



Brief research report

Reducing the negative effects of media exposure on body image: Testing the effectiveness of subvertising and disclaimer labels



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ABSTRACT

Body image activists have proposed adding disclaimer labels to digitally altered media as a way to promote positive body image. Another approach advocated by activists is to alter advertisements through subvertising (adding social commentary to the image to undermine the message of the advertisement). We examined if body image could be enhanced by attaching Photoshop disclaimers or subvertising to thin-ideal media images of swimsuit models. In Study 1 ($N = 1268$), adult women exposed to disclaimers or subvertising did not report higher body state satisfaction or lower drive for thinness than women exposed to unaltered images. In Study 2 ($N = 820$), adult women who were exposed to disclaimers or subvertising did not report higher state body satisfaction or lower state social appearance comparisons than women exposed to unaltered images or to no images. These results raise questions about the effectiveness of disclaimers and subvertising for promoting body satisfaction.

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Introduction

Many women are dissatisfied with their appearance and weight (Frederick, Forbes, Grigorian, & Jarcho, 2007; Frederick, Peplau, & Lever, 2006; Peplau et al., 2009; Swami et al., 2010). Slender women are routinely featured as attractive in popular media, and women who internalize these slender ideals are less satisfied with their bodies (Cafri, Yamamiya, Brannick, & Thompson, 2005; Schaefer et al., 2015). Meta-analyses show that exposure to slender models can cause small increases in body dissatisfaction (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008), particularly for women if they have low overall body satisfaction ($r = .26$) rather than high body satisfaction ($r = .07$; Ferguson, 2013).

Body image activists and researchers have emphasized the importance of developing measures to counteract the negative effects of exposure to thin-ideal media. The primary goal of the current research was to examine whether adding disclaimer labels or “subvertising” messages to thin-ideal media improves body image, and whether it discourages women from comparing themselves to these media images.

Strategies for Reducing Negative Effects of Thin-Ideal Media Exposure

Warning and disclaimer labels. Some governments, media literacy programs, and industries have embraced the idea of adding disclaimers to media images (Bury, Tiggemann, & Slater, 2016). Disclaimers are intended to prevent consumer confusion (e.g., “this image has been Photoshopped;” Heymann, 2010). Women do attend to these disclaimers when they are added to advertisements (Bury, Tiggemann, & Slater, 2014; Bury et al., 2016).

Little is known, however, about whether disclaimers are actually effective in promoting body satisfaction. The existing literature typically finds no benefits to adding disclaimers (for brief review, see Bury et al., 2016). In three experimental studies, women were exposed to images with or without disclaimer labels and their body dissatisfaction was assessed. These studies found no evidence for any protective effects of these disclaimers (Ata, Thompson, & Small, 2013; Bury et al., 2016; Tiggemann, Slater, Bury, Hawkins, & Firth, 2013). In another study, disclaimer labels were associated with negative thoughts becoming more readily accessible, raising concerns that labels could have counterintuitive negative effects (Selimbegovic & Chatard, 2015). Disclaimer labels may actually bring more attention to aspects of the model’s appearances (Bury et al., 2016).

Only two studies have found positive effects (Slater, Tiggemann, Firth, & Hawkins, 2012; Veldhuis, Konijn, & Seidell, 2012). In the Veldhuis et al. (2012) study, the only specific conditions that

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differed significantly from each other had small sample sizes ($N_s = 11–16$), raising concerns about the replicability of the study. An unexamined question is whether or not these disclaimers effectively reduce the extent to which women engage in social comparisons to these models or the extent to which they desire to be thin.

Culture jamming and subvertising. Alongside warning and disclaimer labels, some body image activists have advocated the more radical approach of “culture jamming,” which is a political movement to undermine the marketing rhetoric of corporations (Harold, 2004). Culture jamming is driven by the idea that advertising is a form of propaganda that serves special interests, and this propaganda can be countered by sabotaging or parodying the advertisements (Chung & Kirby, 2009). As a result, those who participate in culture jamming can alter advertisements to highlight certain flaws or hypocrisies, a practice known as “subvertising” because it subverts the purpose of the advertisement.

A common subvertising strategy is to superimpose slogans and phrases on media images or to alter a well-known logo to fit certain phrases (Chung & Kirby, 2009). For example, subvertisers changed the tagline on one Fox News billboard advertisement from “We report. You decide.” to “We deceive. You believe.” When applied to media featuring models, some examples of this approach include: (1) Taking an advertisement of a slender model and adding Photoshop tool bars; (2) taking a perfume advertisement that lightened the skin of a model and adding the phrase “This is Aishwarya Rai, and she is Indian. She’s been whitewashed;” (3) taking an advertisement for Special-K cereal featuring a woman in a bathing suit and adding the cheeky phrase “Hey there Special-K lady. I know you think I should diet so that I can be slim just like you. thing is, I think I look pretty fabulous just the way I am. Also, Special-K tastes like cardboard so piss off.” This form of political activism is designed to engage audiences in critical media analysis while promoting media literacy. No research, however, has examined whether viewing images that have been subverted improves body image, reduces social comparison, or reduces desire to be thin.

