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Liking Them Thin: Adolescents' Favorite Television Characters and Body Image

TALI TE'ENI-HARARI[1] and KEREN EYAL[2]

[1]*Business School, Peres Academic Center, Rehovot, Israel*
[2]*Sammy Ofer School of Communications, The Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya, Israel*

Considering the alarming worldwide increases in eating disorders among adolescents, thought to be linked with body image, this study uses social cognitive theory as a framework to combine the examination of adolescent body image with the topic of mediated characters. The study places a new focus in this realm on favorite television characters, extending past research on general social comparison tendencies or comparisons with unfamiliar mediated models. A survey of 756 students in Grades 7–8 and 10–11 identified their favorite same-gender television characters as well as the adolescents' body image and social comparison with the characters. The survey was accompanied by a content analysis of the favorite characters and their body sizes. Adolescents' favorite television characters were mostly identified as thin or average in body size. The thinner the characters, the more adolescents self-compared with them. The discrepancy between the adolescents' body size and that of their favorite characters significantly and negatively predicted adolescents' body image both directly and indirectly through its relationship with social comparison with the character. The study finds that television characters are important references for adolescents and may serve as targets for social comparison in the context of body image.

The media, alongside other socialization agents, play a role in youth body-related perceptions and health, largely by providing an ideal to which adolescents compare themselves (Eyal & Te'eni-Harari, 2013). Body image perceptions, in turn, are related to eating disorders, which have become an alarming worldwide presence (Hawkes, 2007). Whereas previous research focused on unfamiliar mediated models who contribute to audience members' body image, this study is innovative in examining the role played by favorite television characters, as important reference points for adolescents. Television characters may be especially significant in shaping the health-related attitudes and behaviors of audiences (e.g., Aubrey, Behm-Morawitz, & Kim, 2012), but this has yet to be comprehensively examined with regard to body image. Drawing on social cognitive theory (SCT), this study examines the relation between favorite television characters' body size and adolescents' social comparison with them and identifies the extent to which the discrepancy between the adolescents' and the characters' body sizes explains body image. Understanding these relations may assist in combatting some of the health risks facing adolescents. The literature review below addresses research on the media representation of the body and its link to adolescent development, mediated characters, and the study's theoretical framework.

Address correspondence to Tali Te'eni-Harari, Business School, Peres Academic Center, Shimon Peres 10, Rehovot, Israel. E-mail: tee.tal100@gmail.com

The Role of the Media in Body Image Perceptions

Previous research has focused on the visual representation of the body in the media and the effects of exposure to such portrayals on body image, especially in magazines, which often include pictures of thin-ideal endorsing models. Especially for females, exposure to magazines and involvement in their appearance-related content has been linked with internalization of cultural ideals of beauty and body dissatisfaction (Jones, Vigfusdottir, & Lee, 2004; Shaw, 1995).

Television, too, has been found to present a human body that is thin as compared with real-world statistics that highlight the increasing prevalence of obesity (National Center for Health Statistics, 2012). Thinner television characters, relative to overweight characters, tend to be presented more positively with regard to personal characteristics and social interactions (Greenberg, Eastin, Hofschire, Lachlan, & Brownell, 2003). Scholars have recognized the link between the televised representation of the body and audiences' body image, defined as a "person's mental perception of the size, shape, and appearance of his or her body" (Hendriks, 2002, pp. 106–107). Body image is shaped by physical development but also by exposure to cultural stimuli, including the media (e.g., Clay, Vignoles, & Dittmar, 2005).

Overall, research has documented links between media exposure and unrealistic, largely exaggerated, perceptions of one's body (Hamilton, Mintz, & Kashubeck-West, 2007). Although small in size, associations have been found between television and magazine exposure and a host of concerning body image–related outcomes, including a heightened

estimation of the importance of physical appearance, lowered body satisfaction, symptoms of eating disorders, and preference for the thin ideal (Holmstrom, 2004).

While largely studied among adults (e.g., Harrison, 1997) and, to a limited extent among early elementary school children (Harrison, 2000), it is crucial to examine this topic among adolescents, as developmental advances increase vulnerability to body image effects (Clay et al., 2005). Physical changes, increasing independence from parents, peer pressure, and changes in cognitive processing, all join the arguably most important task facing adolescents—the establishment of personal identity—in guiding social comparisons with others in the environment, including media characters (e.g., Jones, 2001; Steinberg & Morris, 2001).

