The Effects of Representations of ideal body types in fashion/beauty magazines on College-aged Females

Introduction

Millions of women in the United States are affected by magazine advertisements every day. Jean Kilbourne states, “We are each exposed to over 3000 ads a day. Yet, remarkably, most of us believe we are not influenced by advertising” (Kilbourne, 2012). Women pay a lot of attention to fashion or beauty magazines, which feature many advertisements filled with models that have an unrealistic body image that the female consumers may never be able to achieve physically. These images used in the mainstream media are what set the tone for how women are supposed to look or dress.

The model’s body-images that the marketing companies normally use can potentially end up being very harmful to its viewers, because the images typically feature unrealistic body measurements that are incompatible to its average female reader. Due to this reason, it is important to better educate ourselves on the different perceptions of body-images that affect the female consumers and their ideal body desires. There has been much research on the female consumers’ behaviors and their views towards the traditional super-thin model. But grasping a better understanding whether the female viewers would rather see a more realistic body image verses an unrealistic body image in advertising is uncharted territory.

Therefore, the communication phenomenon that I’m interested in focusing on is how college-age women evaluate themselves after viewing advertisements in magazines and whether they prefer more realistic or less realistic body-images in advertising. This research will allow a better understanding of how magazine advertisements affect women’s opinions of themselves, their self-esteem and acceptance of their personal appearance. It will also focus on an overview of how women are affected by the images planted in the media, research studies that support this
statement and a methodology that brings this research experiment to life. This research investigation could help determine the boundaries between what body-images that are most desirable but still somewhat achievable for the average female consumers. The purpose of this study is to understand how college-aged women view themselves after viewing models used in fashion and beauty magazines advertisements and whether they prefer more realistic or less realistic model representation in advertising.

**Body types typically used in beauty and fashion advertisements**

There has been much discussion about the models used in the media, which can affect and have a large impact on females’ body images, self-esteem and desired body appearance. Women use advertisements in magazines to analyze their own body image and attractiveness. Marketing companies use unrealistic models to their advantage in advertisements, because they know that the models’ body images are unattainable to 95% of the US female population. This statistical fact is a gimmick that will never go out of business for marketing companies, because as long as the female consumers desire to be thin, the companies will always have a product to sell. They are selling a product that is highly desired but rarely achievable.

According to Rader Programs which is a website that offers valuable information about eating disorders and many factors that contribute to them, this site states, “The average U.S. model weighs 117 lbs. and is 5’11 while the average U.S. woman weighs 140 lbs. and is 5’4.” (Media and eating disorder, 2012). This statistic can be very alarming when female consumer’s use ultra-thin models in magazines to compare themselves to the body ideals marketing companies use to promote their products. Radar Programs also talk about how most models are classified as anorexic and are at least 25% under their ideal weight for their height (Media and eating disorder, 2012). It’s ironic that the average readers want to compare themselves to models
in fashion magazines, when those very models only statistically represent 5% of the female population in America. These models are also statistically the only body types typically used in beauty advertisements, which excludes 95% of the other body types that make up America’s female population (Kilbourne, 2012).

Lately in the marketing world, some companies have started trying other approaches as well. For example, Glamour Magazine shocked viewers, when they featured a plus size model without her being altered by Photoshop. The fans raved over this article and Editor, Cindi Leive wrote, “On its own, the picture may not seem that incredible, but after flipping through 193 pages of uniform sample-size models, the image is striking.” (On the CL.: The picture you can’t stop talking about: meet "the woman on p. 194" Glamour). This articles talks about how many women enjoyed seeing a model in the magazine that they could relate too.

