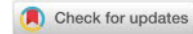


CONCERNS REGARDING THE PRESENTATION OF IDEALIZED FEMALE BEAUTY IN VISUAL ADVERTISEMENT

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Abstract: Beauty is most commonly comprehended as something pleasurable to see and feel, an aesthetic quality that comforts our senses. Women in visual advertisements are usually objectified and valued based on their sex appeal and overall physical attractiveness. The purpose of this review paper is to identify and discuss societal concerns regarding idealized female beauty depiction in advertisements in popular visual media, such as fashion magazines, television, and Instagram. Since these issues can occur with women of different age, we found it useful to consider the relationship between the exposure to idealized female presentation in ads and issues such as self-esteem and body satisfaction with women from three different adult generations: Gen X, as an older, midlife cohort; Millennials; and Gen Z as a younger age cohort. Throughout their lifetime, women from all three cohorts have been exposed to at least one form of dominant visual media advertisements, displaying how a beautiful woman should look. The focus of this paper considers the Westernized model of female body depiction, because the Westernized depiction is the most globally accessible, as well as the factors contributing to the process of internalization of the thin beauty ideal. After being exposed to idealized beauty presentations, particularly in fashion magazines and Instagram, women in all three cohorts experience numerous effects, such as becoming dissatisfied with their body; pursuing the perfect look presented in usually airbrushed images; and the possible development of unhealthy lifestyles. A question that arises considers the tension between the motivational aspect of the visual messages reflected in idealized, often photoshopped imagery of women in ads, and discouraging unrealistic representations of women's appearance that take beauty standards to an extreme and can distort female self-image. The body positivity movement has been inspirational for Millennials and Gen Z women. The challenge for advertisers regarding Gen X women should include becoming more age-positive.

Keywords: advertisements, dissatisfaction, internalization, photoshopping, body positivity

Field: Social sciences

1. INTRODUCTION

Mass media has an enormous impact on shaping standards of beauty. Fashion magazines and television, especially in Western cultures (Mills et al., 2017, 146) are referred to as the "thin-ideal" media (Harrison, 2000), displaying thin female subjects and promoting the idea that thinness is a preferable female attribute associated with success and social desirability (Van Vonderen & Kinnally, 2012; 42-43; Harrison, 2000, 121). Several meta-analytic reviews and experimental studies showed negative body self-image and body dissatisfaction in women exposed to the thin ideal media images (Mills et al., 2017; Groesz et al., 2002). Exposure to idealized images can affect female perception of beauty and lead to internalization of the thin body look as an ideal of beauty (Mills et al., 2017).

Social networks have provided new access to the self as an object (Gonzales & Hancock, 2010, 82), which is particularly noticeable with Instagram. Unlike other social media, Instagram is primarily an image-sharing platform that features appearance-focused posts to the greatest extent. Thus, presentation and self-presentation of beauty images have become much easier to access and copy. Peers and celebrities as opinion leaders have significant power to choose whether their messages influence followers positively or negatively (Del Fresno Garcia et al., 2016, 25; Bell, 2016). They upload powerful pictures, videos, and other messages portraying their own idea of female beauty and what the ideal female body and face should look like. Additionally, Instagram and other social media increased the use of retouching tools, making these tools ubiquitous and an important part of body image manipulation. The problem that occurs with photoshopped images is that the audience often has trouble identifying the manipulated elements (Harrison & Hefner, 2014), making it possible to alter ideas about what constitutes female beauty.

Although female bodies have been observed as a standard of beauty, and an ideal that women should strive for (Belch & Belch, 2012, 691; Berberick, 2010, 2), there is also a vast body of literature that presents concerns about unrealistic, false, and idealized presentations of female beauty that can strongly impact women's body image and their appearance issues (Mills et al., 2017, 146).

