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Beauty, Body Image, and the Media

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Abstract

This chapter considers the role of mass media in people's perceptions of beauty. We summarize the research literature on the mass media, both traditional media and online social media, and how they interact with psychological factors to impact appearance concerns and body image. There is a strong support for the idea that traditional forms of media affect perceptions of beauty and appearance concerns by leading women to internalize a very slender body type as ideal or beautiful. Rather than simply being passive recipients of unrealistic beauty ideals communicated to them via the media, many individuals actually seek out idealized images in the media. Finally, we review what is known about the role of social media in impacting society's perception of beauty and notions of idealized physical forms. Social media are more interactive than traditional media and the effects of self-presentation strategies on perceptions of beauty have just begun to be studied. This is an emerging area of research that is of high relevance to researchers and clinicians interested in body image and appearance concerns.

Keywords: body image, media, social media, beauty ideals

1. Introduction

This chapter examines the role of the mass media in the perception of beauty ideals and how those ideals, in turn, affect individuals' behavior and well-being. The mass media play a critical role in people's self-image by informing and reflecting what people consider to be beautiful or attractive. One of the ways in which they do so is through the common use of very thin and attractive models in print and other media. Often termed the 'thin ideal', they communicate the way people believe they should look in order to be attractive and desirable to others. There are different aspects of appearance about which the media can convey beauty ideals, including hair, skin, and facial features. However, we focus this chapter on how the

media convey messages about body weight and shape ideals. For women in Western culture, a very common attitude is that thinness is beauty. We review the literature on the role of mass media—both traditional media and newer, online media—and how they interact with psychological factors to impact appearance concerns and body image.

Body image is a multidimensional construct that refers to one's perception of and attitudes about the size and shape of one's body. It has both a perceptual component that refers to how we see our body size, shape, weight, physical characteristics, performance, and movement, and an evaluative component, which refers to how we feel about these attributes and how those feelings influence our behaviors [1]. Body dissatisfaction is experienced when someone perceives that their body falls short of the societal ideal in terms of size and/or shape, regardless of that person's objective size or shape. In other words, body dissatisfaction is influenced not only by how we interpret societal ideals, but by how we perceive ourselves. Therefore, body dissatisfaction and perceptions of beauty are inextricably linked. Body dissatisfaction is the number one risk factor for a number of unhealthy behaviors, including clinical eating disorders and chronic dieting. Therefore, a delineation of the origins of body dissatisfaction is important not just for theories of perceptions of beauty, but for clinical and practical purposes.

2. Effects of exposure to idealized media images on body image

In modern times, most people living in developed countries encounter some type of mass media (e.g. television, music videos, movies, and magazines) on a daily basis. Thin ideal images often accompany various advertised products, the pairing of which reinforces the idea that if you buy or use a particular product, you, too, can be beautiful. In the past two decades, there has been an abundance of empirical research concerning the impact of exposure to idealized bodies in the media on how people perceive and evaluate their own bodies. Most of this research has been on women, among whom the idea that 'thin is beautiful' is prevalent. Correlational studies typically examine the association between naturalistic media consumption and various body image constructs, such as body perception, ideal body size, and body dissatisfaction. Experimental studies typically expose participants to photographs of very thin and attractive models under varying conditions and measure the participant's subsequent body image. The latter type of studies can advance our understanding of the causal effects of media on body image. Several meta-analytic reviews of such studies have been conducted with regard to these findings. The first meta-analysis of the effects of exposure to thin ideal media was conducted by Groesz et al. [2], who examined 25 experimental studies conducted between 1983 and 1998 involving a total of 2292 participants. They concluded that women's body image was significantly more negative after viewing thin media images, as compared to after viewing control images or images of average-sized or plus-sized models, and that this effect was moderate in size.

Although the previous meta-analysis was limited to experimental studies, Grabe et al. [3] conducted a meta-analysis of both experimental and correlational studies examining the link between media exposure and body dissatisfaction, as well as internalization of the thin ideal—the extent to which someone believes that a very slender body type is beautiful—in

women. They reviewed 90 studies and concluded that media exposure was associated with decreased body satisfaction in women and that this effect was moderate in size. They also concluded that media exposure was associated with increased internalization of the thin ideal across 23 studies and that the effect size was moderate.