The Importance of Television Personalities

Television characters' effect on audience members is a growing area of research, recognizing that their role may be especially important for young audiences (Giles & Matlby, 2004). Relationships that audiences form with characters are associated with enhanced cognitive elaboration, self-efficacy perceptions, and establishing or reinforcing attitudes (e.g., Igartua, 2010). Whereas viewer characteristics (e.g., gender, family background; see Rosaen, Sherry, & Smith, 2011) may shape these relationships, attributes of the characters may be important, such as their intelligence and physical attractiveness (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). Still in need of exploration is the nature of the relation between television characters' physical appearance—specifically body size—and young audience's body image.

Theoretical Framework: SCT

SCT has been used as a framework to guide studies on the role of television characters in audience effects. Originally focused on the outcomes of learned behaviors (e.g., Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963), the theory has since been extended to also explain cognitions, attitudes, and emotions, all important steps in the cognitive learning process (Bandura, 2001). The theory combines personal determinants of the audience member with elements in the media content, such as characters, as explanatory factors in audience indicators (Bandura, 2009). The observational learning through which viewers acquire information regarding social behaviors involves four steps: paying attention to the content, recalling and cognitively rehearsing it, reproducing the observed actions, and contemplating the motivations to imitate them. Television characters may play a role in each of these steps by drawing attention, encouraging cognitive considerations, serving as role models, and shaping viewers' motivations to reenact behaviors.

Harrison (1997, 2000), for example, examined how interpersonal attraction to mediated personalities in television and magazines is associated with eating disorder symptoms, fat stereotyping, and body standards. She found that involvement with the personalities predicted concerning outcomes among female college students and early grade school children. She concluded that there is evidence of a modeling effect in the context of eating disorder indicators, especially when the audience member is involved with the personality.

Social Comparison With Mediated Personalities

One possible cognitive mechanism involved in the social learning process is comparison in which the viewer engages relative to mediated models (Cattarin, Thompson, Thomas, & Williams, 2000). Scholars have recently begun to integrate the notion of social comparison with cognitive theories of media effects (e.g., Nabi, 2009). The body shape of thin mediated models often serves to instigate social comparison (Tiggemann & McGill, 2004), largely negatively influencing one's body image, including increased depression and body dissatisfaction relative to those not exposed to thin media images (Bessenoff, 2006).

The process of social comparison has been suggested to be automatic, impacted by factors associated with the audience member or the mediated image, such as messages communicated about the attainability of desired outcomes (Knobloch-Westerwick & Romero, 2011; Lopez-Guimera, Levine, Sanchez-Carracedo, & Fauquet, 2010). The prototypical portrayal of mediated characters combines their body shape with various personality characteristics, largely equating thinness with attractive features as popularity and beauty (e.g., Herbozo, Tantleff-Dunn, Gokee-Larose, & Thompson, 2004). This representation likely enhances the link between body size as depicted in the media and viewers' appearance-based social comparisons. Ccomparisons, in turn, commonly results in viewers feeling dissatisfied with their bodies and driven to lose weight to resemble the models in unhealthy ways (Bessenoff, 2006).

Favorite Mediated Personalities and Social Comparison

In the context of body image, studies have largely focused on comparisons to unfamiliar mediated models or on general self-comparison tendencies (e.g., Hamilton et al., 2007). Within the landscape of mediated personalities, special emphasis should be placed on the characters with whom audiences more strongly relate and who are common targets for social comparison on physical attributes (e.g., Harrison, 2000; Jones, 2001). Much as in interpersonal connections (Rubin & McHugh, 1987), audience members establish relations with mediated personalities. The recurring nature of televised series allows for an increased sense of intimacy with characters, similar to real-life acquaintances. With this come a sense of perceived similarity, affinity, and identification with the characters and a greater potential for them to significantly impact viewers' lives as sources of information.

Favorite mediated personalities are especially likely to impact the social cognitive stage of retention as they are salient and their presence in viewers' lives extends beyond the moment of exposure. The contemporary media environment offers viewers many opportunities to search for information about their preferred mediated personalities, such as in magazines, talk shows, or the Internet. These instances deepen the presence of characters in viewers' minds, aiding long-term recall of related messages. Such phenomena,

which have been identified among adults, may be highly relevant for youth (Giles & Maltby, 2004). However, only limited research to date has afforded an important role for favorite mediated characters in the context of body image (e.g., Greenwood, 2009), and with regard to adolescents, specifically (e.g., Harrison, 1997). The extent of generalizability of findings regarding the effects of short-term first exposure to unfamiliar models to the realm of favorite mediated personalities is yet unknown.