In contrast, an article which talked about Ralph Lauren casting its first plus-size model ever gained a bit of negative feedback from bloggers. The article explains how Ralph Lauren hired its first plus-size model, which is rare for the company, since his company is known for using ultra-thin models to represent most of their products. Some bloggers complained that a size 12 model is not a realistic plus size woman and that plus size is at least size 18 to 24 (Lauren casts first ever plus-size model, as Vogue beauty Robyn Lawley takes starring role in new campaign, Mail Online). Other bloggers commended Ralph Lauren for using this plus size model, saying that it was very refreshing that they could relate to her size and could imagine themselves in the very clothes she was wearing. So these articles bring up a great debate on the factor of where do women in the United States draw the line for models being too thin or too large, that are used in the fashion and beauty magazines.
Theoretical Grounding

There are two theoretical constructs which will help inform my communication phenomenon. The first theory I will use is the Generalized other theory, which explains how individuals create a personal images of themselves based on social norms and expectations. (Griffin, 2009) This theory is very helpful to my research because it explains how individuals use what they see in the media to help them create their self-image and the way they want to be perceived. Women use the model images they see in magazine advertisements to create or guide their individual image, in order to feel included by the United States cultural expectations. The media acts as a generalized other according to Griffin, (2009). His text states, “An organized set of information that the individual carries in her head about what the general expectation and attitudes of the social group.” (Griffin, 2006, p.65) This theory is a personal guide on how to behave, act and look in society, so you feel accepted. Individuals don’t realize how often they base their actions and self-concepts off of what they see and feel is a social norm. Female consumers based their self-images on the common trends featured in the women’s fashion and beauty industry. This industry sets the bar on how women are supposed to look in America’s society to be considered desirable, beautiful and attractive. So understanding how fashion magazine affect women’s desires will also allow us to understand how they compose their personal view of themselves based off of what the media to telling women magazine readers. Since the media acts as our Generalized other and sets the bar for women in society, marketing companies should learn when they have crossed a line and understand limitations.

The second theory that will help explain my research topic is Social comparison theory. This theory describes how individuals judge their personal exceptions based off of other individuals in
society (Wood, 2010). This theory helps explain why women care so deeply about what others think and are constantly measuring and comparing themselves to the models in fashion and beauty magazines. Social comparison can be helpful because it helps individuals develop normal and socially accepted behaviors. This theory also validates realistic cultural norms used in an individual’s social living environment.

Social comparison theory allows researchers to understand the connections women make with the models that are used in the fashion industry and magazines. The models that are used in the fashions magazines are considered a main factor in what sets the bar on the traits women should obtain in order to be perceived as beautiful and attractive. Women use this concept, so they can evaluate themselves and see whether or not they are fitting into the mold that the media and marketing companies are constantly creating. Women continually strive to uphold the criteria that the media creates as most desirable. But why hasn’t the media asked what the female viewer’s find beautiful or most desirable or what body type would they rather see in the media? It is a question that needs to be investigated.

**Physical body image consequences and benefits**

Many researchers have explored different areas and behavior that females go through when comparing themselves to the mass media images that set the bar for all women by telling them what they are supposed to look like in the United States. So it’s critical that researchers keep expanding on different research which explains the effects the media has on women. Because it is important that we recognize the positive and negative effects the media creates. These studies will help expand on my research and allow me to better my experimental study
about finding what college women desire most in the media and what is going to represent their needs.

**Media’s Negative consequences and contributions to dissatisfaction about self-body image**

The media contributes to women’s body-anxiety stress and can also lead to eating disorders. It is important to understand the toll the mainstream media can take on individuals, especially women. A study by Bissell and Rask (2010) called “Real Women on Real Beauty” used a variety of images of this one Dove model, where the researchers used Photoshop to manipulate the model’s body to represent four different body shapes. These four shapes consisted of an ultra-thin representation, muscular/athletic representation, a plus-size representation and the real image of the Dove model. The researchers wanted to explore the effectiveness of using manipulated images of the Dove model to see whether the exposure to these different body shapes would decrease short-term judgment of the women’s personal body image versus their ideal body image. After testing a group of women between the ages of 19 to 51, the researchers found that it didn’t make a difference in the participants’ opinion of their current body image versus their ideal body image after viewing the natural image of Dove model or the plus-size version. Bissell and Rask (2010) found that that participant’s level of involvement towards the model’s body-image and the disagreement between their physical appearances versus their ideal appearance were based on how important it was to the participant to fit into the societal views of being thin. The researchers also discovered that the participants that felt it was most important to be thin or felt that thin women were more successful typically had a more critical evaluation on the models and their current appearance. Bissell and Rask (2010) also explained that it didn’t matter the age of the individual, but factored more on participant’s “level of endorsement to be thin” (p.663). The scores of the body image
disagreement and social comparison to the models seemed to be much greater in the Caucasian participants then in the African-American participants. This result may exist because the media promotes more Caucasian models to set a social norm or trends in the United States. Leading to Caucasian women had more advertising images of models representing their race to remind them of the most desired body image in the media.