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2. THIN BEAUTY IDEAL, BODY IMAGE AND BODY DISSATISFACTION

Continuous exposure to appearance-based advertisements can lead to an increase in the importance of appearance to young girls, resulting in obsession over their look as a measure of self-worth (<https://www.healthypace.com/eating-disorders/articles/eating-disorders-body-image-and-advertising,5/14/2022>). Researchers reported that fashion magazines are the primary source of beauty messages for Millennials and Gen Z. Their exposure to thin ideal advertisements affects their weight concerns, self-esteem, mood, and levels of depression (Tan, 2015). Another study reached a similar conclusion regarding television ads that focus on idealized female beauty portrayed with tall, slim, and light-skinned models, whose figures are commonly altered digitally (<https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/features/advertisings-toxic-effect-on-eating-and-body-image,5/14/2022>). On the other hand, the abundance of cosmetic, beauty, and anti-aging products and procedures advertised specifically for older women (e.g. Gen X) in visual media suggest that they are also pressured to maintain a tight, wrinkle-free, youthful look as they age (Smith Kilpela et al., 2015).

Although some findings do not support of the impact of media on body image (Holstrom, 2004), and even find that in some cases the exposure to slim images can be motivational for maintaining body weight (Bartlett et al., 2008; Holstrom, 2004), there are still many factors considered responsible for the negative impact of media on female body image. Social comparison was found to be an important factor that negatively affected mood and body satisfaction in young women exposed to thin ideal advertisements (Tiggemann & McGill, 2004). According to Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), people constantly evaluate themselves by comparing themselves to others. Tiggemann & McGill (2004) showed that women who engaged in more social comparison experienced more negative mood changes and were less satisfied with their bodies after being exposed to magazine advertisements containing female images of thin body beauty ideals. (Mills et al., 2017)

“Fat talk,” as a conversation that directly or indirectly promotes the thin ideal, was also found to contribute to body dissatisfaction. Fat talk has become a “social epidemic” and part of daily conversation, partly as a result of exposure to thin ideal media (Adams, 2017). Women from three generations – Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z, reported engaging significantly more in fat talk than Baby-Boomers. For women over age 45 (i.e. Gen X), fat talk was significantly correlated with body dissatisfaction, thin ideal internalization, and self-objectification. Gen X women also reported the pressure to maintain the “young” beauty ideal, which caused them to get involved in “old talk” as well. As a conversation that emphasizes the importance of a youthful appearance, old talk “belittles the natural process of aging” (Becker et al., 2013). It contributes to overall older women’s body dissatisfaction (Smith Kilpela et al., 2015), transforming the thin ideal into the more complex “thin-young” beauty ideal.

For different female cohorts, internalization of the thin beauty ideal was found both as a factor that leads to body dissatisfaction and as an issue triggered by body dissatisfaction. Internalization of the thin young beauty ideal is recognized to contribute to body dissatisfaction with younger women (e.g. Gen Z and Millennials). However, with midlife women (e.g. Gen X), it is body dissatisfaction that triggers internalization of the thin young beauty ideal (Stice et al., 1996). Midlife women who reported higher internalization felt more anxious after being exposed to thin ideal images than those who reported lower internalization (Smith Kilpela et al., 2015). Based on the abovementioned factors influencing Gen X women’s body dissatisfaction, it can be concluded that Gen X women’s exposure to the thin young beauty ideal, compounded by fat and old talk, leads to increased body dissatisfaction, while, on the other hand, the more dissatisfied they are with their bodies, the more they internalize the thin young ideal. With Gen X women, body dissatisfaction works both as a result and a cause, creating a vicious circle provoked by exposure to the thin young ideal.

A 2004 study showed that 80% of women age 54 and older reported dissatisfaction with their body image, to the extent that it affected their daily activities (McLaren & Kuh, 2004; Tiwari & Kumar, 2015, 4). It is important to note that research conducted in primarily Westernized societies, most frequently done in the U.S., UK, and Australia, and using mainly White samples, has shown the same unrealistically thin body ideal (Bell & Dittmar, 2011; Perloff, 2014) and thin young ideal (Smith Kilpela et al., 2015) of female beauty. Some non-white groups, like Latinas, report body dissatisfaction at comparable rates to White young women (Perloff, 2014). White and Asian women are less satisfied with their body image and are more influenced by body beauty ideals presented in advertisements than Sub-Saharan Africans (Tiwari & Kumar, 2015).

