

The Effects of Toxic Media Messages on Women's Health

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Explanation of Problem

In today's society, young women are constantly inundated with mixed messages regarding body image via music, video, movies, and other forms of media (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002). Many of these media messages are promoting an idealistic female body image. Research shows that exposure to images depicting the slender female ideal, relative to exposure to average-sized or neutral images, has consistent negative effects on some females' levels of body dissatisfaction; specifically, females with existing body image concerns are most likely to experience adverse effects (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002).

Further research has revealed that sociocultural models have connected the growth of body image dissatisfaction and eating disorders to exposure to media messages of the idealistic female body image (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). The ideal body for a female is portrayed in media as slender and young, with long legs and well-developed female attributes (Levine & Smolak, 1998). This desirable image is something that women believe they must achieve, with no regard to the fact that the media edits images. Even brief encounters with body-related images are likely to produce automatic affective responses in young women irrespective of body-related concerns (Watts, Cranney, & Gleitman, 2008). In university students, the perfectionist mentality is influenced greatly by media with respect to other populations (Simon, et. al, 2009).

Clemson University women are not exempt from being pressured by similar media messages. This paper outlines on-campus research that led us to the conclusion that a series of events tailored for women at Clemson University to reveal the truth regarding female body image, self-esteem, and media messages was necessary to combat these media messages. This week of events was the first of its kind in South Carolina and will positively impact college-aged women. This week proved successful, and it could serve as a model for other universities. We heard from students that bringing attention to the media messages regarding self-esteem and body image was positive for women at Clemson. Female students gained a

greater appreciation for themselves as a result of these events. A few females cited that they had not realized how much they were personally influenced by media messages. Students were excited about the opportunity to showcase their appreciation for influential women by giving these women flowers. We even heard some students ask for additional flowers.

Researching the Problem at Clemson University

The purpose of our study was to evaluate electronic media in the forms of music, lyrics, and music videos for criteria that promotes healthy and unhealthy messages, images, self-esteem, and body image in women ages 18-24. In order to assess the climate of Clemson University women with regard to how the media affects their body image and self-esteem, we facilitated focus groups. It was important to use focus groups because they provided a small and relaxed environment for open discussion. For each focus group, we chose three songs from a local popular radio station, likely recognized by the students, to present to the groups three times: once in the audio form, once in the visual form of a video, and once in a visual form of typed lyrics. After each media form was presented, students were asked to answer a series of questions and we recorded their reactions.

We selected the top three downloaded songs for Thursday, November 29, 2007: *Low* by Flo Rida featuring T-Pain, *No One* by Alicia Keys, and *Apologize* by Timbaland featuring OneRepublic. Participants were recruited via a popular website, Facebook. Each focus group was held in an academic classroom and lasted no longer than an hour and thirty minutes. In order to maintain continuity between each focus group, the same research student facilitated each session using a prepared script and the other two student facilitators recorded feedback similar to each previous session. A few of the sample questions that we asked included the following:

- “Did this piece of music make you feel positive or negative about the way you look?”
- “What do you feel were some of the underlying messages in this piece of music?”
- “Did you feel differently about this piece of music after watching the music video and reading the lyrics than you did just listening to it?”
- “In your opinion, is the female character in the song portrayed as a person or an object?”

A total of 15 females participated in the three focus groups. It was important that we invited a diverse group of participants. As a result, we recruited females from every academic class year, as well as from multiple demographic backgrounds. Though diversity was important to us, based on our participant confidentiality, the demographic information of each participant cannot be documented or distributed.

There were many themes that were identified from coding the information based on participant discussion, with two main themes emerging. The majority of participants found the popular music they tend to listen to most as depressing and degrading toward women. These songs also evoked strong emotions such as anxiety and confusion, along with a lack of awareness about the negativity within the music and the embellishment of negative influences in order to put them in a more positive light. As these themes continued to emerge, the need for a creative intervention became clearer and the opportunity to influence the female perception of these media messages became necessary.

