Body Image 17 (2016) 136–142

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Body Image

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/bodyimage

The effect of digital alteration disclaimer labels on social comparison and body image: Instructions and individual differences

Belinda Bury[a,*], Marika Tiggemann[a], Amy Slater[b]

[a] Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia
[b] University of the West of England, Bristol, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 10 September 2015
Received in revised form 9 February 2016
Accepted 12 March 2016
Available online 7 April 2016

Keywords:
Disclaimer labels
Media
Fashion magazine advertisements
Social comparison
Body dissatisfaction

ABSTRACT

The current study aimed to investigate the effect of digital alteration disclaimer labels appended to fashion magazine advertisements, as well as instructional condition, on women's social comparison and body dissatisfaction. Participants were 378 female undergraduate students who viewed 11 thin ideal advertisements with either no disclaimer, a generic disclaimer, or a more detailed specific disclaimer. There were three instructional conditions: neutral, distractor, and social comparison. Disclaimer labels did not affect appearance comparison or body dissatisfaction, but instructional condition did, with the social comparison instructions producing the highest appearance comparison and body dissatisfaction. In addition, there was a three-way interaction with trait appearance comparison, such that women high on trait appearance comparison who saw specifically worded disclaimers in the distractor instructional condition experienced increased body dissatisfaction, whereas women low on this trait experienced decreased body dissatisfaction. It seems that both instructions and individual differences may influence responses to disclaimer labels.

Introduction

It has now been well established that exposure to thin idealised media images can impact negatively on women's body image (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Levine & Murnen, 2009; Want, 2009). These negative effects happen particularly for more vulnerable women, that is, for those who have internalised the thin ideal to a greater extent (Dittmar & Howard, 2004; Grabe et al., 2008; Groesz et al., 2002; Heinberg & Thompson, 1995; Yamamiya, Cash, Melnyk, Posavac, & Posavac, 2005) or for whom appearance is important to their self-concept (Dittmar & Howard, 2004; Halliwell & Dittmar, 2005). Negative body image, in particular body dissatisfaction, has been found to be associated with increased risk of depression, low self-esteem, and eating disorders (Dittmar, 2009; Posavac, Posavac, & Weigel, 2001; Stice, Schupak-Neuberg, Shaw, & Stein, 1994). Thus, the impact of thin ideal media imagery has become an important societal concern.

In an attempt to reduce negative effects due to exposure to thin ideal media imagery, in 2009 the Australian National Advisory Group on Body Image introduced the Voluntary Code of Conduct which targeted the fashion, media, and advertising industries (Krawitz, 2014). One recommendation under this Code was that a disclaimer of digital alteration should be attached to any image that has been digitally altered. Since the above Code was introduced, Israel passed a law in 2012 requiring the advertising industry to disclose when images of models have been digitally enhanced (Geuss, 2012; Krawitz, 2014). Then, in April 2015, legislation was approved by the French lower house requiring advertisements to carry disclaimers if images have been digitally altered. This legislation will need to be approved by the upper house to become law (Charlton, 2015).

Disclaimers of digital alteration appended to fashion magazine or billboard advertisements are appealing and attractive to policy makers and governments because they are easy and relatively cheap to implement. However, before a strategy is implemented widely in society, there needs to be evidence of its effectiveness. More generally, media literacy programs which include a discussion of digital enhancement (models made thinner, removal of wrinkles and blemishes) have shown some promise in encouraging women to become more critical of media images (Halliwell, Easun, & Harcourt, 2011; Ogden & Sherwood, 2008; Posavac et al., 2001; Yamamiya et al., 2005). Thus, it seems plausible that disclaimer labels indicating digital alteration might encourage women to be more critical of the unrealistic thin ideal images presented in fashion magazines. Based on the logic that negative body image

* Corresponding author at: School of Psychology, Flinders University, GPO Box 2100, Adelaide, SA 5001, Australia.
E-mail address: belinda.bury@flinders.edu.au (B. Bury).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2016.03.005
1740-1445/

results from comparisons with unrealistic thin ideal media images (Festinger, 1954; Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999; Want, 2009), it is reasoned that a disclaimer label would highlight a model's appearance as unrealistic and inappropriate as a comparison target. The disclaimer label would thereby reduce social comparison on the basis of appearance, and thus preserve body satisfaction (Tiggemann, Slater, Bury, Hawkins, & Firth, 2013).

However, despite this plausibility, the existing research has produced mixed findings. Thus far, only one study by Slater, Tiggemann, Firth, and Hawkins (2012) has found that disclaimer labels attached to fashion shoots were able to reduce body dissatisfaction. However, studies which have investigated the use of disclaimer labels on fashion magazine advertisements have found no such benefit (Ata, Thompson, & Small, 2013; Bury, Tiggemann, & Slater, 2016; Tiggemann et al., 2013). In fact, one form of disclaimer label has been found to exacerbate negative effects for some women. In particular, for women high on trait appearance comparison, disclaimer labels which specified the body areas that had been digitally altered led to increased body dissatisfaction (Tiggemann et al., 2013).

