How Drive for Thinness Moderates the Influence of Media on Female Body Image

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This study was designed to investigate how drive for thinness moderates the influence of media on female body image and self-esteem. Drive for thinness is defined as an excessive concern with dieting, preoccupation with weight, and fear of weight gain. Forty-two female undergraduates taking Introductory and Cognitive Psychology classes completed a questionnaire measuring dieting behavior, with 21 exhibiting a high drive for thinness and 21 revealing a low drive for thinness. Participants recorded pleasure ratings as they viewed either 8 slides of thin female models or 8 slides of plus-size female models. They next answered 2 questionnaires, one measuring self-esteem and body image and the other a figure rating scale. Significant differences were found between the low and high drive for thinness groups, independent of the type of media image viewed. Participants with a high drive for thinness had lower self-esteem scores and greater negative body image.

Over the last century, the ideal female body image presented in various media has decreased significantly in weight and size. In just the past 40 years, the dominant body shape of fashion models, Playboy centerfolds, and Miss America Pageant winners has changed from a full, hourglass figure to a thin, tubular one (Lin & Kulik, 2002). In turn, more and more women are feeling the pressure to be thin in today’s society, leading them to develop a negative body image. Body image disturbance is defined as a distortion of perception, behavior, or cognition related to weight or shape (Posavac & Posavac, 2002). Studies have shown strong positive correlations between body image disturbance and images presented in the media (Posovac & Posovac, 2002; Vartanian, Giant, & Passino, 2001; Pinhas, Toner, Ali, Garfinkel, & Stuckless, 1998). This can have detrimental consequences on young girls, as it can lead to disordered eating and the possible development and maintenance of anorexia and bulimia nervosa (Baranowski, Jorga, Djordjevic, Marinkovic, & Hetherington, 2003). Due to the fact that the media has such a serious influence on our culture by manipulating the formation of females’ ideal body image, it is important to investigate the extent to which media plays a role in the female psyche.

Past research has overwhelmingly concluded that, due to media influence, women are not satisfied with their bodies, and most women desire to be thinner than their current weight and thinner than what men indicate they like (Zellner, Harner, & Adler, 1989). For instance, Posavac and Posavac (2002) found that the larger the discrepancy women perceive between their own physical attractiveness and the female attractiveness commonly presented in advertising and media, the greater the extent to which they had concerns about their weight. Pinhas et al. (1998) discovered similar results when they concluded that thin media images have an immediate effect on the mood states of women. For instance, women feel angrier and have a greater depressed mood after looking at images of the thin ideal.

The assumption that all women respond to thin-body images in the same way, however, is a weakness of past research. Some studies do not find results consistent with this theory, including one conducted recently by the present experimenter. Participants varied in response to thin images, ranging from negative to positive, with no significant differences notable (Pavelo, 2004). Botta (1999) argues that “increased body dissatisfaction as a result of encountering thin-body images should be confined to those who endorse the thin ideal.” Wilcox and Laird (2000) also believe that only women who ultimately value body shape compare themselves to thin media images and thus experience negative feelings about their own bodies.

Hausenblas, Janelle, and Gardner (2004) tested this idea when they determined women’s drive for thinness and then assessed their psychological responses to media exposure. In this case, drive for thinness was defined as an excessive concern with dieting, preoccupation with weight, and fear of weight gain. They concluded that reviewing self and model slides had negative affective consequences for individuals with a high drive for thinness, supporting the theory that those who endorse the thin ideal are more liable to be negatively affected by thin media images. The current study investigated what effect drive for thinness had on a participant’s psychological response to images in the media.

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By accounting for this subject variable, any non-significant results in past research might be partially explained. Therefore, it was questioned whether a high drive for thinness or a low drive for thinness would moderate the influence of thin media images and plus-size media images on the pleasure rating, self-esteem, and body image scores of female college students. It was hypothesized that those with a high drive for thinness would have lower pleasure rating, self-esteem and body image scores than those with a low drive for thinness after viewing the thin slides. It was also predicted that there would be no effect of image type for those with a low drive for thinness.

