



Research report

The bold and the beautiful. Influence of body size of televised media models on body dissatisfaction and actual food intake

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ABSTRACT

The effects of exposure to televised thin and average size models on body dissatisfaction and actual food intake were examined. Normal weight female students ($N = 104$) were exposed to a 30-min movie clip featuring beautiful girls. Half of them viewed the movie clip in normal screen size (4:3) and the other half viewed the same movie clip in broad screen size (16:9), in which the body size of the actresses was slightly stretched breadthways. Actual food intake while watching and body dissatisfaction afterwards was examined. Additionally, restrained eating was assessed as a possible moderating variable. Two interaction effects were found between screen size and restrained eating on body dissatisfaction and actual food intake. Restrained eaters tended to feel worse and eat less in the average size condition compared to the thin model condition, whereas unrestrained eaters felt worse and ate less in the thin model condition compared to the average size condition. So, body size of televised images affected body dissatisfaction and food intake, differentially for restrained and unrestrained eaters. The screen sizes used correspond with widely used screen sizes nowadays enhancing the practical relevance of the study, since screen size might affect body dissatisfaction and food intake in daily life as well.

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Introduction

In the fall of 2006, Spanish fashion models with BMI scores below 18 were banned from the catwalk of the famous Madrid Fashion Week. Madrid's local government stated they wanted to set a more positive, healthy image of beauty for teenagers to endorse, because fashion functions as a mirror and many teenagers imitate what they see on the catwalk. In addition, the Italian fashion industry and the government followed, by formulating a voluntary code of conduct which aimed to keep unhealthy models from the catwalk. Italy's Youth and Sports minister said that fashion's obsession with slimness created an extreme ideal (Duff, BBC News, 2006). These new developments are in contrast with the increasing thinness of fashion models that can be seen in the last decades (Sypceck, Gray, & Ahrens, 2004). In our society, the media provides women with depictions of thin models in magazines and on television, and underlines that thinness is linked to happiness and health. Most of the time, the thin media models women are exposed to are very unrealistic. Levine and Smolak (1996) found that fashion models are thinner than 98% of American women. Many scholars have accordingly suggested that this unrealistic

media portrayal of women can be held partly responsible for the development and maintenance of body-image disturbances and eating pathologies (e.g., Harrison & Cantor, 1997; Levine & Smolak, 1996; Stice, Schupak-Neuberg, Shaw, & Stein, 1994; Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). The question arises what would happen when women are exposed to less thin models. Would these more realistic images reduce the occurrence of a negative own body image? Would they even prevent any negative perceptions from developing? In the present study we examined the effects of exposure to televised images of women, both thin and more average-sized, on body dissatisfaction and food intake in young women.

Several experimental studies earlier compared the influence of very thin models on body image and eating behaviour with that of average-sized and plus-sized models or inanimate objects (for an overview, see Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002). Most of these studies used images from existing magazines to tap the effects of exposure to slim media images. In an experimental study, Irving (1990), for instance, exposed female students to slides of thin, average- and oversized models. The participants that had been exposed to the thin models had lower self-esteem scores and body satisfaction than the participants that had been shown the average- and oversized models. Stice and Shaw (1994) compared the effects of magazine images of thin female models with the effects of images of normal weight models and found that women

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felt significantly less satisfied with their bodies and reported significantly more emotional distress after they had viewed the images featuring thin models. More recently, Hawkins, Richards, Granley, and Stein (2004) had college women fill in various questionnaires related to body image and eating disturbance after they had seen thin-ideal magazine images or neutral magazine images. Body satisfaction and self-esteem decreased after exposure to the thin-ideal images, whereas negative mood and eating disorder symptom scores increased. In general, previous research that compared exposure to thin model images with exposure to average size, oversized model or neutral images showed that the negative effects on body satisfaction were stronger after exposure to slim model images, which is often referred to as the 'negative contrast effect' (e.g., Thornton and Maurice, 1999).

It is essential to know whether besides the negative impact on body satisfaction, thin-model images affect actual eating behaviours as well, especially since previous studies found body dissatisfaction to be related to restraint as well as bulimic eating patterns (e.g., Paa & Larson, 1998; Ricciardelli, Tate, & Williams, 1997; Stice, 1994). Nevertheless, only two studies have examined the effects of idealized magazine images on actual food intake. Mills, Polivy, Herman, and Tiggemann (2002) found that restrained eaters ate more than unrestrained eaters after having been exposed to thin-model images rather than plus-sized models or neutral images. Monro and Huon (2006) reported high self-objectifying women, i.e. women who view their bodies as an object to be valued for external appearance rather than internal qualities, to eat more after exposure to advertisements featuring idealized female models than after exposure to neutral ads. Although the two comparative studies both suggest that women who are preoccupied with their appearance eat more after exposure to thin-ideal models, the findings clearly warrant corroboration.