Combating the Problem

Based on our findings, we realized that Clemson University female students are not exempt from being pressured by media messages. To help combat these pressures, we developed and hosted the Women's Awareness Week, a collection of events that provided positive messages for college-aged women. Before creating a schedule of opportunities available for our week, we reached out to student organizations and clubs, Clemson University's Fike Recreation Center, health promotions, and other areas across campus that often lacked the resources for their own promotion of female-specific services. Additionally, we contacted University departments and student groups to learn about events they already had planned for the week of April 13-17, 2009. The result was a schedule of empowering and female-tailored events and services across campus. Our motto for the week was "to be extraordinary everyday" and we created the following schedule with themed days:

Monday

"Be Good to Your Body"

Women's nutrition experts available in the dining halls

Tuesday

"Play It Safe"

Attend "Sex in the 21st Century: Can We Talk?," a seminar on domestic violence and sexual assault.

Wednesday

"Take Care of Your Body"

Enjoy a free fitness assessment at Fike Recreation Center, and attend a tour on how to use the fitness equipment. The free fitness assessments were available all week.

Thursday

"Love What You See"

Dare to Bare: exude self-confidence and shorten your morning routine by going all natural. Wear your free t-shirt that says "love yourself from the inside out."

Friday

“Love the Women that Impact our Lives”

Pick up a free flower on campus in appreciation for being an extraordinary woman.

To prepare and advertise for the week, we consulted a graphic designer to create fliers that included a distinguished Women’s Awareness Week logo and the opportunities available on campus throughout the week. We used this logo to link the various events and services available over the course of the themed week and we posted the fliers with this logo at numerous popular student locations. Additional advertising efforts included strategic communication through email with partners across campus that had expressed an interest in women’s issues. Partners included sororities, the Women’s Leadership Conference Board, and the Women’s Commission of Clemson.

We assessed each event on the schedule separately. Our plans to have a representative from Redfern Student Health Center in the dining halls on Monday were unable to materialize due to scheduling conflicts. On Tuesday, over 120 attendees came to the “Sex and the 21st Century: Can We Talk?” discussion, and 25 women completed surveys after the presentation. From comments on the survey assessments, many attendees felt empowered by the speakers to confront personal issues and further the discussion of domestic violence across Clemson University’s campus. Students explained their lack of awareness of domestic violence issues, their personal desire to influence these occurrences on campus, and the desire to inform their peers about domestic violence. On Wednesday, five students received the fitness assessment at Fike Recreation Center, and two students learned to properly use the exercise equipment through equipment tours. In comparison to average weekly participation rates, fitness personnel were impressed with the number of students who received fitness assessments and tours.

Thursday and Friday were our most successful days. We had approximately 108 women receive “love yourself from the inside out” T-shirts to wear on Thursday. These T-shirts were printed and worn inside out with this phrase printed on the front. Many women responded that wearing the T-shirt and going make-up free spurred awareness of inner beauty through conversations. After the week ended, we placed an extra order for T-shirts requested by an additional 26 women showing a continued interest in this message. On Friday, 500 carnations were distributed for students to give to women in order to show their appreciation. Each flower had a note card attached that read, “Thank you for being an extraordinary woman.” Female students, faculty, and staff received flowers. When distributing the flowers, we received overwhelmingly positive responses from women. Many students were excited about sharing their flower with their mom, friend, coworker, and teacher. One student said, “This is great! I can’t wait to see the expression on my professors’ face when she realizes what this flower stands for.” Many students asked for additional flowers to give away saying that one was just not enough.

Lessons Learned

We continue to hear of interest and talk on campus about the message of the week. After reflecting on the week, we deemed the week successful based on the high rates of participation, the anecdotal feedback received, and the continued desire to order t-shirts after the week ended. Throughout the week, we proved that research can be fun and is an important part of making decisions and planning programs. We also learned the importance of communication, especially with professionals. Finally, we learned, and saw first hand, how a small group of people can influence our campus in a big way. Our hope is that the Women's Awareness Week will continue as an annual tradition at Clemson University.

References

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