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# **The Impact of Media Exposure on Self-Esteem and Body Satisfaction in Men and Women**

*Salenna Russello*

**Abstract:** The current study explored the effects of media exposure on men and women's body satisfaction, self-esteem, level of internalization of sociocultural ideals, and level of social comparison. Male and female undergraduates (N = 32) were exposed to television advertisements either with muscular men and thin women (sociocultural ideal group) or without those types of men and women (neutral advertisement group). Men were more satisfied with their bodies than women, and they internalized ideals less. Self-esteem and social comparison levels were similar for both men and women. In addition, exposure to physical-ideal advertisements did not appear to effect body satisfaction, self-esteem, or internalization. Also, the level of internalization increased as the level of social comparison increased.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2006) Americans will spend approximately 3,592 hours this year on media usage with 1,704 of those hours being spent watching television. That is equivalent to spending five months using some form of media and watching about two and a half months worth of TV. It is only plausible to assume that something we spend so much of our time on has some affect on us. This idea has been the focus of a number of research studies (e.g., Bessenoff, 2006; Hawkins, Richards, Granley, & Stein, 2004). Many of these research studies have looked specifically at the ideals that the media portrays, and how those ideals (such as the thin-ideal) have affected how one views themselves. Both self-esteem and body satisfaction have been shown to be negatively effected by the media. That is why it is so important to understand the specific role that the media plays, what affect it has on one's wellbeing. Once the media's role is understood then ways can be found to reduce those damaging effects.

In the following literature review the research studies that describe the media and its effects on men and women are explored. First, studies that address the general influence of the media and its separate influence on men and women are examined. Internalization of sociocultural ideals are described, as well as studies that address the media's effect on self-esteem and weight concerns. Also, body satisfaction in reference to how it is influenced by the media is presented, along with social comparison theory and its connection with the media's influence.

## **Influence of the Media**

Many forms of media can be found all over the world. American society is especially involved in the use of the media. Americans are confronted with images of beautiful people,

expensive must-haves, and the latest fashion almost everywhere they go. The mass media is the most powerful way to spread these images that represent sociocultural ideals (Tiggemann, 2003). One of most influential ideals spread by the media is society's ideal of beauty and attractiveness. The ultra-thin beautiful woman and the handsome muscular man are seen everywhere. And as the influence of media increases, the pressure to adhere to these ideals becomes greater.

The standard of female attractiveness that the media portrays is becoming increasingly harder for women to live up to. Hawkins et al. (2004) stated that most of the women portrayed in the media are 15% below the average weight of women, and there has been evidence that these women have become increasingly thinner over the years.

Not only are women pressured to be thin because of the beauty standard, but positive traits are also linked to this ideal of attractiveness (Greenberg & Worrell, 2005).

Both men and women are confronted with pressures from the media to conform to society's attractiveness ideal. Unlike women, men are not pressured to be thin, but rather to be muscular. Media exposure has been shown to increase men's concern about muscularity and make them feel pressured to become more muscular (Botta, 2003; Hatoum, & Belle, 2004). The media often portrays that it is the strong handsome men who are popular and who get the beautiful women. Both men and women are faced with the demands that society places on them to conform to these ideals of attractiveness.

### **Internalization of Sociocultural Ideals**

Sociocultural ideals, like the thin-ideal, are most influential when they are internalized. Internalization of sociocultural ideals of attractiveness is accepting or agreeing with social standards of beauty. Sometimes these ideals are internalized without one realizing that they are. Since media has a large part in spreading society's ideals it is no surprise that researchers have found that increased media consumption leads to increased internalization of the thin-ideal (e.g., Miller & Halberstadt, 2005; Tiggemann, 2003). Once that ideal is internalized it affects how one views their body and comparisons are made between their body and what society's standards are.

Yet not everyone is affected by the thin-ideal. Some do not internalize this ideal, and therefore exposure to the media does not affect them as greatly. Posavac, Posavac, and Posavac (1998) suggested that there are two reasons why the media is not as influential on some people. They suggest that (a) their body is not much different than those of models presented in the media, or (b) physical attractiveness is not as important to them because they are confident in their skills and abilities. Even though some men and women are not affected by the thin-ideal there are still many that are, and their self-esteem can be a good indicator of the extent that the thin-ideal influences their lives.

### **Self-Esteem and Weight Concern**

Self-esteem, a measure of how one feels about oneself, can also effect how one feels about his or her weight. Having a high level of self-esteem can also help prevent the negative effects of the media's influence. Low self-esteem on the other hand can cause one to be more

susceptible to media images. Research has shown that low levels of self-esteem in both men and women are predictive of more weight concern compared to those who have high levels of self-esteem (Hatoum & Belle, 2004; Posavac & Posavac, 2002).