There is robust empirical support for the idea that exposure to idealized body images in traditional forms of media (e.g. magazines and television) affects perceptions of beauty and appearance concerns by leading women to internalize a very slender female body type as ideal or beautiful. There is also support for the idea that exposure to the thin ideal is associated with body dissatisfaction in the moment among women. While most of the research on this topic has been conducted with female participants, there is also some research on male participants. Men's and women's body ideals vary considerably in Western cultures, where most of this research has been conducted. While women's body ideal is slim, men's is lean, but well-defined and muscular. Blond [4] conducted a meta-analysis of experimental research concerning the effects of exposure to media featuring the male muscular ideal on men's body image. In her review of 15 studies with a total of 1085 participants, she concluded that exposure to images of idealized male bodies caused men to feel more dissatisfied with their own bodies and that the effect size was small. In sum, we can say that the association between exposure to idealized body images in the media and body dissatisfaction holds true for both men and women, with the effect in women being slightly stronger than in men. There is no established cause for this gender difference to date.

Although it has been established that exposure to idealized bodies in the media has significant effects on how both men and women want to look (and, sometimes, how they think they do look), it is important to emphasize that not all individuals respond to viewing idealized images in the same way. Research has revealed various individual differences that moderate the impact of exposure to idealized images on body image. For example, a person's psychological motives for viewing thin ideal media images can determine whether and how they affect that individual's self-perceptions of beauty.

Social comparison refers to an individual's tendency to compare oneself to other people and has been found to moderate the impact of exposure to idealized media. Tiggemann and McGill [5] found that the effects of thin-ideal advertisements on mood and body dissatisfaction were mediated by social comparison in a sample of 126 female undergraduate students such that women who engaged in more social comparison experienced more negative mood and body dissatisfaction after exposure to magazine advertisements containing images of thin-idealized female beauty. Indeed, social comparison, as either a psychological trait or state, is a reliable moderator of the impact of idealized media exposure on both men and women. For example, Galioto and Crowther [6] found that trait social comparison as measured by a self-report questionnaire predicted increased body dissatisfaction among male undergraduate students who viewed muscular idealized men in advertisements. Moreover, Tiggemann et al. [7] further investigated the role of cognitive processing in the impact of idealized images on mood and body dissatisfaction. They found that instructing women to engage in social comparison processing (e.g. asking the participant to rate how much she would like her body to look like that of a thin model) of thin-ideal images led to greater negative mood and body dissatisfaction

as compared to a control condition. Interestingly, they also found that giving women fantasy instructions to imagine themselves in the place of a thin model led to improved mood as compared to control. In sum, the way that idealized images are cognitively processed is a key determinant in terms of the impact those images have on an individual's self-perceptions of attractiveness or beauty. But little is yet known about why some people are more at risk for comparing themselves to idealized images.

Trait, dietary restraint has been found to moderate individuals' responses to idealized body images found in the media. Mills et al. [8] found that restrained eaters (i.e. chronic dieters) are differentially impacted by exposure to thin ideal media as compared to unrestrained eaters. Restrained eaters frequently attempt to lose weight by restricting what they eat. We concluded that restrained eaters may be susceptible to a 'thin fantasy' when viewing ideal body images. Specifically, restrained eaters, but not unrestrained eaters, rated both their ideal and current body as thinner and felt more attractive as a result of viewing ideal body images in magazine advertisements. This effect was further moderated by thinness attainability beliefs. Specifically, the immediate enhancement of women's feelings of attractiveness following exposure to the thin ideal was stronger when dieters were led to believe that they could lose weight through dieting, as compared to when they were told that losing weight is extremely difficult. In other words, under certain conditions, thin ideal media images can actually make women feel better about their appearance. These effects are presumed to be short-lived, although no research to date has examined how long self-enhancement lasts after exposure to thin ideal images.

Further evidence that the context of the idealized images is important in terms of their psychological impact comes from a recent study by Veldhuis et al. [9]. The authors found that when self-improvement messages accompanied images of idealized bodies, exposure increased body satisfaction in a sample of undergraduate men and women, as compared to self-evaluation messages or control. Knobloch-Westerwick [10] also found that women, who made self-improvement (versus self-evaluation) social comparisons in response to thin-ideal images, had improved body satisfaction as opposed to decreased body satisfaction. In other words, the messages that accompany idealized body images commonly found in the media make a difference in terms of how people feel about their bodies after looking at them.

Lastly, the psychological construct of body appreciation, or the extent to which one allows negative body-related information to be rejected and positive information to be accepted, is an individual difference variable that has been found to be protective against some of the negative psychological impacts that stem from exposure to idealized media images. Andrew et al. [11] found that, in a sample of university women, participants with low body appreciation experienced increased body dissatisfaction after exposure to thin-ideal advertisements whereas individuals with high body appreciation did not. This lends support to the idea that women, who have a positive bias in their perceptions of their body, are less likely to experience a negative shift in body image in response to exposure to thin ideal media images.