Through the powerful medium of television, Western women are exposed to the current beauty ideal on a daily basis and it has been suggested that due to identification and transportation, the impact of televised images on body image might be more substantial than the impact of magazine images (e.g., Hobbs, Broder, Pope, & Rowe, 2006; Nabi, Stitt, Halford, & Finnerty, 2006). Given the fact that actresses are often selected for their capacity to get people involved and empathize with them, identification with actresses and transportation into the storyline may be important factors in the transference of norms and values pertaining to the appearance and presumed eating behaviour of these actresses. Most films and TV shows and particularly commercials are designed to get people emotionally involved in the message that is conveyed and thus designed to induce transportation.

Only a few experimental studies used a design in which exposure to televised thin-model images was assessed. They all compared the actual food intake of women while they were watching television commercials featuring slim models and/or diet products with the intake of women watching neutral commercials (Seddon & Berry, 1996; Strauss, Doyle, & Kreipe, 1994; Warren, Strauss, Taska, & Sullivan, 2005). Summarizing, it was found that only restrained eaters ate more after viewing commercials featuring slim women. The authors suggested that exposure to slim women may lead to low self-esteem and body dissatisfaction in restrained eaters, and this negative affect may disinhibit the cognitive control of food intake with overeating as a result. Apparently, an individual factor like restraint status moderates the effects of exposure to thin models on food intake. It needs to be noted that the studies cited above all used neutral commercials in their control conditions rather than commercials with normal weight models, which may have confounded their findings in that the neutral messages may have differed from the

thin-model commercials on more aspects than containing the beauty ideal or not.

In the present study we examined the effects of a body-size manipulation of the same film characters on the actual food intake and body dissatisfaction in female students. To create a thin-ideal condition and a 'normal' or 'average-size' condition while keeping all other aspects such as type of film, storyline and appearance of the main characters constant over experimental conditions, we opted to present all participants with the same film but manipulated the body size of the actresses by using different screen proportions, thus avoiding any unwanted potentially confounding effects due to differences between actresses or storylines. By using the same movie in different screen sizes, we avoided any unwanted effects of individual differences between actresses or story lines that would be present when using two different movies (one with thin models and one with normal sized models). We investigated the effects of our body-size manipulation on the actual food intake while the participants were watching the film and assessed their body dissatisfaction afterwards. Moreover, because restrained eating is known to be an important factor in actual eating behaviour (e.g., Ouwens, van Strien, & van der Staak, 2003; Wardle and Beales, 1987) and because restrained eaters might be more susceptible to thin-ideal media images (see also Mills et al., 2002), we additionally looked for moderating effects of restrained eating on the associations between thin-ideal exposure and food intake.

We hypothesised that overall participants would feel more dissatisfied with their bodies when they were exposed to the slim-looking actresses rather than to the same actresses whose proportions looked more average and we expected the restrained eaters to eat more in the thin-ideal condition only, supporting the findings of Strauss et al. (1994), Seddon and Berry (1996), and Warren et al. (2005).

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 104 normal weight female students, all recruited at the Radboud University Nijmegen. At this university, a system is used in which students can voluntarily sign up for participation in current research, in exchange for money or course credits. All students can use the system, but students enrolled in certain educational programs (e.g., students following Bachelors in psychology and educational sciences) are obliged to participate in research for a specific number of hours during their first year. The participants of the current study had a mean age of 20.8 years (S.D. = 3.6) and their average body mass index (BMI = weight/height²) was 21.3 (S.D. = 2.1). To facilitate an accurate interpretation of the results, students with BMI scores exceeding 25 were excluded because overweight individuals have been shown to have different intake patterns than non-overweight individuals (e.g., Bray & Popkin, 1998; Gibson, 1996; MacDiarmid, Vail, Cade, & Blundell, 1998; McCrory et al., 1999; Roberts, McCrory, & Saltzman, 2002). In addition, participants with EDI bulimia scores (EDI-II; Garner, 1991) above 3.5 were excluded since other factors have been suggested to play a role in the food intake of women with bulimic symptoms (Galanti, Gluck, & Geliebter, 2007; Steiger et al., 2004). Only one participant indicated that she had already seen the movie, but removal of this person from analyses did not alter the findings. When asked following completion of the experiment, none of the participants indicated having been aware of the actual purpose of the study. Four participants reported they knew the study was about food intake, but excluding their data also did not alter the results.

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