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Psychological Motivations For Tanning

Skin cancer is the most common type of cancer, with 3.5 million cases diagnosed each year. From 1970 to 2009, statistics show that there has been an 800% increase of melanoma cancer among women (qtd. in Watson et al. 209). Many studies have been done on the harm that comes with tanning and the direct relation to skin cancer. However, even with this being common knowledge today, it appears that the risks alone are not enough of a deterrence for individuals to avoid tanning. This points to the possibility of motives that outweigh the perceived harm of tanning. Studies have been done to assess the role psychological motives play in tanning intentions and behaviors. Results suggests that narcissism, egocentrism, mood, and low self-esteem are possible factors for why individuals continue tanning behaviors despite the risks.

An individual’s knowledge on tanning risks does not appear to have a significant correlation to the individual’s likelihood to tan. Watson, Zank, and Turri conducted a study about the impact self-esteem, narcissism and knowledge have on addictive tanning behaviors among millennials. In their study, 256 students in a southwestern university were asked to fill out a survey in exchange for extra credit. To measure the knowledge of participants, nine true or false questions such as “When applied correctly SPF 100 is twice as effective as SPF 50” and “Spending time in the sun increases my risk of skin cancer and early skin aging” were asked. From the results, no significant relationships were found to support the idea that knowledge lead to lower levels of addictive tanning. In a second study conducted by Holiday, similar findings were reported. Sixty participants ranging from age 18 to 25 (35 females and 25 males) were asked to fill out a questionnaire. There was no significant difference in tan knowledge score between tanners and non-tanners. Most studies agree that knowledge of tanning risks alone don’t dissuade individuals from tanning. Many studies instead seek for more significant motivations.

Watson, Zank, and Turri’s study showed that narcissism is mediated by appearance motivations. The study makes the assumption that the increase in skin cancer is not isolated from other sociocultural and psychological drivers (Watson, Zank, and Turri 210). It examines tanning behaviors in relation to phenomena such as narcissism and the desire for perceived attractiveness. The study also noted that “personality factors not only account for some portion of defensive strategies used by individuals responding to health messages, but in the actual motivation to elaborate on message content” (qtd. in Watson et al. 210-211). Knowing this, it would benefit efforts trying to minimize tanning to understand how psychological constructs like narcissism connect with the educational efforts to increase consumer knowledge on the risks of tanning. Results show that the relationship between narcissism and addictive tanning to be significant, with β=.313 and p=.000 (Watson, Zank, and Turri 215). In the second part of their experiment, they also found that the relationship between narcissism and appearance motivation to be significant, with β=.376 and p=.000 (Watson, Zank, and Turri 215).

A study done by Banarjee et al. suggests the contribution of egocentrism to adolescent tanning behaviors. Adolescent egocentrism is the belief that others are preoccupied with one’s appearance and behavior. It materializes as two expressions: imaginary audience (thinking that others are preoccupied with you) and personal fable (unrealistic belief in one’s uniqueness, omnipotence, and invulnerability). Omnipotence refers to the sense of self-worth with the belief that one’s actions are influential. Uniqueness refers to the belief that one is the focus of attention. Invulnerability is the sense that risks are less for oneself compared to others. Stemming from this, a frequent belief is that adolescents engage in risky behaviors because of their sense of invulnerability. Banarjee et al. examined the role of imaginary audience and personal fable ideations in affect tanning behaviors. The results showed that there is significant correlation between tanning intentions and imaginary audience ideations (Banarjee et al. 369). Banarjee et al. interprets the results to mean that adolescents with high imaginary audience ideations are more self-conscious about their appearance, leading to a positive view on appearance-enhancing behaviors. They noted that imaginary audience ideations have been associated with weight concerns and eating disorders, so it is plausible that it also applies to other risky appearance-enhancing behaviors. Their results did not find any direct or indirect association between tanning intentions and the aspects of personal fable ideations, except for invulnerability. Studies have associated the sense of invulnerability with risky behaviors (Banarjee et al. 350).

Another study suggests mood may be another psychological factor that increases dependency to indoor tanning. Carcioppolo et al. noted that there aren’t many studies previously done on mood-based tanning motivations because of the lack of valid measurements for mood. Through their study, they developed and validated a valid mood indoor tanning scale. Research shows that people who indoor tan to regular their mood are more likely to become dependent on tanning (Carcioppolo et al. 42). Carcioppolo et. al suggests that individuals “are constantly comparing current mood state to a desired state and often engage in regulatory processes to achieve desired states” (43). Their study tested whether individuals use tanning as a regulatory strategy to enhance their mood or just in a better mood after tanning. Some people report tanning to regulate and enhance mood, while others report heightened relaxation from indoor tanning. Studies show that the people who experience mood elevation report that the mood enhancement outweighs the risks (Carcioppolo et al. 44). Thus, if a person who has tried indoor tanning once and thinks their mood is improved, then it would be more difficult for them to quit tanning and develop a dependency. If this is the case, it suggests that mood-based motivations for tanning is a strong predictor for tanning behaviors and intentions.

Holiday’s study attempted to determine the extent for which categories such as self-esteem, body satisfaction, complexion satisfaction, and knowledge could be used to predict tanning behaviors. The only significant category found was the participant’s reported level of self-esteem. Results show that there is a 12.4% variation in tanning frequency with a negative correlation value (Holiday 10). This suggests that about 12.4% of people choose to tan because of their self esteem, with low self-esteem correlating to the frequency of tanning. Holiday notes that previous studies show that individuals that frequent tanning salons want to increase their perceived attractiveness. Participants report that indoor tanning is related to increased confidence and feeling of attractiveness.

The studies above investigates the psychological motivations for tanning. The results all support that factors involving an individual’s perception of oneself correlates with tanning frequency. These studies hope that the results may be prove useful in efforts to dissuade the public from engaging in tanning because of all the risks associated with it. A study by Mays and Zhao investigated the effectiveness of two types of prevention messages in influencing tanning behaviors. The two types of prevention messages are gain-framed and loss-framed. Gain-framed messages emphasized the benefits of avoiding tanning, whereas loss-framed messages emphasized the risks. The study participants consisted of 475 women ages 18 to 30 who had reported indoor tanning at least once in the past year (Mays and Zhao 123). They were then randomized and assigned to one of the two types of messages. Intentions to tan and intentions to quit were then measured afterwards. Results showed that those assigned to loss-framed messages reported weaker intentions to start tanning and stronger intentions to quit tanning. Additionally, they reasoned that self-affirmation may increase an individual’s intentions to tan through the defensive reactions to the framed messages (Mays and Zhao 124). However, they found that self-affirmation did not reduce the defensive processing of loss-framed messages (Mays and Zhao 128).

Although May and Zhao’s study shows that emphasizing risks appear to be better than emphasizing benefits, previous studies have came to the conclusion that risks alone are not enough. Keeping in mind the findings from studies on the psychological motivations of tanning, it may be effective to use messages that target individuals’ psychological motivations along with loss-framed messages in attempt to create more effective preventive measures.

Work Cited

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