

**The responsibility for body image:
Is it the consumer or marketing media?**

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Abstract

Background: Media brand marketing has a significant impact on how young American women view themselves and handle body issues. Young women who are exposed to products that promote a particular body type may experience eating disorders and body dysmorphia, which can have an impact on how they see themselves and those around them.

Objective: The aim of this Research paper is to discern the level of liability both the Media and Consumers have over the presentation of certain Body Images.

Design and Method: This research project will combine qualitative and descriptive methods with a written literature review that covers issues like unhealthy body image, marketing, and social responsibility. The SUNY Purchase Library Database was utilized to find the material, much of which was found in peer-reviewed academic journals. These articles provided evidence of the relationship between media, body image, and individual behavior through literary analyses as well as academic research. The Research question proposed is: Does the ultimate responsibility of body image concern rest with individuals or with popular brand marketing and media?

Results: This analysis assumes it the Responsibility of Consumers to determine Body Image trends shown in Popular Media by their consuming behaviors

Conclusions: Individuals are aware that they have the power to choose the kind of body image they want to see in the media and that doing so is their responsibility. In the end, it became evident that communities have the ability to jointly control the kinds of material they see on media by analyzing consumer behavior.

Keywords: *Body image, Social Media, Fashion, Brand, Product Image, Self-Image, Consumers, Consumer Behavior, Social Comparison, and Body Dissatisfaction*

Chapter 1: Introduction

Although perceptions of the ideal Body Image are created, beauty is frequently associated with idealizing particular body forms and proportions. Since the beginning of time, there has been a strong connection between media and consumer behavior. This connection largely revolves around how consumers perceive themselves as a result of brand marketing initiatives implemented through various media. In Western media, idealized body types are adopted because they are associated with attractiveness and the legitimacy of the model or endorser. Previous studies have shown that being exposed to media representations of slender idealized bodies has a negative impact on body image, self-esteem, mood, and appearance management. It has been determined that the prominence of slim female models significantly impacts young girls' self-esteem, body image, and mental health problems associated with this ideal, including anorexia, bulimia, and depression (Becker & Hamburg, 1996; Harrison & Cantor, 1997). Marketers use idealized body shapes in advertising for a variety of reasons, including to sway consumer behavior and drive sales. Still, there are also drawbacks to the extensive application of this kind of communication.

However, there are debates on whether the Media has the ultimate responsibility to regulate the Body Images being portrayed to society. Therefore, we must consider and evaluate the level of culpability the Media and Consumers have for over-representing certain Body shapes and sizes. It presents the question, "Does the ultimate responsibility of body image concern rest with individuals or with popular brand marketing and media?" The influence of idealized body pictures in marketing communications can be helpful. Still, it is unclear from the available studies how this can coexist with the detrimental effects of poor self-comparisons with these stereotypical representations. With technology advancing and social media networks being

available to access easily, it is also crucial to discern whether consumers vs. the Media drive Pop culture. By navigating through the research question, we aim to answer what is known to be the primary factor of influence on Beauty and Body Image. The methods section of this research will demonstrate how the analysis was explored, which will then lead to the Results and Overall discussion on the conventional interpretation of the inquiry.

Literature Review

Brand marketing through the media significantly impacts how young college women in the United States see themselves and deal with their personal body image. The relationship between media and consumer behavior has always been closely intertwined. Many aspects of this link boil down to how consumers see themselves through marketing schemes run by brands through various forms of media. Brands create an exclusive image by limiting sizes of clothes, thus bolstering the need for these young women to want to achieve this ideal by trying to fit those specific sizes. Through this constant reinforcement, women develop both eating disorders and body dysmorphia, affecting their perception of themselves and those around them for a lifetime. The purpose of this research is to explore how much impact media has on body image and investigate how to a certain extent, the responsibility for such issues falls on the young women themselves. On the opposing viewpoint, individuals are more likely to influence media through their consuming behaviors, which in turn shows a relationship between businesses and their potential to foster positive body images through the lenses of capitalism. Although companies are responsible for distributing content that alters the perspective of beauty standards, it is also essential to understand the culture behind the ordeal.

