

Abstract

Introduction: Previous research has documented normative misperceptions of college student alcohol and tobacco use, and to a lesser extent body image. The current research extends social norms approaches to the etiology and treatment of health-risk behaviors by evaluating the influence of normative misperceptions of body image and substance use on college student health-risk attitudes and behaviors.

Method: Sample, n=842 and participants included undergraduate students (64% female) attending two public West coast universities. Baseline and three-month follow-up data (78% follow up response rate) were collected via an online survey assessing associations between college students' normative perceptions of health-risk behaviors and students' self-reported attitudes and behaviors. Measures of body image, substance use, personality, and mental health were included in the assessment.

Results: A series of paired sample t-tests and multiple regression analyses were conducted to evaluate normative misperceptions of thinness and muscularity norms. Based on pictorial ratings of thinness and muscularity norms, females' perceived other females to be significantly thinner and less muscular than the actual reported body figure norms. In contrast, males perceived other males to be significantly heavier than their own self-reported figures, but the difference between men's self-reported muscularity and perceived muscularity norm was not significant. Results of regression analyses revealed gender as a moderator of associations between normative misperceptions and body dissatisfaction and depression. Specifically, misperceptions of body image norms predicted greater body dissatisfaction and depressive symptoms among females compared to males. Further analyses will be conducted to evaluate associations between perceived body image norms and eating disorder symptoms and substance use over time.

Discussion: Preliminary results of this research document misperceptions of body image norms for males and females, and the association between perceived body image norms and body dissatisfaction and mental health. Given the deleterious physical, psychological, and social consequences associated with body dissatisfaction, mental health, and substance use, implications of this research on prevention efforts and social norms interventions will be considered.