Method

Participants

Forty-two female undergraduate students from introductory and cognitive psychology classes at a northeastern public university participated in the study. Participants were recruited through the use of written sign-up sheets that were posted in the psychology department. Upon permission of the instructor, students were also tested during an introductory psychology class and a cognitive psychology class. For equal opportunity purposes, several males participated at this time, but their data was disregarded during analysis. Students were compensated with partial course credit or extra credit for their classes.

Materials

Slides consisted of eight pictures of thin female models and eight pictures of plus-size female models. Participants completed several body-image related and one self-esteem scales. The Silhouette Figure Rating Scale (Stunkard, Sorensen, & Schulzinger, 1983) was administered to determine body image discrepancy. Body image discrepancy was calculated by subtracting one’s ideal body rating from one’s current body rating. The Concern Over Weight and Dieting Scale (Kagan & Squires, 1984) was used to measure excessive concerns with dieting and weight preoccupation. The Self-Assessment Manikin (Lang, 1985) is a figure-rating measure that assessed on a scale of 1 to 9 participants’ immediate levels of pleasure while viewing the slides. The Self-Esteem Questionnaire (2005) was used to measure participants’ self-esteem. For instance, students rated how often they doubted their abilities or lacked confidence in situations. Scores on the Body Image Assessment Scale (Brannon-Quan & Licavoli, 1998) were used to assess whether one had a positive or negative body image. Statements dealt with one’s body and how one felt it compared to others, and were rated on the degree to which they applied to oneself.

Pleasure rating scores on the Self-Assessment Manikin Scale ranged from 1 to 9, with 1 indicating extreme happiness and 9 signifying extreme unhappiness. Self-esteem scores were rated on a scale of 1 to 3, with 1 indicating high self-esteem, 2 indicating moderate self-esteem, and 3 indicating low self-esteem. Body image scores were labeled either 1 or 2, with 1 equating a positive body image, and 2 equating a negative body image.

During the slideshow, a set of 8 multiple-choice questions was also used for the purpose of maintaining participants’ viewing attention. For instance, students were asked to identify what a model’s favorite color might be or how old she appeared. Finally, a general questionnaire was included to determine participant’s relative weight, happiness with body, and exposure to fashion magazines (see Appendices A and B for questionnaire samples).

Procedure

Upon arrival, students were instructed to complete an informed consent and research participation sheet. Participants were then asked to answer the Concern Over Weight and Dieting Scale. When finished, a set of eight slides was presented. Half of the participants in the study observed slides of thin female models, while the other half observed slides of plus-size female models. While viewing each slide, participants were required to answer a multiple-choice question about the model in the image. They then rated, using the Self-Assessment Manikin scale, which figure best represented their emotional state at that moment. Each slide was shown for a period of 45 seconds. After the conclusion of observations, students completed the remaining questionnaires.

Results

Out of the sample, 45% viewed thin female models and 55% viewed plus-size female models, with 50% of these participants exhibiting a high drive for thinness and 50% revealing a low drive for thinness. Participants’ overall drive for thinness scores ranged from 22 to 56. Using a median split, scores of 39 and above characterized a high drive for thinness, and scores of 40 and above characterized a high drive for thinness. There were 19 females who saw thin media images, with 10 indicating a high drive for thinness and 9 indicating a low drive for thinness. There were 23 females who viewed plus-size media images, with 11 indicating a high drive for thinness and 12 indicating a low drive for thinness.

In total, 21 females had a high drive for thinness, and 21 females had a low drive for thinness. Overall, high drive for thinness females had a mean pleasure rating score of 5.18, with a standard deviation of 1.034, while low drive for thinness females had a mean score of 4.86, with a standard deviation of 0.831. High drive participants had a mean body image discrepancy score of 2.10, with a standard deviation of 0.899, while low drive participants had a mean score of 1.95, with a standard deviation of 0.831. The mean self-esteem score for those with a high drive was 2.24, with a standard deviation of 0.507, while the mean self-esteem score for those with a low drive was 2.52, with a standard deviation of 0.680. The mean body image score for high drive females was 1.95, with a standard deviation of 0.218, while low drive females had a mean score of 1.43, with a standard deviation of 0.507.