Understanding Body Image and Beauty

Oftentimes it is hard to define “beauty” as there are many distinctions and standards of the word throughout many entities. Race, gender, and culture significantly determine the shift of those standards throughout pop culture. Depending on which of its many dimensions is highlighted, the phrase "body image" has several definitions. Body image is generally understood as a person's views, thoughts, and feelings regarding their body. Beauty is often

linked with idealizing specific body shapes and sizes, which creates conceptions of the ideal Body Image. Young women have body dysmorphia and eating disorders as a result of this frequent reinforcement, which permanently alters how they see themselves and the people in their lives. In an article, authors D'Alessandro and Chitty B. (2011) explain that "In the case of young and vulnerable women, the constant portrayal of thin models may cause these consumers to regard a thin body shape as being the ideal body shape" (p. 844).

To investigate the factors at play in young women's self-image judgments that lead them to aspire to an "ultra-thin" ideal, authors Grover and Burckes (2016) worked to better understand young women in order to capture the complex relationships that exist within a social setting and to investigate their overwhelming desire to be ultra-thin. The findings of their study could help in the development of more well-informed and successful preventative programs to lessen not just the possibility of the development of eating disorders but also to promote mental well-being, which depends on a positive sense of self. The authors stated, "...though extant research has identified the key factors triggering the need for consuming less than what is appropriate in an attempt to be thin, we are not aware of any research that has identified the factors that feed into the identified triggers" (p. 2).

Qualitative methods were then used to conduct a study on the young adult female population by having open conversations with the participants about their need to be thin. Additionally, the study aimed to learn about potential challenges, impediments, and the societal pressure that affect attitudes and behaviors surrounding body image. It is still unclear why the media has such a strong influence on people. However, it proposes that ad campaigns should encourage healthy eating habits while emphasizing the value of the self and de-emphasizing the "thin-ideal" image promoted by media, friends, and family. It has helped to understand better the

underlying processes or elements that promote the spread of eating disorders, given the documented media effects. It all then comes down to understanding Beauty Ideals throughout many cultures and how western media has influenced an array of other behaviors regarding the perception of body image.

Presumably, an article was set out to determine whether university students' unhealthy behaviors were connected to body dissatisfaction. Nichols (2009) created a questionnaire that prompted a cross-section study of about 383 female and male students at the University of West Indies. The participants were then asked to select a silhouette they desired from a chart ranging body types from “severely underweight to severely obese” (pg. 467). Similarly, they were then asked to select from the same chart the silhouette representing their current figure. Female participants were more likely than men to participate in dieting activities and chose underweight shapes to match their actual or target body sizes. On another important note, race played a factor in the results as it was found that compared to East Indian and other ethnic groups, females of African heritage were substantially more likely to report heavier weights and choose larger silhouettes to match their existing body shapes.

In the article's conclusion, Nichols (2009) emphasizes how discreet body image can influence the risk of lower self-esteem and mental illnesses such as depression in college students. Those issues permit disordered eating and allow researchers to discern to the public the need for services that address and tackle these problems. Although it cannot be proven that body image issues are only a female issue, it points out that there are significant gender differences in dissatisfaction with body size as it relates to participating in unhealthy behaviors. It is also majorly important in looking at how body image can be a cross-cultural phenomenon, as it shows that the issue is not exclusively an American issue.

Social Comparison Theory

When comprehending the overall topic of Self Image, it is paramount to look at why specific individuals might develop issues as opposed to others depending on how much media they consume on average. The social comparison theory proposed by Leon Festinger illustrates how people assess themselves by comparing themselves to others. It was proposed that humans have a tendency to evaluate themselves accurately by comparing themselves to others. For example, when comparing oneself to those who are physically more attractive than oneself, social comparisons can boost a person's self-esteem. On the other hand, comparing oneself to higher or unreasonable standards might result in dysfunctional self-esteem.

Conceivably, the marketing of dangerously thin female images in mainstream media decreases women's self-esteem and contributes to unhealthy body issues and disordered eating. Moreno (2018) and various other authors managed a study on how social comparison impacts self-evaluations. By showing 145 Spanish women ranging from ages 18 to 41 from Southern Spanish University pictures of lean or overweight models, they aimed to look at whether clearly asking or not explicitly asking participants to compare themselves to the models would reduce the impacts of social comparison. Exposure to skinny models damages body image while raising anxiety and body dissatisfaction.

On the other hand, exposure to obese models enhanced self-perception and reduced body dissatisfaction but did not influence anxiety. The authors revealed to have “....found a significant social-comparison effect reflecting pre- to-post exposure change-score differences on body image and body dissatisfaction between women exposed to images of thin versus overweight models” (pg. 612). There was no difference in the responses from the participants who were

asked to compare themselves to the models directly or subconsciously. According to the author's hypothesis, the increased portrayal of women who are average-weight and overweight in media advertising might help mitigate the harmful effects of the media's practice of idealizing slim and excessively thin women as representations of female beauty.

