Body Image During Quarantine; Generational Effects of Social Media Pressure on Body Appearance Perception

Speranza Trinidad B,1, A. Abreu Soloa,2, and R. Canovenio Cortesia3,4

1 Centro de Investigación en Psicología, Universidad de Buenos Aires, Ciudad autónoma de Buenos Aires, Argentina. 2 Instituto de Ciencias de la Salud, Facultad de Ciencias Económicas y Empresariales, Universidad de Buenos Aires, Ciudad autónoma de Buenos Aires, Argentina. 3 Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, Facultad de Psicología, Córdoba, Argentina.

Introduction

Body image changes during the pandemic and are partially shaped by external social influences. These influences range from friends and family to cultural forces such as the body ideal promoted by the media. Dysfunctional body image or body image discrepancy appears when there is discrepancy between evaluation judgments (self-perceptions) about the body and its physical characteristics is too large (Pittman, Lipscomb, & Vigersland, 2018). The emergence of virtual forms of social interaction afforded by social media digital tools has introduced new ways in which the external pressures can influence body image formation. Social media use is associated with body image problems, disordered eating behaviors, and changes in the body image in younger generations (Roberts et al., 2018).

When the past year’s lockdown by pandemic has been partially related through research papers that have increased the prevalence of negative psychological symptoms (Bendinelli et al., 2020), social distancing has changed how we relate to our bodies in fundamental ways; it has constrained our social interactions and prohibited in-person sexual and social contact as a result, has partially isolated us from social pressures introduced by time to face-to-face interactions.

Participants

957 subjects (528 females, 429 males, 11 other gender; M = 30.42 years old, SD = 11.20 years). Respondents that completed the whole study (n=827) were sorted into groups depending on their gender identity and age.

Online Questionnaires

• Demographic and social media use
• Pressure-Social Media: Items added were identical to those of Pressure-Media factor but for replacing the wording ‘media’ for ‘social media’.

Methods

Results

Social Pressure

Muscle experience more family pressure than females (p = 0.018), but females experience more peer pressure than males (p = 0.042). Both males and females experience more peer pressure than friends (p = 0.001). Males experience more traditional media pressure from news media (p = 0.012). Social media pressure increases with age, particularly in females (p = 0.003), whereas males do not experience this change (p = 0.071).

Body ideal by Generation

We found significant differences in body ideal by gender (p < 0.001), age (p < 0.001), and type of body ideal (p < 0.001). Females experienced more pressure to have a thin body, whereas males experienced more pressure to have a muscular body and experience pressure to have a generally attractive body. Significant effects for gender (p < 0.001) and type of body ideal (p < 0.001) were also found and the interaction between gender and type of body ideal (p < 0.001).

Discussion

Socializing through a virtual self-body image during the pandemic had a different impact on men’s and women’s body image. Post-pandemic studies should explore if this effect holds up with the return to normal face-to-face social interactions (without masks) and physical activity.

Social pressures and body-ideal appearance showed distinct effects on individuals’ body image depending on their generational belonging. Effects during adolescence should be investigated in future studies.

Media pressure affected body image satisfaction significantly more than other kinds of social pressure across genders and generations particularly for young males.

We should take into consideration how social media affects individuals’ self-esteem based on their gender and age. This would help us develop tools to promote realistic body images, encourage healthier behaviors, and help ameliorate their negative effects on how we construe our body image.

Thanks!!