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## Media Effects on Body Image and Eating Attitudes of the Women Living in Metropolitan and Rural Areas in a Turkish Population

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### Abstract

Body perception is a subjective formation that is open to change via social effects. In fact, there is no need for a relation between one's own perception about his/her body and other peoples' perception about his/her body. body perception is subject to change due to social effects. Research indicate that body ideal has been changing through different ages, different groups and cultures (Jackson, 2002). Media, on the other hand, is an active agent triggering problems about body perception. Aim of the present study is to investigate media effects on body perception of women living in rural and metropolitan areas of Turkey. Our results indicate that sociodemographic variables are among determinants of media follow-up habits and eating attitudes of women living in metropolitan and rural areas

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### 1. Introduction

Disturbances in body perception is not a rare situation during adolescence, a period in which young individuals are very sensitive about how do they look. When these concerns about their appearance reach at anxious levels people might change their eating patterns and dietary choices which may result in vomiting or a total abstain from eating. Such sort of behaviors are in fact are attempts of taking control of one's own body and constituting a positive self image (Wykes and Gunter, 2004).

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Body perception is a subjective formation that is open to change via social effects. In fact, there is no need for a relation between one's own perception about his/her body and other peoples' perception about his/her body. For instance, anorexia nervosa patients feel themselves much more heavier than they actually are which is related with the fact that a considerable amount of women feel themselves as fat even though their weight is normal or even under average weight of their peers (Grogan, 2001). In anorexia nervosa this problem in weight perception goes on to occur even after psychiatric treatment (Garfinkel and Garner, 1982). Findings in literature indicate that women with eating disorders believe that other people evaluate them only through their physical appearance (Cooper and Gunter, 2004).

As asserted above body perception is subject to change due to social effects. Research indicate that body ideal has been changing through different ages, different groups and cultures (Jackson, 2002). For example, in western cultures being thin is associated with self control, attractiveness, grace and youth (Orbach, 2005). On the other hand, as a reflection of cultural differences about body ideal, women from various ethnic origins including black and hispanic women are more satisfied about their look and body image when compared to white women with high social status who are more prone to internalization of culturally reinforced body ideal (Jackson, 2002).

Media, on the other hand, is an active agent triggering problems about body perception. Research in literature show that being subjected to film or pictures of thin models, actresses etc can exaggerate symptoms in anorexia and bulimia patients and cause perceptual disturbances about their bodies in clinical samples (Hamilton and Waller, 1993; Waller, Hamilton and Shaw, 1993). Research in normal population also indicate similar results (Grabe, Ward and Hyde, 2008). However, being satisfied with physical appearance in general is an significant predictor of to what extent a person will be affected from messages about body ideal coming through media channels (Posavac, Posavac and Posavac, 1998; Groesz, Levine and Murnen, 2002). It also has to be noted that when media characters presented with a "culturally approved" body shape are perceived as real rather than just television or advertisement means their capability of disturbing body perception in risk groups increases (Richins, 1991). Thus, schematic information processing, as well as mere exposure to media, seems as a high risk factor on its own for negative media effects on body image and body perception.

Given the findings in literature above it is of importance to conduct studies on extent of media effects on body image and body perception in different cultures. Aim of the present study is to investigate media effects on body perception of women living in rural and metropolitan areas of Turkey. It is expected that exposure to thin body images as body ideal through local and global media will increase disturbance in body perception in women living in metropolitan areas when compared to women living in rural areas.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

A total of 200 women living in high S.E.S metropolitan areas of Istanbul (Sisli, Bakirkoy and Kadikoy districts) and town center and districts of Bartın Province (a small town with town center population of 63000) were given a semi-structured media follow-up question form (SMFQF) including questions about socio-demographic variables and media follow-up habits. Also a revised form of Appearance Schemas Inventory (ASI-R) were given. ASI-R has two subscales: One self-evaluating subscale demanding participants to answer questions about evaluating him/herself through his/her physical appearance and a second, motivational, subscale evaluating ones efforts about his/her physical appearance. Participants were also given Eating Attitudes Test (EAT). Data is analysed via SPSS 16.0 version.

### 3. Results

Our results from SMFQF indicate that women living in high S.E.S metropolitan areas of Istanbul are significantly more exposed to, especially, foreign/global media than women living in rural areas; that is, they watch foreign tv serials significantly more ( $t=-10$ ,  $sd=178.2$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), follow-up foreign music and entertainment programs significantly more ( $t = -7.8$ ,  $sd = 128.3$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), read significantly more fashion magazines ( $t = -7.0$ ,  $sd = 124.9$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), follow-up news related with fashion and celebrities significantly more through both newspapers/magazines ( $t = -7.0$ ,  $sd = 124.9$ ,  $p < 0.001$  for magazine follow-ups and  $t = -10.8$ ,  $sd = 158.7$ ,  $p < 0.001$  for newspaper follow-ups respectively) and through internet ( $t = -9.5$ ,  $sd = 131.3$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Therefore, it can be expressed that exposure to foreign media is significantly more in women living in high S.E.S metropolitan areas of Istanbul when compared to women living in rural areas. In addition, when asked for their favorite actresses in SMQF it is observed that women living in metropolitan area of Istanbul are significantly more fond of foreign thin women images when compared to women living in rural areas (10% vs 80%,  $\chi^2 = 99.0$ ,  $sd = 1$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Results from ASI-R indicate that women living in metropolitan Istanbul area are significantly more concerned about their physical appearance and display more effort for a better look when compared to women living in rural areas. That is, for overall inventory score ( $X = 3.0$ ,  $SS = 0.69$  vs  $X = 2.44$ ,  $SS = 0.76$ ,  $t = 5.44$ ,  $sd = 197$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), for self evaluation subscale ( $X = 2.8$ ,  $SS = 0.73$  vs  $X = 2.4$ ,  $SS = 0.79$ ,  $t = 4.05$ ,  $sd = 197$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and for motivation subscale ( $X = 3.3$ ,  $SS = 0.76$  vs  $X = 2.6$ ,  $SS = 0.89$ ,  $t = 6.33$ ,  $sd = 197$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

