



# Media images and female body dissatisfaction: The moderating effects of the Five-Factor traits

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The purpose of this study was to examine how the Five-Factor personality traits moderated the effects of exposure to idealized images on body dissatisfaction in women.

**Method:** Sixty-four college women completed the NEO-PI and the Eating Disorder Inventory and were then randomly exposed to images of either thin fashion models or heavier, (“plus-sized”) models. Following presentation of the stimuli, participants completed a second body esteem measure, which was the dependent variable.

**Results:** Women high in neuroticism showed significantly greater shifts in body esteem following exposure to media images than did less neurotic women, feeling more dissatisfied with their bodies after viewing idealized images and more satisfied with their bodies after viewing heavier women. Each of the other traits was associated with more favorable self-appraisals following exposure to the idealizing images.

**Conclusions:** Of the Five-Factor traits, the harmful effects of idealized images seem to be limited to women with relatively higher levels of neuroticism. These results suggest that the harmful effects of media images may not be as pervasive as is widely believed.

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## 1. Introduction

Although there is evidence that idealized images may lower body esteem in some women, results have been contradictory with some studies reporting negative effects (Irving, 1990; Stice & Shaw, 1994), some no effect (Champion & Furnham, 1999; Halliwell, Dittmar, & Howe, 2005; Martin & Kennedy, 1993), and some actually reporting positive effects (Henderson-King & Henderson-King, 1997; Joshi, Herman, and Polivy, 2004; Mills, Polivy, Herman, & Tiggemann, 2002). Overall, it appears that viewing thin media images generally has an adverse effect on female body image; however, effect sizes are small and heavily contingent on study design, specific measures, and characteristics of the participants (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Tiggeman, 2002).

### 1.1. Individual differences and media exposure

The growing awareness that women show a wide range of responses to media images has led to an increased interest in identifying individual difference variables that may moderate the relationship between exposure to media images and body dissatisfaction. It appears that high body weight (Henderson-King and Henderson-King, 1997), pre-existing body dissatisfaction (Stice, Spangler, & Agras, 2001), and

contingent self-esteem (Patrick, Neighbors, & Knee, 2004) increase the likelihood that idealized images will have a deleterious effect on self-image.

Thus far, research on the relationship between media exposure and personality has proceeded along a relatively atheoretical path focusing on specific, isolated traits. To date, the question of how broad personality traits moderate the relationship between exposure to idealized images and body image remain relatively unexplored. The Five-Factor Model currently provides the most widely accepted taxonomy of personality traits (McCrae & Costa, 1999). These traits—extroversion, neuroticism, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and openness to experience—are thought to comprise the core dimensions of human personality and may, therefore, represent a fruitful avenue for exploration. Although a number of studies have explored the relationship between the Five-Factor traits, or one or their facets, and eating disorders, the relationship between these traits and responses to idealized images has remain relatively unexplored.

### 1.2. Neuroticism

There are several reasons to suspect that neuroticism may moderate the impact of idealized images. Individuals who are high in neuroticism are, by definition, emotionally unstable (Eysenck, 1990). That is, they are emotionally, and perhaps physiologically, more reactive to potentially threatening stimuli (Rushting, 1998). They are excitable, easily upset, and prone to overreacting to any experience considered unpleasant. There is ample evidence that at

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least for some women, exposure to images of exceptionally thin attractive women is emotionally threatening (Bergstrom, Neighbors, & Malheim, 2009; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002). Thus, women who are high in neuroticism should be more likely than other women to be disturbed by idealized images.

Neurotic individuals also more likely than others to experience negative affect (Watson and Clark, 1984): “such individuals are, in any given situation, *more likely* to experience a significant level of distress” p. 466 That is, not only do neurotic individuals react more strongly to experiences but they are disproportionately likely to react in negative terms. Therefore, we expect that women higher in neuroticism may respond more strongly, and more negatively, to idealized images than women who are lower in neuroticism.

Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) is the most widely accepted theoretical framework for understanding the effects of idealized images on body satisfaction. Viewing images of highly attractive individuals is thought to produce an upward comparison process, which in turn, results in lowered body esteem. A recent meta-analysis supports the claim that the social comparison process is associated in increased levels of body dissatisfaction in both women and men (Myers & Crowther, 2009). However, individuals differ in their tendency to engage in social comparison. Research has shown that neurotic individuals are more likely than those low in neuroticism to make upward comparisons (Martin and Kennedy, 1993; Van der Zee, Buunk, Sanderman, Botke, & Van Den Bergh, 1999). In addition, women with eating disorder symptoms are more likely than those without symptoms to engage in upward comparisons (Corning, Krumm, & Smitham, 2006) and women with eating disorders also tend to show elevated rates of neuroticism (Cassin & Ranson, 2005; Cervera et al., 2003; Ghaderi and Scott, 2000; Miller, Schmidt, Vaillancourt, McDougall, & Liberte., 2006). Thus, when confronted with images of highly attractive individuals, women high in neuroticism should be more likely than those low in neuroticism to compare themselves to the target.