Hypothesis

We hypothesized that women exposed to thin-ideal media images with disclaimer labels or subvertising will report better body image, less drive for thinness, and less social comparison to the images than women exposed to unaltered thin-ideal media images.

Method

We conducted two experiments. To conserve space for this brief report, we describe both studies in this section because the methods and analyses were similar for Studies 1 and 2.

Participants

Adult participants were recruited via Mechanical Turk, a widely used online panel system used by researchers to access adult populations. We restricted the samples to include only participants who completed the full survey and fit the following criteria: reported living in the United States, aged 18–65, with body mass indexes (BMI) ranging from 14.50 to 50.50 based on self-reported height and weight.

In Study 1, a total of 1303 women completed the survey, and 1268 met the inclusion criteria. The mean age was 34 ($SD = 11$) and the mean BMI was 26.5 ($SD = 6.9$). The ethnic composition of the sample was 74% White, 9% Black, 6% Asian, 4% Latino/a, and 7% Other.

In Study 2, a total of 861 women completed the survey, and 820 met the inclusion criteria. The mean age was 35 ($SD = 12$) and the mean BMI was 25.9 ($SD = 6.3$). The ethnic composition of the sample was 75% White, 10% Black, 6% Asian, 4% Latino/a, and 5% Other. The educational background of the sample was 1% having some high school, 10% high school degree, 32% some college, 46% college degree, and 11% advanced degree.

Materials

Stimuli. Ten images of slender White women modeling bikinis at the beach were selected based on a Google search for swimsuit models. Nine of the images showed the woman in a frontal view, and one from the rear view. All of the images showed the woman from the top of her head down to below her waist or lower (see [Online Supplement A](#)).

In the disclaimer condition, a red box with white lettering was placed in the lower right corner of each image (see [Online Supplement B](#)). The disclaimer stated “Warning: This photo has been PHOTOSHOPPED”.

In the subvertising condition, we overlaid different phrases or images on each photo (see [Online Supplement C](#)). The subvertisements were intended to challenge the objectification of the woman in the ad, to highlight the digitally manipulated aspect of the image, to highlight the extent to which women have to modify their bodies to be models, or to turn the model into a less desirable target for upward social comparison. We used subverted images from google image searches (“subvertising body image;” “subvertising dieting”) and websites (www.about-face.org/take-action/tweak-an-ad/) as inspiration.

We modified the rear view image, writing in large black lettering: “Why don’t you show that she is a person with a face and personality instead of presenting her as a sexualized body part?” In another image, we overlaid an image of a Photoshop tool bar. Four of the images had dialogue bubbles emerging from the woman’s mouth, with her saying one of these phrases: “I wonder what I’m going to do after I’m ‘too old’ to be a model;” “This isn’t my natural hair color;” “I dropped out of school for this modeling job;” and “I’m thinking about that last cheeseburger I ate. . . 5 years ago.” The remaining photos were manipulated in the following manner: “Photoshop made me ripped” with an arrow toward the stomach; a red circle around a woman’s breasts with the word “FAKE!” next to it; the words “several spray tans later. . .” alongside the woman; and a woman with a dramatic “thigh gap” that was likely digitally altered, which was circled and the comment “REALLY?!” placed next to it.

Measures. We included two dependent variables in Study 1 and three dependent variables in Study 2.

Drive for Thinness (Study 1). The Drive for Thinness scale (Garner, Olmstead, & Polivy, 1983) assesses how often people report doing certain behaviors or having certain thoughts (e.g., “I am terrified of gaining weight”). The Likert scale ranged from 1 (Never) to 6 (Always), with higher scores indicating greater drive for thinness. The items were averaged ($\alpha = .80$). This is generally thought of as a “trait” measure and therefore may be less influenced by experimental primes.

Body Image States Scale (Studies 1 and 2). The Body Image States Scale (BISS) contains six items that assess how people currently feel about their bodies, such as how dissatisfied or curious they feel right now about their overall appearance (Cash, Fleming, Alindogan, Steadman, & Whitehead, 2002). The measure contains different Likert scales for different items, with higher numbers representing higher body satisfaction. When conducting the study, we

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