Not only does self-esteem affect weight concern and the media's level of influence, but self-esteem itself can be affected by the media. Research indicates that being exposed to thin-ideal images lowers self-esteem and increases the drive for thinness in women and the drive for muscularity in men (Bessenoff, 2006; Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006; Hawkins et al., 2004; Hobza, Walker, Yakushko, & Peugh, 2007).

### **Body Satisfaction and Self-Esteem**

Self-esteem levels have also been linked to body satisfaction. Usually when one is low the other is low as well. How an individual feels about his or her body is an important part of how he or she feels about themselves. Many individuals in today's society are not satisfied with their bodies. Researchers have found that this body dissatisfaction increases as self-esteem decreases (Bessenoff, 2006; Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006; Hawkins et al., 2004).

Since self-esteem and body satisfaction are related, it is no surprise that the media has just as strong an influence on body satisfaction as it does on self-esteem. Watson and Vaughn (2006) stated that sociocultural pressures to adhere to the ideal body image, as is reinforced by the media, is the cause for the large amount of body dissatisfaction found in many individuals, especially women. Exposure to media can not only cause body dissatisfaction, but body dissatisfaction can also cause one to be more apt to expose oneself to certain types of media that feed that dissatisfaction (Aubrey, 2006). Body dissatisfaction and self-esteem are also both affected by how an individual compares themselves to those media images.

### **Social Comparison Theory**

Social comparison theory was first suggested by Festinger in 1954 (as cited in Wykes & Gunter, 2005). It states that individuals make comparisons between themselves and others who possess certain desired qualities or traits, and these comparisons help the individuals to establish their identity. Also, individuals differ in their tendencies to compare themselves to others. Those who are more likely to choose inappropriate comparison targets or to take part in upward comparisons are also more likely to be influenced by sociocultural ideals, especially those dealing with appearance (Wykes & Gunter, 2005).

The more an individual engages in social comparison the more negative the media's influence will be. Social comparison theory can be seen as the chain that links together the media's effects on "internalization of ideals, self-esteem, and body dissatisfaction. Miller and Halberstadt (2005) found that men and women who were predisposed to social comparison were more aware of thinness norms and were more likely to internalize those norms. Researchers have also discovered that those who used social comparison were more affected by exposure to the thin-ideal and therefore had more weight concerns, more body dissatisfaction, and lower self-

esteem (Bessenoff, 2006; Botta, 2003; Posavac & Posavac, 2002). The problem then rests in an individual's dependency upon comparison to others in an attempt to define themselves.

Most of the research studies found similar effects from media exposure. Yet there were some limitations to some of the research that was done. Most of the research focused on white heterosexual women of college or adolescent age. While there were some studies that used male participants, they were not nearly as numerous as the ones that had used female participants. Another limitation was the nature of the media sources that were used. Magazines were used the most as opposed to other types of media. The last major limitation was the lack of experimental research. Most of the research that was done used survey methods. It would be beneficial to use a design that is more experimental as opposed to only using surveys and questionnaires.

The current research problem addressed the issue of whether or not social comparison leads to the internalization of sociocultural norms. The purpose of this study was to examine the effects that the media has on college students and the effects of individual differences on media exposure. Specifically it examined if exposure to television causes changes in self-esteem and body satisfaction levels.

## **Hypotheses**

**Null hypotheses.** Three null hypotheses were tested in this study:

1. There are no gender differences in the effects that the media has on self-esteem, body satisfaction, the internalization of sociocultural ideals, and on social comparison.
2. There are no differences in participants' levels of self-esteem after being exposed to certain media.
3. There are no differences in participants' levels of body satisfaction after being exposed to certain media.

**Research hypotheses.** Three research hypotheses guided this study:

1. After exposure to the media female participants will feel more pressure to be thin while male participants will feel more pressure to be muscular.
2. Self-esteem will decrease after media exposure.
3. Body satisfaction will decrease after media exposure.

## **Research Questions**

Two research questions were addressed in this study:

1. Does exposure to the media increase the internalization of sociocultural ideals such as the thin-ideal?
2. Is there a relationship between the level of social comparison and internalization of sociocultural ideals?

## Method

### Participants

A convenience sample of 32 students (16 males, 16 females) were recruited from the General Psychology class at Southern Adventist University. They were college students ranging in age from 18 to 29 years ( $M = 20$ ,  $SD = 2$ ). Participants received 3 extra credit points in their General Psychology course for participating in this study. All participants were treated in accordance with the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (American Psychological Association, 2002).

