



IMPACT OF THE THIN IDEAL PORTRAYED IN ADULT WOMEN

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Abstract

The effects of model thinness and age in media-portrayed idealized body images on several aspects of body image and self-concept were examined in young and middle-aged women. A total of 168 women (87 young, 81 middle-aged) viewed magazine advertisements of women who were either (a) young and thin, (b) young and average-sized, (c) older and thin, or (d) older and average-sized, and then completed questionnaires on body dissatisfaction, self-esteem, self-consciousness, body-esteem, and social anxiety. Results indicated that model thinness and age – at least over the short term – did not have a strong impact on body image or self-concept measures for either young or middle-aged women.

Introduction

The mass media are often held responsible for the glorification of slenderness and weight loss through the transmission of unrealistic beauty ideals (Levine & Smolak, 1996). In Western societies, the thin ideal, characterized by “flawless skin, a thin waist, long legs, and well-developed breasts” (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002, p. 2) is a standard that many women cannot attain by healthy means. Most studies looking at the effects of media images have focused on adolescents and college students and found a variety of negative effects. These negative effects included increased self-consciousness (e.g., Wegner, Hartmann, & Geist, 2000), increased body dissatisfaction (e.g., Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2003), increased emotional distress (Stice & Shaw, 1994), increased physique anxiety, decreased self-esteem (Thorton & Maurice, 1997), and decreased body-esteem (e.g., Green & Pritchard, 2003). A recent meta-analytic review of the effect of media images on body satisfaction found that females consistently experienced more negative body image after viewing thin media images (Groesz et al., 2002).

Purpose of Study

The purpose of the present study was to extend previous research by examining body dissatisfaction, body-esteem, self-esteem, self-consciousness, and social anxiety in both young (18-39 years) and middle-aged (40-65 years) women who have viewed magazine photographs of models who are (a) either thin or average-sized, and (b) either younger (i.e., look younger than 30) or older (i.e., look

older than 40). No previous research has looked at the youthfulness of the model as a variable contributing to the above-mentioned effects. By examining this variable, one can begin to partition out whether it is thinness on its own that may lead to these negative effects, or whether it is thinness in combination with youthfulness.

Hypotheses

- (1) Young and middle-aged women who have viewed photographs of thin models will show (a) higher body dissatisfaction scores, (b) lower body-esteem scores, (c) lower self-esteem scores, (d) higher self-consciousness scores, and (e) higher social anxiety scores, than women who have viewed photographs of average-sized models, irrespective of the age of the models (i.e., main effect for model size).
- (2) Although women in both age groups will show increased social anxiety scores when viewing photographs of thin models compared to average-sized models, irrespective of the age of the models, these scores will be lower for the middle-aged women (i.e., model size x age group interaction, main effect for age group). Previous research has shown that, as women get older, they place less importance on their appearance (Tiggemann & Lynch, 2001). As such, it is expected that, although the middle-aged women will be equally dissatisfied with their appearance, they will be less concerned about it.
- (3) Each of the effects above will be stronger when younger models rather than older models are viewed (i.e., model size x model age interactions and a 3-way interaction for social anxiety).

Methods

Participants

A total of 168 women (87 young, 81 middle-aged) took part in this study. The young adult sample ranged in age from 18 to 39 ($M = 26.0$; $SD = 6.35$). The middle-aged sample ranged in age from 40 to 65 ($M = 52.5$; $SD = 6.26$). The sample was predominantly White (58.6%) or East Asian (30.2%). Participants tended to be well educated with 11.2% being high school graduates and 88.8% having more than high school.

Materials

Magazine Photographs. Four sets of photographs were used. Set 1 ($n = 43$) contained 8 photographs of younger, thin female models. Set 2 ($n = 41$) contained 8 photographs of older, thin female models. Set 3 ($n = 42$) contained 8 photographs of younger, average-sized female models. Set 4 ($n = 42$) contained 8 photographs of older, average-sized female models. The final selection of photographs for each set was determined through independent ratings from a sample of 8 judges who rated each model on thinness and attractiveness, as well as whether she appeared younger than 30 (“younger”), 30-40, or over 40 (“older”). Four neutral ads were also placed in each set of photographs as distracter ads.

