



Inspiration or deflation? Feeling similar or dissimilar to slim and plus-size models affects self-evaluation of restrained eaters[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The present studies examined the effect of perceiving images of slim and plus-size models on restrained eaters' self-evaluation. While previous research has found that such images can lead to either inspiration or deflation, we argue that these inconsistencies can be explained by differences in perceived similarity with the presented model. The results of two studies ($ns = 52$ and 99) confirmed this and revealed that restrained eaters with high (low) perceived similarity to the model showed more positive (negative) self-evaluations when they viewed a slim model, compared to a plus-size model. In addition, Study 2 showed that inducing in participants a similarities mindset led to more positive self-evaluations after viewing a slim compared to a plus-size model, but only among restrained eaters with a relatively high BMI. These results are discussed in the context of research on social comparison processes and with regard to interventions for protection against the possible detrimental effects of media images.

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Introduction

Media images portraying slim models and representing the current beauty ideal of thinness, are ubiquitous in our society. We are presented with slim ideals on a daily basis, for example when reading a magazine, watching television, or simply walking down the street. Comparing yourself with such standards can lead to self-deflation (i.e., more negative self-evaluations), by making evident that you look nothing like the standard (e.g., Richins, 1991; Stice & Shaw, 1994; Yamamiya, Cash, Melnyk, Posavac, & Posavac, 2005). Indeed, an extensive body of research has demonstrated that exposure to media images depicting the idealized, slim body is related to body image concerns for women (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002). As a result, and in response to recent societal criticism on such effects of extremely slim models in the media, some major cosmetics companies have started to use plus-size models in their campaigns (e.g., 'Dove'). On the other hand, comparing yourself with an idealized slim standard may also

work as an inspiration (i.e., more positive self-evaluations), by serving as an inspirational role model (e.g., Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). At the same time, comparing oneself to a plus-size model may have deflating effects if one feels rather similar to the model (Anschutz, Engels, Becker, & van Strien, 2009; Bosch, Buunk, Siero, & Park, 2010; Smeesters, Mussweiler, & Mandel, 2010), and make one feel good about oneself if it is obvious that one is much slimmer than the model (Smeesters et al., 2010).

While it is clear that slim media images can have a profound effect on the perceiver's own body image (e.g., Groesz et al., 2002), the specific effects on particularly weight-concerned individuals have been inconsistent. In the present paper, therefore, we investigate the effects of slim and plus-size models on such individuals (i.e., restrained eaters), and we will argue that it is one's spontaneous assessment of one's similarity to the model which determines whether a model works as an inspiration or deflation.

Social Comparison and Restrained Eating

Like any other judgment, people's evaluation of themselves is relative in nature and depends on the context in which the judgment is made (Festinger, 1954; Mussweiler, 2003). When thinking about our own academic performance, for example, we can feel better when we compare ourselves to a college Freshman, but less smart when we compare ourselves to a top researcher in our field. A central finding in research on social comparison processes is that people are more likely to compare themselves with others on domains which are personally relevant to them (e.g., Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; Major, Sciacchitano,

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& Crocker, 1993). Lockwood and Kunda (1997), for example, found that participants were more inspired by a standard who excelled at their own intended profession (e.g., teacher) than by one who excelled at a different profession (e.g., accountant), which they considered less relevant.

In the context of media images depicting models, we suggest that these models, when their weight and body shape are salient, are more likely to affect the self-evaluation of individuals who consider weight and body shape as very important than individuals who consider this a less relevant domain. A group of individuals for whom weight and body shape are particularly relevant are restrained eaters (i.e., chronic dieters; Herman & Polivy, 1980). Restrained eating is associated with decreased satisfaction with one's own body and with body image concerns (e.g., Gerner & Wilson, 2005; Johnson & Wardle, 2005), and restrained eaters chronically try to regulate their food intake with the intent of decreasing or maintaining their body weight—although this often is unsuccessful (e.g., Ouwehand & Papies, 2010; Papies & Hamstra, 2010). Indeed, previous research has indicated that the effects of viewing idealized media images are stronger for individuals who are dissatisfied with their bodies or who qualify as restrained eaters (Groesz et al., 2002; Mills, Polivy, Herman, & Tiggemann, 2002; Posavac, Posavac, & Posavac, 1998; Trampe, Stapel, & Siero, 2007).

