

The impact of thin models in music videos on adolescent girls' body dissatisfaction

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Abstract

Music videos are a particularly influential, new form of mass media for adolescents, which include the depiction of scantily clad female models whose bodies epitomise the ultra-thin sociocultural ideal for young women. The present study is the first exposure experiment that examines the impact of thin models in music videos on the body dissatisfaction of 16–19-year-old adolescent girls ($n = 87$). First, participants completed measures of positive and negative affect, body image, and self-esteem. Under the guise of a memory experiment, they then either watched three music videos, listened to three songs (from the videos), or learned a list of words. Affect and body image were assessed afterwards. In contrast to the music listening and word-learning conditions, girls who watched the music videos reported significantly elevated scores on an adaptation of the Body Image States Scale after exposure, indicating increased body dissatisfaction. Self-esteem was not found to be a significant moderator of this relationship. Implications and future research are discussed.

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Introduction

Music videos are a relatively recent, but increasingly influential form of mass media for adolescents (Roberts, Henrikson, & Foehr, 2004). There has been concern about documented negative effects with respect to violence and aggression (Anderson et al., 2003; Rustad et al., 2003), sexuality and gender roles (Brown, Steele, & Walsh, 2002; Ward, Hansbrough, & Walker, 2005), and alcohol use (Van den Bulck, Beullens, & Mulder, 2006), but much less attention has been paid to the fact that music videos also depict sociocultural ideals of the body perfect. Music videos often feature scantily clad models whose dance movements further highlight the

size, shape, and proportions of their bodies. Among these idealized models are young women who epitomize the female ideal of ultra-thinness, and who can function as aspirational role models for adolescent girls (Dittmar, 2007; Tiggemann, 2005). Given the growing evidence that unrealistic body ideals in other forms of mass media can increase body dissatisfaction (see review by Levine & Harrison, 2004), it seems likely that thin models in music videos have detrimental effects on adolescent girls' body image. Yet, their role in causing body dissatisfaction among adolescent girls still needs to be examined.

The reasons why this is a significant research gap that needs to be addressed unfold from more general to specific when we consider previous findings and current trends in conjunction. Body dissatisfaction, a psychologically salient discrepancy between a person's perceived body and their ideal body (Halliwel &

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Dittmar, 2006), is important to study because it leads to negative self-focused affect and unhealthy body-shaping behaviors (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002; Thompson, 2004). Heightened body dissatisfaction is likely when actual body sizes are highly discrepant to the sociocultural body ideal, and this is likely to be a growing trend given the increasingly thinner ideal for girls and women in the context of rising obesity in the US, with over 30% of adolescent girls overweight and over 15% obese (American Obesity Association, 2002), and other developed countries. The sociocultural ideal has become synonymous with ultra-thinness, with idealized media models often more than 20% underweight and a Body Mass Index (BMI) in the range of 14–16 (Dittmar, 2007). The extremity of this ‘cult of the skinny’ (Spencer, 2006) becomes clear when we consider that 15% underweight constitutes a diagnostic criterion for Anorexia Nervosa (American Psychiatric Association, 2000), and a BMI of 18.5 the lower end of a biologically healthy body size (Thompson, 2004).

Consistent research evidence documents that the mass media are a pervasive force in shaping body ideals (see review below), and adolescents girls are particularly likely to be sensitized to this influence because appearance and the ‘body perfect’ are central to female identity (e.g., Frederickson & Roberts, 1997) and they are in a phase of identity transition to womanhood (e.g., Grogan, 1999). Although not all music videos feature ultra-thin models, a sizeable proportion do (e.g., Tiggemann, 2005), including videos who feature young all-girl bands who are marketed to appeal to adolescent girls. We have provided a developmental account of how girls use age-relevant icons of the thin sociocultural body ideal as aspirational role models and, extrapolating from the evidence that 5–7-year-old girls report lower body esteem and express a greater desire to be thinner after exposure to images of Barbie dolls (Dittmar, Halliwell, & Ive, 2006), it stands to reason that thin and glamorous girl teen celebrities in music videos could function as aspirational role models for adolescent girls.

To date, research on media exposure to thin models and body image has focused on TV programmes, magazines, and advertisements, but music videos are becoming an increasingly popular form of entertainment amongst young people. MTV, the first TV channel launched in 1980 exclusively for the showing of music videos, now boasts over 342 million viewers worldwide (statistics from www.mtv.co.uk). A survey of 12–34-year olds revealed that 78% of 12–19-year-old girls watch MTV regularly, with adolescents 12–19 years old the most frequent viewers, watching an average of 6.4 h

per week (Rich et al., 1998). In addition to MTV, cable TV typically boasts many additional channels dedicated to playing music videos, and public places, such as stores, bars, and clubs, increasingly display music videos on large TV screens, making them an inescapable, almost omnipresent, form of media. Hence it is likely that adolescent girls’ current exposure to music videos is much higher than the figure of 6.4 h per week suggests.

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, there is a substantial body of research showing that music videos have significant effects in influencing adolescents’ beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors with respect to aggression, violence, sexuality, gender roles, and alcohol use (Anderson et al., 2003; Brown et al., 2002; Rustad et al., 2003; Van den Bulck et al., 2006; Ward et al., 2005). Yet, their impact on adolescent body dissatisfaction has remained curiously under-examined, despite good reasons for suspecting negative exposure effects. Our proposal that female models depicted in music videos often reflect the thin ideal, and are depicted in ways that emphasize their physical appearance, such as close-ups of dance movements, is supported by a content analysis of MTV (Gow, 1998). Two correlational studies have shown that time spent watching music videos is linked with adolescent girls’ body dissatisfaction (Borzekowski, Robinson, & Killen, 2000) and drive for thinness (Tiggemann & Pickering, 1996). However, their correlational design cannot identify cause–effect relationships; it may be that body-dissatisfied girls choose to watch more music videos.

Controlled experimental exposure is best suited to gauging the immediate psychological impact of music videos as a possible *cause* of girls’ body dissatisfaction. To date, there is only one such experimental study, with women students as respondents, aged between 18 and 30 years (Tiggemann & Slater, 2004). These women were exposed to clips from music videos that focused either on appearance, emphasizing female thinness and attractiveness, or that presented ordinary-looking people and scenic shots. Instructional set was also manipulated, to encourage or discourage social comparison with the women in the video clips, but did not have any effect. The main findings were that exposure to appearance-focused music videos increased women’s body dissatisfaction, as expected, and that this effect was due to comparison processing. Thus, these findings provide good evidence that exposure to thin idealized models in music videos increases body dissatisfaction among young women. However, given the focus on college students, we have yet to study the impact of such

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