



Disclaimer labels on fashion magazine advertisements: Effects on social comparison and body dissatisfaction

Marika Tiggemann*, Amy Slater, Belinda Bury, Kimberley Hawkins, Bonny Firth

Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Recent proposals across a number of Western countries have suggested that idealised media images should carry some sort of disclaimer informing readers when these images have been digitally enhanced. The present studies aimed to experimentally investigate the impact on women's body dissatisfaction of the addition of such warning labels to fashion magazine advertisements. Participants were 120 and 114 female undergraduate students in Experiment 1 and Experiment 2 respectively. In both experiments, participants viewed fashion magazine advertisements with either no warning label, a generic warning label, or a specific more detailed warning label. In neither experiment was there a significant effect of type of label. However, state appearance comparison was found to predict change in body dissatisfaction irrespective of condition. Unexpectedly, trait appearance comparison moderated the effect of label on body dissatisfaction, such that for women high on trait appearance comparison, exposure to specific warning labels actually resulted in increased body dissatisfaction. In sum, the present results showed no benefit of warning labels in ameliorating the known negative effect of viewing thin-ideal media images, and even suggested that one form of warning (specific) might be harmful for some individuals. Accordingly, it was concluded that more extensive research is required to guide the most effective use of disclaimer labels.

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Introduction

Widespread body dissatisfaction among women, particularly with body shape and weight, has now been documented in an extensive research literature, adding cumulative support to Rodin, Silberstein, and Striegel-Moore's (1985) earlier conceptualization of weight as a "normative discontent" for women. Such high levels of body dissatisfaction and accompanying disordered eating are generally attributed to sociocultural factors (e.g., Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999; Tiggemann, 2011). It is certainly clear that current societal standards for female beauty inordinately emphasize the desirability of thinness, and thinness at such a level as to be increasingly impossible for most women to achieve (Spitzer, Henderson, & Zivian, 1999). While such beauty ideals can be transmitted in many ways, e.g., by parents and peers, the mass media represent by far the most powerful and persuasive sociocultural transmitter (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002) and are argued to play an important causal role in body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (e.g., Nemeroff, Stein, Drehb, & Smilack, 1994; Tiggemann, 2002).

Fashion and beauty magazines, in particular, have been identified as a potent source of unrealistic thin ideals (Harper & Tiggemann, 2008; Kilbourne, 1994). Even a casual flick through any women's fashion magazine will reveal a plethora of young, tall, long-legged, large-eyed, and clear-skinned women with typically Caucasian features. But the more obvious and consistent feature shared by the models is that they are also very thin. Not only are the models naturally thin, but digital modification techniques are now routinely used to further elongate legs and slice off kilograms and centimetres from waists, hips, and thighs, as well as to eliminate any other blemishes (Bennett, 2008). Thus the media-presented ideals are artificially rendered even less realistic and attainable for the average girl or woman.

Extensive correlational evidence supports the link between naturally-occurring media exposure (especially fashion magazines) and body dissatisfaction or disturbed eating (for a meta-analysis, see Levine & Murnen, 2009). However, such correlational evidence cannot speak to the postulated causal role played by media images. Accordingly, researchers have increasingly turned to experimental methods which manipulate exposure to thin ideals under controlled conditions. A large number of such studies have now demonstrated that acute exposure to thin ideal images in a variety of media contexts (causally) leads to women immediately feeling worse about their bodies. Two different meta-analyses (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Groesz et al., 2002) have confirmed that across studies there is a reliable negative effect of viewing thin-ideal

* Corresponding author at: School of Psychology, Flinders University, GPO Box 2100, Adelaide, SA 5001, Australia. Tel.: +61 8 8201 2482; fax: +61 8 8201 3877.

E-mail address: marika.tiggemann@flinders.edu.au (M. Tiggemann).

media images (compared to other images) on body satisfaction and disordered eating, particularly for those women who already have significant body concerns.

The detrimental impact on women of exposure to thin ideals has become an important social issue. Accordingly, there is considerable interest from researchers, policy makers, and the general public alike in developing interventions to disrupt the nexus between media images and body dissatisfaction. Some interventions have successfully used media literacy training to ‘inoculate’ against negative media effects (Levine & Smolak, 2006; Ogden & Sherwood, 2008; Posavac, Posavac, & Weigel, 2001; Yamamiya, Cash, Melnyk, Posavac, & Posavac, 2005). However, such interventions target the individual, often involve considerable time and effort (multiple sessions over a number of weeks), and are difficult to put in place in a naturalistic environment. Thus there is a pressing need for simple but ecologically valid interventions directly addressing the media.

In Australia toward the end of 2009, the National Advisory Group on Body Image released a Voluntary Industry Code of Conduct which recommended a number of strategies for reducing the negative impact of media images (National Advisory Group on Body Image, 2009). These include: using a diverse range of models of healthy weight, ensuring that models are over 16 years of age, limiting the use of digital technology, and of most relevance here, making consumers aware of the extent to which media images have been digitally altered. Elsewhere in the world, in France, the United Kingdom, and Israel, there have been similar political movements. For some time (since December 2006), the most popular teenage magazine in Australia, *Girlfriend* (Roy Morgan Research, 2010), has been using a “reality check” label (e.g., “It took weeks of planning, two hair and makeup artists and studio lighting to help make our celebs look photo shoot ready”) on selected images. However, as yet such labelling is restricted to the relatively small number of in-house images, and cannot be applied to images from other sources (such as advertisements or accompanying celebrity stories).

