Effect of Viewing Thin Versus Normal Body Shapes on Body Image Perception

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Introduction

The pervasive cultural message that an unattractively thin body is the ideal for women (e.g., Lew, 1999) can impact individuals’ perceptions of themselves and others. Both Williams (1996) and Clark and Tiggemann (2007) argued that specific, visual cues can activate body-relevant schemas, affecting subsequent body-image evaluations. If people’s existing schemas reflect the internalization of cultural norms of thinness and dissatisfaction with their own bodies, these cues are more likely to have a negative impact on self-perceptions.

Social comparison is one process by which media affects body image. Research consistently shows that viewing images of attractive, same-sex models results in a decreased body-externality (e.g., Grogan, Williams, & Conner, 1996; Stice & Shaw, 1994; Wilcox & Laird, 2000). Those who feel dissatisfied with their appearances and invest more in appearance are more likely to engage in social comparison (Smets, Jansen, Ruf, & Roefs, 2010; Discrepancy (BID))

While body dissatisfaction (BPSS) and body perception (BID) were strongly related to one another, BID was not as strongly related to any other factor; additionally, body perceptions did not change as a result of the experimental manipulation. This may be evidence that women interpret themselves as larger or smaller than their ideal is more stable over time; it may also be an effect of the limited variability of the FRS. Body perception and satisfaction are difficult to tease apart quantitatively, yet neither may reflect reality. Stowell (1996) found that the discrepancy between a woman’s and an objective observer’s judgment of her actual shape was positively correlated with patterns of disordered eating.

Further research is needed to fully understand the complex relationship between body perception, evaluations, and the potential consequences in real women’s lives.

Hypotheses

Participants

• 217 undergraduates females participated (61%white)
• On-line Psychology subject pool maintenance system (Sona).

Materials: Stimulus Images

• 22 Images of “thin” and 22 Images of “average” models
• Criteria for selection and matching of images
• Full, frontal image of body, neutral pose and background
• Body shape not obese or emaciated
• Clothing commercially sold (product name not apparent)
• Thin/average images matched for general clothing styles
• Inclusion of non-white models in both conditions
• Each image rated along 5 adjectives on a 5-point scale

Measures

• Demographics
• Figure Rating Scale (FRS) **, “actual” and “ideal” ratings
• Actual – Ideal = Body Image

Discrepancy (BID)

• Body Parts Satisfaction Scale-Reported (BPSS-R) **
• Body Parts Satisfaction Scale-Alternate Form (BPSS-A)
• General Media Consumption
• Upward Physical Comparison Scale (UPACS)
• Downward Comparison Scale (DACS)
• Beliefs About Appearance Scale (BAS)
• Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire (SATQA)

Table 1: Condition:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Thin Model</th>
<th>Average Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BPSS-Pre</td>
<td>4.05 (.71)</td>
<td>3.94 (.84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BPSS-Post</td>
<td>3.99 (.78)</td>
<td>4.05 (.91)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AFAS-Pre</td>
<td>2.71 (.67)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AFAS-Post</td>
<td>2.61 (.62)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: BPSS (Post-Pre)

Table 3: BID (Pre-Post)

1. Women who view images of models with thin body sizes will have a significant reduction in body satisfaction and an increase in anti-fat attitudes. Those viewing averaged sized models will experience an increase in body satisfaction and a decrease in anti-fat attitudes.

2. The model size will only affect participants’ body satisfaction and body images when they evaluate each image along appearance factors (i.e. appearance-related primes), and not along personal factors (i.e. non-appearance-related primes).

3. Women’s tendency to engage in social comparison with regards to physical appearance will be positively correlated with anti-fat attitudes, acceptance of cultural standards of beauty, and dysfunctional beliefs about appearance, and negatively correlated with body perception and satisfaction.

Methods

Pre-treatment measures:

Indicate perceived and ideal body-image using the Figure Rating Scale (Stunkard et al., 1983). Current height and weight, demographics (e.g., year, race/ethnicity).

Time 1 measures FRS, BPSS-R and AFAS

Treatment: Image exposure and ratings:

Presentation/rate 22 images of either “thin” or “average” sized models.

Table 3:

BID (Pre-Post) | AFAS (Pre-Post) | UPACS | DACS | BAAS | SATQA
--- | --- | --- | --- | --- | ---
BPSS (Pre) | -0.63** | 0.05 | -0.42** | -0.15 | -0.54** | -0.50**
BPSS (Post) | 0.15 | 0.34** | 0.18** | 0.32** | 0.48** |
AFAS (Pre) | 0.36** | 0.51** | 0.62** |
AFAS (Post) | 0.031** | 0.29** | 0.63** |

Hypothesis 1:

Pearson’s r correlations revealed significant relationships between most of the factors (see Table 3). Upward social comparison, beliefs that one’s value is based on appearance, acceptance of cultural standards of thin ideals, and body satisfaction were all strongly related to one another. Note: Since pre and post comparisons were similar, only pre-treatment measures were included below.

References


