

Sweeping analysis of research reinforces media influence on women's body image

As France's parliament considers a landmark bill that would outlaw media images glamorizing the extremely thin, psychology researchers are reporting some of the most definitive findings yet on how these images affect women.

In the May issue of *Psychological Bulletin*, University of Wisconsin-Madison postdoctoral researcher Shelly Grabe and psychology professor Janet Hyde describe a sweeping analysis of 77 previous studies involving more than 15,000 subjects. In it, they found that exposure to media depicting ultra-thin actresses and models significantly increased women's concerns about their bodies, including how dissatisfied they felt and their likelihood of engaging in unhealthy eating behaviors, such as excessive dieting.

Although on one level the results seem obvious, Grabe believes many people still resist the idea that a societal influence, like the media, can have a real impact on how women view themselves. When individual experiments have found this relationship in the past, she explains, critics have often dismissed them for focusing on groups of particularly body-conscious women, such as college students, or exposing test subjects to unusually racy photos.

Grabe and Hyde, in contrast, analyzed data from every well-designed study on the topic they could find, thus avoiding much of this criticism.

"We've demonstrated that it doesn't matter what the exposure is, whether it's general TV watching in the evening, or magazines, or ads showing on a computer," says Grabe. "If the image is appearance-focused and sends a clear message about a woman's body as an object, then it's going to affect women."

The effect also appears to be growing. The researchers' analysis reveals that, on average, studies conducted in the 2000s show a larger influence of the media on women's body image than do those from the 1990s, says Grabe.

"This suggests that despite all our efforts to teach women and girls to be savvy about the media and have healthy body practices, the media's effect on how much they internalize the thin ideal is getting stronger," she says.

The results are troubling because recent research has established body dissatisfaction as a major risk factor for low self-esteem, depression, obesity, and eating disorders, such as bulimia. At the same time, women's displeasure with their bodies has become so common that it's now considered normal, says Grabe. She hopes that wider recognition of the media's role will encourage people to see the issue as a societal one, rather than as a problem of individual women as it's viewed now.

"I think we need to consider how we're using media images as a culture to share the values we think are important, and the effect that has on our well-being," she says.

The approach Grabe and Hyde took in their study, called meta-analysis, offers a way to quantitatively examine an entire body of research at once. In their case, this meant 77 carefully selected studies of the effects of appearance-focused media images on women's body dissatisfaction, investment in their looks, adoption of the thin ideal, and eating behaviors and beliefs. The analysis also included controlled, experimental studies, in which these effects were tested directly, and investigations that correlated body concerns with women's self-reported consumption of media.

In simple terms, the meta-analysis placed test subjects from every study into two groups: those who were exposed to media images portraying women's bodies and the thin ideal, and those who weren't. It then asked whether differences existed between the two and the magnitude of the differences.

In the end, the researchers did find a significant difference, with women who were exposed to media reporting less satisfaction with their bodies. Notably, this difference was also seen across all four measures of body image concerns.

So, what's the answer? The French government may try to control the media, but don't women also need to learn to be a little less concerned with their looks?

Grabe replies that the issue lies not with our attraction to images of beauty or with women's desire to emulate them, but with what we've come to define as beautiful: bodies that are unnaturally and unhealthily thin.

"I want to stress that it's totally normal for women to want to be attractive," says Grabe. "But what's happening in our society is that many women are striving toward something that's not very realistic or obtainable, and that leads to a lot of health consequences."

Source: University of Wisconsin-Madison

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