

Female “Thin Ideal” Media Images and Boys’ Attitudes Toward Girls

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Both boys and girls are exposed repeatedly to “thin-ideal” images in the media, that is, images of unrealistically thin and attractive women. As yet, however, little research has examined the impact of these images on boys. In the present study we investigated the effect of exposure to televised thin-ideal images on boys’ attitudes toward girls. The participants were 354 boys aged 13–15 years, who viewed either 20 commercials that epitomized the thin-ideal for women or 20 commercials that contained no such images. They then rated the importance of 10 characteristics, including slimness and physical attractiveness, in their choice of partner or girlfriend. Appearance schematicity, a trait measure of the extent of investment in appearance as the basis for self-evaluation, was also assessed. It was found that schematicity was positively related to boys’ importance ratings of attractiveness, slimness, athletic ability, muscularity, and popularity in a girlfriend. Further, boys who scored medium (but not high or low) on appearance schematicity were influenced by the commercials. These findings suggest that the media may have an indirect impact on girls’ body image through influence on boys’ expectations and evaluations of girls’ appearance.

KEY WORDS: mass media; thin ideal; sociocultural influences; appearance schemas; body image.

The mass media have long been criticized for presenting unrealistic appearance ideals that contribute to the development of negative body image for many women and girls. A growing number of experimental studies have demonstrated a causal link between acute exposure to “thin-ideal” images (i.e., images of impossibly thin and attractive female beauty) and increased body dissatisfaction. Overall, these studies consistently demonstrate a small, negative, immediate effect of exposure to such thin-ideal images (for a meta-analytic review, see Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002).

To date, however, little research has examined the impact of ongoing exposure to attractive and unrealistically thin female images on men and boys.

Lavine, Sweeney, and Wagner (1999) exposed men to television commercials that depict women as sex objects or to a control tape. The results showed that men who viewed the sexist commercials reported a greater discrepancy between their actual and ideal body size than men in the control condition. However, the sexist commercials also contained highly attractive men, and the authors concluded that a definitive explanation for the finding was not possible. Hargreaves and Tiggemann (2002) have found that exposure to thin-ideal images did not affect boys’ own body satisfaction. These latter results are not surprising in that, whereas images of female attractiveness provide a relevant source of social comparison and self-evaluation for women and girls (Jones, 2001), such images are not personally relevant for men and boys (Major, Testa, & Bylsma, 1991).

A more likely outcome of repeated and ongoing exposure to thin, attractive women in the media, however, is the shaping of men’s and boys’ expectations and evaluations of women and girls. Yet this has

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largely gone unexamined. Certainly in the extreme case of pornographic material, increased exposure has been reliably associated with poorer evaluations of a sexual partner (Barak & Fisher, 1997; Jansma, Linz, Mulac, & Imrich, 1997) and increased sexually aggressive behavior (Malamuth, Addison, & Koss, 2000). In an experimental study, Kenrick, Guitierrez, and Goldberg (1989) found that men who were exposed to erotic images of women reported being less attracted to and loving their mates less than men who were exposed to abstract art images. Fortunately, exposure to such explicit materials is not common for most men (Goodson, McCormick, & Evans, 2001) and can be easily avoided. In contrast, the pervasiveness of female thin-ideal images in many male-oriented magazines, on television, and in other mainstream Western media makes exposure to the thin-ideal almost unavoidable. Cultivation theory (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994) suggests that such ongoing exposure to a particular set of values, types of people, and themes (such as the thin-ideal for women) can powerfully influence viewers' conceptions of social reality. Thus the media's repeated presentation of thin and attractive women, frequently paired with beauty and success, may lead viewers to hold largely unrealistic expectations for women's appearance.

In the one correlational study to address the relationship between men's media exposure and their endorsement of the thin-ideal for women, Harrison and Cantor (1997) showed that magazine reading in general, and the reading of men's entertainment magazines in particular, were related to anticipated disappointment in meeting an overweight blind date. These data seem to suggest some link between media exposure and men's attitudes toward women. As yet, however, there have been no experimental studies for adolescent boys.

Thus the aim of the present study was to examine experimentally the impact of exposure to thin-ideal media on boys' attitudes toward girls. It was predicted that boys who viewed thin-ideal images would rate thinness and attractiveness as more important in their potential girlfriends than would boys who viewed nonappearance-related images. Furthermore, it was predicted that particular boys would be more strongly affected.