Comparatively, the idea of social comparison can create notions of coping strategies that help individuals garner a sense of self-worth by either rejecting or allowing brands to dictate their perceptions. Wan, Ansons, Chattopadhyay, and Leboe (2013) studied the effects of exposure to idealized female images, whether overtly or covertly, on women's perceptions of their selves and their attitudes toward the brands that these models with these idealized bodies promote in marketing communications. It is well demonstrated how explicit exposure to slim bodies in advertisements can trigger defensive coping, which results in a higher self-perception and a more favorable brand attitude toward a product supported by a model with an ideal body image. However, when exposure is minimal, idealized body images result in lower self-assessments and higher evaluations of promoted companies. It was proven to be correct in identifying that consumers are becoming much more sensitive to brand depictions than ever before. The authors concluded that “to use idealized images in marketing communications successfully, they should be presented subtly” (p.45). According to research, the choice of coping strategies is heavily influenced by individual differences, particularly in terms of self-esteem. Overall, consumers have internalized media images to fit their perceptions of beauty for themselves.

The Role of Mass Media and Marketing

Rarely do researchers explore how many people, in general, genuinely struggle with body image concerns in relation to brand marketing. It's crucial to consider why some people,

depending on how much media they typically consume, could experience problems compared to others. This information is helpful as we begin to question if individuals already have predestined tendencies to have negative body images without constantly consuming targeted marketing by brands. There are various research papers regarding the influence of mass media on Body Image after taking into account the standards for demonstrating a causal risk factor. Levine and Murnen (2009) propose that the contents, consumption, and interaction of media influence both by themselves and within the background of mutually supportive messages from friends, families, and educators allow it a likely direct risk factor based upon the strength of the existing studies in regard to body image. It discusses the causal relationship of negative body image and mass media on young women through scientific research studying the psychology behind the phenomenon. The main objectives of this article are to identify what is relatively sure about and what is still unknown about the effects of media on females. It also aims to also discover what methodologies and studies are required to develop the forms of risk-factor knowledge that should facilitate prevention, treatment, and support throughout eating-disordered recovery.

At the moment, involvement with mainstream media is generally best understood as a fluctuating potential cause that may one day be proven to be a significant risk factor. Additionally, even if the relationship is limited through the review, exposure to thinness-focused media, in both general and specific, is presently and proactively linked to disordered eating and negative body image. When taking into account just how influential media and marketing can be on individuals, adversely some companies have begun to foster more inclusive images of beauty. This concept is important as it comparatively inspects the extent of responsibility that business ethically has to the wellness of consumers. Some brands have begun to assert disclaimers in order to alert consumers of the potential risks of viewing media only exclusive to a specific body

type. Governments and policymakers throughout the world have started looking for cost-effective solutions that can be quickly adopted and will reach a large audience to address the pervasive occurrence of body dissatisfaction and its effects. Adding disclaimers to digitally changed media images is one tactic that has been used. McComb and Mills (2020) reviewed primary sources examining how media disclaimers affected women's body images. Through their investigation, they hypothesized and wrote:

While it has been assumed that media disclaimers are a positive strategy to protect women's body satisfaction, it is unclear whether there is empirical support for the idea that policies that encourage the use of media disclaimers mitigate the negative outcomes of thin-ideal media on women's body image and mood. (pg. 35)

The goal was to ascertain how well media disclaimers worked to shield women's body image and mood from thin-ideal media exposure. Consequently, it was found that disclaimers did little to lessen women's body dissatisfaction and adverse effects from exposure to thin ideal images. In some situations, they may have even been detrimental to women's body image. The use of warning labels after exposure to skinny body types enhanced body dissatisfaction in women who internalized the thin ideal and had high trait levels of body dissatisfaction. Therefore, it affirmed that disclaimers were useless in mitigating the harmful consequences of exposure to thin-ideal media. Although it is through certain media that individuals either have positive or negative attitudes towards their bodies, it can be adversely proclaimed that brands who do try and help combat these sentiments are not met with enhanced results. Thus, confirming that the obligation of having positive attitudes toward oneself falls on individuals.