Inspiration or Deflation

Thus, an extensive body of research has shown that exposure to media images depicting the thin-ideal body can trigger contrasting, negative self-evaluations in women, and particularly in those with body image or weight concerns (e.g., Grabe et al., 2008; Groesz et al., 2002; Mills et al., 2002; Posavac et al., 1998; Richins, 1991; Trampe et al., 2007; Trottier, Polivy, & Herman, 2007). However, the findings of experimental studies examining these effects on restrained eaters have at times been inconsistent. Some studies suggest that images of slim bodies have especially negative effects on the self-evaluation of restrained eaters. A study by Trottier et al. (2007) for example, found that restrained eaters, but not unrestrained eaters, who were exposed to a slim standard experienced more negative self-conceptions. Other studies, however, suggest the opposite effect, namely that such images have an inspirational effect on restrained eaters. For instance, a study by Mills et al. (2002) showed that restrained eaters engaged in self-enhancement following exposure to images of slim bodies: instead of feeling worse about themselves, they engaged in a fantasy of being thin and experienced a temporary feeling of thinness. Again, there were no effects on unrestrained eaters. Similarly, Joshi, Herman, and Polivy (2004) found that restrained eaters reported a more positive self-image after exposure to slim models than to control images. In a similar fashion, while studies examining the effect of thin media images on women in general show mostly detrimental effects and that these effects are more pronounced for women with existing body concerns, some studies also report that some women even have a tendency to feel better about themselves after exposure to thin models (Posavac et al., 1998; Smeesters et al., 2010).

These inconsistent findings concerning the effects of exposure to slim models raise the question of the factors underlying these different responses. Here, we propose that the differential effects can be explained by a variable which has been found to determine the direction of social comparison in other domains, namely the degree to which perceivers spontaneously perceive similarity between themselves and the model.

Perceived Similarity

Based on recent advances in social psychology, the selective accessibility model (Mussweiler, 2003) aims to explain whether

assimilation or contrast occurs when one is confronted with a relevant comparison standard. This model proposes that in the beginning of the social comparison process, the perceiver first makes a quick and holistic assessment of the similarity between the self and the standard, briefly considering a small number of salient features (e.g., category membership, salient person characteristics) to determine whether the self is generally rather similar, or rather dissimilar from the target (Mussweiler, 2003, p. 475). The outcome of this initial assessment of perceived similarity then determines whether the subsequent social comparison process is driven by similarity testing or dissimilarity testing. When perceived similarity is high, the individual will engage in a process of similarity testing, which will lead to the activation of standard-consistent information about the self. On the other hand, low perceived similarity will trigger a process of dissimilarity testing, which leads to the activation of standard-inconsistent information about the self. As a result of these knowledge accessibility differences, similarity testing is more likely to lead to assimilation effects, and dissimilarity testing to contrast effects. In sum, whether a perceiver will assimilate to or contrast away from the standard thus depends on the information activated during that quick and holistic initial assessment (Häfner, 2004; Mussweiler, 2003; Smeesters & Mandel, 2006), and thus on salient feature of the stimulus (e.g., the body shape of a model) and the similarity with the perceivers' representation of herself on that dimension (e.g., the own body schema).

As an example, consider the effects of an attractive model in an advertisement. According to the selective accessibility model, perceiving such a model would lead to assimilation (i.e., feeling more attractive oneself) if the perceiver spontaneously feels generally similar to the model and therefore activates standard-consistent knowledge. However, it would lead to a contrast effect (i.e., feeling less attractive oneself) if the perceiver spontaneously feels rather different from the model and therefore activates standard-inconsistent knowledge. Thus, the quick and holistic assessment of the similarity between oneself and the model may have important consequences for the direction of social comparison effects.

Two experimental studies in the domain of body image research provide initial support for the notion that the occurrence of contrast or assimilation in self-evaluation depends on differences in perceived similarity, and that this can be experimentally manipulated. Brown, Novick, Lord, and Richards (1992) showed that the information about the date of birth of a standard affects the direction of self-evaluation. In their study, after exposure to an image of an attractive model, participants perceived themselves as more attractive when they believed that they had the same birthday as the model, suggesting that they assimilated toward the model. However, they perceived themselves as less attractive when they believed that they had a different date of birth (i.e., they contrasted away from the model). Thus, these findings suggest that merely changing a subtle but temporarily salient cue such as a date of birth can change how participants evaluate themselves after exposure to media images. Similarly, in a study by Häfner (2004), participants' perceived similarity to models in advertisements was manipulated by priming them with either similarities or differences in the headlines of the advertisements (e.g., 'same body-same feeling' or 'feel the difference'). In this study, after exposure to an advertisement of an attractive model, participants showed a higher motivation to change their appearance when they had been primed with differences (i.e., they contrasted away from the model), but a lower motivation to change their appearance when they had been primed with similarities (i.e., they assimilated to the model). Thus, these findings suggest that priming similarities led to assimilation, and priming differences to a contrast effect, and they indicate that the initial assessment of one's similarity to the model can be influenced by subtle external cues.

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