A repeated measures ANOVA was used to test for any significant differences. Results indicate that there was no significant effect of type of media image on psychological response, $F(1,38) = .019, p = .891$ and no significant interaction between type of media image and drive for thinness, $F(1,38) = .543, p = .466$. The
size of the model in the slides viewed had no influence on the responses of the participants in the sample. There were, however, statistically significant differences between high and low drive for thinness groups, independent of the type of media image viewed, $F(1,38) = 23.762, p = .000$. Participants with a high drive for thinness had greater negative emotional responses than those with a low drive for thinness, exhibiting lower self-esteem scores and substantial negative body image.

**Discussion**

Unlike past research, the current study failed to produce a significant interaction between media image and drive for thinness. As predicted, though, there were significant differences between those who indicated a high drive for thinness and those who exhibited a low drive for thinness. As results signify, and previous research substantiates, those with a high drive for thinness had decreased levels of self-esteem and increased levels of negative body image. This exemplifies the idea that a subject variable is indeed present and can account for variances in self-esteem and body image. Pleasure rating scores, on the other hand, did not vary heavily between groups and averaged in the middle, giving no indication of emotional response and the implication that perhaps this assessment was not the best for the objective of the study.

Overall, results confirm the theory that women who value the thin ideal experience increased body dissatisfaction. This supports the notion that there is a subject variable that needs to be taken into account when women are being assessed for emotional response. The level to which a woman possesses a drive for thinness will influence how she feels and behaves in society, as revealed in the current research. Many women who value the thin ideal and obsess over their weight find themselves doubting their abilities and lacking confidence in situations. They begin to avoid social situations or constantly compare themselves to others, enhancing what this study identified as body image disturbance.

Although media did not have an effect on the participants in this investigation, current results suggest, and previous research has shown, that not all women will react to images in the media in the same fashion. If a subject variable, such as drive for thinness, is present, then the female’s emotional response should be dependent on her current state of mind. Those who endorse the thin ideal have relatively low self-esteem and a negative body image, while those who do not value thinness portray levels of high self-esteem and positive body image. With such extreme emotional responses such as these, it is no wonder that media would have such varying effects on women in present day society.

The lack of an effect of media images had on participants in the present study was most likely due to shortcomings in the experimental design. Due to time constraints, students only viewed each slide for 45 seconds, and although they were asked to answer questions for the purpose of maintaining their attention, there was no way to indefinitely control their focus on the images. In addition, even when instructed not to, participants would advance to the following questionnaires before the scheduled time, providing them knowledge of what the study was testing. For this reason, it is proposed that future research be undertaken using a longitudinal study and more indirect testing questions, so that there is a more realistic approach to media influence and less opportunity for participant bias. By incorporating changes like these, further investigation into the new theory involving media and drive for thinness can occur.

**References**


Appendix A

Self Assessment Manikin Scale with Questions

The following question was included after each slide presentation:

As you view the slide, choose the figure, from 1-9, that best represents your immediate emotional response. In other words, how are you feeling while observing the image presented.

SLIDE 1

1. What is this person’s favorite color?
   a. black
   b. blue
   c. red
   d. green

SLIDE 2

1. Where does this person like to eat on a Friday night?
   a. Chili’s
   b. Olive Garden
   c. Diner
   d. Pizzeria

SLIDE 3

1. How much money does this person make a year?
   a. $30,000
   b. $50,000
   c. $70,000
   d. $90,000

SLIDE 4

1. How old is this person?
   a. 24
   b. 26
   c. 28
   d. 30

SLIDE 5

1. Is this person:
   a. outgoing
   b. timid
   c. confused
   d. nervous

SLIDE 6

1. What is this person’s marital status?
   a. married
   b. divorced
   c. single

SLIDE 7

1. What level of education has this person reached?
   a. high school
   b. college
   c. graduate school
   d. doctorate program
SLIDE 8

1. What kind of car does this person drive?
   a. Jeep Wrangler
   b. Honda Accord
   c. Minivan
   d. Mercedes Benz SUV

Appendix B

General Questionaire

Please circle your response:

1. Are you happy with your current body shape?
   a. Yes
   b. No

2. Compared to others, do you consider yourself:
   a. Thin
   b. Average
   c. Heavy

How often do you read magazines?
   a. Never
   b. Once a month
   c. 2 to 5 times a month
   d. Twice per week

4. Do you think that pictures of women in magazines influence what you think is the perfect body shape?
   a. Yes
   b. No

5. Do pictures of women in magazines make you want to lose weight?
   a. Yes
   b. No