Neuroticism is also highly correlated with self-esteem. Indeed, the relationship between the two traits is so strong that some investigators are now questioning whether they reflect a single underlying construct (Judge, et al., 2002). This is important because low self-esteem has been shown to moderate the relationship between media exposure and body image (Berel & Irving, 1998; Jones & Buckingham, 2005). It seems likely, therefore, that neuroticism would also influence women's reactions to these images.

Thus, we would expect that women high in neuroticism are more likely than those low in neuroticism to compare themselves to attractive others. Second, because of their greater emotional lability, this comparison is more likely to result in negative affect for upward comparisons.

Each of the remaining Five-Factor traits has also been linked to eating disorder symptomatology; however, none have been studied in relation to media images. Therefore, the following discussion is limited to literature that supports a theoretical link, directly or indirectly, between a Five-Factor trait (or one of its facets) and response to idealized images.

### 1.3. Conscientiousness

It has often been alleged that excessively thin standards of beauty promote body dissatisfaction by providing an unattainable standard to which women compare themselves. This argument assumes that most women perceive these standards as unattainable and that comparing oneself to a superior other invariably results in decreased self-esteem. Although it is often assumed that comparing oneself to a superior other will result in a negative self-evaluation, Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) suggests that both positive and negative self-appraisals are possible depending on the psychological process triggered by the comparison and one's relationship to

the comparison target. Ultimately, the impact of social comparison on self-image is determined by whether the comparison results in assimilation or contrast with the target. If one assimilates, or identifies with, the idealized image, the result is enhancement of the self. If the comparison results in contrast with the idealized image, the result is decreased self-esteem.

Individuals high in conscientiousness are determined, persistent, confident, and self-disciplined. They are generally competent people who have faith in their ability to accomplish their goals. In short, they could be characterized as having high self-efficacy. Such individuals should be less likely than most people to be intimidated by idealized images. On the contrary, these individuals tend to meet challenges with confidence and, if appearance is important to them, are likely to be inspired rather than threatened by idealized images. In short, exposure to the images is likely to result in assimilation rather than contrast.

### 1.4. Openness to experience

Openness to experience is generally regarded as the most controversial and nebulous of the Five-Factor traits (Costa & McCrae, 1997). This trait is associated with a number of different and sometimes difficult to define concepts. Consistent with this observation, its relationship to eating disorders has been contradictory. In a Swedish sample, Ghaderi and Scott (2000) found that, relative to non-eating disordered subjects, women with eating disorders were significantly higher on openness to experience. A second study (Podar, Hannes, & Allik, 1999) found that eating disordered subjects scored *lower* on openness to experience than those in a non-disordered comparison group. And a third study (Claes et al., 2006), reported low levels of openness among one cluster of eating disordered patients but no relationship among other clusters. Given the inherent complexity of this concept, it is difficult to speculate about its relation to media responses.

Individuals who score high on this trait might be best characterized as unconventional and nonconforming. Conversely, low scores on openness are associated with greater endorsement of traditional values. Thus, women low on this trait may assign greater importance to physical appearance and be more likely to internalize the thin ideal of beauty than those higher in openness. If true, higher scores on openness to experience would tend to be associated with higher levels of body esteem following exposure to idealized images.

### 1.5. Extroversion

Like all of the Five-Factor traits, extroversion is multi-faceted. Among the most important defining characteristics of the extroverted individual, however, is the tendency to experience positive emotions (Watson and Clark, 1997). Extroverts are cheerful, positive and confident. Like the conscientious individual, they can also be quite determined in pursuing their goals. Given these traits, it is doubtful that idealized images would negatively impact the self-image of extroverts. Their mood is simply too resilient. Consistent with this reasoning, it appears that low extroversion is almost a prerequisite for the development of an eating disorder (Miller et al., 2006).

### 1.6. Agreeableness

While both theory and research suggest that anorexics should show elevations on agreeableness (Bollen & Wojciechowski, 2004), it is not clear how agreeableness might be related to reactions to idealized images in a non-clinical population. There is reason to suspect that agreeable individuals would be less likely than others to react negatively to the images. They are relatively stable emotionally. As is the case with extroverts, it is fairly difficult to upset agreeable individuals. Moreover, because they are noncompetitive and not prone

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