Eating Disorder Inventory (EDI; Garner, Olmsted, & Polivy, 1983). The 9-item Body Dissatisfaction subscale of the EDI was used as a measure of body dissatisfaction. Items are rated from *never* (1) to *always* (6), with higher scores indicating greater body dissatisfaction. Alpha for this scale was .88).

Body-Esteem Scale for Adolescents and Adults (BESAA; Mendelson, Mendelson, & White, 2001). The 10-item Appearance (general feelings about appearance; $\alpha = .90$) and 8-item Weight Satisfaction ($\alpha = .91$) subscales of the BESAA were used as measures of body esteem. Items are rated from *never* (1) to *always* (5), with higher scores indicated more positive feelings about appearance and

greater weight satisfaction, respectively. Alpha for the Appearance subscale was .90 and for the Weight Satisfaction subscale was .91.

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE; Rosenberg, 1965). The 10-item RSE scale was used as a measure of self-esteem. Items are rated from *strongly agree* (SA) to *strongly disagree* (SD), with higher score indicating higher self-esteem. Alpha for this scale was .87.

Self-Consciousness Scale Revised (SCSR; Scheier & Carver, 1985). The 7-item Public Self Consciousness subscale of the SCSR was used as a measure of self-consciousness. Items are rated from *not at all like me* (0) to *a lot like me* (3), with higher scores indicating more self-consciousness. Alpha for this scale was .84.

Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale (FNES; Leary, 1983). The 12-item FNES was used as a measure of social anxiety. Items are rated from *not at all characteristic of me* (1) to *very characteristic of me* (5), with higher scores indicated greater social anxiety. Alpha for this scale was .85.

Procedure

This study was presented to participants as a combination of two unrelated investigations that ostensibly were being conducted together because of a shortage of participants. The first study was described as a mood assessment of advertising images. The second study was depicted as a survey of attitudes, opinions, and behaviors on body image.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four photograph conditions and were given a folder containing 12 photographs. In the first study, participants were asked to rate each photograph using a 10-item semantic-differential scale (e.g., unoriginal-neutral-original), although the real purpose was to simply expose participants to the media images. In the second study, participants were asked to complete the five dependent measures and a demographic form. In order to maintain the appearance of separate studies, informed consent was obtained twice and participants were debriefed about the deception at the end of the study and a manipulation check was obtained.

Results

A series of 2 (model size) x 2 (model age) x 2 (age group) univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted with the six body image and self-concept measures as the dependent variables. Means and standard deviations are presented in Tables 1 and 2. There were no significant interactions. Small, but significant, main effects for model size were found on the RSE, $F(1, 159) = 4.13$, $p = .044$, *part. eta-sq.* = .025, and the Appearance subscale of the BESAA, $F(1, 159) = 6.85$, $p = .010$, *part. eta-sq.* = .041. Specifically, women who viewed average-sized models reported higher levels of self-esteem and more positive feelings towards their appearance than those women who viewed thin models. A small, but significant, main effect of age group was found for the RSE, with the younger women reporting lower self-esteem scores than the middle-aged women, $F(1, 159) = 4.32$, $p = .039$, *part. eta-sq.* = .026. A moderate, but significant, main effect of age group was found for the FNES, with the younger women reporting higher social anxiety scores than the middle-aged women $F(1, 159) = 10.54$, $p = .001$, *part. eta-sq.* = .062. There were no significant main effects for model age for any of the measures.

[Note: Kirk's (1996) criteria for interpreting omega-squared may be applied appropriately to interpreting eta-squared as follows: small effect = .010 to .058, medium effect = .059 to .137, large effect $\geq .138$.]

