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Exposure to thin-ideal media affect most, but not all, women: Results from the Perceived Effects of Media Exposure Scale and open-ended responses

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ABSTRACT

Findings conflict as to whether thin-ideal media affect women's body satisfaction. Meta-analyses of experimental studies reveal small or null effects, but many women endorse appearance-related media pressure in surveys. Using a novel approach, two samples of women (*N*s = 656, 770) were exposed to bikini models, fashion models, or control conditions and reported the effects of the images their body image. Many women reported the fashion/bikini models made them feel worse about their stomachs (57%, 64%), weight (50%, 56%), waist (50%, 56%), overall appearance (50%, 56%), muscle tone (46%, 52%), legs (45%, 48%), thighs (40%, 49%), buttocks (40%, 43%), and hips (40%, 46%). In contrast, few women (1-6%) reported negative effects of control images. In open-ended responses, approximately one-third of women explicitly described negative media effects on their body image. Findings revealed that many women perceive negative effects of thin-ideal media in the immediate aftermath of exposures in experimental settings.

1. Introduction

The sociocultural perspective on body image postulates that culture influences people's attitudes, behaviors, and values about their bodies (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). What is deemed physically attractive in Western cultures is communicated via the media and influences women's attitudes towards their own bodies. A specific model that fits within this larger theoretical framework is the tripartite influence model, which posits that media, parents, and peers are the primary sources of sociocultural influence on body dissatisfaction (Keery, van den Berg, & Thompson, 2004; Thompson et al., 1999; Thompson & Stice, 2001). Appearance-based comparisons to popular media are one mechanism through which media exposure can influence body image. Many women engage in upwards social comparisons to these images, meaning that they focus on how their own appearances do not compare favorably to thin-ideal media, which can lead to body dissatisfaction (Tiggemann & Polivy, 2010; Tiggemann & Slater, 2004).

In contrast to the viewpoint that thin-ideal media have an important effect on body image, several scholars have proposed that the influence and importance of media effects on body dissatisfaction have been exaggerated (Ferguson, Winegard, & Winegard, 2011; Holmstrom, 2004). Finally, still other scholars have taken a more intermediate position. In a review of the existing literature, Levine and Murnen (2009) proposed that the evidence shows that media use is reliably associated with body dissatisfaction, but that the evidence for media causing body dissatisfaction is not conclusive.

It is critical to understand whether media have a notable effect on body dissatisfaction. Many women are dissatisfied with the appearance of their faces (Frederick, Kelly, Latner, Sandhu, & Tsong, 2016), their weights (Frederick, Forbes, & Berezovskaya, 2008; Peplau et al., 2009; Swami et al., 2010), and their overall appearance (Fiske, Fallon, Blissmer, & Redding, 2014; Frederick, Forbes, Grigorian, & Jarcho, 2007; Frederick, Peplau, & Lever, 2006; Frederick, Sandhu, Morse, & Swami, 2016). This dissatisfaction is linked to a range of negative psychological and physical health outcomes, including social anxiety (Cash, Theriault, & Annis, 2004), a compulsive need for excessive exercise (White & Halliwell, 2010), discomfort with sex (Peplau et al., 2009), interest in liposuction (Frederick, Lever, & Peplau, 2007), lower life satisfaction (Frederick, Sandhu, Scott et al., 2016), and disordered eating (Fitzsimmons-Craft et al., 2014; Rodgers, Chabrol, & Paxton, 2011).

If media do not play a key role in causing or maintaining body dissatisfaction, then it is important to reallocate research efforts

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away from studying media effects and interventions targeting media. If media do have important effects, then it is important to integrate media effects into existing theories and highlight media as important targets for intervention. Below, we briefly outline evidence for the perspectives that the media do have a substantial impact on body image, as well as the evidence for little or no media effects. The existing evidence relies primarily on women's self-reports of perceived pressure from the media to be slender or attractive, experiments assessing the effects of brief exposures to media, and correlational and prospective studies of media exposure and body image. We then introduce a new approach for assessing how media affect women by first exposing women to media images and then assessing how they feel the exposures affected them using both quantitative and open-ended reports.

1.1. Evidence that media have substantial effects on body image

Longitudinal, correlational, and experimental studies provide some evidence that women who consume more thin-ideal media report more body dissatisfaction (for a review, see Levine & Murnen, 2009). Research that directly assesses women's perceptions of how thin-ideal media affect them finds that many women report feeling pressure from the media to be attractive in the United States (Frederick, Tylka, Smolak, & Murnen, 2017; Schaefer et al., 2015; Tylka, Russell, & Neal, 2015) and in China (Jackson, Jiang, & Chen, 2016). For example, in a study of 11,711 adult women, 63% of heterosexual women and 39% of lesbian women somewhat agreed or strongly agreed that they felt pressure from the media to be attractive (Frederick, Tylka, Schaefer, & Thompson, 2017).

