

Body Image and Self-Esteem: The Role of Self in the Third Person Effect Among Female Students at University of Queensland

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The present study investigates how the third person effect occurs when one is presented with body images that are stereotypical in the media. It is how perceived negative effect of idealized images on media to self and others related to self esteem. The participants were student of University of Queensland that randomly approached in highly populated area. It has been found that the participants rate negative impact lower for self than for others when they are presented with harmful visual stimulus. However, this study did not support the second hypothesis where there was no significant difference with the participants with high self-esteem and low self-esteem in rating negative impact when they are presented with harmful visual stimulus.

Key words: body image, self-esteem, third person effect

FOREWORD

Nowadays, mass media are principal social and cultural institution. Mass media have a big influence in human's life because indirectly they illustrate symbols and become points of focus and interaction in the society. There are many kind of mass media that are familiar with the society; television and newspaper. Each media has its own advantages; however, there are many theories that explain the negative impact of television and newspaper on oneself and others. Ethnic, religion, age and gender groups struggle to influence society's values, myths, symbols, and information through the media (Gans, 1972 cited in Milkie, 1999).

One of the theories is called third-person effect, which Davison (1983) referred as a tendency for people to believe that the media have a greater effect on the beliefs, attitudes, and behavior of other people than on themselves. The third-person effect hypothesis has two components: perceptual and behavioral. The perceptual component states that people will estimate the effects of media messages on themselves to be lesser than the effects on others. This perceptual tendency predicted by the third-person effect becomes more meaningful if it is linked with real-world consequences as hypothesized by

Davison (McLeod, Eveland, & Nathanson, 1997). The behavioral component proposes that these perceptions of media impact will lead to behavior intended to protect the public from perceived negative effect (Davison, 1983).

One of illustration that given by the media is images of so-called 'perfect body for women' that made the cultural standard and emphasized unrealistically thin body shapes and attractive physical characteristic. Richins' (1991) study found that female college students exhibited lower satisfaction with their own physical attractiveness when they were exposed to advertisements containing idealized images (cited in Jung & Lennon, 2003).

Many researchers have found that body image (Jackson, Sullivan, & Rotker, 1998; Lennon, Rudd, Sloan, & Kim, 1999) is positively related to self-esteem (cited in Jung- & Lennon, 2003). According to Fitch (1970), a person with high self-esteem is conceptualized as liking" or valuing himself, as well as seeing himself competent in dealing with the world he perceives. Whilst the person with low self-esteem is seen as "disliking", devaluing himself, and general perceiving himself as not competent to deal effectively with his environment (cited in David & Johnson, 1998). Using these definitions, one can predict that those with high self-esteem would estimate a small

effect of media on self. Conversely, those with low self-esteem would estimate a large effect of media on self.

In 1999, Milkie, conducted a study and found that third-person effect occurs in body image. Using interviews with 60 white and minority girls (black/colored girls), she argued that third person effect had a wider affection to participants especially white participants who wanted to achieve an appearance like that featured on the media while black participants had have less influence. In this study, she used the same variable such as self-esteem as David and Johnson (1998) study to explain how others use and are affected by media figures.

Based in those findings, this study try to examine whether female university students perceive others to be more negatively affected by unrealistic media body images than themselves and whether self-esteem level effect their ratings of negative impact on themselves.

H1: when presented with a harmful visual stimulus, rating negative impact will be lower for self than for others.

H2: when presented with a harmful visual stimulus, participants with high self-esteem will have lower ratings of negative impact on self than participants with low self esteem

This study predict that this would happen because the third person effect might occur when people presented with body images and when people have low self-esteem they tend to rate others subtle to the images.

METHOD

Participants. Forty participants participated in this study. The participants were all female aged 18-25 years old ($M = 20.38$, $SD = 2.20$). They were all student of the University of Queensland that nonprobability sample and their participation was voluntarily.

Design. The study used a 2 x 2 Split-Plot ANOVA. Where one of the independent variable (self-esteem) was between-subject and the other (target) was within-subject. Self-esteem were manipulated by measuring this construct using a scale made up to six items to be answered on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree", the dividing people into High Self-esteem (HSE) and Low Self-esteem (LSE) group using a median split. The target were manipulated by specifying whether the question relates to "Self" and "Other".

The dependent variable perceived negative which

used a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "Not at all" to "Very much", describing the level of negative effect. Three items for "Self" and three items for "Other" will be used.

Materials. *Self-Esteem Questionnaire.* The questionnaire set includes six questions that were adapted from Rossenberg (1983) with some necessary changes. The questions were on 4-point likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 4 (strongly disagree). The questionnaire were contain statement such as "I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others", "All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure", and "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself". Questions 3, 4, and 5 are reverse questions.

Media Images. This part includes collection of images of typical thin body shape models of those in the media. Every participant must take a moment to look at the collection of images after they filled the Self-esteem questionnaire and before they turn the page and answer the next questionnaire set.

Third-Person Effect Questionnaire. The questionnaire set includes six questions about participants' consideration of the images on self (three questions) and others (three questions). The questionnaire was on 7-point likert scale where 1 indicates "not at all" and 7 "very much". The questions about participants' consideration of the images on self were; "to what extent do you believe that media images such as these negatively affect your satisfaction with your body shape and size?", "to what extent do you think that images like these influence you to control your consumption on food?", and "to what extent do you feel that these images pressure you to exercise more than you otherwise would?". While the questions about participants' consideration of the images on others were: "to what extent do you think that these types of media images pressure female university students in general to control their food intake?", "to what extent do you believe that such images influence female university students to exercise more than they would otherwise?", and "to what extent do you believe that images such as these negatively affect female university students' satisfaction with their bodies?".