Previous research has not identified clear patterns of gender difference in the media–body image link. Recently, more attention has been directed to examining men. Although significant media effects on men have been identified (e.g., Harrison & Cantor, 1997), they are not always consistent with those on women, both in nature and strength (Jones et al., 2004). More research should focus on examining both genders in this context (Polce-Lynch, Meyers, Kliewer, & Kilmartin, 2001). Especially when considering favorite mediated personalities, there is room to also consider male audience members. Whereas differences may exist in general exposure patterns to appearance-related media (e.g., Jones et al., 2004), both genders relate and respond to preferred media personalities, and especially to same-gender characters.

On the basis of findings that exposure to relatively thin models in the media is associated with increased social comparison (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002), we hypothesized the following:

> Hypothesis 1: Adolescents' favorite characters' body sizes will be negatively related to social comparison with the characters, so that a thinner body size will be associated with greater engagement in social comparison.

It may be that underlying the social comparison process, and ultimately the learning of behaviors, is a negative perception of one's own body size, especially in relation to that of the favorite character. Research has begun to examine the role of such discrepancies in body perceptions (Krayer, Ingledew, & Iphofen, 2008), but, to date, this has focused on the gap between one's own current versus ideal body shapes. It is important to empirically test whether discrepancies relative to favorite mediated personalities—the gap between one's perceived own body size and that of the favorite character—also predict such an outcome:

> Hypothesis 2: The greater the discrepancy between one's perceived own body size and that of their favorite character will be associated with a more negative body image for the adolescent.

Consistent with SCT's predicted mechanism of media effects, we asked the following:

> Research Question 1: Will the link between the viewer-character body size discrepancy and adolescents' body image be mediated by social comparison with the favorite character?

Method

Sample and Procedure

Questionnaires were distributed to 1,003 students in Grades 7–8 and 10–11 in three schools in the central region of Israel, with the approval of the institutional review board, the Israeli Ministry of Education, and the schools' principals.[1,2] Israel, similar to other Western countries, has experienced a growth in eating disorders among youth in recent decades. According to the 2009/2010 worldwide World Health Organization report, Israel has high rates of weight and body-related behaviors among adolescents, including dieting and purging (as cited in Weissblei, 2010). Israeli media, especially since the introduction of cable and satellite, includes many imported foreign shows, especially fictional genres (Cohen, 2005; Eyal, Raz, & Levi, 2014).

Students were invited to voluntarily and confidentially participate in the study after reading a consent form. Questionnaires were distributed in the classrooms. Students responded individually and research assistants were present to answer questions. Of the questionnaires, 247 were discarded for missing answers or for not identifying a favorite same-gender character as instructed. Thus, 756 participants provided data for the study. There were 344 (45.50%) men and 412 (54.50%) women; 391 participants were in Grades 7–8 (51.70%) and 365 in Grades 10–11 (48.30%). Ages ranged from 12 to 18 years ($M = 14.26$, $SD = 1.35$).

Measurement

Favorite Television Characters

Each participant chose a favorite same-gender television character, as gender similarity is important in body-related social comparison (Jones, 2001). The choice of televised personalities was consistent with past studies (e.g., Rosaen & Dibble, 2008). Television is a central leisure activity for adolescents (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010) and its repeated exposure to characters is uncontested by other media.

In total, 325 characters were chosen as favorites (see Table 1). The characters were analyzed by independent coders. For each character, three photographs were chosen from online databases. The photographs of clothed characters were associated with the specific content to which participants related the characters and included the character's full body, upper body, and a facial close-up. Coding proceeded in two phases by two male and two female coders. For each variable, a pair of mixed-gender coders was chosen and the level of agreement between them was assessed on a random 15% subsample of characters. Reliability was assessed using Hayes and Krippendorff's (2007) alpha

[1]Data collection proceeded in two phases (May–June 2011 and November–December 2011), because of school year schedules.