Body dissatisfaction is a major predictor of the development of clinically disordered eating. While it oversimplifies the psychopathology of eating disorders to suggest that exposure to thin ideal images causes eating disorders, thin ideal images do have significant health

implications. For both women and men, the development of unhealthy weight control practices can result from body dissatisfaction, such as strict or chronic dieting, excessive exercise, and steroid use. To mitigate the negative effects of thin ideal exposure on the health and well-being of their viewers, it has been suggested that magazines should contain disclaimer labels if a photo has been retouched. In 2009, Australia's National Advisory Group on Body Image endorsed the use of warning labels by the advertising, media, and fashion industries to indicate digitally altered images. Other countries have considered a similar public policy. Retouching of magazine photos can include enhancements of skin tone or texture, hair, or make-up, but most attention has been paid to retouching related to models' weight and shape. Photos are often altered by magazines so that flesh is trimmed off in areas like the stomach and thighs, giving the appearance of a slimmer body. The idea is that if women were aware that media images are not real, they could distance themselves psychologically from unrealistic beauty standards and not be influenced by them. Unfortunately, results from this line of research suggest that disclaimer labels are generally not very effective in terms of minimizing the negative effects of thin ideal images on viewers' body image, mood/confidence, or intention to diet [12, 13]. In addition, a popular media literacy campaign aimed at diminishing the negative effects of exposure to the thin ideal (i.e. a 75-second Dove Evolution video, showing all of the effort that goes into producing a photo of a model who looks flawless) did not improve how women feel about their own appearance [14]. Clearly, cultural beauty standards as communicated by the media are powerful messages. Even knowing that thin ideal images are not real does not stop women from wanting to achieve that standard of beauty.

3. The media and perceived appearance norms

It could be that the mass media affect their audience not only by reinforcing beauty ideals ('thin is beautiful') or by eliciting immediate changes in terms of how people perceive and evaluate their own appearance, but also by influencing perceived norms. Experimental findings demonstrate that perceptions of what is considered to be 'average', influence how individuals feel about their own bodies. In other words, one of the reasons that media-portrayed thin ideal images can be harmful is because they skew what people think of as being 'normal' or typical in a given population. There is no research to date directly testing the question of whether media images change people's perceptions of what is considered average or typical. However, there is indirect evidence to support this idea. Studies show that women generally want their bodies to appear a certain way depending on (1) what they think other people find attractive and (2) what they think the average person looks like.

In a series of experimental studies, Bair et al. [15] examined the influence of normative body ideals (i.e. the body type purported to be preferred by their peers) on body image. University students were told that their peers preferred the look of either relatively thinner or relatively heavier body types. In other words, we varied what participants believed to be 'beautiful' to other people. The gender of the peers whose preferences were being reported was also manipulated. Participants then reported the body size they

most wanted to look like, from a range of hand-drawn silhouettes. Women selected a thinner personal ideal body size in the thin norm condition than in the heavy norm condition. This was true whether they were told what either men or other women found most attractive.

In a related study by Mills et al. [16], we examined the effect of purported body norms on ideal and current body size perception. In study one, female participants were given bogus information about the average body size of women of the same age as participants. Current and ideal body size perceptions were then measured. Women reported a thinner ideal body size in the thinner norm condition than in the heavier norm condition, supporting the idea that ideal body size is malleable. Women had shifted their ideal body size so that it was a bit thinner than what they believed the average woman's body looked like. We interpreted these findings to mean that women may set their ideal as thinner than average so that they can be seen (or see themselves) as special. Study two replicated these results, but in a sample of young men. In this case, body norms were manipulated through purported averages in terms of muscularity rather than thinness. Men had a more muscular ideal body size in the more muscular norm condition than in the less muscular norm condition.

