

Media and its effects on body image

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**Abstract**

This paper will discuss women's perception of their bodies based on media pressure and social standardizations. There are many themes though this specific research; this paper will highlight three of these themes. All of the themes will be connected with the thoughts in Adler and Procter's (2011) book *Looking Out, Looking In*. The first theme will be, how advertisements play a role in decreased body satisfaction and attention to advertisements. The second will explore, how and why media images increase body dissatisfaction. The third theme will discuss how stereotypes of women play a major role in female eating disorders, body dissatisfaction and mental health. All three are enforced by research articles and studies conducted by other parties. After the conclusion of the themes, limitations of the research and possible future research and research questions will be elaborated on.

*Keywords:* Body Dissatisfaction, Media, Women, Perception, Stereotyping

### Media and Its Effects on Body Image

Today's society can be a difficult place to thrive. There is an immense amount of pressure on almost every person to fit into a certain category of society. At the top of the pressure list is women. Women are forced into social roles at a very early age. Parents are constantly pressuring their female children to "act more lady like". This continues through the girls' teenage years where they are extremely influenced by the media. Magazines, Television, Internet, Radio; all telling these young girls to not only act like a lady but at that age to be "sexy". Girls see images through mass media of the "beautiful"/"sexy" woman. This woman is tan, tall and extremely thin. These girls want to fit into this unrealistic norm and this is where issues occur such as, eating disorders, low self-esteem and body dissatisfaction. There have been many research studies done on this subject, closely focusing on the perception of how women are feeling with these standards set upon them. Through the research studied in this paper three themes stand out. First, having thin, "beautiful" women in ads is a distraction and also makes women feel bad about themselves. Second, images of "Beautiful" women (as portrayed by the media) decrease self-esteem and increase body dissatisfaction in women. Third, strong stereotypes exist that all women should be thin and "beautiful". The research studies shown in this paper all have some limitations which will leave room for future research to be conducted.

### Literature Review

Many studies have been completed showing the correlation between body dissatisfaction/perceived body image and media influence. These studies have become more frequent in the past ten years with the explosion of Reality TV, Social Networking websites and access to media online. Many of the same themes have been found throughout the research. The

research that has been completed thus far also connects with Adler and Proctor's (2011) thoughts on perception.

### **Putting Thin/ "Beautiful" Women in Ads is Distracting**

When people see thin women in the media they are usually seeing them in advertisements for services and/or products. Tiggemann and Polivy found in their 2010 research study *Upward and downward: Social comparison processing of thin idealized media images* that, ad recall is lower with more "beautiful"/ thin women in the ad. Not only are women being distracted by these models but they are gaining increased body dissatisfaction as they look at these women. In considering the idea of distraction, it is important to remember that people are very easily influenced by the obvious. "We select stimuli from our environment that are noticeable: intense, repetitious, unusual, or otherwise attention grabbing" (Adler & Procter, 2011 p.102). The models that are seen in ads are extremely attention grabbing and distract the viewer from the message of the ad. In addition, these images cause an emotional reaction in the female viewers mind. Bessenoff's research study *Can the media affect us? social comparison, self-discrepancy, and the thin ideal* (2006) found that "Exposure to thin-ideal advertisements increased body dissatisfaction, negative mood, and levels of depression and lowered self-esteem" (p.3). These ads are detrimental to women's feelings about their body and self-esteem. What is this accomplishing for the Ad companies? The ad recall for women is lowered with the models that they put in the ads. In an ad targeted towards women, ad companies would be better off putting in an average looking woman. It would make women looking at the ad feel good about themselves. This way women will be more likely to remember the advertiser's product. These media images are also making women portray themselves heavier.

### **Media Images and Body Dissatisfaction**

Looking at media images will increase body dissatisfaction in women. However this effect is short-lived. Tiggemann and Polivy made a significant discovery when they found that body dissatisfaction does not last. They wrote that the media images “had no effect on subsequent body dissatisfaction” (2010). This seems to be a positive development for women who consume media. The body dissatisfaction is there but will only last for an hour or less after mass media images are viewed. However, for women and girls who look at media images more often, the effect will be substantial. In Schneider, Weiß, Thiel, Werner, Mayer, Hoffmann, and Diehl’s (2012) research study *Body dissatisfaction in female adolescents: extent and correlates*, study they had women (using 3d avatar software) estimate their actual body image, their desired body image, and the body image of a best women friend or mother. In creating their avatars women were much more likely to produce a heavier creation of themselves and a slimmer version of a best women friend after repeated exposure to the “beautiful” woman. They found that the “amount of time spent watching TV was correlated with significantly higher body dissatisfaction” (p.1). The more TV that is watched by women the more unhappy they will be with their bodies because of prolonged exposure to the “beautiful” woman. Of even greater importance this media exposure has an effect on women’s mental wellbeing. Swami, Taylor, and Carvalho’s (2011) research study, *Body dissatisfaction assessed by the photographic figure rating scale is associated with sociocultural, Personality, and media influences*, found that “negative body image is associated with poorer mental well-being (e.g., higher rates of depression) and diminished confidence in interpersonal relationships” (p.2). Several factors from Adler and Procter’s (2011) book may be the reasons for women’s perception of themselves. The authors discuss the concepts of personal experience, self-concept, and assumptions about human behavior. These important factors could have influenced women’s perception of their bodies.