[2]Study variables were compared across the three schools, two middle schools and one high school. Participants differed on two variables: BMI ($F[2, 753] = 26.81$, $p < .001$; this is not surprising considering that students in high school are expected to have a higher BMI than those in middle schools) and exercise activity ($F[2, 753] = 30.41$, $p < .001$, with differences across all three schools). Considering these minimal differences, school affiliation was not taken into account in subsequent data analysis.

Table 1. Top 10 chosen favorite characters in the sample ($N = 325$)

Character name (title of show)	*n* (%)
Women	
Marianella Talarico Rinaldi (*Casi Angeles*)	32 (9.85)
Hannah Montana (*Hannah Montana*)	25 (7.69)
Rachel Green (*Friends*)	21 (6.46)
Alexandra Russo (*Wizards of Waverly Place*)	17 (5.23)
Kika (*Asfur*)	14 (4.31)
Men	
Spongebob (*Spongebob SquarePants*)	18 (5.54)
Barney Stinson (*How I Met Your Mother*)	14 (4.31)
Itzik Bansuli (*Asfur*)	10 (3.08)
Arthur (*Arthur*)	9 (2.70)
Drake (*Drake & Josh*)	8 (2.46)

formula in each of the two phases. Three variables were coded for each character: (a) body size, using Thompson and Gray's (1995) pictorial contour drawing rating scale with nine male and female figures organized from very thin to very fat (K alpha = .83, .90); (b) gender (K alpha = 1.00, 1.00); and (c) age, coded as one of six categories or "can't tell" (K alpha = .90, .84).

Social Comparison With Favorite Television Character

Participants responded to six items taken from Bessenoff (2006), Hargreaves and Tiggemann (2004), and Tiggemann and McGill (2004; see the Appendix). Response options ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a lot*). Items were summed with a Cronbach alpha reliability of .78 and an average of 2.03 ($SD = 0.84$).

Body Image Perceptions

Mendelson, White, and Mendelson's (1996) 20-item measure of body esteem assessed body image, with a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Items were summed with a Cronbach alpha reliability of .94 ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 0.79$).

Participants were also presented with Thompson and Gray's (1995) 1–9 scale and asked to indicate the same-gender figure that most closely resembles their own body size. Participants indicated that, on average, their body size is 4.88 ($SD = 1.43$), slightly above the scale's midpoint. The discrepancy score between adolescents' perceived body size and the body size of their favorite character was calculated by subtracting the latter from the former. Higher scores indicate that the participant's body size is larger than that of the character.

Control Variables

Participants indicated the number of hours on an average weekday and weekend day that they spend watching content on these platforms: television set in real time, programs recorded using digital devices, video-on-demand, and the Internet. Weekday estimates were multiplied by five, weekend estimates by two, and the figures were added with an average daily amount of television exposure of 6.56 hours ($SD = 4.03$), consistent with WHO reports about Israeli adolescents (Trabelsi-Hadad, 2012).

Personal Variables

Participant gender was considered as much research has supported a gender difference in media effects in body image (Sohn, 2010). It is important to examine both genders because an increase in eating disorders has been found also among men along with links between exposure to attractive media models and body dissatisfaction (e.g., Harrison & Cantor, 1997). *Body mass index (BMI)* refers to a person's designated body size according to weight classifications using a commonly accepted formula based on weight and height (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2011). O the basis of self-reports, the sample's BMI ranged from 11.37 (i.e., underweight) to 36.67 (i.e., obese), $M = 19.75$, $SD = 3.14$.

Because *dietary and physical activity* relate to body size and image, four questions were asked (Neumark-Sztainer, Paxton, Hannan, Haines, & Story, 2006):

1. Number of fixed meals on an average day. Response options ranged from 1 (*I have no regular schedule of fixed meals throughout the day*) to 5 (*I eat at least three fixed meals a day*). Participants averaged 3.88 ($SD = 1.25$), eating about two fixed meals per day.
2. Frequency of eating breakfast. Five response options ranged from "Never" to "Every day," averaging 3.65 ($SD = 1.36$), eating breakfast several days a week
3. Frequency of participating in exercising activities that require continuous effort on a scale of 1 (*never*) to 6 (*every day*). The average was 3.79 ($SD = 1.34$), about two or three times a week.
4. Extent of dieting in the past year. On a 6-point scale, the average was 1.70 ($SD = 1.42$), indicating most have not undertaken diets or one at most.