On the basis of self-schema theory (Markus, 1977), Cash and Labarge (1996) have suggested that appearance-related information may be particularly salient for certain individuals who invest heavily on appearance as the basis for self-evaluation. The well-

developed and elaborate appearance schemas of such individuals influence their attention to, memory for, and interpretation of appearance-related material (Altabe & Thompson, 1996; Cash & Labarge, 1996; Vitousek & Hollon, 1990). Such a bias not only affects the processing of self-relevant appearance information, but individuals high on appearance schematicity are also hypothesized to pay more attention to the appearance of others (Markus & Smith, 1981; Markus, Smith, & Moreland, 1985). In an investigation of the influence of gender-role schemas on perceptions of others, Fong and Markus (1982) found that men with a masculine self-schema attributed more schema-relevant attributes to an actor in a film than did aschematics. Thus it was predicted that, due to their heightened processing of appearance-related information, the effect of exposure to thin ideal images would be stronger among boys who scored high on appearance schematicity.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 354 boys from two South Australian high schools. The boys were in grades 8 ($n = 124$), 9 ($n = 132$), and 10 ($n = 98$), and were aged 13–15 years ($M = 14.1$, $SD = 0.89$). Participants were allocated to the appearance or nonappearance commercial condition by random selection of class group ($n = 35$), which resulted in a total of 192 participants in the appearance commercial condition, and 162 participants in the nonappearance commercial condition.

Materials

Experimental Manipulation: Thin-ideal Media

The participants were shown one of the two video-tapes that were developed for an earlier study (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2002). The appearance-commercial tape consisted of 20 commercials that featured actresses who "epitomized societal ideals of thinness and attractiveness" (Heinberg & Thompson, 1995). In contrast, the 20 commercials in the non-appearance condition contained no such images. Rather, these commercials contained actresses who were considered normal in appearance. Both tapes contained male actors, although they were not rated for attractiveness.

The two sets of commercials were selected from an initial sample of 162 commercials collected over a 1-week period. Each commercial was then rated by 10 undergraduate students according to how much it reflected the thin ideal of attractiveness and how much they liked the commercial. The 20 commercials with the highest thin ideal score ($M = 5.7$ out of 7) were selected for the appearance-related tape, and 20 commercials with a low thin ideal score ($M = 2.3$ out of 7) were selected for the nonappearance tape. The two sets of commercials were carefully matched for their likability ($M = 3.4$ and 3.3 out of 7 respectively), to ensure that both tapes were of equal interest to the viewers. The two sets of commercials contained a range of products (e.g., food, movies, shampoo, bank loans, and cars).

Endorsement of Thinness

The 6-item Endorsement of Thinness and Dieting for Women Scale used in Harrison and Cantor's (1997) correlational study was adapted for the present experimental study. In their scale, men were asked to rate a number of characteristics "in terms of how important they are when you are choosing a woman to date or become involved with" (p. 53). Men's rating of the importance of the characteristic "slim figure" was used to assess their endorsement of thinness for women. Although the authors also assessed the importance of other characteristics, these were not reported. In the present study, we asked boys to rate the importance of 10 characteristics when choosing a person to date or become involved with. Some of the characteristics were directly related to appearance (physical attractiveness, slim figure, muscular figure), whereas others were related to abilities (athletic ability, intelligence) or other aspects of the person (sense of humor, personality, manners, similar interests, popularity). Each of the 10 characteristics was rated on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = *not at all important* to 7 = *very important*.

Appearance Schematicity

The Appearance Schemas Inventory (ASI; Cash & Labarge, 1996) is a self-report measure of core beliefs and assumptions about the importance, meaning, and effects of appearance in one's life. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with 14 statements (e.g., "Attractive people have it all";

"What I look like is an important part of who I am") on a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. Thus total scores could range from 14 to 70; high scores reflect high appearance schematicity. The ASI showed good internal reliability in this sample ($\alpha = .84$).

As is often done (e.g., Lavin & Cash, 2001), the participants were divided into tertiles on the basis of their ASI scores, which resulted in three groups that represent those low ($n = 108$), medium ($n = 132$), and high ($n = 114$) on appearance schematicity. The mean score for the high schematicity group was 48.4 ($SD = 4.9$), for the medium tertile, $M = 38.4$ ($SD = 2.4$), and low tertile, $M = 29.0$ ($SD = 4.6$), $F(2, 348) = 613.19$, $p < .001$. Neither commercial condition, $F(1, 348) = 2.04$, $p > .05$, nor school, $F(1, 348) = 1.71$, $p > .05$, differed on appearance schematicity.

Procedure

The students were invited to participate in a study about the effectiveness of television advertising. After completing some brief measures about television viewing, the participants were shown one of the two 10-min video-tapes. Shortly after viewing the tapes (and after some self-ratings, which are not reported here), participants were asked to complete the endorsement of thinness task. Finally, participants completed the ASI.

