A Cross-National Examination of Body Image and Media Exposure Comparisons Between Jordanian and American Women

Kaitlyn Baptista

Follow this and additional works at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev

Part of the Psychology Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev/vol7/iss1/6

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.
Copyright © 2011 Kaitlyn Baptista
Body image, defined by Cash and Pruzinsky (2002), as "the multifaceted psychological experience of embodiment," is a combination of attitudes, thoughts, emotions, and behaviors regarding one's body. Of particular interest to this study are the concepts of evaluation of appearance and investment in appearance. Appearance evaluation refers to one's feelings of how attractive they consider their body to be, and how satisfied they are with their believed level of attractiveness (Cash, 2000). Appearance orientation refers to how much importance an individual places on attractiveness and how invested that individual is in appearance, often measured by grooming behaviors (Cash, 2000). Body image is an important research area due to the effects a negative body image can have upon self-esteem, eating, and exercising behaviors; which can further lead to problems such as anxiety disorders, depression, and problems with sexual functioning (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2004).

In the West, women have been plagued with body image dissatisfaction to the point where it has become the norm, coined by the phrase “normative discontent” (Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1985). Research suggests that the media may be largely to blame for this view (Ruggiero et al., 2000). Non-Western cultures with little to no exposure to Western culture have been found to have fewer body image concerns than Westerners (Lam et al., 2009; Ruggiero et al., 2000). However, as cultures modernize, and subsequently westernize, younger generations appear to experience some negative repercussions from the media (body image concerns and eating disorders) that prior generations had been shielded from (Xu et al., 2009).

The majority of body image research is conducted on samples consisting of young women (Ruticus, Hubley, & Zumbo, 2008; Midlarsky & Nitzburg, 2008). It is important to realize though that body image does not exclusively impact teenage girls. In fact, body image concerns have been found to emerge at a very young age and can continue throughout the lifespan. For example, Davidson, Thill, and Lash (2002) conducted a study to examine children's body shape preferences in male and female children in the first and fifth grade, from three different countries (United States, China, and Turkey), and found that even at ages as young as six years old, children showed preference for a thinner body type.

Body image issues often become less important to women as they age; perhaps
due to greater emphasis being placed on their career and/or motherhood; but this is not true for all women (Tiggemann & Lynch, 2001). For some women, aging is the factor that brings on body image dissatisfaction and the development of eating disorders (Midlarsky & Nitzburg, 2008). The ideal body type is even more unattainable as one gets older, yet midlife and elderly women still report feeling pressure to obtain a figure of youthfulness. The presence of wrinkles, gray or thinning hair, reduced elasticity of skin, and weight gain associated with menopause make it even harder to maintain youthful looks, and can lead to increased body image dissatisfaction (Lewis & Cachelin, 2001; Ferraro et al., 2008).

While some women are preoccupied with reaching the thin ideal, they often misconstrue their own true body size (Toriola et al., 1996). Many factors can affect one's perception and satisfaction with their body, including gender, age, body size, and ethnicity. Social factors, including information or comments from parents or peers, such as teasing and modeling, also play a vital role in one's body image satisfaction (Groesz et al., 2002).

The three sociocultural influences correlated with body image dissatisfaction and eating disorders are parents (usually mothers), peers, and the media (Lam et al., 2009, Williams et al., 2006). It has been suggested that it is from these three sources that men and women obtain the information regarding which body size and shape is the most attractive, and the importance of obtaining this ideal shape. Media exposure has been researched extensively and shown to have a powerful effect on body image (Tiggemann et al., 2005; Mazur, 1986). In the West, the body size women are expected to have is a figure that is angular, lean, and toned, generally known as the “thin ideal” (Williams et al., 2006). Women who have obtained this body type are considered to be more beautiful, competent, successful, and have greater self-control than women who are not thin (Toriola et al., 1996). Exposure to the media and the thin ideal can lead to a negative body image, since it is nearly impossible for most women to obtain this body type (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002).

Although the destructiveness of striving to meet the thin ideal is widely recognized, research examining whether the media is to blame for internalization of the thin ideal suggests that the effects of the media are nuanced. Stice, Schupak-Neuberg, Shaw, and Stein (1994) found that media exposure had a significant effect on eating disorder symptoms and that internalization of sociocultural pressures mediated the adverse effects (eating disordered symptoms and body image concerns) of the thin ideal, but media exposure did not have a direct effect on ideal-body stereotype internalization.

