

HOW DO "BODY PERFECT" IDEALS IN THE MEDIA HAVE A NEGATIVE IMPACT ON BODY IMAGE AND BEHAVIORS? FACTORS AND PROCESSES RELATED TO SELF AND IDENTITY

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Body image has emerged as a core aspect of mental and physical well-being. Informed by sociocultural theory, a rapidly growing body of research addresses the question of whether body perfect ideals in the mass media are a core risk factor for negative body image, particularly in women. This work has moved beyond assessments of whether or not negative exposure effects occur so that significant progress has been made toward identifying diverse factors that make individuals more or less vulnerable to body perfect ideals in the media. This special issue examines and extends this work in various ways. It offers a critical analysis of the evidence base for a causal link between media and body image. It presents new findings which support a qualified and complex picture of media effects or influences, highlighting the importance not only of individual differences, but also psychological processes, related to self and identity. Thus, it aims to contribute toward a more theoretically informed understanding of vulnerability factors through a focus on self, identification with the thin ideal, and related processes.

It is hard to overstate the significance of body image as a research area at the interface of social and clinical psychology. Body dissatisfaction, the experience of negative thoughts and esteem about one's body, is linked to a range of physical and mental health problems, including disordered eating, obesity, body dysmorphic disorder, depression, or low self-esteem (cf., Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002; Polivy & Herman, 2002; Thompson, 2004). It is also implicated in the increasing use of body-shaping behaviors with potentially unhealthy consequences, such as cosmetic surgery, unbalanced diet regimes, or steroid abuse (cf., Cafri et al., 2005; Grogan, 2008). Thus, it can be

argued that body image is a core aspect of physical and mental well-being. The growing prominence and recognition of body image as a conceptual and empirical research area in its own right is reflected in the number and close temporal proximity of special issues in the *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, starting with a special section on media and disordered eating in 2001, and then followed by two full special issues devoted to body image in 2004 and 2005. Now we have the third special issue with a distinctive focus on the role of "body perfect" ideals in the mass media as a source of body dissatisfaction.

Prospective and longitudinal studies confirm that dissatisfaction with one's body, or negative body image, can be understood as one of the most consistent and significant precursors of negative self-perception, negative emotional states, and unhealthy body-related behaviors (cf., Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008). Given this significance, it becomes imperative to improve our understanding of risk factors and psychological processes that lead to body dissatisfaction. Sociocultural models have provided the dominant framework in this research area (cf., Levine & Harrison, 2004; Stice, 1994; Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999), which focus on unrealistic "body perfect" ideals transmitted and reinforced by various social influences. Of these, the mass media are seen as a particularly potent and pervasive source of influence, evidenced by a virtual explosion of studies on media exposure and body dissatisfaction. Almost all of this research has been carried out with women and girls, for whom the "body perfect" ideal is ultra-thin, and whose media models are typically underweight. The new extreme of dress size "zero" represents a starvation-level Body Mass Index (< 16) well in the range of anorexia (Dittmar, 2008). Recently, there are also studies with men and boys, for whom the media has started to portray an increasingly muscular body ideal (e.g., Pope, Olivardia, Gruber, & Borowiecki, 1999). "Body perfect" ideals are communicated early to children, for example through dolls such as Barbie, and girls as young as 5 to 7 years reported lower body esteem and a greater desire for a thinner body directly after exposure to such doll images (Dittmar, Halliwell, & Ive, 2006).

