



Labelling fashion magazine advertisements: Effectiveness of different label formats on social comparison and body dissatisfaction



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 22 December 2017

Received in revised form 27 February 2018

Accepted 27 February 2018

Keywords:

Media

Disclaimer labels

Body dissatisfaction

Social comparison

Fashion magazines

ABSTRACT

The experiment investigated the impact on women's body dissatisfaction of different forms of label added to fashion magazine advertisements. Participants were 340 female undergraduate students who viewed 15 fashion advertisements containing a thin and attractive model. They were randomly allocated to one of five label conditions: no label, generic disclaimer label (indicating image had been digitally altered), consequence label (indicating that viewing images might make women feel bad about themselves), informational label (indicating the model in the advertisement was underweight), or a graphic label (picture of a paint brush). Although exposure to the fashion advertisements resulted in increased body dissatisfaction, there was no significant effect of label type on body dissatisfaction; no form of label demonstrated any ameliorating effect. In addition, the consequence and informational labels resulted in increased perceived realism and state appearance comparison. Yet more extensive research is required before the effective implementation of any form of label.

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1. Introduction

Widespread body dissatisfaction, particularly with body shape and weight, has been well documented in women across a number of western countries (Swami et al., 2010). The pervasiveness of this body dissatisfaction has generally been attributed to sociocultural factors, most notably the mass media (e.g., Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999; Tiggemann, 2011). In particular, fashion magazines have been identified as a potent source of unrealistic thin ideals for women and girls (Harper & Tiggemann, 2008). Furthermore, images in fashion magazines are now routinely digitally altered to remove blemishes, elongate legs, trim waists and hips, and in other ways render them even more perfect (Bennett, 2008), and consequently less realistic and attainable for the average girl or woman.

The link between exposure to thin idealized media and body dissatisfaction has received extensive correlational and experimental support (for meta-analyses, see Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Levine & Murnen, 2009; Want, 2009), especially for women who already have significant body concerns (Ferguson, 2013). Accordingly, the detrimental impact on women of exposure to thin ideals has become an important social and public health issue. Governments and policy makers across the globe have

begun the search for simple and cost-effective universal interventions to combat the observed negative effects (Krawitz, 2014). One strategy proposed in a number of countries is the addition of some form of disclaimer label to media images that have been digitally altered. In 2012, Israel became the first country to enact legislation requiring the advertising industry to disclose when images have been digitally enhanced to make the model thinner (Krawitz, 2014). More recently, in October 2017, France enacted a law that commercial images of models whose bodies have been digitally altered in size (to appear thinner or larger) must be accompanied by the notice “photographie retouchée” (retouched photograph) (Eggert, 2017).

Despite the attractiveness of disclaimer labels as a strategy that can be (and is being) relatively easily implemented, as yet there is little empirical evidence supporting their effectiveness. To the best of our knowledge, only two relatively small studies (Harmon & Rudd, 2016; Slater, Tiggemann, Firth, & Hawkins, 2012) have shown positive effects relative to a no label condition. In contrast, a growing number of studies have now found that disclaimers of digital alteration attached to fashion images confer no positive protective effect for body image (Ata, Thompson, & Small, 2013; Bury et al., 2016a,b; Bury, Tiggemann, & Slater, 2017; Frederick, Sandhu, Scott, & Akbari, 2016; Tiggemann, Brown, Zaccardo, & Thomas, 2017; Tiggemann, Slater, Bury, Hawkins, & Firth, 2013).

More generally, sociocultural models (e.g., the Tripartite Influence Model, Thompson et al., 1999) position social comparison as the main mechanism by which media exposure leads to body dis-

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satisfaction. When women compare themselves to the unrealistic and idealized images presented in the media, they invariably do not measure up, resulting in dissatisfaction. Thus, the implicit rationale behind the use of disclaimer labels is that they will inform the reader that the particular image is unrealistic and therefore not relevant or appropriate for them as a target of comparison, resulting in reduced social comparison and the preservation of body satisfaction (Tiggemann et al., 2013). However, a number of the existing studies have shown that the addition of disclaimer labels does not appear to lead to either lower perceived realism or lower social comparison (Bury et al., 2016b; Bury et al., 2017; Tiggemann et al., 2013, 2017), as is widely assumed.

To date, the precise wording, content, or format of the label has received little research attention, although a few studies have shown that disclaimer labels that specify the body parts altered (e.g., “This image has been digitally altered to lengthen and thin legs”) can actually result in increased, rather than decreased, body dissatisfaction for some women (Bury et al., 2016b; Tiggemann et al., 2013). Thus, it remains possible that there may be other wordings or formats of label that are indeed more effective at reducing social comparison and hence preserving body satisfaction. Accordingly, the present experiment aimed to investigate the impact of the addition of different forms of label to fashion magazine advertisements that might better protect women’s body satisfaction.