**Stereotyping: The Norm for Women**

Adler and Proctor (2011) describe the third part of the perception process as stereotyping. Stereotyping helps us generalize and make predictions about certain people or groups.

Stereotyping can help human brains cope with an overload of information in the outside world but it can become overgeneralized. “Stereotypes may be based on a kernel of truth, but they go beyond the facts at hand and make claims that usually have no valid basis” (Adler and Procter, 2011 p.86). The media is stereotyping that all women should be thin and “beautiful”. Women question why they are not more similar to media images; they have curves even with diet and exercise. Models and celebrities are now only generally accepted if they are almost to the point of emaciation. This is what the media has deemed beautiful. This is the ‘in-group’, the ‘out-group’ is everyone else that does not look like these women do. This puts a tremendous amount of pressure on women. Women are now expected to look a certain way. The Halo effect is making women in the media seem to be perfect “Forming and overall positive impression of a person on the basis of one positive characteristic” (Adler & Procter, 2011 p.102). Women perceive that these models and celebrities are part of the in-group and they idealize them.

Knauss, Paxton, and Alsaker’s research article, *Body dissatisfaction in adolescent boys and girls: Objectified body consciousness, Internalization of the media body ideal and perceived pressure from media*, stated that “Internalization of the media ideal and perceived pressure to conform to the ideal have not only been found to be predictors of objectified body consciousness, they have also been found to directly predict body dissatisfaction in female preadolescents and adolescents”(2008 p.1). This is now becoming part of the gender-norm for women. Gender roles are defined as “socially approved ways that men and women are expected to behave” (Adler and Procter, 2011 p.98). Gender norms may not be limited to behavior but could also include

appearance. Haas, Pawlow, Pettibone, and Segrist's research study, *An Intervention for the Negative Influence of Media on Body Esteem*, used an informational video about how the media skews the perception of thin/"beautiful" women. This video changed how women viewed their bodies in a very positive way (2012). This extinguished part of the gender role put in place by the media and helped women embrace their bodies, and feel positively about themselves.

### **Limitations**

There were many limitations found in the research that has been conducted. The research is missing how men are also affected by media images. All of the studies to date have had a strong focus on women. Another limitation in most of the studies is that the research was conducted on college age women. This is probably because college age subjects are the easiest to use for research studies. None of the six studies had a large enough sample size or a placebo group. This limitation in the research may have caused confounding and inhibited the researchers' data. A final limitation of the research was that the samples were mainly American and Caucasian subjects. These limitations carry interesting implications for future research.

### **Future Research**

If/when a future research studies are done on the media there would be many great questions to answer. Future research should examine how men are affected by media images. There is an unrealistic standard in today's society for men. Males are expected to be extremely muscular and have a very low body fat percentage. Examining how the mass media is affecting men would help us draw conclusions on how both sexes are influenced by mass media, and would compare social norms placed on both men and women. There needs to be additional studies on high school girls rather than specifically college age women. High school girls are

more impressionable and susceptible to eating disorders. Finally, the media exerts pressure on all races of women in a many different countries so it would be interesting to see how other cultures react to this media stimulated pressure. Future research studies will expand and make body image issues apply to a greater percentage of the population.

In summary, demands placed on modern women are made even more stressful by the media. The research that has been conducted has shown how media pressure and idealized media images can affect the everyday woman. Putting this pressure on woman causes distraction from ad's and lowered self-esteem, body dissatisfaction and stereotyping. Idealized images are processed by women and result in body dissatisfaction, eating disorders and weakened mental health. For women to achieve their full potential they must put these images along with these stereotypes and gender norms in proper perspective. Haas, Pawlow, Pettibone, and Segrist's (2012) video used in their study; which increased body satisfaction, could be a tool used more often to increase women's love of their bodies. Future research questions will also help researchers understand how both sexes and other cultures are being affected. This way the public can be more informed about how to put perspective on these media portrayals of the "perfect" woman and "perfect" person over all.

RQ1: "Why is the media pushing the "thin" woman (why not the healthy woman)?"

RQ2: "Would images of healthy, strong women not necessarily extremely thin cause the same level of body dissatisfaction?"

RQ3: "How are men dealing with the media portrayed male ideal (Positive: eating healthy, going to the gym, Negative: eating disorders, being unhappy)?"

RQ4: "How does media's influence affect the perception of body image on other cultures (outside the U.S)?"

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