Most of the research examining the effects of the media on body image have focused on the thin ideal; however, the ideal image is not only thin, she is also tall with smooth, tan skin, long blond hair, and large breasts (Groesz et al., 2002; Englis et al., 1994). These unrealistic images are often created by the media by air brushing photographs of women who have often turned to surgical procedures to obtain the body a model is expected to have, though fairly impossible to obtain naturally. Even though the United States is culturally diverse country, it has a narrow concept of beauty that excludes a majority of the population (Groesz et al., 2002).

Until recently, eating disorders were rarely documented in areas outside of the West (Lam et al., 2009). Research shows that rates of eating disorders and body dissatisfaction are rising as non-Western countries continue to modernize and adopt Western values (Lam et al., 2009). A classic example of the deleterious effects of the media can be seen in research conducted on the island of Fiji (Becker, 1995). Prior to 1995, the women of Fiji had relatively large body sizes, and the larger women were considered to be most attractive. However, soon after the advent of television on this island in 1995, adolescent girls became concerned with losing weight to look more like their favorite television stars and began engaging in disordered eating behaviors, something previously unheard of there (Becker et al., 2002; Becker et al., 2005).

Not all research supports a connection between the media and negative body image. Jane, Hunter, and Lozzi (1999) found that identification with the Cuban culture was more important than media exposure in predicting eating disorders. Culture also has been shown to play a role in body size preferences of children, with Middle Eastern children choosing heavier ideal female body types than both Chinese and American children (Davidson, Thill, & Lash, 2002). Thus, there may be characteristics of Middle Eastern culture that shields its children from ideas such as the thin ideal, allowing them to view a heavier, healthier body type as most attractive. As exposure to Western media increases, so does the risk of falling victim to the standards portrayed in the media, and the emotional toll of attempting to reach those standards.

Abdollahi and Mann (2001) conducted a study comparing Iranian women living in Iran and Iranian women who had immigrated to America. They hypothesized that the Iranian women in America, having substantially more exposure to Western culture and media, would exhibit higher rates of eating disorders. Surprisingly there were hardly any significant differences between the Iranian women living in either country. Two possible explanations for these findings are that Western values still remain in Iran from before the Islamic revolution.
of 1978, or that the large sample of Iranians living together in the area sampled (Los Angeles) may be buffering the effects of Western society by preserving the collectivism associated with their culture. Thus, even within the Middle East, vast differences are likely to be found due to remnants of previous Western presence in some areas and current increasing Western presence in other areas.

Jordan
According to the Central Intelligence Agency (2010), the official language of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is Arabic; however, the English language is also widely used. Jordan is one of the more liberal countries in the Middle East, although there are still some areas that are considered conservative. It is not mandatory for women to wear the hijab, the headscarf, but many women opt to wear it anyway. The initial reason for wearing the hijab was to protect women from sexual harassment and to promote equality among the sexes (Nydell, 2006). Unlike Westerners, many Arabs do not view this as a sign of oppression. In fact, the percent of women wearing the hijab has increased over the last 20 years, at the same time that their society is being Westernized and modernized (Nydell, 2006). The one study examining whether Western advertising has a negative impact upon eating and body image in Jordanian women found that internalization of the media was related to restrained and emotional eating and desired weight loss, but the media did not appear to have negatively affected body image (Madanat, Brown, and Hawks, 2007).

The principal aim of the current study was to examine the effect of media exposure and internalization on body image in two distinctly different cultures: a Western culture, using a college sample from the U.S., and a Middle Eastern culture, using a college sample from Jordan. In order to also investigate generational effects, a smaller sample of some of the mothers of the participants was also obtained. It was hypothesized that the American women would report greater body dissatisfaction and media exposure than the Jordanian women. It was also hypothesized that the Jordanian college students would have had greater exposure to the media and therefore exhibit greater body image dissatisfaction than the sample of their mothers. Finally, it was hypothesized that American women would report significantly higher appearance orientation scores than Jordanian women; furthermore, that Jordanian college women would have higher scores than the Jordanian mothers.