Consumer Behavior

In marketing communications, endorsements are crucial. Marketers need to be aware of the potential effects of endorsers' cultural backgrounds and how they are portrayed in marketing

communications when targeting an audience. Economically speaking, it seems as though brands greatly benefit from presenting an exclusive image, prompting consumers to want to achieve that image by purchasing the marketed products. Faridoon and Iqbal (2018) conducted a study that perpetuated the argument that consumer behavior is enhanced when individuals are more exposed to marketing schemes. The author aimed to examine how commercials affect young people's attitudes toward materialism and body image. According to them, Materialism is an obsession with money and goods and the belief that having personal wealth and material possessions is essential for success.

According to the study, watching TV commercials makes teenagers less satisfied with their bodies and makes them more materialistic. It makes it clear that women participants who are unhappy with their appearance started dieting and exercising not for their health but to achieve a particular appearance. When adolescents compare their bodies to those in the media, they get dissatisfied with their appearance and take various measures to achieve an ideal and flawless body image. Although it is, in part, the responsibility of those commercials to diversify their content, the Social Comparison Theory thrives as it highlights how individuals

Attitudes toward brands diversifying their marketing schemes can adversely be detrimental to businesses. Yu and Russel (2011) aimed to investigate how consumers' perceptions of their body images affect their sentiments toward a clothing brand through their approach to beauty and similarity to thin-idealized and non-idealized advertising pictures in the social simulation study. The engagement with skinny models did not result in brand sentiments that were more positive than exposure to average-sized models. However, through their judgments of resemblance with model photos throughout the social comparison, people's body images

enhanced brand sentiments. In the discussion, it was written that “Consumers are not passive receivers but actively interpret, negotiate, and respond to mainstream beauty ideology” (p.71).

As previously emphasized by other research studies on the topic of body image, it is evident that consumers conjointly have the power to determine what type of content is shown through media. The findings highlighted the significance of body image in comprehending how people interpret images in the media. Instead of investigating how brand marketing affects young women, it is adversely crucial to explore the idea that the “easily” influenced subjects themselves can express certain attitudes towards such media. Which in turn creates a consequence of the particular brand modifying their image to suit consumer needs. This concept can help us understand that consumers are hyper-aware of the idealized vision the media portrays and have the power to alternate specific Body Images to fit their standards as opposed to relying on the Brands to make the change.

Chapter 3: Methods

This research study is qualitative and descriptive. As a starting point for my research, I looked at the idea of exclusivity and inclusivity and how both could impact a brand's worth with consumers. However, that was quickly discarded as it became apparent to dig deeper into Brand and Consumer relationships when it came to Image. Therefore, to narrow my topic, it was essential to inquire about ideas of self and media/brand marketing to their respective responsibility on Body Image and Beauty. In order to establish an argument, I have composed a Literature Review encompassing topics that focus on *Social Responsibility*, *Marketing*, and *Unhealthy Body Image*. The literature used was obtained from the SUNY Purchase College Library database, which mainly consisted of peer-reviewed academic articles. These articles consisted of literary analysis and scholarly studies conducted by researchers to prove the correlation between media, body image, and individual behavior.

This literature helped me build my argument for the conclusion to the following research question:

RQ: *Does the ultimate responsibility of body image concern rest with individuals or popular brand marketing and media?*

The primary research strategy used was literature analysis, which was complemented by ongoing learning about relevant themes surrounding my topic. I searched for material using specified terms in scholarly and widely—read articles, such as *Body image*, *Social Media*, *Fashion*, and *Brand*. However, only having these words limited my search as the topic became too broad. Therefore, introducing keywords like *Product Image*, *Self-Image*, *Consumers*, *Consumer Behavior*, *Social Comparison*, and *Body Dissatisfaction* helped get various opinions and discussions on the theme of my research question. All the sources found were then pinned

into a folder through the SUNY Purchase database that was quickly accessible to further this inquiry. This research was made qualitative because of the limited time and resources I faced during the analysis. Therefore, it seemed wiser to use resources that helped progress the inquisition more effectively. Albeit discovering various articles on the topic, a challenge encountered was the ability to limit the main ideas of each paper to where they would help build the main arguments. Although there was limited time to review each article in its entirety, reading the abstracts, details, methods, results, and conclusions of the texts, I was able to find meaningful information that would greatly help support my analysis.