Spurgas’ (2004) study called “Body Image and Cultural Background” states that, “Researchers have found that body image can influence a women’s self-confidence, her assertiveness, and her attitude regarding eating and exercise habits.” (Spurgas, 2004, p.297). This study consisted of eleven females between the ages of 16 to 25 having different cultural backgrounds, such as race and ethnicities in an interview which focused on factors that affected college women’s perceptions on their body. The results of this experiment basically stated that the female individual’s degree of satisfaction with her body appearance relies on the amount she emphasizes on physical appearance. In this study there was a reoccurring theme, that the college women kept referring the media’s sense of perfection and how “the idea that images of women’s bodies portrayed in the media are ‘unrealistic’ and ‘unattainable.’ While “terms such as ‘super-skinny’ and supermodel’ surfaced frequently during the data analysis” were constantly stated (Spurgas, 2004, p.313). All of Spurgas’ (2004) participants did agree “that the most prevalent portrayal of the female body in the media is thin and white, and that women of all races and ethnicities are increasingly being held to this standard” (p.313). Even-though all females are being held to this standard, it was resulted in one of Spurgas’ (2004) interviews with a non-U.S. participant that she possessed a much great satisfaction with her body image then the other U.S. participants. This theme seemed to keep appearing, because Spurgas (2004) also reported how the U.S. participants focused more energy and concern for their personal appearance, more so
than the non-U.S participants did. This last statement lead my research to the next level in trying
to figure out whether different racial backgrounds may affect participant’s opinion of their body
images after viewing other models of different races in magazines. David, Morrison, Johnson,
and Ross (2002) study was created to investigate the biases races may have when viewing of an
opposite races in magazines. David, Morrison, Johnson, and Ross (2002) decided to use 80 Black
and White college-age women as their participants and they stimulated the participants by using
ten advertisements from key fashion magazines. The findings resulted in both the Black and
White agreeing that when there was an image the same race as the participant, then it was very
easy for the participant to gravitate or hold a stronger identity correction with the model of their
same race (David, Morrison, Johnson, and Ross, 2002, p.270)

These prominent themes could be strong indicators about the pressures of being thin
portrayed in the media that the United States female population has to endure. Both of these
articles help explain why women can feel uncomfortable or un-worthy based on the unrealistic
models the media decides to portray in advertisements. Women in the United States seem to
have a hard time relating to the model’s body images used in advertising and sometimes take
extreme measures to try and compare themselves to these ideal ultra-thin models. These
comparisons can lead females to feel dissatisfied with themselves and their current body image.
But it seems that as you age and mature you start thinking so much about how well you match up
models. According to Kozar & Damhorst’s (2009) study which explored whether or not there
was a connection between age and body image and the woman’s behavior to compare their self
to models in the fashion and beauty industry. Kozar & Damhaorst (2009) asked 281 women
among the ages of 30 to 80 to participate in this study by completing a questionnaire. After
receiving all the questionnaires back from the participants, it was resulted that older participants
in the study were focused less on social comparison between their own body image and model’s body images. Unless the participants felt they had a younger spirits or personality, than their actual age, it was determined that these participants would show more concern with comparing themselves to models in the media. Also the participants who had less of a connection between their current self-image and their desired self-image were more likely to feel dissatisfaction about their body appearance. These study results hint at a very unique clue that maybe once women mature in age they stop thinking so much about comparing themselves to models and become more accepting of their own body (Kozar & Damhorst, 2009, p.207).