METHOD
Participants
The participants were college women and a subset of their mothers from two separate countries, Jordan and the United States. A total of 293 Jordanian college women from Yarmouk University located in Irbid, Jordan and 62 of their mothers participated in this study as well as 149 college women from Bridgewater State University located in Massachusetts, United States of America and 26 of their mothers. The Jordanian students had a mean age of 20.79 years compared to 19.73 years for the American students. The Jordanian mothers averaged 46.08 years versus 48.27 years for the American mothers. Body Mass Index scores (BMI), a measure of body fat based on the relation of an individual’s height to weight, were 23.42 for American students, 25.38 for American mothers, 21.67 for Jordanian students, and 39.56 for Jordanian mothers. The BMI of the American students was significantly greater than the Jordanian students and the Jordanian mothers had a significantly greater BMI than both the American mothers and the Jordanian students.

Procedure
American participants were recruited through an introductory psychology participant pool. All participants signed a consent form agreeing to participate. Participants were informed that they would be filling out questionnaires about their personal views, feelings, and attitudes, and were assured that their responses would be confidential. After completion of the battery of questionnaires, participants were debriefed and any questions and/or concerns were addressed by the experimenters. All procedures were approved by Bridgewater State University’s Institutional Review Board. Even though the northern Jordanian university did not have a formal institutional review board, its president granted permission to collect data at the university.

Consent forms and questionnaires given to Jordanian participants were translated from English to Arabic by a translator and then reviewed for accuracy by a second translator. Research assistants recruited Jordanian student participants from classrooms at the university. The research assistants assured students that participation was voluntary and that responses would be anonymous. Once informed consent documents were read and signed by students, questionnaire packets were dispensed. A research assistant was available throughout the process to answer any questions by participants. Upon completion of the questionnaire packet, a subset of the college women in both Jordan and the United States were given a debriefing form and a shortened questionnaire packet to send home to their mothers for voluntary participation.

Measures
Body image dissatisfaction was measured using the Multidimensional Body-Self Relations Questionnaire- Appearance Scales (MBSRQ-AS; Cash, 2000). The MBSRQ-AS consists of 34 questions yielding five subscales, three of which were used
to measure body image dissatisfaction: Appearance Evaluation (AE), Appearance Orientation (AO), and Overweight Preoccupation (OWP). Internalization of the media was assessed through the use of the SATAQ-3 (Thompson, 2004). The SATAQ-3 consists of 30 statements concerning the media and the feelings invoked by it and yields four subscales, three of which were used in this study: Internalization-General, Pressures, and Information. Two additional questions asked the participant to list the number of hours spent watching television in the last week, based on five different categories (News & Current Events, Health & Fitness, Fashion, Entertainment & Gossip, and Sports and Activities). Participants were then asked to do the same with the number of magazines read in the last week for each of these categories. The category for Sports and Activities was not used for this particular study.

Results

A 2 X 2 analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted to evaluate the effects of culture and generation on body image, while controlling for BMI. For this analysis, the appearance evaluation subscale served as the dependent variable. Generation and culture served as the independent variables and BMI as the covariate. There was a significant main effect for culture, \(F(1,469) = 57.65, p < .01\), partial \(\eta^2 = .11\). The covariate of BMI significantly influenced the dependent variable of appearance evaluation, \(F(1,469) = 43.02, p < .01\), partial \(\eta^2 = .08\). Sample means and standard deviations for BMI and all other variables are presented in Table 1. Correlations among the variables by group are presented in Tables 2 and 3.

A 2 X 2 analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to evaluate the effects of culture and generation on appearance orientation, or the extent to which an individual is invested in physical appearance. Appearance orientation served as the dependent variable and culture and generation as the independent variables. Results indicated a significant main effect for culture, \(F(1,509) = 46.61, p < .01\), partial \(\eta^2 = .08\), and generation, \(F(1,509) = 28.58, p < .01\), partial \(\eta^2 = .05\), as well as a significant interaction effect, \(F(1,509) = 8.13, p < .01\), partial \(\eta^2 = .02\) (see Figure 1). Due to the significant interaction between culture and generation, differences among generation for Americans and Jordanians were examined separately. There were no significant differences among the Americans, but there were significant differences among the Jordanians \(F(1, 509) = 52.89, p < .01\). Follow-up tests indicated the Jordanian college women had significantly higher appearance orientation scores than the Jordanian mothers.

