



Brief research report

## Single exposure to disclaimers on airbrushed thin ideal images increases negative thought accessibility<sup>☆</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

Disclaimers on airbrushed thin ideal images can attract attention to the thin ideal standard promoted by the advertisements, which can be damaging rather than helpful. In this study, 48 female college students were exposed to a thin ideal image including a disclaimer, a neutral sentence, or nothing. Two weeks and two months after this, they were again exposed to the same image but with no accompanying text in any of the conditions. Negative thought accessibility was assessed three times, after each exposure to the thin-ideal image, using reaction time measures. Participants randomly assigned to the disclaimer condition systematically showed greater accessibility of negative thoughts than those in the other two conditions, irrespective of the time of measurement. These results suggest that disclaimers on airbrushed images may have some counter-productive effects by accentuating the problems that they precisely aim to address.

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### Introduction

Mass media have been repeatedly criticized for promoting unrealistic standards of physical beauty through airbrushed thin ideal images. Indeed, repeated exposure to such images may be a risk factor for certain problems in women, such as body dissatisfaction and eating disorders (Dittmar, 2009; Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Levine & Murnen, 2009), decreased self-esteem and anxiety (Thornton & Maurice, 1997), depressive symptoms (Stice & Bearman, 2001), and negative thought accessibility (especially in body dissatisfied women, Chatard & Selimbegović, 2011; Johansson, Lundh, & Andersson, 2005). Related concerns have led countries (e.g., France, United Kingdom, Australia, Israel, see also American Medical Association, 2011) to consider introducing disclaimers (i.e., statements about the digitally altered nature of images) on airbrushed photos, aiming to protect women continuously exposed to unattainable standards of thinness and beauty in the media. However, the few studies conducted so far to assess disclaimer effects have yielded inconclusive findings.

In Bissell's (2006) pioneering work, disclaimers on fashion photographs increased the desire to look like the model, drive for thinness, body dissatisfaction and anorexia symptoms. In contrast, in Slater, Tiggemann, Firth, and Hawkins' (2012) study, disclaimers on fashion magazine shoot spreads buffered the deleterious impact of thin ideal exposure on body dissatisfaction, and facilitated perception of these images as unrealistic. Nevertheless, two follow-up studies failed to replicate this pattern with fashion magazine advertisements (Tiggemann, Slater, Bury, Hawkins, & Firth, 2013). In Tiggemann et al.'s (2013) studies, a disclaimer specifying the modifications made on the image ("This image has been digitally altered to smooth skin tone and slim arms and legs", p. 47) had a deleterious effect for women prone to engage in social comparison of physical appearance. Yet another study with both a disclaimer and a warning condition (i.e., with a statement about possible negative effects of trying to look like the model) failed to show protective effects of either on body dissatisfaction, negative affect, or intent to diet (Ata, Thompson, & Small, 2013). Finally, Harrison and Hefner (2014) showed that making participants aware that photographs of (various size) models were retouched increased objectified body consciousness and decreased physical self-esteem. Hence, previous research suggests that disclaimers are likely to have a negative rather than a protective effect.

How can this be explained? While protective regulations are based on the idea that disclaimers underline the unrealistic character of the thin ideal, and thus might attenuate the impact of upward comparisons with the standard (Slater et al., 2012), we submit that

<sup>☆</sup> The data, SPSS syntax, and the stimulus used in the present study are available at: <https://osf.io/vdf8a/>.

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disclaimers may also induce redeploying attention to the image. As a consequence, the image might be processed more deeply in presence than in absence of a disclaimer. “Deeper” processing refers to treating a stimulus in terms of meaning, inference, and implications, rather than its physical properties, and requires more attention than “shallow” processing (Craig, 2002). Thus, the thin ideal accompanied by a disclaimer may ironically produce undesirable effects compared to the same image without a disclaimer, because participants focus more on the normative nature of the image, that is, on the idea that to be beautiful they would have to correspond to the featured ideal. Increased attention to this idea is likely to remind women of the degree to which they (do not) correspond to the image themselves. Also, if more attention is allotted to the image with a disclaimer, the memory trace of the image and the disclaimer are likely to be stronger in this condition (Bower & Karlin, 1974; Craig & Tulving, 1975). As a consequence, upon subsequent exposure to the same image, the disclaimer is likely to be recalled (even in its absence), and the same process activated again. The present study aimed to test a prediction derived from this reasoning. In what follows, we underline the contributions of the present work to the extant literature.

