingly, this trend is also on the rise among males and transgender individuals.

It was also hypothesized that body appreciation might mediate the relationship between media influence and eating problems. The result of this research indicated that body appreciation partially mediated the relationship between media influence and eating problems. Media plays a role in creating an environment within society related to a body look that contributes to the occurrence of eating disorders (Spettigue & Henderson, 2004). Body appreciation itself has a positive impact on an individual's health but when it comes to the influence of media it contributes to increasing eating problems. It becomes critical over time in different platforms (Sanzari et al., 2023).

Similar to other societies, the influence of media in Pakistan on body image and eating behaviors is significant, notwithstanding the country's unique cultural context (Sajjad & Jafree, 2023). Despite diverse cultural values and complex societal norms, Pakistan deals with the impact

of media in shaping idealized beauty standards and expectations regarding the lifestyle of individuals. Traditional Pakistani culture puts a great emphasis on modesty and conservative values. However, the development of Western media and internet platforms has led to new beauty standards that undermine these traditional principles. Westernized beauty standards are characterized by slimness, but Western fashion trends are also increasingly prevalent in Pakistani mainstream media, including television dramas, advertisements, and various social media platforms. The resemblance of traditional cultural values with Westernized beauty image ideals creates a complex picture where individuals, specifically young adults, navigate their conflicting expectations regarding body image and appearance. Conversely, there is an increased pressure to conform to the traditional norms of modesty and family values, and this can cause greater complexity and uncertainty in the lives of youth.

Different studies that have been conducted in Pakistan have outlined the detrimental effects media exposure has on body image and eating behaviors among Pakistani youth (Sajjad & Jafree, 2023; Khan et al., 2011). Exposure to Western media is associated with increased body dissatisfaction and a longing for slim body types among Pakistani adolescents and young adults. This dissatisfaction often leads to various forms of disturbances in eating behaviors, including restrictive eating patterns and excessive exercise. In addition, the media and societal pressure are not issues limited to only urban areas and young adults. The use of smartphones has increased dramatically, and while many individuals do not own a television, a smartphone is more commonly found in a lot of individuals who do not own a television in the country. The use of media has thus penetrated rural areas, and women, children, and the elderly use social media platforms, which further inculcate into their minds unrealistic beauty standards and may increase their dissatisfaction with their bodies.

Limitations

The tools used in this study were not indigenously developed, and the operational definitions of the study variables may differ in cultural context. Culture-appropriate scales should be used so that the phenomenon being researched is depicted in its true essence. Moreover, if the study were conducted on a large sample size, including participants from not just one city but from every province/ state of the country the results would be more generalizable.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research investigated the multifaceted impact of media on body image and eating disorders across a multicultural city and ethnically diverse city. It has investigated how media advances have transformed individual lives and society standards, forcing a reconsideration of current techniques of socialization and lifestyle expectations in the digital age. In today's culture, both men and women are lured to pursue beauty ideals, which are frequently centered on idealized body perceptions that have come to represent modern beauty standards. The abundance of media information featuring attractive and very slim people heightens the pressure to meet these unattainable ideals, resulting in body dissatisfaction and the emergence of eating disorders. In the Pakistani cultural context, where family and societal dynamics play a central role in the lives of individuals, the influence of media on body image and eating behaviors may intersect with traditional values and societal norms.

This intersectionality emphasizes the significance of introducing culturally sensitive interventions that address the particular issues that Pakistani adolescents confront while navigating media influences to maintain cultural identity and positive values. Thus, this study is important in emphasizing the interplay between media influence, cultural norms, and individual experiences.

Interventions at universities are needed for youth and they must be tailored to promote body appreciation and healthy eating behaviors. Empowering individuals to critically interact with media messages while simultaneously developing a positive cultural identity can help reduce the media's negative influence on body image and contribute to the general well-being of Pakistani youth.

DECLARATION STATEMENTS

Conflict of Interest

There was no conflict of interest among the Authors

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Ethics Approval

This research study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Department of Clinical Psychology, University of Management and Technology.

Author Contribution Statement

All authors equally contributed to the article

Data Sharing and Availability Statement

The data can be acquired from the corresponding author upon request.

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