Other studies using validated scales of perceived media pressure have produced similar results. The most recent version of the Social Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire (SATAQ-4; Schaefer et al., 2015) contains subscales with questions explicitly asking women if they feel pressure from the media regarding their appearance. In this study, the mean reported pressure from the media was above the midpoint of the Likert scale (3.0), indicating that college women generally agreed they felt this pressure. In two other studies using this measure, women were above the midpoint for perceived media pressure, but below the midpoint for perceived pressure from family and peers (Frederick, Kelly, et al., 2016; Tylka et al., 2015). Similarly, in a study of 6,348 women, most women reported high pressure from the media to be thin (60%; mean > 3.25), but few reported high pressure from family (20%) and peers (12%; Frederick, Tylka, Schaefer, et al., 2017). These studies provide support for the conclusion that women perceive media to be an important influence on how they feel about their bodies. Indeed, women who reported more awareness of the thin-ideal in the media and greater pressure from the media also reported greater body dissatisfaction (Cafri, Yamamiya, Brannick, & Thompson, 2005).

The research cited above suggests that assessing women's perceptions of media effects is useful, as their perceptions are associated with their body image. Research on other types of media effects have also asked people to directly assess how certain types of media affect them. For example, there is substantial disagreement among researchers about whether pornography has negative, neutral, or positive effects on most men and women. To supplement experimental and correlational studies, Hald and Malamuth (2008) asked men and women to rate the extent to which watching pornography had positive or negative effects on different aspects of their lives. They found that most men and women believe it has few negative effects on them, but also only modest positive effects. Hald and Malamuth found utility in directly assessing participants' perceptions to understand how pornography does or does not influence men and women. More broadly, a wide swath of research studies in communication have examined the "third person effect," which is the tendency for people to believe that the media affect other people more so than themselves (Perloff, 1999)

The approach of asking women to reflect on how media generally affect them in surveys, however, is subject to recall biases. For example, women may feel negatively immediately after consuming thin-ideal media, but they may not recall these negative effects when asked about them later on a survey. Therefore, one goal of the current studies is to assess women's perceptions of whether they were affected by exposure to thin-ideal media in the immediate aftermath of the exposure rather than asking about their more general perceptions.

1.2. Evidence that media have minimal effects on body image

In contrast to research on women's perceptions of media effects, meta-analyses of correlational studies, and of experiments where women are exposed to thin-ideal media, typically find small effects or no effects of this media exposure (Ferguson, 2013; Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Holmstrom, 2004; Want, 2009). Small effects were observed in older meta-analyses of this literature ($d = 0.28$, Grabe et al., 2008; $d = 0.31$, Groesz et al., 2002; $d = 0.35$, Want, 2009), with one finding a negligible link ($r = .08$, Holmstrom, 2004). A more recent meta-analysis of over 200 correlational and experimental studies found no overall effect of media exposure on women's body dissatisfaction ($r = 0.07$; Ferguson, 2013). Among women who were already highly dissatisfied with their bodies, however, there was a link between media exposure and body dissatisfaction, but the effect size was small ($r = .26$). The author concluded that some, but not most, women are affected by thin-ideal media.

The existing research has relied on a mix of state and trait measures, with the latter being less sensitive to change after experimental stimuli and thus possibly weakening the effect size. The current study builds on this research by examining effects of media exposure on a state-based measure of body image, along with assessing women's perceptions of the effects of media using both Likert-scale and open-ended items.

1.3. The present study

Conflicting findings between the research on self-perceived effects of media and findings from meta-analyses suggest the importance of further research using diverse outcome measures. The current study merges the standard experimental approach used in many of the studies comprising the meta-analyses with the approach used in research with the SATAQ-4 whereby women report their perceptions of how media affect them. More specifically, the present studies exposed women to thin-ideal media images (women modeling bikinis and/or fashionable clothing) and to control conditions (viewing paintings, products, and/or no images). Women then completed state measures of body image and then reported their perceptions of how the media did or did not affect their feelings about their bodies.

The present study makes five unique contributions to the study of media effects on women's body image. First, we used several different approaches to determine if media impact body image. Consistent with most experiments in this research area, women completed validated state body image scales after being exposed to the media images or control conditions. We supplemented this traditional approach by also assessing women's perceptions of how the media images influenced them using Likert scale questions. This approach of assessing women's perceptions in the immediate aftermath of media exposure contrasts with prior research that has relied on participants' general recollections or impressions of how media affect them. Using validated scales alongside assessments of women's perceptions enabled us to test whether the effects revealed were similar or different in magnitude.