Studies on body image have shown that body dissatisfaction was also reported by young girls. A study conducted on Gen Z female cohort showed that as young girls (ages 9-10), 14% of them expressed negative body image and overall body dissatisfaction (Bun et al., 2012; Tiwari & Kumar, 2015, 4), whereas

28% of normal weight preadolescent girls rated themselves as 'too fat' (Burroes, 2013; Tiwari & Kumar, 2015, 4). Research on young female Millennials from the U.S. and Australia showed that Instagram images can contribute to the idealization of female physical appearance and women's internalization of beauty ideals (Fardouly et al., 2018).

3. VISUAL "PUFFERY" - THE USE OF PHOTOSHOP IN CONTEMPORARY ADS

The use of photoshop as a tool to produce an idealized female beauty presented in advertisements results in negative effects on the body satisfaction of women (Taylor et al., 2018, 380). This impaired self-image often leads to a number of serious consequences and health behaviors such as social anxiety, depression, eating disorders, compulsive exercise or decreased physical activity, smoking (Smith Kilpela et al., 2015), unhealthy attitudes toward sex and sexuality, and can even lead to suicide. (Hargreaves & Tiggemann 2002; Lavine et al., 1999; Tiggemann et al., 2013)

While the extensive photoshopping of advertising imagery can be considered deceptive and misleading, advertisers are allowed to exaggerate their advertising messages both verbally and visually (Waller, 2015, 111). So retouching female models in ads with the aim to reflect the prevailing standards of beauty is considered visual "puffery" (<https://cdn1.sph.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/1267/2019/07/STRIPED-Photoshop-Policy-Brief-07-18-19.pdf>, 4/7/2022). It appears, however, that girls and adults most often cannot tell if images have been photoshopped (Burns, 2016), which leads them to conclude that the women in media ads and pictures are real, and therefore that the portrayed beauty is achievable (Diesch, 2014).

Adding warning notes to digitally altered ads to indicate their unrealistic nature has been considered a possible solution to this issue. In 2017, France introduced a policy requiring that advertisements in which a model's look has been digitally modified include a disclosure statement "retouched photo." The body-positive U.S. brand Aerie introduced the campaign #AerieREAL, focusing on young adults and portraying unretouched models. The campaign resulted in increased sales, which were tied to the positive impact it had on its target audience. (Pounders, 2018, 133-134)

Nevertheless, the results of several studies have shown that warning labels barely had any effect on body dissatisfaction. Another study showed that retouching disclaimers resulted in a negative effect on self-esteem among U.S. teenagers, which researchers explained as "the boomerang effect." (<https://cdn1.sph.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/1267/1267/20/FINAL-STRIPED-Photoshop-Policy-Brief-Jan-29-19.pdf>, 4/7/2022). Many advertisers naturally oppose this practice, arguing that a warning label subverts the appeal of images that in many cases are what sells the advertised products. (Donovan, 2012, 587)

4. IDEALIZED BEAUTY VS. BODY POSITIVITY

With over 1.4 billion users (Statista, 2025), Instagram is one of the most popular social networks for sharing images and judging the appearance of oneself and others. By offering filters and other editing apps, Instagram enables its users to promote societal beauty ideals. (Fardouly et al., 2018) Since most Instagram influencers are college and high school students (Marwick, 2015; Bauer, 2020), it can be assumed that Millennials and Gen Z women are more prone to compare their appearance and body to influencers than to traditional models. Additionally, with "body ideal" images being posted by their peers, it can be assumed that young women who are heavy Instagram users may consider such depictions as attainable and easily achieved.

The 2016 Girl's Attitudes Survey (ages 7-21) in the UK showed that girls as young as age 7 felt "intense and unobtainable appearance pressures to be perfect" (Burns, 2016). A recent study (Brennan, 2021) conducted in Ireland in 2021 showed that over 87% of young girls ages 10 to 17 (which corresponds to both Gen Z and Gen Alpha cohorts) are not satisfied with their bodies. The feeling of body dissatisfaction can be so profound that they miss out on school activities, important events, or even doctors' appointments.

The idealized model of beauty displayed across Instagram accounts has been confronted in recent years by an opposite movement, known as "body positivity." This movement redefines beauty and women's worth (Cohen et al., 2021, 4), and praises an individual's appearance by changing their attitude toward their body image from questioning their look to adopting self-love and self-acceptance (Chiat, 2020, 3). This approach is primarily based on deploying user-generated posts that present different body shapes, skin tones, and overall looks that should diversify the current beauty standards defined by modern society with the aim to reduce the negative outcomes of appearance-focused content shared on social media. (Brathwaite & DeAndrea, 2021, 26).