The skewed measures of television exposure and BMI were transformed using the square root method (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). The negatively skewed measure of eating fixed meals was reflected and transformed using this method; higher scores indicate fewer daily fixed meals. According to Tabachnick and Fidell (2007), missing data on continuous variables were replaced by the variable's mean score.

Results

In the content analysis, characters averaged 4.01 ($SD = 1.62$) on the 9-point body size scale. They were divided into three groups: thin (1–3), average (4–6), and overweight (7–9) characters. Nearly half of the respondents ($n = 372$, 49.20%) chose characters classified as average in body size and nearly the same amount ($n = 333$, 44.00%) chose characters classified as thin. Only 6.70% of participants ($n = 51$) chose overweight favorite characters. Among all participants' choices, female characters ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 1.20$) were significantly thinner than were male characters ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 1.51$), ($t[754] = -18.43$, $p < .001$). More than half of the 325 unique characters were coded as adults older than 25 years of age ($n = 135$ [41.50%] between the ages of 25 and 40 years; 65

[20.00%] between the ages of 40 and 65 years). The next two most common categories were emerging adults ages 18–25 years ($n = 54$, 16.60%) and teenagers ages 13–18 years ($n = 53$, 16.30%). Least common were children ($n = 13$, 4.00%) and babies ($n = 2$, 0.60%). No characters were coded as older than 65 years of age.

Hypothesis 1 predicted a relation between the body size of the favorite television character and participants' social comparison with them. The partial correlation controlled for participant gender and school grade (Grades 7–8 vs. Grades 10–11). This correlation was found to be significant ($r = -.09$, $p < .05$), partially supporting Hypothesis 1, as can be seen in the subsequently detailed analyses.

To follow up, two additional partial correlations were run. The first considered participant gender as a control variable, separating each of the two grade levels. The partial correlation between favorite character's body size and social comparison with that character was only significant for the younger age group, in Grades 7–8 ($r = -.11$, $p < .05$) but not for the older age group ($r = -.07$, $p = .21$). The second partial correlation considered age group as the control variable, examining each gender separately. The partial correlation between favorite character's body size and social comparison was only significant for women ($r = -.11$, $p < .05$) but not for men ($r = -.07$, $p = .21$).

Hypothesis 2 stated that the discrepancy between the participant's perceived body size and that of the favorite television character will explain the adolescent's body image; Research Question 1 asked whether this relation will be mediated by the social comparison with the favorite character. Baron and Kenny's (1986) process for testing mediation was used by running three models of hierarchical regression. The first stage examined the explanation of body image by the discrepancy between one's own body size and that of the character; the second stage examined the explanation of social comparison with the character by the same discrepancy variable; the third stage examined the explanation of body image when both discrepancy and social comparison are included as predictors at the same time. Control variables in the first step of the regression models were: participants' gender, school grade, BMI, regularity of eating fixed meals, regularity of eating breakfast, sports activity, dieting activity, and television exposure (see Table 2).

The first stage of the mediation model found that the discrepancy between one's own and the favorite character's body sizes significantly explained variance in participants' body image above and beyond the control variables ($\beta = -.10$, $p < .001$), supporting Hypothesis 2. The second stage of the mediation model found that the discrepancy significantly explained variance in social comparison with the character ($\beta = .05$, $p < .01$). The third stage of the mediation model found that both predictor variables explained significant variance in body image when considered simultaneously (discrepancy: $\beta = -.09$, $p < .001$; social comparison: $\beta = -.15$, $p < .001$; see Table 2). The third stage of the mediation model explained 30% of the variance in body image perceptions but the addition of the two predictor variables in explaining body image above and beyond the control variables was only 7%. Control variables that significantly and positively explained body image were school grade and sports activity. Variables that significantly and negatively explained body image were BMI, regularly eating fixed meals (reversed), and dieting activity. A Sobel test conducted to ascertain the significance of the mediation by social comparison with the favorite character confirmed a partial mediation, $Z = -2.24$, $p < -.5$. That is, in answering Research Question 1, the discrepancy between one's own and the character's body size directly explains some variance in body image but also indirectly through its explanation of variance in the extent to which the participant engages in social comparison with the favorite character.