Procedure. The participants were approached at the University of Queensland convenient sample. First, they were given an introductory page that contains necessary information, and if they consent, they can fill the first questionnaire set.

After they finish the first questionnaire set, they are requested to take a moment to look at a page that contains of collection of images that typical of those in the media. After that they can fill the second set of the questionnaire and consider the collection of images when answering the questions. At the end, we were giving them a standard debriefing sheet to explain the purpose of this study after they had finished to every participant who wants it.

RESULT

An independent-samples t-test found that the difference between self-esteem scores for the people we assigned to the high self-esteem group ($M = 1.5$, $SD = 0.33$) and the low self-esteem group ($M = 2.53$, $SD = 0.37$) was significant, $t(38) = 8.98$, $p < 0.001$.

Tests of Within-Subjects Effects revealed a main effect of target, $F(1.38) = 23.794$, $p < 0.001$. In other words, it was revealed that the ratings for Self ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 1.39$) were significantly lower than ratings for Other ($M = 5.15$, $SD = 0.97$). While the differences in ratings of impact on self (High Self-esteem $M = 3.93$, $SD = 1.44$; Low self esteem: $M = 4.42$, $SD = 1.34$) and others (High self esteem: $M = 5.27$, $SD = 1.06$; Low self esteem: $M = 5.03$, $SD = 0.87$) did not depend on self-esteem, there was no significant interaction between Target and Self-Esteem was found $F(1.38) = 3.214$, $p = 0.081$.

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects showed no significant main effect of self-esteem, $F(1.38) = 0.150$, *ns*. This means that overall ratings of negative impact on self and others were not significantly different between people in the Low Self Esteem group ($M = 4.725$, Std Error = 0.228) and people in the High Self Esteem group ($M = 4.600$, Std Error = 0.228).

CONCLUSION

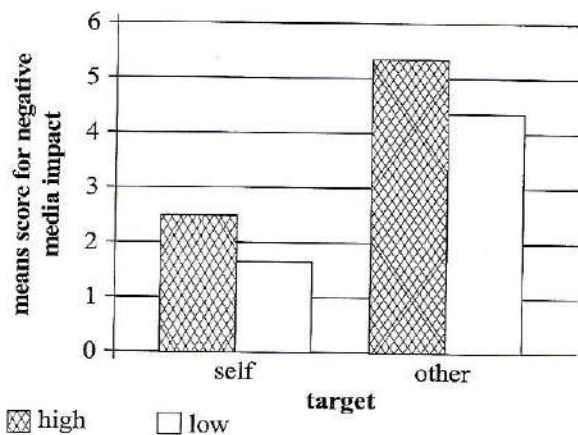


Figure 1. the difference between overall scores for self and other

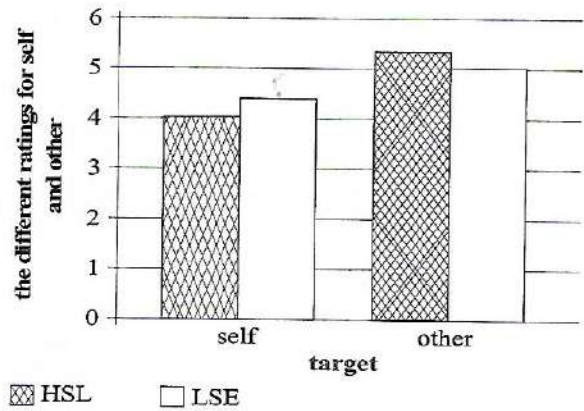


Figure 2. different ratings for negative impact for self and other, for both high and low self esteem groups.

The present study tried to examine third-person effect and self-esteem to the negative effect of body images. As can be seen in the result section, the first hypothesis is supported. However, the second hypothesis which predicted when the participants were presented with the body images, rating negative impact will be lower for self than for others is not supported.

DISCUSSION

The study is aimed to investigate whether female university students perceive others to be more negatively affected by unrealistic media body images than themselves and whether self-esteem level effect their ratings of negative impact on themselves.

The result for the first hypothesis was not surprising because it is compatible with the result in previous studies that suggest that perceived media effects on others to be stronger than effect on self (e.g., David, Morrison, Johnson, & Ross, 2002). Perloff (1983), Perloff and Fetzer (1986), and Weinstein (1980, 1982, 1984) have documented the existence of ‘illusions of unique invulnerability’ as an argument for this kind of phenomenon.

‘Illusions of unique invulnerability’ is a condition whereby people who have not been victimized by negative life events tend to perceive themselves as less vulnerable than others (cited in Duck & Mullin, 1995). This condition is the result of a social comparison process where people estimate their own risk through comparison with others (Perloff & Fetzer, 1986 cited in Perloff, 1989).

This study has several limitations that might affect its outcome. The number of participants is one of the problems, since it only consists of seventeen people, which is a very small sample to be generalized. Furthermore, the number of the questionnaire might

not enough to assess the hypotheses, especially the second hypothesis. Thus it makes less efficient to use.

For the further study, it might be interesting to add more participants to be able to have a more generalizable result and have enough items in the questionnaire to have in depth comprehension on the relations between self-esteem and third-person effect. Despite its limitations, this study has already showed us on how one could overestimate the effect of negative media images to others.

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