

Understanding Youths' Interest in Changing Their Appearance: An Experimental Examination of Media Influences

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"It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible." ~Oscar Wilde

Abstract

The aim of this study was to experimentally examine the influence of media messages about physical appearance change, specifically cosmetic surgery, on youths' interest in altering their own physical appearance. One-hundred and eighty-nine participants completed this study (51% female; M age = 19 years). Approximately half of the participants were exposed to a television media message featuring a cosmetic surgery make-over; the other half were exposed to a neutral media message. Upon completion of the television viewing, all participants completed measures assessing their desire to alter their bodies (e.g., liposuction, upper arm lift, etc.) and faces (e.g., chin augmentation, forehead lift, etc.) using cosmetic surgery. Women generally reported a greater desire to utilize cosmetic surgery to alter their bodies and faces surgically than did men. Self-esteem did not predict interest in cosmetic surgery, but body and face satisfaction did. Finally, participants who watched a reality television program about cosmetic surgery wanted to alter their own bodies and faces using cosmetic surgery more than did participants who were in the control group.

Introduction

- ❖ Youths' perceptions of their physical appearance have been found to factor prominently into their global self-concept (Harter, 2003). However, media influences have been found to detract from youths' perceptions of their physical appearance (e.g., Field et al., 1999).
- ❖ The media, in particular, provides an endless source of information about ways youths can change/improve their appearance.
- ❖ The media are thought to affect body dissatisfaction via social comparison (Lew, Mann, Myers, Taylor, & Bower, 2007). The majority of media messages are directed at women; these idealized media images of attractiveness appear to prompt upward social comparisons that result in negative self-evaluations (Henderson-King, Henderson-King, & Hoffman, 2001).
- ❖ Recently, the media has begun to feature cosmetic surgery as an appearance-enhancing approach that is accessible, relatively affordable, and appropriate for all ages. Research has yet to examine the extent to which these messages influence youths' desire for self-change.

Hypotheses:

- ❖ 1: Gender will predict interest in cosmetic surgery, with women being more interested in cosmetic surgery.
- ❖ 2: Body image (i.e., face and body satisfaction) will predict interest in cosmetic surgery; those who are less satisfied will be more interested in related procedures.
- ❖ 3: Self-esteem will predict interest in cosmetic surgery, with lower self-esteem being related to greater interest in surgery.
- ❖ 4: Watching a reality television shows featuring cosmetic surgery (versus a "control" condition) will be associated with interest in cosmetic surgery.

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Method

Participants and Procedure

- ❖ One-hundred and eighty-nine participants completed this study (103 female; M age = 19.84 years, SD = 4.82) examining "young adults' perceptions of reality TV and potential effects of viewing reality TV."
- ❖ Participation took place in small groups of two to six participants and groups were randomly assigned to the experimental or control condition.
- ❖ Approximately half of the participants were exposed to a media message lauding the efficacy of surgical self-improvement (i.e., a reality television show featuring a cosmetic surgery make-over); the other half were exposed to a neutral media message (i.e., the control group).

Measures

- ❖ **Reality Television Show**
~The independent variable in this study was the television show that participants were exposed to. The cosmetic surgery show viewed was "Extreme Make-Over" and featured make-overs involving multiple cosmetic surgery procedures. The control group viewed a parallel show featuring a home improvement ("Sell This House"). Commercials were deleted from both clips so that they were only 20 minutes long.
- ❖ **"Filler" Questionnaires**
~To mask the true intent of this study, participants were queried about reality television in general and other specific types of reality television (e.g., house remodeling) aside from reality television featuring cosmetic surgery.
- ❖ **Body and Face Satisfaction**
~Participants indicated their general satisfaction with their body and face using single, Likert scale items.
- ❖ **Self-Esteem**
~The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES;1965) was used to assess participants' self-esteem (Alpha = .87).
- ❖ **Interest in Cosmetic Surgery**
~Participants' interest in obtaining cosmetic surgery to alter their bodies and faces was assessed using a measure created for the purpose of this study.
~To assess interest in altering their bodies, a list of 5 cosmetic surgery procedures was presented to participants and they were asked to rate the extent to which they were interested in obtaining the procedures (Alpha = .89).
~To assess interest in altering their faces, a list of 10 cosmetic surgery procedures was presented to participants and they were asked to rate the extent to which they were interested in obtaining the procedures (Alpha = .80).

Results

- ❖ Hypotheses were examined using separate hierarchical regression analyses for each outcome measure (i.e., desire to alter body using plastic surgery and desire to alter face using plastic surgery). In each of these analyses, gender (G), self esteem (SE), and body/face satisfaction (BS or FS) were entered in the first step. The variable of primary interest was then entered in the second step: reality television show watched (RT). In the third step each predictor's interaction with gender was examined in order to determine whether or not these main effects differed for males and females.
- ❖ H1: Female participants had a greater desire to alter their bodies ($\beta = -.23, p < .01$) and faces ($\beta = -.19, p < .01$) using cosmetic surgery than males.
- ❖ H2: Participants who wanted to alter their bodies using cosmetic surgery tended to be unsatisfied with their bodies ($\beta = -.31, p < .01$) and those who wanted to alter their faces using cosmetic surgery tended to be unsatisfied with their faces ($\beta = -.34, p < .01$).
- ❖ H3: Self-esteem did not predict interest in cosmetic surgery.
- ❖ H4: Participants who watched a reality television program about cosmetic surgery wanted to alter their own bodies ($\beta = .20, p < .01$) and faces ($\beta = .20, p < .01$) using cosmetic surgery more than did participants who watched a reality television show about home improvement.

Table 1. Multiple regression analysis predicting desire to alter the body using cosmetic surgery.

	B	SE B	β
Gender (G)	-.37	.11	-.23**
Self-Esteem (SE)	-.05	.12	-.03
Body Satisfaction (BS)	-.12	.02	-.31**
Viewing Reality TV (RT)	.32	.10	.20**
G x SE	.15	.24	.06
G x BS	.06	.06	.09
G x RT	-.29	.21	-.15

Note. n = 189; * p < .05; ** p < .01

Table 2. Multiple regression analysis predicting desire to alter the face using cosmetic surgery.

	B	SE B	β
Gender (G)	-.18	.06	-.19**
Self-Esteem (SE)	.04	.07	.04
Face Satisfaction (FS)	-.09	.02	-.34**
Viewing Reality TV (RT)	.19	.06	.20**
G x SE	.01	.14	.01
G x FS	.07	.04	.16
G x RT	-.14	.13	-.13

Note. n = 189; * p < .05; ** p < .01

Discussion

- ❖ Results from this study indicate that media messages focused specifically on cosmetic surgery as a means of appearance-enhancement did (at least in the short-term) increase participants' interest in, and positive evaluation of, cosmetic surgery when compared to a control group that was not exposed to these media messages.
- ❖ These findings have theoretical and applied implications. Theoretically, the ramifications – including surgery – of youths' concerns about their physical appearance should be included in models examining the development of body image and identity during adolescence and early adulthood.
- ❖ This study adds to the growing body of applied research suggesting that the media may have a deleterious influence on development unless it is paired with education and information literacy.