Previous research focused almost exclusively on *explicit* self-report measures and on *immediate* consequences of exposure to labeled thin ideal images. In the present study, we sought to complement past research by examining possible disclaimer effects on an *implicit* measure of negative thought accessibility and with delayed measurements. The rationale for these choices was twofold. First, repetitive negative thoughts are common to numerous psychological disorders. In particular, anxiety and depression are associated with a difficulty to disengage from such thoughts (Mathews & McLeod, 2005). At the same time, thin ideal exposure can cause an increase in social physique anxiety and lower self-esteem (Thornton & Maurice, 1997), while perceived pressure to be thin and thin ideal internalization were found to predict increases in depressive symptoms (Stice & Bearman, 2001). For these reasons, examining disclaimer effects on negative thought accessibility (i.e., the speed with which concepts come to attention and consciousness, Higgins, 1989) is an important goal. Second, progress may now come from using implicit measures of cognitive-emotional responses to media content, which are less subject to volitional control by participants and thus less susceptible to social desirability than explicit self-reports (Fazio & Olson, 2003; Nosek, Hawkins, & Frazier, 2011).

Based on the reasoning outlined above, we tested the hypothesis that a single exposure to a disclaimer, compared to no disclaimer conditions, increased negative thought accessibility in women immediately after exposure, but also two weeks and two months later upon subsequent exposure to the same image without a disclaimer.

## Method

### Participants

Fifty-six first-year female psychology undergraduates in a French university signed up to participate in this three-session experiment in exchange for course credit.

Forty-eight participants provided data on all three sessions. The analyses reported below were conducted on this sample ( $M_{age} = 18.46$ ,  $SD_{age} = 1.09$ ). Participants' body mass index (BMI) ranged from 17.26 to 32.02 ( $M = 21.56$ ,  $SD = 3.90$ ). In terms of World Health Organisation's (2013) categorization criteria, 9 were underweight ( $BMI < 18.5$ ; 18.8%), 30 were normal weight ( $18.5 \leq BMI \leq 24.99$ ; 62.5%), 5 were overweight ( $25 \leq BMI \leq 29.99$ ; 10.4%), and 3 were obese ( $BMI \geq 30$ ; 6.3%). One participant failed to provide relevant information (2.1%).

### Materials and Measures

Participants first completed the 9-item Garner, Olmstead, and Polivy's (1983) Body Dissatisfaction subscale of the Eating Disorder Inventory (EDI-BD, e.g., “I think that my thighs are too large”), to control for body dissatisfaction in subsequent analysis (similarly to Tiggemann et al., 2013). In the present study the internal reliability of this scale was satisfactory,  $\alpha = .91$ .

**Thin ideal exposure.** Participants were exposed to a thin ideal image previously altered using Photoshop® software to slim waist, chin, upper arms, and thighs (taken from Chatard & Selimbegović, 2011). The image was the same in all conditions, featuring a young model from above knees to head (included), wearing a black undergarment covering her body from upper thighs to below her shoulders. Conditions differed by the text at the bottom of the photograph. In the disclaimer condition, the following sentence was displayed below the image: “This image has been altered to modify a person's bodily appearance”. The exact phrasing was taken from a law proposal advanced by French congress member Valérie Boyer (Boyer et al., 2009). In the thin ideal condition, only the image was displayed. Finally, in a distraction condition, a neutral sentence (not attracting attention to the model's bodily appearance) of approximately the same length as the disclaimer was displayed below the image (“This image was published in a fashion magazine in the year 2000”). This condition was introduced to ensure that disclaimer effects are not due to simply reading a sentence in addition to image exposure, a precaution not taken in previous research. Only one image was used in order to test whether a *single exposure* to a disclaimer has an effect, as well to avoid asking advertisement-related questions several times per session (which may have been perceived as boring). Participants could look at the image as long as they wanted “in order to answer related questions later in the experiment”. Exposure time varied from 5 to 45 s, with a mean of approximately 18 s.

**Thought accessibility measure.** A lexical decision task was used to measure negative thought accessibility (e.g., Selimbegović & Chatard, 2013). Letter strings successively appeared on the screen, and participants indicated whether each was a word or not by pressing the appropriate key. In each trial, a fixation point was replaced after 500 ms by a letter string, displayed until response. Response times were collected unobtrusively. Stimuli were comprised of 16 words and 16 non-words constructed by inverting the order of two letters (excluding the first one) in each word. Among the words, eight were very negative: *sorrow, sad, suffering, bad, worthless, dead, decease, and suicide*. Neutral words were: *ball, good evening, hay, book, pocket, often, train, and wind*. Stimuli presentation order was computer-randomized and different for each participant. Negative and neutral words did not differ in length,  $F(1, 25) = .11$ ,  $p = .75$ ,  $\eta^2 = .004$ , or frequency,  $F(1, 25) = .001$ ,  $p = .98$ ,  $\eta^2 < .001$ .<sup>1</sup>

**Ad-related questions.** To maintain the cover story credibility throughout the three sessions, participants answered questions about the advertisement that they previously saw (e.g., “How favorable is your impression of the advertisement that you just saw?”). These were of no interest to our hypothesis and no related results are reported.

### Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. They provided written informed consent for their participation. The

<sup>1</sup> There are more degrees of freedom than what would be expected based on number of words because some of the words can be both a noun and a verb (e.g., *suicide*). In such cases frequencies of all the word types were taken into account.

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