Discussion

The results of this study provide important evidence concerning the aspects of short-term exposure to magazine photographs that affect body dissatisfaction, body-esteem, self-esteem, self-consciousness, and social anxiety in both young and middle-aged women. Models in the photographs varied in terms of size (thin or average) and age (younger or older). The presence of only two small significant main effects for model size suggests that (a) neither of model size nor age had an impact on *most* of the body image and self-concept measures used with young and middle-aged women viewing magazine photographs in this study, and (b) for self-esteem and body-esteem, thinness on its own (rather than youthfulness or thinness combined with youthfulness) had a negative impact. Thus, whether the models used are younger or older does not seem to have much of an effect on women's body image and self-concept, at least for short term exposure to photographs of models. Generally, the same results were found for both young and middle-aged women. The exception to this was the finding that the middle-aged women reported higher self-esteem scores, which is consistent with Robins, Trzesniewski, Tracy, Gosling, and Potter's (2002) research, and lower social anxiety scores, which is consistent with Tiggemann and Lynch's (2001) finding that older women tended to be less concerned about their appearance.

While these findings seem somewhat contrary to research in the literature on the negative effects of media (e.g., Groesz et al., 2002; Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2003; Wegner et al., 2000), the small effects found here highlight the need for researchers to include measures of effect size. For many previous studies of the negative impact of media images on body image and self-concept, our examination of effect sizes (when provided or could be calculated) indicated that statistically significant effects were often of negligible or minor practical significance (i.e., $f = .08$; Grogan et al., 1996).

Several limitations of the present study, however, need to be mentioned. First, these findings only extend to the impact of short-term exposure to magazine photographs of models. Second, previous research has shown that some women are more susceptible to the thin ideal (i.e., internalization of the thin ideal) and are thus more influenced by media exposure (Thornton & Maurice, 1997). This variable was not examined in the present study and thus it is possible that the present sample had low susceptibility to this ideal. Finally, because of the limited availability of magazine advertisements containing pictures of average-sized and older models, the quality of the ads used may not have been the same in each of the photograph sets.

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Table 1

Means (Standard Deviations) for Body Image Measures by Age Group, Model Age, and Model Size

	<u>Young women</u> (<i>n</i> = 87)	<u>Middle-aged women</u> (<i>n</i> = 81)
<i>Body Dissatisfaction</i>		
Younger models:		
Thin	3.85 (1.16)	4.17 (0.84)
Average-sized	3.48 (0.99)	3.60 (1.25)
Older models:		
Thin	3.87 (1.03)	3.87 (0.89)
Average-sized	3.84 (0.96)	3.78 (1.27)
<i>Appearance</i>		
Younger models:		
Thin	2.94 (0.85)	3.14 (0.49)
Average-sized	3.55 (0.79)	3.47 (0.82)
Older models:		
Thin	3.24 (0.75)	3.30 (0.61)
Average-sized	3.20 (0.55)	3.55 (0.63)
<i>Weight Satisfaction</i>		
Younger models:		
Thin	2.91 (0.95)	2.84 (0.81)
Average-sized	3.20 (1.03)	3.16 (1.02)
Older models:		
Thin	3.02 (0.95)	2.94 (0.90)
Average-sized	2.66 (0.70)	3.15 (0.88)

Table 2

Means (Standard Deviations) for Self-Concept Measures by Age Group, Model Age, and Model Size

	<u>Young women</u> (<i>n</i> = 87)	<u>Middle-aged Women</u> (<i>n</i> = 81)
<i>Self-Esteem</i>		
Younger models:		
Thin	2.94 (0.61)	2.89 (0.47)
Average-sized	3.01 (0.48)	3.22 (0.46)
Older models:		
Thin	2.90 (0.57)	3.14 (0.40)
Average-sized	3.02 (0.55)	3.26 (0.46)
<i>Self-Consciousness</i>		
Younger models:		
Thin	2.08 (0.72)	1.87 (0.64)
Average-sized	2.04 (0.59)	1.91 (0.74)
Older models:		
Thin	2.03 (0.63)	1.81 (0.76)
Average-sized	1.91 (0.65)	1.79 (0.71)
<i>Social Anxiety</i>		
Younger models:		
Thin	3.27 (0.90)	2.84 (0.69)
Average-sized	3.02 (0.81)	2.90 (0.87)
Older models:		
Thin	3.25 (0.88)	2.77 (0.67)
Average-sized	3.17 (0.69)	2.63 (0.61)