Table 2. Mediation test for variables predicting body image: Final stage of hierarchical regression according to Baron & Kenny's (1986) mediation model ($N = 755$)

Variable	β	t
Step 1		
Gender (female)	–0.11	–3.17**
School grade (Grades 10–11)	0.17	4.85***
Body mass index	–0.27	–7.98***
Eating fixed meals	–0.07	–2.20*
Eating breakfasts regularly	0.08	2.49*
Sports participation	0.09	2.64**
Engaging in diets	–0.24	–7.24***
Television content exposure	–0.07	–2.17*
Step 2		
Gender (female)	–0.03	–0.74
School grade (Grades 10–11)	0.15	4.43***
Body mass index	–0.17	–4.75***
Eating fixed meals	–0.07	–2.14*
Eating breakfasts regularly	0.06	1.92
Sports participation	0.11	3.11**
Engaging in diets	–0.19	–5.61***
Television content exposure	–0.03	–1.05
Discrepancy between own and character's body shape	–0.24	–6.67***
Social comparison with character	–0.17	–5.02***

Note. Step 1: $R^2 = .23$, $F(8, 747) = 27.61$, $p < .001$. Step 2: $R^2 = .30$, $\Delta R^2 = .07$, $F(10, 745) = 32.14$, $p < .001$.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Discussion

Considering the health risks associated with eating disorders, which are increasingly common among adolescents (Smink, van Hoeken, & Hoek, 2012; Swanson, Crow, Le Grange, Swendsen, & Merkiangas, 2012), it is important to examine the antecedents of poorer body image. The study examines the links between the body size of favorite television characters, social comparison with them, and youth body image. The investigation is driven by an appreciation of the role of favorite mediated personalities in shaping and reinforcing body image as part of the development of personal identity and due to the potential of characters to serve as role models for audiences, according to SCT (Bandura, 2009).

Many characters were designated as favorites by adolescents. Characters were generally identified as average or thin in body size, consistent with previous research (Eyal, 2011). Consistent with SCT, the study examined social comparison with favorite characters as a possible explanatory cognitive mechanism in the content-audience relation. Research has largely considered the extent to which audiences compare themselves with unfamiliar models. However, this study examined social comparison relative to a specific, favorite television character with whom viewers likely have formed a more meaningful relationship. This study extends the limited past research on the role of relationships that viewers form with preferred media personalities in the context of body image (Greenwood, 2009; Harrison, 1997, 2000). The study extends past research in two main ways. First, by focusing on the adolescent age group, whereas past studies have examined emerging adult viewers or younger children. Second, by considering social comparison with characters, adding to past studies on interpersonal attachment, wishful identification, parasocial interaction, and perceived similarity.

This study found that social comparison was greater when favorite characters were thinner rather than heavier in body size, consistent with previous research (Bessenoff, 2006). Though interactions were identified with adolescent age and gender, as will be discussed, this finding indicates that elements within the content—here, elements related to the characters—relate to social comparison (Knobloch-Westerwick & Romero, 2011). Social comparison processes most likely play a role in the cognitive rehearsal stage of the social learning model (Bandura, 2009). However, the characters may be important throughout the entire process. Heightened attention to the characters likely increases mental elaborations about, and involvement with the content, as well as comparison which, in turn, may impact motivation levels that are associated with behavioral outcomes of body image disturbances (e.g., Bessenoff, 2006; Holmstrom, 2004).

Mere amount of exposure to television content was not significantly related to body image; rather, it was the favorite characters that explained body image. The relation identified between character body size and adolescent body image, though significant, was not very strong. It is likely that when evaluating favorite characters, the audience member self compares on additional dimensions other than body size (e.g., personality, intelligence), given that these relations develop alongside the viewers' increased familiarity with the character. However, at this time, the potential of favorite characters to buffer the negative effects of the media on body image is limited because of the nature of television programming, which heavily promotes the thin ideal. Accordingly, the favorite television characters identified by adolescents in this study were drawn from this pool and reflected a similar body size distribution. Perhaps greater variance in body size representation in the media (and less stereotypical portrayals of heavier characters) will enable youth to prefer characters who do not promote the thin ideal, to focus on other qualities than body size, and thus minimize body image disturbances.