In “Does Size Matter?” a research study by Halliwell & Dittmar (2004) wanted to investigate the impact of body-focused anxiety in adult females by using three different types of advertisements containing the same model but each time the model was presented differently. She was also curious about which advertisements would be more effective among the participants. The three advertisements models featured in this study consisted of a skinny model, an average size model, and no model. Halliwell & Dittmar (2004) discovered from her sample of 202 participants, ranking in the ages from 19 to 67 that introduction to thinner models spiked more body-focused anxiety in the female’s responses, especially if the participant already had a high level of internalizing society’s norm of the desirable thin body-image. After the women completed the online survey, Halliwell & Dittmar (2004) realized that the women’s body-focus anxiety didn’t differ when the participants viewed the advertisements with the average size model or no model. She felt this resulted because the participants were more likely to relate to the average size model or no model. It was more realistic and she felt the participants may have experienced more comfort knowing that the model’s body image was achievable. Halliwell & Dittmar’s (2004) study also demonstrated an interesting point that it didn’t matter about the size
of the model presented in the advertisements because each advertisement was just as effective. She noted how this was a positive discovery, because now it had been proven that it didn’t matter the size of the model, but instead the attractiveness. So marketers could use more realistic models to promote the product just as effective as using ultra-thin models. This finding could lead to less body-focused anxiety among women, but only if the marketing companies increase their usage of more realistic attractive average size models in the media to sell their products. This leads me to the next section of my literature review.

New Positive Approaches to Advertising Using Average-size Models

Companies like Dove have created campaigns that celebrate more realistic women’s figures in the media and explain how they are just as beautiful as any ultra-thin model. These campaigns are trying to market to women of all ages and sizes. The companies are realizing what the mainstream media is promoting to its females consumers and they wanted to create an alternative body-image for women. This goes against the media’s norm, but for a good reason to show females that you don’t have to be a size 00 to be beautiful. Bissell and Rask’s (2010) article reiterates this by stating, “Recent studies have shown that attractive, average-size models can be just as effective as the traditional, extremely thin models in selling products, goods and services” (p. 647). This is considered great news because, it gives women a power to choose whether or not they want to see a super-thin model in advertisements or an attractive average size model that they could better relate too. It’s great that companies are starting to feature models that are more realistic and compatible to the female U.S. population.

Halliwell & Dittrar’s (2004) article results elaborate on Bissell and Rask’s (2010) research findings by stating, “Thus, it is unclear whether it is the thinness of models, or their
attractiveness, or a combination of both, that has an impact on women’s body esteem. This finding may reflect a closer match between women’s actual body sizes (or potential body sizes) and the bodies of average-size models than between adult women’s bodies and thin models” (p. 109). This statement has been proven true by the participants’ responses and results in both Bissell & Rask’s (2010) and Halliwell and Dittmar’s (2004) studies. The female consumers may like the fact that they can relate to the model’s size better and it seems more realistic to obtain.

New Positive Approaches to Advertising Using Thin Model’s but moderated

To the contrast, Smeesters & Mandel (2006) article’s “Positive and Negative Media Image Effects on the Self” studied how female consumers like the contradiction of viewing a thinner model, but moderated. They found out that some females enjoy viewing thinner-models because it helps to inspire them to become thinner, while also helping companies to promote their products. Smeesters & Mandel (2006) research results demonstrated a correlation between positive impacts on one’s self esteem after viewing models that were moderately thin but not extremely thin (p.581). The two researchers also explained how consumers of fashion and beauty magazine may idealize the thin-models in the advertisements, so if there were no thin-models to represent products in magazine, then where would the consumers get their inspiration or have any reason to buy the magazine (Smeesters & Mandel, 2006). These findings validate the result on why females may want to see some contradiction in the model’s bodies used in advertisements, but to a certain extent.

Research Gap

The contradiction between female consumers wanting to see thin unrealistic model body images versus more realistic and achievable model body images in advertisements leads to a
research gap. This research gap needs to explore and expand on the limitations of the ideal body-image promoted by media in the United States. Also examine how it affects female consumers’ opinions on whether the media should use more ultra-thin models or attractive average-size models in magazine advertising.

**Methodology**

In order to satisfy my research questions, I have chosen to conduct a qualitative study to gain a better understanding of the patterns college-age women go through when evaluating themselves after viewing advertisements in magazines. This research will allow a better understanding of how magazine advertisements affect women’s opinions of themselves, their self-esteem and acceptance of their personal appearance. I will ground my research on the socializing effects magazines have on women (personal communication, 2011).