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Jordanian Mothers N = 61</th>
<th>Jordanian Students N = 292</th>
<th>American Mothers N = 26</th>
<th>American Students N = 147</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M(SD)</td>
<td>M(SD)</td>
<td>M(SD)</td>
<td>M(SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>48.11 (5.94)</td>
<td>20.79 (2.81)</td>
<td>48.27 (4.63)</td>
<td>19.73 (3.29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMI</td>
<td>28.98 (4.83)</td>
<td>21.67 (3.96)</td>
<td>25.38 (4.73)</td>
<td>23.42 (4.45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AE</td>
<td>3.59 (.63)</td>
<td>4.09 (.61)</td>
<td>3.26 (.76)</td>
<td>3.25 (.73)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AO</td>
<td>3.70 (.58)</td>
<td>4.22 (.42)</td>
<td>3.45 (.57)</td>
<td>3.61 (.56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OWP</td>
<td>2.78 (.76)</td>
<td>2.89 (.93)</td>
<td>2.63 (.74)</td>
<td>2.74 (.99)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intern-Gen</td>
<td>2.53 (.53)</td>
<td>2.78 (.67)</td>
<td>2.12 (.70)</td>
<td>3.21 (1.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressures</td>
<td>2.61 (.65)</td>
<td>2.82 (.68)</td>
<td>2.24 (.89)</td>
<td>2.98 (1.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information</td>
<td>2.95 (.50)</td>
<td>3.27 (.50)</td>
<td>2.53 (.84)</td>
<td>2.84 (.94)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News</td>
<td>2.77 (3.89)</td>
<td>3.16 (6.02)</td>
<td>6.20 (3.99)</td>
<td>1.48 (1.56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>1.68 (2.10)</td>
<td>2.60 (4.17)</td>
<td>1.06 (1.78)</td>
<td>1.02 (1.70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fashion</td>
<td>1.56 (2.22)</td>
<td>4.08 (5.84)</td>
<td>.85 (.79)</td>
<td>2.37 (2.64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td>3.31 (4.25)</td>
<td>5.98 (7.89)</td>
<td>2.60 (2.81)</td>
<td>5.44 (4.70)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cross-cultural differences: College women. As presented in Table 1, the American college women were significantly younger than the Jordanian college women ($t(430) = -3.51, p < .01$) and had significantly larger BMI's ($t(409) = -3.98, p < .01$). The Jordanian college women had significantly higher appearance evaluation scores ($t(344) = -12.02, p < .01$), appearance orientation scores ($t(428) = -11.66, p < .01$), information scores ($t(426) = -5.25, p < .01$), and spent significantly more time exposed to news ($t(380) = -4.15, p < .01$), health ($t(378) = -5.21, p < .01$), and fashion-related media ($t(383) = -3.94, p < .01$). The Americans had significantly higher internalization-general scores ($t(430) = 4.80, p < .01$).

Cross-cultural differences: Mothers. As presented in Table 1, the Jordanian mothers had significantly larger BMI's ($t(80) = -2.64, p < .01$) and higher scores on internalization-general ($t(80) = -2.64, p < .01$). The only significant difference in media exposure was that the American mothers reported greater exposure to news-related media ($t(65) = 3.28, p < .01$).

Cross-generational differences: Jordanians. Jordanian mothers had a significantly larger BMI ($t(308) = -3.05, p < .01$) and higher scores on internalization-general ($t(80) = -2.64, p < .01$). The only significant difference in media exposure was that the American mothers reported greater exposure to news-related media ($t(65) = 3.28, p < .01$).
Cross-generational differences: Americans. The college women scored significantly higher on internalization-general ($t(171) = 6.65, p < .01$) and pressures ($t(172) = 3.79, p < .01$). They also watched or read significantly more fashion ($t(153) = 5.15, p < .01$) and entertainment-related media ($t(160) = 2.63, p < .01$). The mothers were exposed to significantly more news-related media ($t(152) = -5.23, p < .01$; see Table 1).