RESULTS

Importance Ratings

Table I presents, in rank order, the boys' mean importance ratings of the 10 characteristics they would use when choosing a girlfriend, as well as each characteristic's correlation with appearance schematicity. It can be seen that boys rated personality as the most important characteristic ($M = 5.9$), followed by sense of humor ($M = 5.6$), and physical attractiveness ($M = 5.3$). Muscular figure was the least important characteristic ($M = 3.4$). Appearance schematicity was significantly positively correlated with importance ratings for physical attractiveness, slim figure, popularity, athletic ability, and muscular figure, but not for manners, intelligence, similar interests, personality, or sense of humor.

The interrelationships between the 10 characteristics were examined using a principal components analysis (PCA) followed by varimax rotation. As seen

Table I. Mean Importance (Standard Deviation in Parentheses) of 10 Characteristics to Use When Choosing a Partner/Girlfriend

Characteristic	Importance	Factor loadings			
		Corr. ASI	Attractiveness	Athleticism	Personal qualities
Personality	5.9 (1.3)	.04	.38	-.16	.74
Sense of humor	5.6 (1.4)	.08	.44	-.08	.72
Attractiveness	5.3 (1.4)	.28***	.83	.10	.13
Similar interests	5.1 (1.4)	.05	.07	.01	.69
Manners	5.0 (1.4)	.05	-.24	.33	.55
Slim figure	4.8 (1.5)	.28***	.80	.19	.08
Intelligence	4.5 (1.6)	.10	-.00	.36	.62
Athletic ability	4.2 (1.6)	.12*	.26	.75	.13
Popularity	3.9 (1.5)	.28***	—	—	—
Muscular figure	3.4 (1.6)	.20***	.05	.85	.04

* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

Note. Factor loadings $> .45$ in bold.

in Table I, three clear factors emerged. We used a factor loading criterion of .45, as recommended by Tabachnick and Fidell (2001), and all items (with the exception of “popularity,” which loaded equally on two factors) loaded on precisely one of the three factors. The PCA was repeated without the complex item (i.e., popularity), and the factors loadings are reported in Table I. These three factors were labelled “attractiveness” ($\alpha = .72$), “athleticism” ($\alpha = .67$), and “personal qualities” ($\alpha = .72$) in order to reflect their item content. Item scores were summed and averaged to produce a score on each of the three factors. Popularity was retained as a single item.

Commercial Condition, Importance Ratings, and Appearance Schematicity

A two-way univariate ANOVA (commercial condition, appearance schemas) was then conducted to test the hypotheses that boys would rate “attractiveness” as more important after viewing appearance commercials than after nonappearance commercials and that boys higher on appearance schematicity would be the most strongly affected. In contrast to our prediction, there was no significant main effect of commercial condition on the attractiveness factor, $F(1, 342) = 1.65, p > .05$. As can be seen in Table II, however, there was a significant main effect of schematicity, $F(2, 342) = 15.89, p < .001 (\eta^2 = .09)$, as well as a significant interaction, $F(2, 342) = 3.42, p < .05 (\eta^2 = .02)$. Figure 1 shows that, irrespective of commercial condition, attractiveness was rated more important by boys high

on appearance schematicity ($M = 5.5$) than by boys medium ($M = 5.0$) and low on schematicity ($M = 4.5$). Figure 1 also shows that the nature of the commercials viewed did not affect importance of attractiveness ratings for boys low or high on schematicity. Rather, the interaction arises because boys who scored medium on schematicity rated attractiveness as significantly more important after viewing appearance commercials than after nonappearance commercials.

ANOVAs were conducted on the remaining three variables (athleticism, personal qualities, and popularity). There was a significant main effect of schematicity for both athleticism, $F(2, 341) = 12.62, p < .001 (\eta^2 = .07)$, and popularity, $F(2, 345) = 16.33, p < .001 (\eta^2 = .09)$, whereby boys high on appearance schematicity rated athleticism and popularity as more important than did boys lower on schematicity. However, the main effects of commercial condition and the

Table II. Importance Ratings After Commercial Viewing for Boys Low, Medium, and High on Appearance Schematicity

Characteristics	Appearance schematicity		
	Low	Medium	High
Attractiveness			
Nonappearance	4.6 (1.4)	4.7 (1.2)	5.5 (1.2)
Appearance	4.4 (1.3)	5.3 (1.0)	5.5 (1.2)
Athleticism			
Nonappearance	3.3 (1.2)	3.8 (1.2)	4.2 (1.0)
Appearance	3.4 (1.2)	4.0 (1.2)	4.1 (1.3)
Popularity			
Nonappearance	3.1 (1.4)	4.1 (1.3)	4.5 (1.4)
Appearance	3.5 (1.5)	4.0 (1.4)	4.4 (1.7)
Personal qualities			
Nonappearance	5.1 (1.1)	5.3 (.87)	5.3 (.93)
Appearance	5.2 (1.1)	5.3 (.71)	5.2 (1.2)

