Body Image: Media Influence and Eating Disorders

Body Image

Body image is a cognitive representation that an individual creates that may or may not have any relation to how others actually perceive the way they see that individual (Slade, 1994). It encompasses what someone believes about their own appearance whether its memories, assumptions, or generalizations, including height, shape, weight, and even how they physically feel in their own body (Slade, 1994). An individual's body image can either be positive or negative and is a huge factor to their mental wellbeing. The media plays a major role in how people view beauty and standards of what looks good or not because of how normalized certain attributes and features are perceived. The purpose of this essay is to describe how the media's influence can promote eating disorders, positive and negative body images, and the types of treatments that are effective in treating individuals with eating disorders.

Media Influence

The media proposes beauty ideals for both men and women, women being more thin and fit, while men are to be muscular and strong. Social norms have been created based on how the media describes what is to be perfect or the ideal size. For example, on the social media application Twitter, a man posted an image of a group of girls and he captioned it "fellas which one y'all got," and some guys quoted the tweet saying, "the one in the grey tights, all natural and a big butt." Many girls started tweeting things about how guys only like fair skinned girls with a coke bottle shaped body. Personally, I found myself agreeing with some of the girls because I've seen countless times how men will degrade heavier girls and praise those with smaller waists and large thighs or butts. However, this didn't have a negative effect on my own self-image, and this is because I believe that everyone has their own preferences and since they weren't talking negatively about a different girl's body, I didn't really have a problem with it. It did show that many girls have noticed these perceptions and social norms, but this effects individuals who compare themselves to others or who aren't already happy

Media and Eating Disorders

Due to media influence there have been drives for being thin, dissatisfaction with the body, and weight control methods that are harmful (Spettigue & Henderson 2004). Two main diagnoses that have been produced by Western society's beauty standards are anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa, and this is because thinness has become obsessive and people have a deathly fear of gaining weight (Comer, 2017). However, binge eating disorder is also rising to be a more commonly seen diagnosis (Comer, 2017). Connections have been made between media and eating disorders because research studies have been conducted exposing individuals to images of slim models from fashion magazines, which resulted in lowering self-esteem, increase in body dissatisfaction, and emotional distress (Spettigue & Henderson, 2004). This results in individuals wanting to lose weight and it tends to be in an unhealthy way, like binge-eating/purging or restricting themselves (Comer, 2017). These two types of anorexia nervosa have an onset age of 14-18 years old, and most teenagers are heavily influenced by social

media, peers, and even strangers that they come across (Comer, 2017). Some magazines, television shows, and social media apps have advertisements for diet products, diet foods, and ways to appear smaller by wearing certain colors and clothes that will make someone's body shape and size more attractive (Spettigue & Henderson, 2004). Some patterns that have been seen outside of media is when shopping at a store girls will ask whether the outfit they are trying on makes them look "fat" or big, and even if they are told no, they have their own perception and will not buy it because they do not want to be seen as anything less than the ideal body image. Many of these eating disorders have become so common because of how the media emphasizes the importance of appearance in general (Fettigue & Henderson, 2004). It has also become a how-to guide for those suffering from eating disorders, which they have reported as becoming obsessed with surfing the web and reading magazines to help them obtain an impossible standard (Fettigue & Henderson, 2004).

Promoting Positive Body Image

Some changes that could be utilized to promote a more positive mody image whould be things such as an increase media literacy, activism, and advocacy as a means of treating and preventing eating disorders (Fettigue & Henderson, 2004). Media literacy training teaches individuals to be more involved in critical thinking about the different types of media, increasing awareness of how media is used, and analyzing the content and intentions of media producers (Fettigue & Henderson, 2004). Programs like this would be effective in improving knowledge, internalization of the skinny-ideal, and body image, by individuals less likely engaging in social comparison and being negatively affected by images. Social media apps should also stop promoting ideas for becoming skinny and start promoting ideas for becoming healthy. Many people believe that having a slender body type equates to being healthy, when in reality body shape and size does not always imply an unhealthy lifestyle and eating habits.

Treatments

Treating an eating disorder usually is paired with both psychological and nutritional counseling, along with medical and psychiatric monitoring. The biopsychosocial model is the best way to go about understanding the symptoms and medical consequences that contribute to or maintain eating disorders because of the biological, psychological, and interpersonal components (Munro, Randell, & Lawrie, 2016). One type of therapy that is effective in treating eating disorders is cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), a relatively short symptom-oriented therapy that focuses on beliefs, values, and cognitive thought processes, that aim to change or modify negative and distorted beliefs and attitudes about the meaning of weight, shape, and appearance (Murphy, Streabler, Cooper, & Fairburn, 2010). Another type of therapy that helps with treating eating disorders is acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), which helps individuals to separate their feelings and understand that experiencing pain and anxiety is normal and part of everyday life, this helps with living an authentic life resulting in living good and feeling better (Steiger & Séguin, 1999). Family-based treatment is also an effective treatment because having a strong social support system has been linked with establishing recovery by promoting healthy coping mechanisms (Steiger & Séguin, 1999).

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