One possible reason why the previous studies found no reduction in body dissatisfaction is that the disclaimer labels may not in fact have reduced social comparison. Indeed, in their first experiment, Tiggemann et al. (2013) reported significantly higher appearance comparison for women who saw disclaimer labels, with no difference in their second experiment. In addition, one eye-tracking study has shown that specifically worded disclaimer labels directed more, rather than less, visual attention towards body areas mentioned as digitally altered (Bury, Tiggemann, & Slater, 2014).

Comparisons on the basis of appearance can be made consciously, but alternatively, they can be unintentional and automatic (Bessenoff, 2006; Gilbert, Giesler, & Morris, 1995; Want, 2009). It has been suggested that women may only consider the relevance or appropriateness of such comparisons after they have already been made, and may then attempt to "undo" them if the situation, their cognitive engagement, and their level of motivation allow (Gilbert et al., 1995; Want, 2009). In all previous experimental investigations (Ata et al., 2013; Bury et al., 2016; Tiggemann et al., 2013) participants were requested to rate the advertisements on non-appearance qualities such as creativity, layout, and effectiveness. Thus, it is possible that the cognitive load involved in making these ratings inadvertently left participants with insufficient capacity to consciously undo any inappropriate comparisons (Gilbert et al., 1995; Want, 2009).

More generally, there is evidence that experimental instructions, and thus the type of information processing women engage in, can impact the effect of thin ideal exposure. In particular, it has been shown that social comparison instructions lead to increased appearance comparison processing and body dissatisfaction for women exposed to thin ideal advertisements (Cattarin, Thompson, Thomas, & Williams, 2000; Tiggemann & McGill, 2004; Tiggemann & Polivy, 2010; Tiggemann, Polivy, & Hargreaves, 2009). Accordingly, it is likely that experimental instructions might also affect how women process the information contained in digital alteration disclaimer labels, and consequently affect body image.

Thus, the major aim of the current study was to investigate in more detail the role of social comparison processing in determining the effectiveness of disclaimer labels affixed to fashion magazine advertisements, by not only measuring it, but by also manipulating experimental instructions to induce greater or lesser amounts of social comparison processing. Participants viewed advertisements either without a disclaimer label, or with a generic disclaimer label indicating that the image had been digitally altered or specific disclaimer label which specified the body areas that had been altered. Based on the methodology of Tiggemann and McGill (2004), processing was manipulated via three different instructional conditions. In the neutral instructional condition, in order to reduce cognitive load participants were simply asked to view the advertisements. The other two instructional conditions imposed some cognitive load. In the distractor instructional condition, participants were asked to rate non-appearance qualities of the advertisements (as per Ata et al. [2013], Bury et al. [2016], and Tiggemann et al. [2013]). In the social comparison instructional condition, participants rated items that subtly encouraged comparison with the models in the advertisements.

Based on the reasoning that preventing or undoing appearance comparison requires cognitive effort, it was expected that instructional condition would interact with disclaimer label type in affecting both social appearance comparison and body dissatisfaction. In particular, in the neutral instructional condition where participants were not required to rate the advertisements, it was anticipated that the disclaimer labels would be effective in reducing social comparison and body dissatisfaction. That is, when participants were not made cognitively busy assessing non-appearance qualities of the advertisements, they would retain the cognitive resources necessary to mentally undo (inappropriate) comparisons with the unrealistic thin ideal images. However, for participants in the distractor instructional condition, it was expected that results would replicate those of the previous studies in which disclaimer labels have not proved effective in reducing body dissatisfaction (Ata et al., 2013; Bury et al., 2016; Tiggemann et al., 2013). This same pattern was expected for the social comparison instructional condition, with both appearance comparison and body dissatisfaction expected to be highest for participants in this condition.

Finally, the effect of individual differences in trait levels of social comparison was assessed. Trait appearance comparison was expected to moderate the effect of disclaimer label type on body dissatisfaction, as has been found in previous research (Tiggemann et al., 2013). More precisely, it was expected that specifically worded disclaimer labels would be least effective for women with a greater tendency to compare on the basis of appearance, as these women may be more cognitively primed to attend to any information related to appearance (Yamamiya et al., 2005), and also may be less motivated to avoid such comparisons (Want, 2009).

Method

Design

The experiment employed a 3×3 between-subjects design, with three levels of both independent variables: disclaimer label (no label, generic, specific) and instructional condition (neutral, distractor, comparison). The major dependent variables were state appearance comparison and body dissatisfaction. Trait tendency for appearance comparison was examined as a potential moderating variable.

Participants

Participants were 378 female undergraduate students at a South Australian university who reported that English was their first language. Age ranged from 18 to 30 years, with a mean age of 20.1 years ($SD = 2.9$). The average body mass index of 22.8 ($SD = 4.4$) fell within the normal weight range (World Health Organisation, 2011). The majority of participants identified as White (82.5%), with 14.8% Asian, and 2.7% 'other.'

Materials

Thin ideal stimuli. The stimuli consisted of 11 thin ideal advertisements (plus four product only advertisements) sourced from