*RQ1: How are college-aged females affected by representations of ideal body types in fashion/beauty magazines?*

This research question will expand on analyzing why women choose to compare themselves to ultra-thin models will give me a better understanding as to why females are so dependent on socially comparing themselves to models. This study will also help others understand the impact media can have on individuals and why it is important to have a strong understanding of self-worth and beauty. It can be easy to wrap yourself around an idea of what is consisted beautiful and normal in society when going off an image that is unrealistic. Advertisements are everywhere, you can’t escape them, so it better to learn how to understand and interpret them in a healthy way.

I plan to focus my study on how college-age women evaluate themselves after viewing advertisements in magazine and whether they prefer less realistic or more realistic model images
in advertising. I will look at different factors such as body images, weight, race or the models used for the companies’ marketing tools. After analyzing why women choose to compare themselves to ultra-thin models will give me a better understanding to why females are so dependent on socially comparing themselves to models. This study will also help others understand the impact media can have on individual and why it is important to have a strong understanding of self-worth and beauty. It can be easy to wrap yourself around an idea of what is consisted beautiful and normal in society when going off an image that is unrealistic. Advertisements are everywhere you can’t escape them, so it better to learn how to understand and interpret them in a healthy way.

**Sampling/Text selection**

My study participants will consist of female college-age women that are between the ages of 18 to 24. The participant will not have to have any particular requirements before they are accepted into my study. I will strive to conduct a study with females of multiple ages and different ethnic backgrounds. I feel this way the study will be very diverse and could stir up some interesting discussion among one another. I feel college age females will represent an age of women who have a different view on self-esteem, versus teenagers who are growing into their bodies. Also as women age, they become much more comfortable with their bodies over the years. I will use iconic fashion magazine, such as Vogue, Glamour, and Instyle. I will use these magazines to clear up any confusion of the images I will be discussing or to reference while in the focus group.
Procedure

Since I’m conducting a qualitative study to investigate my research question, I have decided to conduct a focus group on my University’s campus. Using a focus group will allow many of my participants to speak freely on their thoughts and opinions, which create an environment for constructive thinking among a group of individuals (Keyton, 2011). I will lead the focus group and have a note taker to take down notes that evolve during our discussion. I will also center questions around how greatly does the participants focus on comparing herself to the media images of the typically supermodel. This focus group will help me understand why women view themselves in particulars ways after exposure to the models represents in our mainstream media. You will be able to access a few on my focus group question in the appendix A.

Conclusion

Women in the United States are constantly bombarded with advertisements every day, all day long, so it is pretty much impossible for women not to be effected by the images the media is portraying. It’s important to raise awareness about the images that can potentially harm our friends and family, because it applies so much pressure to fit into this mold that marketing companies have created in order to sell products. My study will better educate individuals on the female consumer’s desires and when the media is taking its images way too far. My research will also allow marketing companies better understand the realness factor of models and how using more realistic models may be just as effective as using unrealistic models in the female consumer’s eyes.
Bibliography


Appendix A

Focus Group Questions

1. Do you focus on models in media or ever compare yourself to them?
   This question will help me understand if the participant has a higher level of social
   comparison when viewing images presented in the media.

2. Do you feel that the media portrays women in a false or unrealistic way?
   This question will allow me to understand how the participant feels about the images
   used in the media and whether she agrees with them.

3. How many advertisements do you see with Ultra-thin models promoting a product?
   This question will help me gauge the amount of advertisement the participant is exposure
   to daily.

4. How does it make you feel when you see super-thin models in fashion magazines?
   This question will open up discussion for the participants to talk about their feelings and
   emotions towards the models and their body-image.

5. Follow-up question: How does it make you feel when you see more realistic models used
   in the media?
   This will be the second half of the question asked above so I will be able to compare and
   constant the participant self-evaluations.

6. Which body-image would you prefer to see and why?
This question will explain the participant’s opinions and be the basis of my research findings. So I can better understand and develop my study.