Although labels have not proved effective in the body image context, they have had some demonstrated success in other domains, such as alcohol and tobacco advertising (MacKinnon & Lapin, 1998; Smith, 1990; Strahan et al., 2002). However, the latter are quite different from the proposed disclaimer labels on fashion images in that they typically contain public health warnings that focus on consequences (e.g., “Smoking kills”, “Alcohol can harm unborn babies”). Indeed, John (2009) concluded that to be effective, messages need to be direct and consequence-based. Thus, the present study included a consequence-based label indicating that viewing thin and unrealistic fashion images might make women feel bad about themselves. This has a different focus from the warning label used in one condition by Ata et al. (2013) (“Warning: Trying to look as thin as this model may be dangerous to your health”) and found to confer no benefit.

Another potential form of label comes from the work of Veldhuis, Konijn, and Seidell (2012) who have investigated the effect of the addition of weight information to bikini model images. In particular, they showed that exposure to an image containing an extremely thin model induced less social comparison and body dissatisfaction among adolescent and preadolescent girls when accompanied by a label indicating that the model was 3- or 6-kg underweight than when the label indicated that the model was of normal weight (although it should be noted that body dissatisfaction in the latter case was particularly high). This did not occur for a thin or normal-weight model and there was no no-label control condition. The authors reasoned that the (underweight) information label appropriately confirmed the model’s extremely thin appearance and counteracted the usual negative effect of thin-ideal media exposure. Thus, we wished to test the effect of such an informational label here.

The final type of label tested differed not in wording but in format. We wanted to test a disclaimer label presented in graphic form, that is, as a symbol, to which women may respond more readily and perhaps without the degree of cognitive processing inherent in reading a label. Using a visual image as a warning may be more apposite in some way when paired with a visual fashion image. The use of some kind of logo or ‘kitemark’ on images that have been digitally altered was an early recommendation of the UK Campaign for Body Confidence (Topping, 2010).

Thus, in the present experiment we sought to manipulate different forms of label appended to fashion magazine advertisements,

with a view to determining which (if any) is the most effective. In particular, we aimed to test whether other forms of label might be more successful at protecting women’s body satisfaction than the generic disclaimer labels tested so far. Although somewhat exploratory in nature, on the basis of the reasoning presented above, we predicted that fashion images with consequence, informational, or graphic labels might evoke less social comparison and therefore lower body dissatisfaction than images with no (or generic) labels.

2. Method

2.1. Design

The study employed a between-subjects experimental design, with five levels of the independent variable of label type: no label, generic disclaimer label, consequence label, informational label, or a graphic label. The main dependent variables were state appearance comparison and body dissatisfaction.

2.2. Participants

Participants were 340 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 68 participants in each condition.

2.3. Materials

2.3.1. Experimental manipulation: label type

Participants viewed a set of 15 fashion magazine advertisements that had been shown by Bury et al. (2017) to evoke increased body dissatisfaction. All advertisements were for fashion related items, such as clothes, accessories, and perfume, and were initially sourced from locally available popular women’s fashion magazines, such as *Cleo*, *Marie Claire*, and *Vogue*. The set contained 11 thin-ideal advertisements, plus four product advertisements. The thin-ideal advertisements featured the face and at least three-quarters of the body of a different thin and attractive Caucasian female model. The models had previously been rated by a small panel of female raters in the target age range as representative of the thin ideal ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 0.34$; 1 = *not at all*, 5 = *extremely thin*). The advertisements were printed on high quality photographic paper and presented in a folder similar to the format of a fashion magazine.

Five different versions of the thin-ideal advertisements were constructed: with no label (i.e., unchanged original image), with a disclaimer label that was generic in nature (“Note: This image has been altered to enhance appearance”), with a consequence label (“Note: Viewing thin and unrealistic images of women can make you feel bad about yourself”), with an informational label (“Note: This model is underweight”), and a graphic label, which showed an image of a paint brush with the word “Retouched” underneath. The labels were written in 12pt Calibri font, in either black or white (to contrast with the colour of the background), enclosed within a thin border, and were positioned in the most appropriate corner of the page. Previous studies have demonstrated that participants do notice labels of this form and size (Ata et al., 2013; Bury, Tiggemann, & Slater, 2014; Tiggemann et al., 2013).

2.3.2. Body dissatisfaction

Following Heinberg and Thompson (1995), seven visual analogue scales (VAS) were used to obtain measures of mood and state body dissatisfaction, both before and immediately after viewing the 15 advertisements. The five mood items (not analysed here) were

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