

Media exposure impairs perception of body image

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Abstract

Body image concerns have become exceptionally prevalent, impairing women's ability to correctly identify healthy body weights after media exposure. The purpose of this study was to analyze how women's perceptions of healthy body types are influenced by the costs of being overweight, the positive valence of being thin, and the extent of internalizing media ideals. Eight computer-generated female body images were created with Body Mass Indices (BMI) ranging from 18 to 35. Participants (16 women 18–22 years old) were asked to rate the images, presented randomly over a series of trials, before and after viewing a webpage of swimsuit advertisements. Participants rated how "typical" the images looked on a scale from 1 (thinnest) to 9 (heaviest). Higher perceived cost of being overweight was associated with rating thinner bodies as more "typical" following the swimsuit advertisements ($r = -.635$, $p < .009$). Higher perceived benefit of being thin was associated with more extreme dieting behavior ($r = .775$, $p < .001$). These preliminary findings support the correlation between media exposure and skewed body image.

Introduction

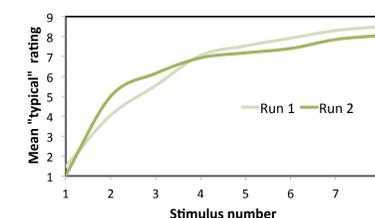
The media is saturated with cultural ideals depicting thinner women as more attractive, more desirable and more successful, which adversely impacts women's body perception. This phenomenon negatively affects women's ability to correctly distinguish healthy body weights. In previous studies, Stice et al. examined the effects of body dissatisfaction and how body image distortions cause a person to view their body to be larger than it is in reality (Stice et al. 2002). This study attributed body dissatisfaction to have stemmed from sociocultural pressures like media, family, etc. (Stice et al.). Rhodes et al. took the Stice study further by investigating whether exposure to distorted bodies can change perceptions of attractiveness. In many Western cultures, attractiveness translates to being thin (Rhodes et al. 2005). The study concluded that the most attractive body was thinner than the normal body after exposure (Rhodes et al.). In more recent studies, Glauert et al. examined how women from Western cultures cope with both body dissatisfaction and the effects of perceptual exposure to body ideals (Glauert et al. 2009). This study found that women's body perceptions were impressionable to these body ideals because higher rates of body dissatisfaction were recorded after media exposure (Glauert et al.). With consideration to the previous studies on body dissatisfaction and perceptual exposure to body ideals, the purpose of our study was to analyze the extent to which media ideals can impact social norms related to body image, and to examine the influence it has on women's perceptions of a healthy body weight. Our study also examined how much having this *ideal* body shown in media would affect their lives. We examined the perceived costs of being overweight and the perceived benefits of being thin.

Results

From the results obtained from run 1 and run 2 of the perception-based task, a change after the priming was noticed in which stimuli were rated most "typical".

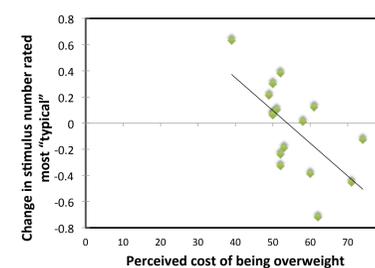
Figure 3: Example of the Swimsuit Priming Effect

For this participant, stimulus 3 was rated as most "typical" during run 1. After priming, stimulus 2 was rated as most "typical" in run 2. Thus, after the priming with the Victoria Secret bathing suit task, the most "typical" body type rating decreased from stimulus 3 to stimulus 2, showing that a thinner stimuli was perceived as more typical after being exposed to media images of *ideal* body types.



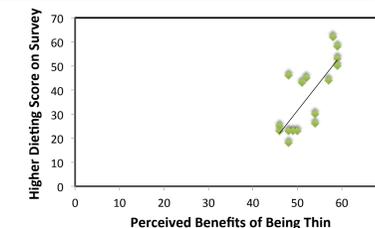
The survey data was analyzed against the change in run 1 versus run 2 in what stimulus was most "typical".

Figure 4: Higher perceived cost of being overweight was associated with rating thinner bodies as more "typical" following the swimsuit advertisements ($r = -.635$, $p < .009$). After the Victoria Secret Swimsuit priming, participants who perceived high negative costs of being overweight on the survey rated a thinner stimulus as most "typical". A thinner stimulus was perceived as more normal on average after the priming if the participant believed that there are negative outcomes to being overweight, like "having less friends" or "less likely to get a job."