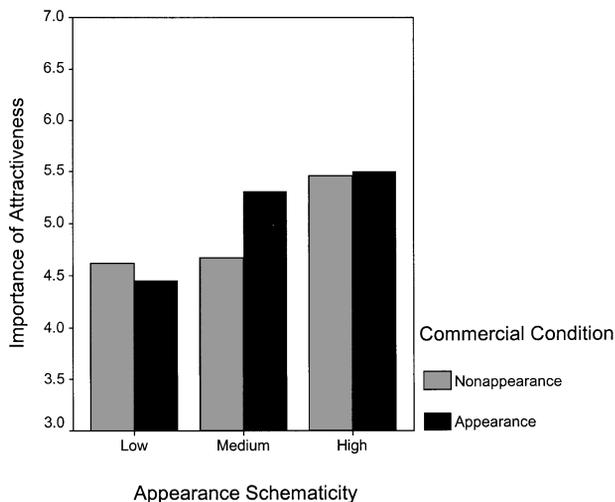


Fig. 1. Effect of commercials on importance of attractiveness ratings for boys low, medium, and high on appearance schematicity.

interactions were not significant, $F_s < 1, p > .05$. There were no significant effects for personal qualities, all $F_s < 1, p > .05$.

DISCUSSION

Although the negative impact of thin-ideal images on women and girls is widely recognized, previous researchers have largely neglected the impact of exposure to these same images on boys and men. In this experiment we examined the effect of exposure to thin-ideal images on boys' attitudes toward girls. Overall, the results showed that exposure to thin-ideal television did affect some boys. In particular, boys who scored in the middle range on appearance schematicity rated slimness and attractiveness as relatively more important after viewing appearance commercials than did similar boys in the nonappearance condition.

The remaining boys were not affected by the commercials. Appearance schematicity did, however, influence boys' importance ratings for appearance-related characteristics. Boys high on appearance schematicity rated attractiveness, popularity, and athletic ability as more important in a girlfriend than did boys low on appearance schematicity, irrespective of commercial condition. These findings are consistent with self-schema theory, which suggests that self-schemas, such as appearance schemas, direct the evaluation of others, as well as of the self, toward schema-relevant attributes (Markus & Smith, 1981).

Although not as we predicted, the findings are also consistent with some social psychological research on attitude change. It may be that participants who scored either high or low on appearance schematicity represent those who have developed stronger views about the importance (or unimportance) of appearance. One likely consequence of such stronger attitude formation is greater resistance to attitude change (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). In contrast, those boys who scored neither particularly high nor low on appearance schematicity may represent those who hold ambivalent or less certain attitudes about the meaning of appearance ("neither agree nor disagree"), and, as a result, they were more responsive to external cues such as media images.

The results of this study on boys have potentially interesting implications for the development of body image concerns among girls. Researchers have typically focused on the direct consequences of media exposure on girls' body image (e.g., Groesz et al., 2002). However, cultivation theory suggests that the media also shape the broader social climate (Gerbner et al., 1994; Harrison & Cantor, 1997), which leads to possible indirect consequences on girls' body image. For example, appearance-related feedback such as teasing, particularly from brothers and peers, is an important cause of body dissatisfaction among girls (Rieves & Cash, 1996). It is possible that the media may contribute to unrealistic appearance expectations and evaluations of girls, which may result in harmful teasing and stereotyping. Such behavior may be more likely from certain boys and men, but it may also be more likely in particular situations (e.g., after exposure to media-ideals). Few researchers have examined which individuals are most likely to tease others about appearance, or when such teasing most often occurs. Future research could examine the interaction between personal and situational variables in the facilitation of appearance-related teasing.

Some limitations of the present study must be acknowledged. The observed impact on boys' expectations for a girlfriend, based on one measure, was small in size. Further, it is not clear whether the attitudes or expectations reported in the study would translate into actual behavior. Future researchers may seek to measure both attitudinal and behavioral effects of media exposure on boys, and possible differences between boys and adult men may be explored. Nevertheless, our data do draw attention to the likely broader role of the mass media in the development of body image concerns. Not only do the media promote unrealistic beauty standards as the basis

of women's and girls' own physical self-evaluation, but these same images may also lead others (i.e., men and boys) to hold unrealistic appearance expectations that may, in turn, feed back into women's body image concerns.

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