The effects of exposure to these media images are complex—as we will also see in this special issue—but before addressing this topic, it is worth referring to three meta-analyses, both to highlight the growth of research studies, as well as to provide some over-

all assessment of whether negative media effects do occur or not. A recent meta-analysis on men reported a significant association between negative body image and the consumption of ideal male media images in 15 correlational studies, as well as more negative body image after direct exposure to such images in 10 experiments, with effect sizes of $d = -.19$ and $d = -.22$ respectively (Barlett, Vowels, & Saucier, 2008). For women, an earlier meta-analysis of 25 experimental studies found that they felt worse about their body after exposure to thin ideal images than other stimuli, identifying an effect size of $d = -.31$ (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002). A recent extension included 49 experiments and 28 correlational studies, again finding that exposure to thin ideal media is linked to women's body image concerns, with effect sizes of $d = -.28$ for body dissatisfaction and $d = -.30$ for eating behaviors and beliefs (Grabe et al., 2008). Thus, the support for a general negative effect of "body perfect" media on body image is robust, consistent with sociocultural theory. Yet, in terms of strength, these effect sizes are small to moderate only, reflecting research findings which show that media effects are absent among particular subgroups of women (for a review, see Levine & Harrison, 2004), or even positive for others (e.g., Joshi, Herman, & Polivy, 2004).

These empirical findings mark a conceptual shift toward identifying vulnerability factors that make individual women more or less responsive to media influences (moderators) and starting to examine the psychological processes (mediators) through which media affect body image (Dittmar, 2005; Tiggemann, 2005). Indeed, whereas research has only just started to examine men, significant advances have been made with respect to women, particularly in terms of the number and diversity of moderators examined. Studies on psychological processes are far fewer, but have highlighted that women's responses to the thin ideal cannot simply be explained by processes of upward social comparison with a media image perceived as superior (e.g., Bessenoff, 2006). Like all positive research developments, they raise intriguing issues, some of which are particularly pertinent for this special issue and can help to locate it with respect to the previous literature.

The complexity of new research findings suggests that we need a more qualified appraisal, and this special issue aims to provide a critical analysis of the state of the art with respect to what we do know about the media's effect on body image and related behav-

iors, and an indication of remaining, and promising, research gaps. This is explicitly done in the opening article, which provides a narrative, up-to-date review of this burgeoning research area (Levine & Murnen, 2009, this issue). The review is structured along a number of criteria designed to provide a grid for evaluating the extent to which the media can be seen as a causal risk factor for negative body-related outcomes in girls and women. In addition, each of the following articles extends recent research, which contributes further to a critical assessment of the media effects literature, but also suggests novel directions.

The second article develops and tests a media effects model that has women's internalization of the thin ideal as a vulnerability factor, and activation of discrepancies between actual and ideal body as a psychological process through which media images lead to increased body-focused negative affect (Dittmar, Halliwell, & Stirling, 2009). Thus, it investigates both a moderator and a mediator in order to predict simultaneously for whom and how body dissatisfaction is likely to occur in response to thin ideal media.

The next article is concerned with providing an explanation for apparently contradictory findings where, in contrast to greater body dissatisfaction after exposure to thin images, some women report positive, self-enhancing effects (Tiggemann, Polivy, & Hargreaves, 2009, this issue). They propose two different psychological processes that can occur when women view thin media models, evaluating themselves with respect to the model (comparison processing) and identifying with, "being," the model (fantasy processing). The reported experiment manipulates the nature of processing through instructions, and measures processing directly, when women view advertisements featuring either thin models or products. Changes in mood and body dissatisfaction from pre- to post-exposure are examined as a function of image type, instructional set, and self-reported processing, which makes it possible to assess in a single study whether the nature of processing is crucial to producing negative or positive media effects, and whether effects are different for general mood as compared to body-specific outcomes.

The final article is concerned with improving our understanding of factors that make it more or less likely that individuals aspire to, and internalize, the sociocultural "body perfect" ideals so prominently displayed in the media (Vartanian, 2009, this issue). It addresses this question through focusing on the nature of individuals'

self-concept, examining the novel proposal that individuals may be more likely to seek out and adopt such external norms of ideal beauty as part of their own identity if they lack a clearly defined sense of self. Links between self-concept clarity, internalization of "body perfect" ideals, body image and eating concerns are examined in both women and men.