Discussion

As hypothesized, culture showed a significant effect on body image satisfaction with Jordanians reporting significantly greater body image satisfaction than Americans. Surprisingly, the Jordanian students appeared to have greater media exposure than the American students, and the American mothers only surpassed the Jordanian mothers in news-related media exposure. American students reported greater internalization of media messages, but it was the Jordanian students who reported obtaining more appearance-related information from the media. Although Jordanian college women did report greater media exposure and internalization than the Jordanian mothers, the Jordanian mothers reported greater body image dissatisfaction, contrary to my hypothesis.

For the Jordanian students, media exposure and internalization were not significantly correlated with appearance evaluation, suggesting that the media is not having a significant effect on these women's body image satisfaction. On the other hand, appearance orientation was associated with internalization of the media's messages regarding appearance and exposure to media related to fashion and entertainment. It is interesting that the Jordanian college women report significantly greater investment in their appearance, concern about their weight, and greater use of media for information about appearance than the American students, yet report a more positive body image.

Although the Jordanian college women reported spending more time with media than the American students, they reported significantly less internalization of appearance ideals than the American students. These results suggest that there may be cultural factors affecting internalization of the media. Two cultural differences between the U.S. and Jordan that have been shown to be related to body image are modesty of dress (Mustafa, 1992; Dunkel et al., 2010) and strength of their religious faith (Boyatzis & Quinlan, 2003; Mahoney, et al., 2005). The Qur'an asserts that the wearing of the *hijab* is not meant to be oppressive, but to protect the women from...
being judged by their appearance (Nydell, 2006). Instead of struggling to change their bodies to meet the standards of the media, they may be more likely to accept their bodies as they are because they believe that is how God wished for them to look.

Appearance evaluation, appearance orientation scores and overweight preoccupation were all associated with media internalization in American college women, but not media exposure. It is possible that Americans students are not watching as much television or reading as many magazines as they normally would since they are reporting hours of exposure during the school year, when they are concentrating on homework and studying. The high media internalization may be residual from previous media exposure. As the research of Davidson et al., (2002) and Cash and Pruzinsky (2004) suggests, beauty ideals are established in childhood and stay with individuals until adulthood.

Like their daughters, appearance evaluation in Jordanian mothers does not appear to be associated with the media exposure or internalization, but appearance orientation and overweight preoccupation are positively correlated with media internalization. These results support the assumption that cultural factors may be allowing the Jordanians to increase their investment in their appearance without experiencing body image dissatisfaction. The research of Madanat et al. (2007) and Davidson et al (2002) supports the assertion of cultural protective factors in the Middle East, in particular an ideal body size that is larger and healthier than the ideal body size in the West. This acceptance of a healthier ideal weight may explain why the Jordanian women did not report as much body dissatisfaction as the Americans.

For the American mothers, appearance evaluation was negatively associated with pressures from the media and appearance orientation and overweight preoccupation were positively associated with general internalization of the media. No significant differences were found between the two samples of mothers on any of the body image subscales, regardless of the fact that the Jordanian women had a significantly larger BMI. This again supports the idea that Jordanians are more accepting of larger body sizes. Even more surprising, the Jordanian mothers reported higher internalization of the media than the American mothers.

Limitations of this study include issues with measurement equivalence when translating measures into a different language, the small sample size of American mothers, problems comparing media exposure in two cultures, and the representativeness of the participants. Although research shows that the Middle East is experiencing an increase in westernization (Nydell, 2006; Lam et al., 2009; Dwairy, 2006; Madanat et al., 2007), we cannot be sure that the media content viewed by the Jordanians contains all the same messages regarding appearance as the media viewed by the Americans. The term Arab encompasses a wide array of people from different regions who are not all exactly alike; therefore, research on one particular culture, such as Jordan, may not necessarily be generalized to the entire Arab community, or even the whole country of Jordan.

In conclusion, the body image evaluations of Jordanian women appear to benefit from some sort of cultural protective factor. Due to the ever increasing process of westernization, it is important that these factors be identified so that younger generations of Jordanians do not find themselves at risk when they are bombarded with Western influences. More importantly, mental health specialists should be alert to body image dissatisfaction and the consequences of it, as they are likely to come in contact with these problems on a more frequent basis. Having never had to deal with problems such as eating disorders before, it is easy for the therapist and client to misinterpret the symptoms (Dwairy, 2006). Finally, more research is needed that examines the Middle Eastern culture to determine which behaviors and customs benefit body image and possibly use this information to design more effective interventions for treating the body image dissatisfaction plaguing our society.

References