A correlation in the answers between two subscales of the survey was determined.

Figure 5: Higher perceived benefit of being thin was associated with more extreme dieting behavior ($r = .775$, $p < .001$). The participants who marked that there are higher perceived benefits to being thin also recorded that they have dieted in the past 6 months to lose weight. For this subscale of the survey, the participants rated on a 5-point scale their perception of the benefits of thinness across a number of areas, including social, professional, and relationship success.



Methods

Each participant was administered a survey with questions falling into eighteen subscales. One subscale looked at the perceived benefits of being thin. This subscale asked the participants to rate how strongly they agreed with phrases such as "If I were thinner I would be happier." Another subscale looked at the perceived costs of being overweight, and incorporated phrases like "If I were fatter I would have less friends".

Eight computer-generated female body images with Body Mass Indices (BMI) ranging from 18 to 35 were created using modelmydiet.com to match that participant's self-reported personal characteristics, such as hairstyle, color and skin tone.

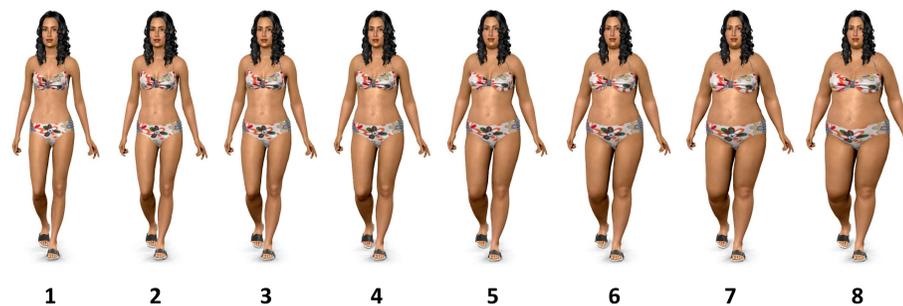


Figure 1: Example stimuli created according to the participant's self described personal characteristics.

Participants viewed these eight stimuli 40 times, in random order, and categorized the stimuli from a scale of 1 to 9, where 1 is thinnest and 9 is heaviest. Participants completed three different runs or trials of the perception-based task. After run 1, participants were primed with a visual search task.

The visual search task was implemented to measure the influence of the idealized body type seen in media on the participant's overall body image perception. The task forced participants to look carefully through a mock webpage of a Victoria's Secret catalog with a few pages of swimsuits by asking detailed questions about the bathing suits.

After the priming, the participants completed the same perception-based task during run 2. The ratings of run 1 and 2 were recorded and compared against each other to measure the effects of the priming.

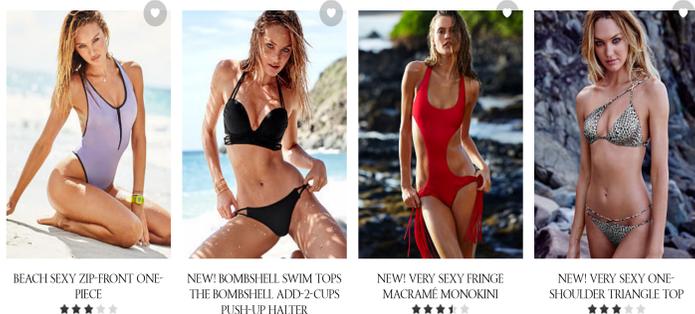


Figure 2: An example of the priming images the participants were exposed to in the visual search task.

Conclusion

The results from this study lean towards the notion that women's perceptions of body image are influenced by the perceived costs of being overweight. If one believes that social status or approval may decrease if one's weight increases, then a thinner body type is considered more typical after media exposure; media exposure thus skewing the perception of body images. The positive valence of being thin also influences perception because of the belief that being thin is more attractive and more successful. If perceiving benefits of being thin is correlated with extreme dieting behavior, women exposed to idealized bodies in media might be more likely to engage in unhealthy disordered eating behaviors. The internalizing of beauty and idealistic norms has a negative influence on the way women perceive themselves and others, even computer generated stimuli. These preliminary findings support the correlation between media exposure and skewed body image.

References

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