Given the contemporary political interest in the use of disclaimer or warning labels on media images, research in this area is particularly timely. Warning labels represent an attractive strategy that can be relatively easily implemented and involve little conscious effort on the part of the reader. They also represent a way of using media strategies to counteract the effects of the media. Nevertheless, the potential benefits of such a strategy have largely been assumed and as yet, there has been very little empirical evidence as to the effectiveness of such a move. Encouraging preliminary results come from the only known published study (Slater, Tiggemann, Firth, & Hawkins, 2012) which has investigated such a strategy. In that study, participants who viewed a series of fashion spreads with a warning label indicating that the image had been digitally altered reported lower body dissatisfaction than participants who viewed the same fashion spreads without the warning label. However, fashion spreads represent a particular form of content in women’s magazines that has not often been the subject of studies of media effects.

The present studies sought to further experimentally investigate the effect of warning labels on women’s response to thin idealised media images. Here, fashion magazine advertisements were chosen as the focus, as these both epitomise the thin ideal and constitute much of the content of fashion magazines. In addition, they have commonly been used as ecologically valid stimuli in studies that reliably demonstrate negative effects of media exposure (Want, 2009). As the precise form of warning has not been specified in the various proposals, two forms of warning label were tested. The ‘generic’ label stated simply that the image had been digitally altered. In contrast, the ‘specific’ label described which part or parts of the image had been altered, more akin to the approach of *Girlfriend* magazine. In this, we speculated that individually-tailored

and more informative specific warning labels might be seen as more credible and therefore prove more effective.

We also sought to begin the investigation of the underlying processes by which warning labels might operate. Thus far, the inclusion of a disclaimer on digitally enhanced images has simply been assumed to be a positive step, with little explicit articulation of how this would lead to reduced body dissatisfaction. The implicit reasoning is that warning labels will serve to inform the reader that the fashion image is not ‘real’ and therefore does not present a realistic, relevant, or appropriate target with which to compare herself, which will then lead to less social comparison and the preservation of body satisfaction. The above reasoning follows from the usually accepted explanation for negative effects of media exposure, which are generally attributed to social comparison (although other mediating processes such as activation of appearance schemas, Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2002, or appearance-contingent self-worth, Strahan, LaFrance, Wilson, Ethier, Spencer, & Zanna, 2008, have also been identified). It is reasoned that when women compare themselves to the thin and beautiful images in the media, as they do (Engeln-Maddox, 2005; Strahan, Wilson, Cressman, & Buote, 2006; Tiggemann, Gardiner, & Slater, 2000), this comparison is almost invariably upward so that women find themselves lacking, thus leading to negative mood and body dissatisfaction (Major, Testa & Bylsma, 1991). Although there is accruing evidence that engaging in social comparison while viewing thin ideal images at least partially mediates negative effects on subsequent body dissatisfaction (e.g., Bessenoff, 2006; Tiggemann, Polivy, & Hargreaves, 2009), in the most comprehensive review of media effects to date, Levine and Murnen (2009) still concluded that “after nearly 25 years of research on media and body image, we still know relatively little about the automatic intentional and motivational processes involved in the role of *social comparison* in media effects”.

Thus the second aim of the studies was to investigate the role of social comparison in the effectiveness of warning labels. Social comparison was conceptualized in two ways: as a reactive state elicited in response to environmental events (state social comparison); and as a relatively enduring characteristic of the individual (trait social comparison). Here we investigated both. Specifically, the extent of (state) social comparison processing in response to the media images was explicitly assessed and tested as a potential underlying mechanism (mediating variable). In addition, trait social comparison was assessed as a potential moderating variable. Just as there are demonstrated individual differences in vulnerability to media images (Groesz et al., 2002), there may also be individual differences that moderate the effect of warning labels on those images. The (trait) tendency to engage in social comparison has been found to be a strong predictor of body dissatisfaction in its own right (for a meta-analysis, see Myers & Crowther, 2009), as well as a moderator of the effect of thin-ideal images (Dittmar & Howard, 2004). Based on Yamamiya et al.’s (2005) finding of a stronger effect for their media literacy intervention for women high on internalization, we predicted that warning labels will have a greater beneficial effect for women with high levels of trait social comparison (who are more prone to negative media effects).

In sum, the present studies were designed as an experimental analogue to contemporary proposals across a number of countries that warning labels be placed on digitally enhanced media images. Specifically, the experiments investigated the effectiveness of such warning labels on fashion magazine advertisements in ameliorating negative effects on women’s body dissatisfaction. The investigation was conducted within the framework of social comparison theory, the assumed underlying mechanism of the intervention. It was predicted that fashion advertisements labelled as digitally altered would be judged as less realistic than unlabelled advertisements and consequently activate less social comparison on the basis of appearance. As a result (i.e., mediated by state social

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