Does Size Matter?
The Impact of ‘Body Perfect’ Ideals in the Media

Helga Dittmar
Why worry?

Media models’ body size \textit{versus} reality

- Gap between body ideal \textless actual body
- Exposure unavoidable (3,000+ ads a day)
- Media models construct “reality” \ne real
- Unhealthy and abnormal body ideal
  - Biologically inappropriate
  - Artificial
Healthy and unhealthy

Weight relative to height

Body Mass Index (BMI)

Underweight
Normal
Overweight
Obese

BMI

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Body Image & Well-Being

Body dissatisfaction

Physical Health
Unhealthy body-shaping behaviours
- Extreme dieting, disordered eating
- Cosmetic surgery
- Abuse of medication & drugs
- Extreme exercising

Mental Health
Negative affect, clinical disorders
- Negative self-evaluation
- Depression
- Eating disorders
- Body Dysmorphic Disorder

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## Meta analyses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25 experiments</td>
<td>10 experiments, 15 corr. studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body dissatisfaction: $d = -0.31$</td>
<td>Negative body image: $d = -0.22_{\text{exp}}$, $d = -0.19_{\text{corr}}$</td>
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<tr>
<td>49 experiments, 28 corr. studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Body dissatisfaction: $d = -0.28$</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eating behaviors: $d = -0.30$</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15 experiments</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Body dissatisfaction: $d = -0.43$</td>
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<td>(Blond, <em>Body Image</em>, 2008)</td>
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State of the art?

- Plenty of evidence that ‘body perfect’ exposure makes individuals feel bad about their bodies
- Negative exposure effects may be stronger in adolescents than adults
- What about children?
Media Exposure Model

- Psychological Mechanism (mediator)
  - Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987)
  - Gaps between actual and ideal self as cause of negative affect
  - Chronic self-beliefs vs. acute activation*
  - Specific SDs related to ‘body perfect’ ideal
- Activation of ideal-body SDs leads to negative body-focused affect (body dissatisfaction)

*Dittmar & Halliwell, 2005, 2008
Process Model

Media Exposure

‘Body Perfect’ Ideals

Mediator

Activation of ideal-body self-discrepancies

Outcome

Body-focused Negative affect
Experiment 1

• Dolls embody female ‘body perfect’ ideal
• Exposure experiment with images of dolls
• 5-8-year-old girls
• First exposure experiment with such young girls Dittmar, Halliwell, & Ive (2006) Developmental Psych
• Does exposure to images of dolls cause actual-ideal body-size SDs?
Experiment 1

- Girls heard story about “Mira”
- Picture book featuring images of
  - Thin dolls (Barbie) OR
  - Average-size dolls (Emme) OR
  - No dolls (control baseline)
Picture book with thin doll
Picture book average-size doll

Taken from Dittmar (2007), image reproduced with kind permission of Tonner Inc. & Emme Model Agency

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Picture book without doll
Experiment 1

- Girls heard story about “Mira”
- Picture book featuring images of
  - Thin dolls (Barbie) OR
  - Average-size dolls (Emme) OR
  - No dolls (control baseline)
- After exposure, measures of
  - Actual body size
  - Ideal body size
Actual vs. Ideal Body

Colour in the figure that looks most like your own figure now.

Colour in the figure that shows the way you want to look the most.

4 – 3 = 1
Body-size discrepancy

Girls’ actual-ideal body-size discrepancy significantly higher after thin dolls than other images

7 year-olds no effect
Process Model in Adults

- Cover story. Advertising effectiveness
- Stimuli. Sets of advertisements identical in background, product, slogan, except
  - Presence of idealised media model
  - OR absence of model (control)
- Measures
- (a) Self-Discrepancy Index (SDI)
- (b) Body-Focused Negative Affect (BFNA)
Ad with thin model*

City living...
Revitalise...Refresh...Renew
with shea butter shower souffle
An incredibly indulgent experience

There’s nothing quite like it.

*research supported by ESRC, see Dittmar & Halliwell (2005)
Ad without model (control)

City living...
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Experiment 2

• Exposure to ultra-thin models ➢ significantly stronger BFNA ($\beta = .21; p < .05$)

Dittmar & Halliwell, 2007, APS
Experiment 2

• Exposure to ultra-thin models ➔ significantly stronger BFNA ($\beta = .21; p < .05$)

• Body-related self-discrepancy activation mediates this link (reduced to $\beta = .09; \text{ns}$)

• Full mediation

Dittmar & Halliwell, 2007, APS

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Ad with muscular model

SILVER
for a man who deserves more than just a shower!