In addition to the unique contributions of each of these articles, there is a further distinctive feature of this special issue when it is considered as a whole. The previous research literature provides a diverse list of vulnerability factors, but this does not easily contribute toward the development of theoretically informed frameworks for understanding media effects and the ways individuals relate to "body perfect" ideals. This special issue aims to make a start toward the development of such a framework by examining, and highlighting, factors and processes that can be conceptualized in terms of individuals' self-concept or identity. Indeed, it grew out of a symposium proposal on media and body that had psychological processes related to self and identity as its focal theme. Identity can be defined as the subjective concept (or representation) that a person holds of him- or herself (Vignoles, Regalia, Manzi, Gollidge, & Scabini, 2006). Although, traditionally, body image has not been conceptualized in this way, it can be defined as an integral part of identity, given that it constitutes the subjective concept a person holds of their body as part of their self-representation (Dittmar, 2008; Halliwell & Dittmar, 2006).

Such a conceptualization may be useful for a qualified understanding of media effects and their complexity, because it can offer two things. First, it can incorporate a distinction between actual and ideal bodily self. Thus, in addition to a person's thoughts and evaluation of their body as it is, it can encompass notions of the ideal body individuals aspire to and strive for, as representing a part of their ideal self-concept. The construct of thin-ideal internalization can be understood in identity-related terms if it is seen as the extent to which an individual incorporates the sociocultural "body perfect" ideal into their ideal bodily self. Thus, what is of crucial importance is the extent to which "body perfect" media ideals become such a central aspect of personal identity. Second, if we draw on theories that attempt to link self-concept and affect, such as Self-Discrepancy Theory (e.g., Higgins, 1987), it becomes possible to theorize negative emotions about one's body after exposure to thin images as a

consequence of the particular aspect of the bodily self-concept that is salient for a person. In other words, media images may be processed very differently, depending on which self-related standpoint women adopt with respect to the thin ideal during exposure. Given the extremity of the ultra-thin ideal for women, if it becomes their ideal self, there is likely to be a large and psychologically salient gap between their ideal body and their actual bodily self. Exposure to thin media images may then activate and highlight these particular gaps within an individual's bodily self-concept, which causes negative affect and body dissatisfaction. In contrast, if women identify with the thin ideal during exposure, for instance by imagining that they are the model portrayed, then the lack of comparison with the model and the lack of focus on differences between actual and ideal body may generate positive emotions (at least momentarily).

We know already that thin-ideal internalization presents a crucial risk factor in the development of women's body image concerns and eating disturbances (Cafri, Yamamiya, Brannick, & Thompson, 2005; Thompson & Stice, 2001), and that it is linked with a greater propensity to make body-related social comparisons (Stormer & Thompson, 1996). This special issue provides further confirmation that it is also a powerful vulnerability factor for negative media effects (Levine & Murnen, 2009, this issue), and demonstrates that it is linked with processing media images in such a way that weight-related self-discrepancies are activated with negative emotional consequences (Dittmar et al., 2009, this issue). Furthermore, in turn, a likely precursor of internalizing sociocultural body perfect ideals is a lack of clarity in one's self-concept, at least in women (Vartanian, 2009, this issue). A further significant implication of this special issue is that it highlights the complexity of underlying psychological processes in media effects, given that women can focus on differences between themselves and thin media models as well as identify with the thin ideal through imagining themselves as the model (Tiggemann et al., 2009, this issue). Although the nature of their processing appears crucial to whether they experience body dissatisfaction or positive mood effects, the reported research also suggests the intriguing possibility that these processes can occur simultaneously, thus offering the beginning of an explanation for why girls and women continue to be attracted to glossy and unrealistic media images that, for vulnerable women, have ultimately negative effects on body image.

This special issue attests to, and builds on, recent developments in the media and body research field. Furthermore, I hope it can help to make a case that it is beneficial to conceptualize aspects of body image as integral components of self-concept and identity, and responses to the "body perfect" ideals in the media in terms of related processes.

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