4. The bi-directionality of media exposure and body dissatisfaction

Despite the fact that they can contribute to body dissatisfaction, mass media featuring thin ideal images are popular forms of media. Many women and men choose to expose themselves to idealized body images as featured in the media. This apparent paradox has received little attention to date in the literature. Recently, we examined whether individuals dissatisfied with their bodies are actually more likely to seek out media featuring images of idealized bodies [17]. We hypothesized that the correlation between thin-ideal media exposure and body dissatisfaction is in fact bi-directional, and that people who feel bad about their appearance may actually consume higher levels of such media. It was predicted that young women who were induced to feel dissatisfied with their bodies would gravitate toward media featuring thin-idealized content. In two experimental studies, a negative body image rumination task was used to induce body dissatisfaction. Participants were then asked to select their choice of different media (appearance-related versus non-appearance-related) for an ostensible market research task. We found that young women who had just ruminated about being unhappy with their bodies disproportionately selected magazine or online video media that featured thin, idealized body imagery over non-appearance-related media. Young women who had been instructed to think about not liking their bodies then gravitated toward thinness-related media that focused on dieting, fitness, health, and beauty. These findings warrant further replication, but suggest that people who are unhappy with their appearance may turn to media that feature thin, beautiful models, possibly for advice or information, or to see advertised products aimed at bringing aspects of one's appearance closer to the perceived ideal [17].

5. The new media: social and online media and their influence on body image

More and more people encounter online media on a daily basis. The Internet is commonly used for social networking (i.e. online activities that create and maintain interpersonal relationships with family, friends, and acquaintances). Social media are particularly popular among female young adults, a group in which body dissatisfaction is common [18]. Facebook, the most popular social media platform in the world, boasts over one billion daily users, with three-quarters of online American adults logging on [19]. Instagram, a popular photo-sharing application, has 600 million users, half of whom use it daily, with 35% using it several times a day [19]. The majority of 18–29 year olds use Facebook and more than half of these individuals use Instagram [19]. These social media platforms and others—such as YouTube, Snapchat, and Pinterest—have a visual element and involve users posting photos of themselves for others to see and on which to comment. Contemporary media platforms are changing how people internalize beauty ideals, how they try to control how other people see them, and how they get feedback from others about how they look.

Most households worldwide have home Internet access, and, in some countries, children, adolescents, and young adults identify social media sites as their primary online communication activity [20]. Given that both social media use and body dissatisfaction are pervasive among adolescent and young adult women, it is not surprising that media and body image research is expanding into this new media domain. The tripartite model of influence proposes that peers, parents, and media are the main sources of the development of body image and eating disturbances. Furthermore, research shows that appearance comparison at least partially mediates the relationships between these sociocultural factors and eating and weight-related behaviors [21]. Each of these three sociocultural factors converges on social media.

Until the past 5 years, research on Internet exposure, perceptions of beauty, and body image concerns was virtually non-existent. In line with research on traditional forms of mass media and body image, recent correlational studies reveal that social media use is linked to body image and appearance concerns among both men and women [22]. Also, much like the relationship between the traditional media and body image ideals, the link between social media use and body image is not straightforward; it appears to be affected by various psychological factors, such as individual differences in the tendency to compare one's appearance to that of others. When people compare themselves to others who they consider to be superior to themselves it is known as upward social comparison. Downward social comparison is when people compare themselves to other people who they consider to be inferior to them on some dimension. Exactly which individual and situational factors determine social comparison processes on social media remain to be empirically tested. But because social comparison moderates the effects of traditional media on viewers, as reviewed above, it is likely that these psychological processes also play a role in the effects of social media on users.

Unlike traditional forms of media like television, movies, and magazines, social media sites are designed to actively engage the user. Since there are many ways for users to engage with

online media, such as scrolling through newsfeeds and profiles, commenting on other users' posts, seeing who else has liked/commented/endorsed posts, or creating and uploading their own content, it is difficult to tease apart exactly how online media are related to perceptions of beauty. Researchers have started to use various research methods to study the link between online media exposure and appearance concerns (e.g. qualitative data, correlational studies, and experimental simulated social media use) that may or may not be analogous to how people use social media in the real world. For instance, researchers have begun to bring social media into the laboratory for study. When women passively view mock social media profiles versus models in magazines, there appears to be no difference between the media types in terms of subsequent increases in appearance comparison and body image dissatisfaction [22]. Although some researchers find that adolescent girls' time spent on the Internet is positively correlated with internalization of the thin ideal, body surveillance, and drive for thinness, experimental studies suggest that mere exposure to one's own social media account does not negatively or immediately impact young women's appearance concerns [23–31].

One of the unique aspects of social media, versus traditional media, is that they are made up of communication with peers and/or public figures. It is the elements of interactivity and connectedness that make social media distinct from other media forms and rife with opportunities for users to perceive, compare, and internalize standards of beauty. Traditional media literacy efforts may have helped people think critically about how photos of models and celebrities are frequently edited by advertisers and editors, and how they display completely unrealistic standards of beauty. However, social media platforms expose users to photos of real-world peers, which may dissuade people from critically analyzing the images they see on social media. In truth, users can present their ideal selves through editing, enhancing, and embellishing their online images and appearance. More research is needed to determine whether social media users engage in selective presentation of their own appearance, but overlook the notion that other users have done the same.