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Ad without model (control)
Experiment 3

• Exposure to muscular models ➔ significantly stronger BFNA ($\beta = .27; \ p < .05$)
• Ideal-body self-discrepancy activation fully mediates this link ($\beta = .14; \ ns$)

Dittmar, Phillips, & Halliwell (in preparation), Study 3

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Process Model

- Model applicable to both women & men
- Good support for process (full mediation)
- Individual differences in vulnerability
New Media & Adolescence

• Magazine advertisements (typically studied)
• Media consumption changed
  • Music videos*
  • Computer games**
  • Teenage drama TV***
• Exposure to ‘Body Perfect’ Ideals causes greater body dissatisfaction
• Important addition: Direct effect on eating behaviour

**Dittmar, Bond, Moorehouse, & Rees (2010)
***Stonebridge & Dittmar (2010)
Do we need ‘perfect’ models?

• Advertisers claim “thin models sell”
• Evidence?
• Our research = first systematic studies to examine claim
• Experiments assessed advertising effectiveness
Advertising effectiveness

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Thin models

Average models

University of Sussex
Advertising effectiveness

Average-size models = Thin models

True for different products
- personal care
- make-up
- diet foods

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Therefore...

- Perceived advertising effectiveness not compromised by average-size models
- No need for advertisers to use thin models
- Average-size models → no negative impact on body image (Dittmar & Howard, 2004)
- Use alternative models!
Do models need to be thin to sell moisturiser?

Advertisers say they use very thin models because they 'sell'. Yet research from Dr. Helga Dittmar and Dr. Emma Halliwell from the University of Sussex suggests that not only do women feel bad about themselves when they see these images, but they are just as likely to buy a product if the model is equally attractive but of average size.

The findings by Drs. Dittmar and Halliwell are based on four studies involving 800 female students aged 18 to 30. Women who had poor self-image became more anxious about their bodies after looking at thin models than women with less of a gap between their body image and how they would ideally like to be. This effect occurred regardless of their actual weight.

To ensure their findings were as accurate as possible, the team created a series of adverts in which models had the same face but different body sizes – either size eight or size 14. They also mixed their research questions with other questions so that the aims of the research would not be obvious to the subjects.

What surprised the researchers the most was that women were just as likely to buy a product if the model is equally attractive but of average size. There were some instances where subjects did evaluate thin models more favourably.

Models who advertised weight-loss products were more knowledgeable and trustworthy. At the same time, those with chronic 'self discrepancies', but whose weight was not far off their ideal, preferred the thin models, but only when they were moderately attractive but not beautiful.

Dr. Dittmar and Dr. Halliwell conclude that their findings have important implications: At the social and public level, they can inform debate about responsible advertising policies, and at the level of the individual, they suggest that –
What can we do?

• Intervention (e.g., in schools)
  • Critical media analysis
  • Increase body confidence
  • Other sources of self-worth

• Advertising and media policy
  • Use of models with an average body size
  • Diversity of body shapes
  • Kitemark airbrushed models (clear labels)
Effects of media images on the body image

On January 11th, Jo Swinson led the Adjournment debate in Parliament on the effects of media images on the body image of women and girls. You can watch the debate on Jo's YouTube channel here.

Campaign For Body Confidence: Jo Swinson MP interview

REAL WOMEN ON TWITTER

Jessica Simpson braves Marie Claire without make-up: http://bit.ly/9QZC0 2 days ago
check out this site that shows retouching effects before and after http://bit.ly/93J25 1 week ago
Airbrushed ads damaging a generation of young women, say experts

A University of Sussex psychologist is the lead author of a report sent to UK advertising authorities condemning the use of ultra-thin, digitally altered women in adverts.

Dr Helga Dittmar collaborated with experts in the field of body image to produce the paper that details scientific evidence on how the use of airbrushing to promote body perfect ideals in advertising is causing a host of problems in young women. These include eating disorders, depression, extreme exercising and encouraging cosmetic surgery.

The report, signed by 44 leading academics, doctors and clinical psychologists from the UK, USA, Australia, Brazil, Spain and Ireland, was submitted to the Committee for Advertising Practice on 15th November 2009 as part of a campaign co-ordinated by the Liberal Democrat Party, headed by Jo Swinson MP.

Dr Dittmar says: “It is clear that most fashion advertising uses airbrushing technology, capable of changing all aspects of appearance and body shape - for example, different size eyes, thinner legs, slimmer waists and enlarged breasts. More than 100 scientific studies show that exposure to unrealistic body perfect ideals like this in the media leads to body dissatisfaction, negative thoughts and feeling about the body, for the great majority of girls and women.”
Lib Dems launch Campaign for Body Confidence

By The Voice | Published 8th April 2010 - 7:15 pm

Congratulations to Lib Dem MPs Lynne Featherstone and Jo Swinson for helping to organise a panel debate this afternoon in Parliament - to coincide with International Women's Day - on measures to tackle the harm caused by pressure to conform to unrealistic and unhealthy body image ideals. The event marked the launch of the Campaign for Body Confidence.

The panel featured Lynne (the party's shadow equalities minister), Clothes Show presenter Caryn Franklin, psychotherapist Susie Orbach and Dr Helga Dittmar of the University of Sussex. Other attendees included Girlguides, Linda Papadopoulos and the world's leading body image experts.

Here's what Lynne had to say about it:

“Unrealistic and unhealthy ideas of what's beautiful mean people suffer with anything from low self-esteem to serious eating disorders, which is why we are launching the Campaign for Body Confidence. Politicians, media figures, modelling agencies, mental health experts and ordinary people will be asked to pledge to campaign against this dangerous trend.”
Publications


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Thank you!