



# “Warning: This image has been digitally altered”: The effect of disclaimer labels added to fashion magazine shoots on women’s body dissatisfaction



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## ABSTRACT

The present experiment aimed to investigate the impact of the addition of disclaimer labels to fashion magazine shoots on women’s body dissatisfaction. Participants were 320 female undergraduate students who viewed fashion shoots containing a thin and attractive model with no disclaimer label, or a small, large, or very large disclaimer label, or product images. Although thin-ideal fashion shoot images resulted in greater body dissatisfaction than product images, there was no significant effect of disclaimer label. Internalisation of the thin ideal was found to moderate the effect of disclaimer label, such that internalisation predicted increased body dissatisfaction in the no label and small label conditions, but not in the larger label conditions. Overall, the results showed no benefit for any size of disclaimer label in ameliorating the negative effect of viewing thin-ideal media images. It was concluded that more extensive research is required before the effective implementation of disclaimer labels.

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## 1. Introduction

High levels of body dissatisfaction, particularly with body shape and weight, have been documented in women across a number of western industrialised countries (Frederick, Forbes, Grigorian, & Jarcho, 2007; Frederick, Peplau, & Lever, 2006; Frederick, Sandhu, Morse, & Swami, 2016; Swami et al., 2010). Such body dissatisfaction and accompanying disordered eating have generally been attributed to sociocultural factors (e.g., Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999; Tiggemann, 2011). The most prominent sociocultural model, the Tripartite Influence Model (Thompson et al., 1999), holds that current societal standards for female beauty emphasise the desirability of thinness. Despite its increasing unattainability (Spitzer, Henderson, & Zivian, 1999), the thin ideal is nevertheless internalised by many women as a standard for themselves, resulting in body dissatisfaction when they fail to meet the standard. The Tripartite Influence Model identifies family, peers, and media as the three main sociocultural transmitters of beauty ideals. Of these, the mass media are generally

regarded as the most powerful and persuasive (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002) and so have been argued to play an important role in body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (e.g., Levine & Murnen, 2009). In support, both correlational and experimental evidence confirms that there is a reliable negative effect of exposure to thin idealised media images on women’s body dissatisfaction, particularly for women who already have high levels of body concern or internalisation (for supporting meta-analyses, see Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Groesz et al., 2002; Levine & Murnen, 2009; Want, 2009; for a counter-view, see Ferguson, 2013).

Accordingly, governments and policy makers internationally have begun the search for initiatives to ameliorate the demonstrated negative effects on body image of media-portrayed thin ideals (Krawitz, 2014). While media literacy training has shown some success (Levine & Smolak, 2006), such interventions target selected individuals and most often require multiple sessions and specialised environments (Richardson & Paxton, 2010; Wilksch & Wade, 2009). Thus there is a pressing need for simpler but ecologically valid universal interventions that target the broader population (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2006). One such strategy proposed in a number of countries, including France, the United Kingdom, and Australia, is the addition of a disclaimer or warning label to advertisements and other media images that have been air-brushed or subject to digital alteration, as most contemporary media images indeed are (Bennett, 2008). In 2012, Israel became

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the first country to actually enact legislation (the “Photoshop Law”) requiring the advertising industry to disclose when images have been digitally enhanced to make the model thinner (Krawitz, 2014).

Although disclaimer labels represent an attractive strategy that can be relatively easily implemented, as yet there has been little empirical evidence supporting their effectiveness. To the best of our knowledge, at the time of the present study, only one study by Slater, Tiggemann, Firth, and Hawkins (2012) had shown that disclaimer labels attached to fashion shoot images resulted in reduced body dissatisfaction. In contrast, a growing number of studies have now found that disclaimers of digital alteration attached to fashion advertisements confer no positive benefit (Ata, Thompson, & Small, 2013; Bury, Tiggemann, & Slater, 2016b; Frederick, Sandhu, Scott, & Akbari, 2016; Tiggemann, Slater, Bury, Hawkins, & Firth, 2013—although see Harmon & Rudd, 2016; for a small positive effect). Some studies have even reported counter-productive effects for some forms of disclaimer. For example, Tiggemann et al. (2013) and Bury et al. (2016b) found that specifically worded disclaimers actually led to increased body dissatisfaction among women high on trait appearance comparison, while Selimbegović and Chatard (2015) reported that a single exposure to a disclaimer label led to increased negative thought accessibility over two months.