In addition, results from EAT also indicate that women living in metropolitan areas of Istanbul displayed significantly higher scores when compared to woman living in rural areas ( $X = 21.0$ ,  $SS = 14.65$  vs  $X = 15.7$ ,  $SS = 7.89$ ,  $t = 3.19$ ,  $sd = 152.0$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). On the other hand 19% of women living in Istanbul and %5 of women living in Bartin displayed disturbances in eating attitudes ( $\chi^2 = 9.28$ ,  $sd = 1$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

### 4. Discussion

Our results indicate that media exposure of thin body images on women living in metropolitan and rural areas are at significantly different levels which in turn alters their attitudes about their own physical appearances as measured by ASI-R. An important reason underlying our results might be the sharp sociodemographic differences between these two groups. Educational level of women living in Istanbul are higher than woman living in rural areas. In addition income level of woman living in high S.E.S metropolitan areas of Istanbul is also higher.

This differentiation in sociodemographic features also reflects itself on media follow-up habits as women living in Istanbul follow-up significantly more foreign TV programs including TV serials and entertainment/music programs. Internet using frequency and scope is also significantly higher and wider for women living in metropolitan areas when compared to women living in rural areas. Yet women living in high S.E.S metropolitan areas of Istanbul follow-up fashion-magazine and celebrity news more frequently than women living in rural areas. All these differences in media follow-up habits reflect themselves in favourite celebrity choices as well, that is women living in Istanbul are fond of foreign celebrities reflecting western culture-based thin body image as body ideal whereas women living in rural areas go for local celebrities of more conventional physical appearance.

Our findings from ASI-R are in accordance with findings from SMFQF indicating that women living in rural areas perceive themselves thinner than they actually are with respect to their body mass index which is also in accordance with finding in literature that women from low S.E.S are generally have greater body mass index whereas they perceive their weight lesser than it actually is and engage in weight control attempts with less frequency compared to women of higher S.E.S (O'Dea and Caputi, 2001). On the other hand, our results also indicate that women living in metropolitan areas are, even though they wish for a thinner body and are dissatisfied with their body weights, do not display a disturbance about their body perception and indeed they perceive themselves thinner than they actually are.

A considerable body of research in literature indicate that being exposed to thin body images and body ideals through media disturb body perception of women and make them perceive themselves heavier than they actually are (Groesz, Levine ve Murnen, 2002; Cusumano ve Thompson, 2001). Yet our current findings are in contrast with these previous findings in literature. However results of some other studies pertain to the fact that mere exposure to

media might not be sufficient enough to alter body and weight perception in a negative manner on its own (Champion, Furnham, 1999), some other factors like individual vocations such as given priority in sexual attractiveness in interpersonal relations and cultural context also play a mediator role through this process (Henderson-King, Henderson-King, Hoffmann, 2001).

In addition, results of some studies in literature even indicate that media exposure to thin body images does not necessarily alter body perception or self-esteem of women on diet (Miller et al, 2002). Thus, it can be expressed that our findings from women living in Istanbul metropolitan area are in accordance with results of these previous studies. It should also be taken into consideration as another important factor modulating effects of media exposure that making comparisons with images on media and internalisation of these thin body images as body ideal and/or social norms to be obeyed is also important (Botta, 1999; Cusumano and Thompson 1997). In light of these findings it is unknown in current study that to what extent our participants make comparisons with thin body images exposed through media and to what extent they accept and internalise these images as socially valid “real” and “normative” body images. Thus, although media follow-up habits living in metropolitan area differ significantly between women living in metropolitan and rural areas similarity between their self perceptions related with their body weights might be a result of the fact that women living in metropolitan area do not internalise thin body images presented through media and do not make comparisons with these images they are exposed to. However, when our finding that mean EAT score of women living in metropolitan area is significantly higher than women living in rural areas, is taken into account it seems obvious that media exerts some sort of negative effect on women living in metropolitan area with foreign media follow-up habits.

To sum up our results should be evaluated with some constraints taken into account. For example the sample size should be increased in following research and thus representability power should be accelerated. Another constraint in our research is that internalisation level of thin body images presented through media was not specifically measured which should also be considered in future research. In addition, as another similar constraint, exposure level to thin body images should also be taken into consideration and measured in following studies. Though, our study is the first in Turkish population that compares effects of media on body perception of women living in metropolitan and rural areas in non-clinical sample. New studies taking constraints of the current study expressed above into consideration should be conducted for better understanding the paths of media effect on body perception together with aforementioned sociodemographic variables.

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