This study further found that the gap between one's body size self-perception and the body size of favorite characters was associated with more negative body image, both directly and through the mediation of social comparison with the character. Studies have suggested that the discrepancy in perceptions of the body explains body image concerns; but this has thus far been defined as the difference between how one perceived him- or herself and how one wishes to be (e.g., Sohn, 2010). In the present study, this notion was extended to test the role of the incongruity between one's own body size and that of a favorite character. The findings supported theory and previous research in that favorite characters seemed to be important models for viewers (e.g., Lemish, 2007). The fact that this discrepancy significantly explained body image above and beyond factors such as eating habits and BMI indicates the importance of television characters designated as favorites by young viewers. As this study confirms, eating breakfast regularly and sports activity were also important in promoting health outcomes. Considering the centrality of satisfaction with one's body in predicting health-related behaviors and risks (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2006), the extent to which mediated characters contribute to such perceptions is important to consider.

When considered alongside other variables, school grade (Grades 7–8 vs. Grades 10–11) significantly explained body image. Older adolescents had a more positive body image than younger adolescents. Previous research has not been consistent in documenting developmental changes in body image and so comparisons are difficult to draw (Smolak, 2004). Some studies have found no differences in body esteem between high school and middle school students (van den Berg, Mond, Eisenberg, Ackard, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2010) and others have found a decrease in middle school without a clear marker of when body image stabilizes (Smolak, 2004). It could be that the extent of physical changes characterizing early adolescence contributed to the confusion and self-criticism of younger adolescents toward their own body; this should be explored in future research.

Similarly, gender differences were identified, but only with regard to the relation between the character's body size and the adolescent's social comparison with them. Here, it was only women who exhibited such an association. However, when considering the role of body size discrepancies between the character and the adolescent, this study found that men and women did not differ in the process relating these perceptions with body image. It seems that thinner body sizes are not associated necessarily with greater social comparison among men but that the gap between the character and the viewer does link with body image perceptions similarly for both genders. This finding is consistent with previous studies that have found the male body ideal to be different from that of the female ideal; rather than thinness, it seems masculinity is more highly valued for men (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2006). Still, when one's perceived own body size is incompatible with that of the favorite mediated character, the audience member does engage in greater social comparison and exhibits more

negative body image perceptions. Although some previous research has shown that men and women differ in their response to mediated images of body ideals (e.g., Jones et al., 2004), it seems that this difference may be more relevant for general appearance-related media exposure; when favorite mediated personalities are considered, gender differences are less pronounced, highlighting the significance of these characters for young viewers.

Limitations

The cross-sectional nature of the data precludes from drawing conclusions regarding the causal, long-term nature of media effects. Along with this, the self-report nature of the data, whereas usually known to adolescents, may be prone to biases. Furthermore, the wide range of television characters designated as favorites has both advantages and disadvantages. Whereas it reflects an authentic choice by the adolescents, the resulting list involves much diversity across genres, ages, and types of characters. Another limitation of this study is associated with measurement. The scale used to assess body size is well validated but focuses mostly on fat rather than muscles, which may be less relevant for men (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2006). Last, the study assesses the discrepancy between adolescents' self-perceived body size and the objectively coded size of the character, but another approach could be to examine the gap between the adolescents' self-perception and their own perception of the character body size.

With regard to future research, the outcomes examined were cognitive (i.e., body image, social comparison with characters). Although this is consistent with SCT, which sees these elements as steps in the learning process (Bandura, 2009), future research would benefit from examining behavioral outcomes (e.g., eating disorder symptoms). The present study was situated in Israel and the findings largely support those identified in research conducted in other countries. Such consistency is not surprising considering the westernized nature of Israel and its media content and the prevalence it experiences with eating disorders (Weissblei, 2010). It will be interesting to conduct a comparative examination also with less westernized cultures.

Conclusions

Considering the alarming worldwide trends with regard to eating disorders thought to be linked with negative body image, the current study makes an important contribution supporting the role of favorite television characters for young viewers in this realm. Adolescents' favorite characters are associated with more social comparison when they are presented as thin rather than heavy; furthermore, adolescents' perceptions of their own bodies relative to these characters are associated negatively with body image, both directly and through their correlation with social comparison.

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Appendix. Social comparison with favorite television character measure

1. To what extent do you compare your own external appearance to that of your favorite television character's external appearance?
2. To what extent do you want to look like your favorite television character?
3. To what extent do you compare your body shape to the body shape of your favorite television character?
4. To what extent do you think about your body weight when you think about the body weight of your favorite television character?
5. To what extent do you think about losing weight when you think about your favorite television character?
6. To what extent do you think about adding muscle when you think about your favorite television character?