Some insight into the lack of positive effects for disclaimer labels comes from studies that have included measures of social comparison processing. The implicit rationale behind the use of disclaimer labels is that they serve to inform the reader that the fashion image is not realistic and therefore does not present a relevant or appropriate target for social comparison, and hence body satisfaction should be preserved (Tiggemann et al., 2013). However, Tiggemann et al. (2013) and Bury, Tiggemann, & Slater (2016a, 2016b) found that the addition of disclaimer labels did not lead to lower perceived realism or lower social comparison as expected (and widely assumed). In one study (Tiggemann et al., 2013; Experiment 1), disclaimer labels actually led to higher judgements of self-relevance and greater appearance comparison. The authors speculated that disclaimer labels may paradoxically serve to encourage women to pay more attention to the model’s body than they normally would.

The most obvious difference between the one positive published finding (Slater et al., 2012) and the negative findings (Ata et al., 2013; Bury et al., 2016b; Frederick, Sandhu, Scott, et al., 2016; Tiggemann et al., 2013) is in the nature of the stimulus images used. The former positive study used fashion shoot images, whereas the negative studies used advertisements as experimental stimuli. Fashion shoots or spreads are a common but understudied content of women’s fashion magazines that typically show a single thin and attractive model wearing a range of fashionable clothes and accessories. Tiggemann et al. (2013) have suggested that the models in fashion shoots may appear more natural and be presented in a more realistic context than the artificially perfected images presented in advertisements. The latter are obviously highly constructed in both the depiction of the woman’s body and in the surrounding layout and text, in their attempt to present an idealistically happy and successful life resulting from use of the advertised product (Engeln-Maddox, 2006; Tiggemann & Polivy, 2010). It seems possible, then, that disclaimer labels on fashion advertisements may offer little benefit because women simply do not expect these images to be realistic. More generally, Want (2009) has argued that media research has paid insufficient attention to the context of images. In the light of the Slater et al. (2012) result, here we hypothesised that disclaimer labels added to fashion shoots would prove effective.

Thus the aim of the present study was to investigate the addition of disclaimer labels to fashion shoot images, replicating Slater et al. (2012). Fashion shoots represent one form of content in women’s magazines that has not often been the subject of studies of media effects. We extended the original study in a number of ways. First,

we included a product control condition to see whether exposure to fashion shoot images does lead to increased body dissatisfaction like other media images. Second, we included measures of perceived realism and social comparison processing. Specifically, the extent of (state) social comparison processing in response to the fashion shoot images was explicitly assessed and tested as a potential underlying mechanism. Third, we assessed the trait measures of appearance comparison and internalisation as potential moderating variables. Just as there are demonstrated individual differences in vulnerability to media images (Groesz et al., 2002), there are likely individual differences that moderate the effect of disclaimer labels on these images. Both trait appearance comparison and internalisation have been found to moderate the effect of thin ideal images on body dissatisfaction (Dittmar & Howard, 2004; Yamamiya, Cash, Melnyk, Posavac, & Posavac, 2005).

In addition, we sought to investigate the impact of disclaimer label size. Even though they have not proved effective, women do report noticing disclaimer labels of the size used in previous studies and likely to be used naturalistically (Ata et al., 2013). Eye-tracking research has confirmed that women visually attend to such disclaimer labels (Bury, Tiggemann, & Slater, 2014, 2016a). Nevertheless, it is possible that a larger sized and more visually obvious disclaimer may prove more effective. In particular, we tested the effect of a label conforming to the specifications of the Israeli Photoshop Law which states that the disclaimer statement must feature prominently and take up a minimum of 7% of the entire image (Krawitz, 2014).

In sum, the present study investigated the effect on body dissatisfaction of the addition of disclaimer labels of varying size to fashion shoots. Based on Slater et al.’s (2012) finding, it was expected that disclaimer labels informing of digital enhancement on such images would ameliorate negative effects on body satisfaction. It was expected that this effect might be greater for larger labels. Further, it was predicted that fashion shoots labelled as digitally altered would be judged as less realistic than unlabelled fashion shoots and consequently activate less appearance-based social comparison. Finally, trait appearance comparison and internalisation were tested as moderators of the effect.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Design

The study employed a between subjects experimental design, with five levels of the independent variable of image type: product images (unlabelled), thin ideal images with no disclaimer label, thin ideal images with small label, thin ideal images with large label, and thin ideal images with very large label. The main dependent variables were body dissatisfaction and state appearance comparison. Trait social comparison and internalisation of the thin ideal were examined as potential moderating variables.

### 2.2. Participants

Participants were 320 female undergraduate students at Flinders University (in South Australia) aged between 18 and 30 years. They were randomly allocated to one of the five experimental conditions (subject to equal *n*), resulting in 64 participants in each condition.

### 2.3. Materials

**2.3.1. Experimental manipulation: Image type.** Participants in the product control condition viewed 14 colour double-page magazine fashion shoots which featured products (e.g., jewellery, shoes, handbags, perfume) without any people. Participants in the

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