

## Messages about physical attractiveness in animated cartoons

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### Abstract

Relying upon a content analysis of one specific type of medium to which young people are exposed beginning at an early age, on a regular basis, and for many years (i.e., animated cartoons), the present study examines what types of messages are provided about being physically unattractive, physically attractive, and ordinary-looking. This research concerns itself with identifying the characteristics that tend to be associated with being good-looking or unattractive, and then discussing the implications of the findings. Results indicate that many variables were found to differ based on cartoon characters' physical attractiveness, including gender, age, intelligence, body weight, emotional states experienced, prosocial behaviors, antisocial behaviors, and overall goodness/badness. Whenever differences were found, the overriding tendency was for cartoons to provide positive messages about being attractive and negative messages about being unattractive.

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### Introduction

In recent years, a considerable amount of research has been conducted on the impact of the media with respect to promoting “ideals” for physical appearance among people exposed to these media. Most studies published on this subject have focused on characters' weight-related appearance, and have concluded that the print, broadcast, and electronic media all emphasize what has come to be termed the “thin standard” or the “thin ideal.” That is, the media promulgate the messages that it is good to be thin and that being thin is associated with a variety of positive traits such as popularity, likability, being active, intelligence, and so forth (Malkin, Wornian, & Chrisler, 1999; Nemeroff, Stein, Diehl, & Smilack, 1994; Petrie et al., 1996; Spitzer, Henderson, & Zivian, 1999). A

number of researchers have studied the effects of exposure to such media messages, almost always concluding that internalization of the thin ideal leads to problems such as decreased satisfaction with one's own body (i.e., poorer body image), reduced self-esteem, and eating and weight disorders (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2004; Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2003; Lokken, Worthy, & Trautmann, 2004; Yamamiya, Cash, Melnyk, Posavac, & Posavac, 2005). Studies have shown that these effects are greater for women and girls than they are for men and boys (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2004, 2003), but researchers who have examined both males and females in their studies have been quick to point out that adverse effects are, indeed, observed for males as well (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2004).

One intriguing thing about the “physical appearance in the media” literature, though, is that researchers have tended to combine two conceptually very different constructs into one: namely, physical (perhaps better termed facial or overall) attractiveness and body weight.

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That is, when discussing media messages about appearance, researchers overwhelmingly have treated physical attractiveness and weight as if they were one and the same, reporting on the internalization of cultural appearance standards as if they represented only weight-based expectations. In truth, however, they are not one and the same (although we readily concede that contemporary American cultural norms are such that the two are quite intertwined in many people's minds). In their study of the impact of advertisements on body image, Halliwell and Dittmar (2004) noted the fact that researchers consistently have confounded the effects of thinness and attractiveness. Usually overlooked, however, is the fact that it is entirely possible to be overweight and still very good-looking, or to be thin and unattractive. In the present study, we differentiate between physical appearance (i.e., looks or attractiveness) and body weight, and focus on the former.

What little research has been conducted specifically on the subject of appearance as differentiated from weight has generally concluded that, in the media, attractiveness is portrayed as a good thing. Indeed, in their research focusing on internet-based magazines (what some people now term "e-zines") targeting female youths, Labre and Walsh-Childers (2003) concluded that one of the main media messages provided is that being attractive is not merely a good thing, but actually is a requirement for social acceptance in contemporary American society. Recent research focusing on magazine content has shown that there is a preponderance of muscular male images, particularly in magazines targeting male audiences (Frederick, Fessler, & Haselton, 2005) and that magazines often promote a consistent message about the ideal male body as being one that is "built" (Petrie et al., 1996). In their study of appearance-related content on prime-time television, Greenberg, Eastin, Hofschire, Lachlan, and Brownell (2003) concluded that overweight characters were less likely to be considered attractive than those who were not overweight, and they were less likely to interact with romantic partners or display physical affection. Harwood and Anderson (2002) also examined appearance-related messages in prime-time television programs aired during the 1999 broadcast season. They concluded that males were less likely to be attractive than were females; that older characters were less likely to be attractive than their younger counterparts; and that Latinos were more likely to be shown as unattractive when compared to characters of other racial groups. Based on their study of several decades of top box office grossing films, Smith, McIntosh, and Bazzini (1999) concluded that, on a variety of measures, attractive characters were portrayed

more favorably than unattractive characters were. Of particular note, these researchers found that older women were portrayed especially negatively when compared to other age-gender groups (Bazzini et al., 1997).

In their study of children's videos and books, Herbozo, Tantleff-Dunn, Gokee-Larose, and Thompson (2004) discovered that messages emphasizing the importance of physical appearance are present in many children's videos, but not nearly as often in the books they read. Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz (2003) examined the content of Brothers Grimm fairy tales and found that the ones that have survived over the years (e.g., Cinderella, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty) were the ones that placed the greatest emphasis on female beauty, whereas those that did not have such an emphasis have become less well-known as time has passed. Rumble and Cash (2000) examined physical attractiveness among 120 characters appearing in 23 feature-length Walt Disney cartoons spanning a six-decade period. The authors discovered that protagonists were shown to be more attractive than antagonists, and in particular female protagonists were depicted as more attractive than male protagonists were. Moreover, protagonists were portrayed as being thinner than antagonists, a finding that was especially true for female protagonists when compared with their male counterparts. The latter three studies are particularly noteworthy vis-a-vis the present study, as they were the only research studies we found that specifically addressed attractiveness issues in media targeting young people.

Such messages about the importance of being attractive and of the "types" of people who are considered to be attractive and unattractive are of concern because they present people with repeated messages about physically and psychologically unhealthy notions of what one should or should not look like. Over the years, a substantial body of literature has accumulated to demonstrate that exposure to the media has a profound impact upon people's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (see, for example, Mares & Woodard, 2005; Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2004; Shrum, Wyler, & O'Guinn, 1998) while at the same time the media reflect the types of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors characteristic of many persons. There also appears to be a dose-response effect operating, such that people who have more exposure to the media are affected more by what they see, hear, and read than their peers who are exposed less significantly to media messages (Agha, 2003; Shrum, 1999; Shrum, Wyler, & O'Guinn, 1998; Singer, Slovak, Frierson, & York, 1998).

Conceptually, this makes perfect sense and there is a substantial body of theoretical work in the sociological,

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