People can engage in a variety of behaviors related to perceptions of beauty in online forms of media. Examples include taking multiple selfies and choosing to post only the flattering photos, using camera filters to enhance the appearance of a person's face, and photo-shopping body parts to make them appear thinner. Research is just starting to examine the relations between these types of self-presentation strategies on social media and well-being (body image and appearance self-esteem) among women. A study of online dating website users found that individuals commonly managed their online profile by posting selfies of which they felt especially proud [32]. It is not yet known whether self-presentation strategies like photo enhancement actually improve body image and appearance self-esteem (by allowing users to present an idealized version of themselves to others) or whether they worsen appearance concerns because they perpetuate an evaluation of and focus on physical appearance.

It seems that people who post photos of themselves on social media probably do so when they feel *good* about their appearance. Indeed, research suggests that the use of social media predicts subsequent body dissatisfaction and not the other way round [33]. It could be, however, that social media users post photos of themselves when they feel especially good about their appearance, but that they end up feeling worse about their appearance in the longer term

after frequent use of social media. The longer term adverse effects of social media use could be due to looking at images of idealized, and often retouched, photos of other people, as well as reading online commentary about people's appearance. Replication and clarification of the causal effects of social media usage on body image and appearance self-esteem is an important goal for future research in this field.

Popular social media platforms have begun to acknowledge the risks inherent in exposure to certain types of photos. At this time, Instagram has banned hashtags such as 'thinspiration' and 'proanorexia' because Instagram views them as actively promoting self-harm. These are terms that would be familiar to many social media users (particularly young women) and alert viewers to photos that are meant to glorify very thin bodies. Before content associated with eating disorders is shown, a graphic-images warning and link to the National Eating Disorders website is displayed. Other appearance-related hashtags, such as 'sopretty', 'attractive', 'bikinibody', and 'everybodyisbeautiful' are, at present, no longer searchable on the photo-sharing application [34]. Although it is not clear what the impetus was for Instagram to enact these guidelines, advocacy groups generally applaud these types of content moderation efforts aimed at the prevention of disordered eating and body image disturbances.

In summary, research that addresses the question of whether posting, modifying, and viewing photos on social media hurts or helps women's body image and appearance self-esteem is currently underway. The available evidence and theory point to exposure to thin, idealized photos online, and taking and retouching selfies—which may masquerade as promoting body positivity and esteem—as particularly risky behaviors in terms of body image and self-esteem.

6. Conclusions

One of the ways in which the media affect perceptions of beauty is through the use of very thin and attractive models, known as the thin ideal, which reinforces the idea that 'thin is beautiful'. We summarized the research literature on the mass media, both traditional media and online social media, and how they appear to interact with psychological factors to impact appearance concerns and body image disturbances. While correlational studies show a clear link between exposure to thin ideal media images and body dissatisfaction, the results of experimental studies are more mixed. The most reliable finding in the literature is that exposure to thin media images makes women want to be thinner. In other words, there is strong support for the idea that traditional forms of media (e.g. magazines, music videos) affect perceptions of beauty and appearance concerns by leading women to internalize a very slender body type as ideal or beautiful. We further suggest that the media affect their audiences by influencing perceived beauty norms, thereby skewing perceptions of reality (and not just fantasy or inspiration). Experimental findings demonstrate that perceptions of what is considered to be 'average' influence how individuals feel about their own bodies and appearance. Rather than simply being passive recipients of unrealistic beauty ideals communicated to them via the media, many individuals actually seek out idealized images in the media. In a

recent set of experimental studies, we found that women who were primed to feel unhappy about their bodies were actually more likely to choose to expose themselves to media featuring thin, beautiful models. This idea has received virtually no research attention to date but is important, as it highlights the complexity of people's relationships to beauty ideals. Finally, there is a need for an even better understanding of the role of more modern forms of social media in impacting society's perceptions of beauty and notions of idealized physical forms. These new forms of media are changing the way in which people internalize standards of beauty and the ways in which they try to control others' perceptions of their appearance. Online media involvement is more interactive than traditional media, and the effects of self-presentation strategies on perceptions of beauty have just begun to be studied. Social media represent an emerging area of research that is of high relevance to researchers and clinicians interested in body image and appearance concerns.

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