A recent study (Cohen et al., 2019) was conducted on 195 women belonging to Millennials and Gen Z cohorts (18-30-years old) who were exposed to either body positive, thin ideal, or appearance neutral posts on Instagram. The impressions of participants from these age groups showed that the overall presence of body positive posts had an inspiring effect on their body satisfaction and body appreciation, which was the opposite of the reactions to thin ideal imagery and appearance neutral posts. Respondents also showed preferences towards the body positive accounts with the majority interested in following them. However, both thin ideal and body positive posts contributed more to self-objectification compared to appearance neutral content.

The paradox that puts a shadow on this new practice was the result of research conducted by Lin and McFerran (2016). The research showed that while models with the fuller figure in ads were considered respectful, such an approach was found to have an adverse effect on the viewers' motivation to exercise. Also, exposure to these ads could lead to negative diet habits such as intensified consumption of unhealthy food (Taylor et al., 2018, 388-389). The results of one study even imply that some consumers actually believe that brands that include plus-size models are promoting obesity and an unhealthy lifestyle. These opposed findings deepen the advertisers' dilemma of what kind of images would best represent their brands (Pounders, 2018, 133-134).

Empowering women has turned into one of the crucial topics and experiences in advertising, transforming stereotypical gender roles and spreading the word of body positivity (Drake, 2017, 593). On social media, the diversified beauty ideal is getting significant attention with influencer examples such as size-22 model Tess Holliday, model Winnie Harlow with vitiligo, or Jillian Mercado, a model who has muscular dystrophy and uses a wheelchair. However, the fact that most women that participate in redefining female beauty standards belong to either to Millennial or Gen Z cohort may imply that generation X women who confront aging are not able to fully relate to the body positivity approach, which doesn't seem to involve enough of the issue of women's body image as they age (<https://time.com/5348584/body-positive-movement-gen-x-women/>, 5/11/2022).

The latest hashtag search shows that hashtags such as #agepo or #agepositive count around 218K posts, while the hashtag #bodypositivity or #bodypositive posts number 10.1M. Browsing through these posts it reveals that most posters are Millennials or Gen Z women. Even when Instagram ads include Hollywood celebrities that belong to generation X, most of these celebrities look younger than they actually are. It can be assumed that it puts pressure on women of this generation to strive to look younger (<https://time.com/5348584/body-positive-movement-gen-x-women/>, 1/11/2025).

5. CONCLUSION

For females in all three cohorts, exposure to the thin young beauty ideal in visual advertisements, particularly in fashion magazines and on Instagram, compounded by: internalization of the thin young beauty ideal; social comparison; fat talk and/or old talk; excessive photoshopping, can have serious psychological effects. These effects include decreased personal and body satisfaction, low self-esteem, and unhealthy lifestyles, including disordered eating. Additionally, with Gen X women, body dissatisfaction works both as a result and a cause of internalization of the thin young beauty ideal. With Millennials and Gen Z women, exposure to the thin ideal images on Instagram, compounded by social comparisons, leads to their increased body dissatisfaction. We believe that future research in this area should explore how the exposure of Gen Z and Millennial women to the more complex, thin young body ideal, as opposed to only the thin ideal, influences their body dissatisfaction, self-esteem, and eating habits as they age.

Another question that arises is whether the depiction of "real women" yields positive results in advertising effectiveness. From one perspective, consumers strongly support such efforts, which put a sense of belonging to their social presence by portraying realistic body images they can relate to. However, from the advertisers' point of view, the long-term outcomes of the body-positive campaigns are uncertain, especially profit-wise. Body positivity is doubtless becoming significant for female empowerment and their overall mental health, but a concern that arises relates to the potential consequence in which body positivity unwittingly encourages unhealthy habits, especially in young girls. Resolving this dilemma should go beyond the appearance-focused debate of "thin vs. fat" and point out the true health risks that should be considered in the visual presentation of body positivity in ads. Finally, brands targeting women should consider whether their overall marketing strategy is consistent with the body-positive message they try to communicate.

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