A limitation I faced while examining sources was finding a credible opposing viewpoint to my research question. It was rather difficult as most of the keywords were inserted into the databases to find the articles that always recommended the same viewpoint with just adversely different media or focus groups. Finding material with an opposing viewpoint was also burdensome, as the arguments related a lot to ethics. For example, the topic of Body Image is always closely related to mental health alongside unhealthy eating disorders/habits. For this reason, it was hard to make a pleasant argument against individuals dealing with these issues to avoid victim blame. This concern could also create a bias as the subjects of the studies conducted mainly were young women I closely related to in terms of age, background, and overall lifestyle. Therefore, I needed to avoid these biases in order to construct valid discussions on both sides to come to an accurate conclusion.

Chapter 4: Results

Summarizing the results of my literature review, I would conclusively argue that the ultimate responsibility for proclaiming and maintaining a particular body image ideal lies with the consumer, not the brand. At the beginning of my literature review it would seem as though this argument geared towards explaining how marketing strategies greatly affected individuals as it pertained to body image. As previously discussed, The Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) suggests that people tend to evaluate themselves accurately in comparison with others. Therefore constant portraits of thin bodies will leave individuals to admire certain self image perceptions that they find most appealing. However further research suggested that the relationship between brands and consumers were much more complicated than anticipated.

Through the lenses of ethicality, it would be apparent to come to a conclusion that big businesses have the extreme capacity to influence individuals. If the question proposed was 'If the Media had power to Influence individuals' then yes; presumably the results would be certainly different. Despite the significance however, studies showed that when Brands altered their marketing strategies to be more ethical by providing disclaimers to edited images, there was no difference in the level of body dissatisfaction in consumers. The specified study clarified that in this instance the researchers are confident that the disclaimer did not reduce the increases in body dissatisfaction because those in the disclaimer condition reported similar levels of body dissatisfaction to those in the control condition.(McComb and Mills, 2011). Adversely, it can also be said that an individual's self esteem seems to rise when examining their bodies to a body type that seems inferior. Exposure to average or overweight models does create a sense of

reliability to average consumers, however most individuals do not aim to achieve that appearance. Aside from the discussion that for decades the Media has pushed on society to be subconsciously biased towards certain bodies, which is fundamentally accurate. Some research has shown that when more diverse body types are shown, brand sentiments decrease. By reason of preconceived notions of Beauty aligned with thinness, although idealized body perceptions lead to lower self-evaluations, it additionally prompts greater assessments of marketed businesses (Wan, Ansons, Chattopadhyay and Leboe, 2013). A significant part of society desires inclusivity in media portrayals but exclusivity when purchasing products.

Presently, different Images are shown to include diverse bodies into the discussion of Beauty. This wave of inclusion was effectively done by individuals rejecting the Ideal and demanding brands to display various forms of Images. It allowed for both the Media and the consumer to have an agreeable relationship that benefited them both. From an economic point of view, Businesses allowed the continuous portrayal of Beauty that had been showcased for centuries for greater capital benefits, nonetheless groups of individuals shifted these standards. This implies that conjointly, individuals know that they have the ability and are responsible for allowing the type of Body Image they view in the Media. Though my research did not officially include a study, by vaguely gaging the research question to fellow peers, they understood that the Media did influence them in certain instances however it was nevertheless their responsibility to allow that effect. Ethics aside, ultimately it was clear that through observing consumer behavior, communities collectively have the power to determine the types of content they see on media.

Chapter 5: Discussion

When it comes to Analyzing certain groups of people, it is important to understand that overgeneralization can become a serious issue. The consumption of Media will always affect individuals differently depending on various factors such as background and personal beliefs. Individuals are usually grouped as consumers to show overall trends in markets and society. Viewing the responsibility of Body Image Ideals through the lenses of consumerism is evidently a great way to compare and contrast how Media/Brands or Consumers deal with the issue. Presently, It is becoming more apparent that businesses greatly rely on popularity through social media to sustain great profits. In that sense, power has shifted to the consumers to dictate the images that are meant to be accepted in the Media.

In popular social media apps like TikTok, viral videos greatly influence consumer behaviors. Reliability is becoming the main priority for companies to relay to consumers, which is often pushed through young social media micro influencers. And through these micro celebrities who are beginning to have different body types alternating from the thin-ideal, consumers convey to the brands the types of images they prefer to conceive. This is crucial to understand as we have examined the many ways in which Body Image greatly influences the way individuals navigate through their lives as it often coincides with their mental health, self esteem and overall physical wellness. The research question overall aims to answer how much capacity consumers have to combat the influence the Media has on determining a trending Body type. Based on the findings in the literature review, it is apparent that consumers on a group level in the long run have obtained the potential to encourage specified ideas of Beauty.

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