### Materials

**Advertisements.** Two separate sets of advertisements were used. Both were a collection of television advertisements that were put onto a DVD for the participants to watch. Each DVD was approximately 8 minutes long, and each contained 10 commercials. The first DVD was watched by the experimental group and contained thin female models and/or muscular male models. The second DVD was watched by the control group and contained neutral images (e.g., cars, cell phones, laptops) and did not contain thin or muscular models such as the ones in the first DVD.

**Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (SES).** Rosenberg's (1965) 10-item measure was used to determine the level of self-esteem for each participant. Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with statements about themselves, such as "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself." A 4-point Likert scale ranging from SA (strongly agree) to SD (strongly disagree) was used. The higher the score is the higher self-esteem is. Reports show coefficient alphas ranging from .77 to .87 and test-retest reliability coefficients ranging from .73 to .85 (Hawkins et al., 2004).

**The Body-Esteem Scale (BES).** Franzoi and Shields' (1984) 35-item measure was used to determine the level of body satisfaction for each participant. For time constraint reasons 9 items were taken out of the scale leaving 26 items. These nine items were not seen as necessary for the information needed. Participants were asked to rate their feelings about parts or functions of their bodies (e.g., appetite, nose, legs) using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (have strong negative feelings) to 5 (have strong positive feelings). The higher the score is the higher body satisfaction is. This measure has an alpha ranging from .80 to .86 and a reliability ranging from .78 to .87 (Franzoi & Shields, 1984).

**Sociocultural Attitudes Toward Appearance Questionnaire (SATAQ).** Heinberg, Thompson, and Stromer's (1995) 30-item measure was used to determine the level of internalization of sociocultural ideals for each participant. For time constraint reasons 9 items were taken out of the questionnaire leaving 21 items. These nine items seemed repetitive and unnecessary. Participants were asked their level of agreement with such statements as "I compare my appearance to the appearance of TV and movie stars." A 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (definitely disagree) to 5 (definitely agree) was used. The higher the score is the

higher the level of internalization is. This measure has an alpha of .71 and a reliability of .88 (Hawkins et al., 2004).

**Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure.** Gibbons and Buunk's (1999) 11-item measure was used to determine the level of social comparison for each participant. Participants were asked their level of agreement with statements such as "*I always like to know what others in a similar situation would do.*" A 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (I disagree strongly) to 5 (I agree strongly) was used. The higher the score is the higher the level of social comparison is. This measure has an alpha ranging from .78 to .85 (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999).

## **Design and Procedure**

This study is an experimental between-subject, single-factor design. Students from an introductory psychology course were contacted with permission from the course instructor. I had two sign-up sheets for them with different times that they can come to the library to participate in the experiment. The time slots were for 10 minute intervals starting at 6 p.m. and going until 8:50p.m. These times were available for two consecutive days, April 2nd and 3rd. After the sign-up sheets were returned to me, I used random assignment. The participants were randomly assigned into two groups with 18 participants in each group. There were an equal number of males and females in each group. The participants did not know that they were split into two separate groups. Out of the 36 participants that signed-up, 32 showed up.

When the participants arrived at the library they were given an informed consent form to read and sign. After that they were told that they will be watching an 8-minute video of TV commercials. The experimental group watched the DVD with the models that fit the sociocultural ideals of beauty (thin women and muscular men). The control group watched the DVD with the neutral images. After they were done watching the DVD, participants were given a packet containing four surveys: Rosenberg's SES, the BES, the SATAQ, and the Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure. The participants were asked to answer the questions honestly. They were reminded that, if they had put their e-mail on the informed consent form, they will be contacted after all the data is collected and will be fully debriefed.

## **Results**

The mean age of the experimental and control groups was 20 with a standard deviation of 2. There were 16 participants in the control group, and 16 participants in the experimental group. Each group had an even number of male and female participants.

### **Hypothesis 1**

The first hypothesis was that there are gender differences in the effects that the media has on self-esteem, body satisfaction, internalization of sociocultural ideals, and social comparison. An independent-samples t-test revealed that there was not a statistically significant difference between male and female participants on self-esteem scores as measured by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (SES),  $t(31) = 1.35, p = .188$ . A statistically significant difference was found

between male and female participants on body satisfaction scores as measured by the Body Esteem Scale (BES),  $t(30) = 2.14$ ,  $p = .041$ , indicating that women reported higher levels of body dissatisfaction than men. A statistically significant difference was found between male and female participants on sociocultural internalization scores as measured by the Sociocultural Attitudes Toward Appearance Questionnaire (SATAQ),  $t(31) = -3.97$ ,  $p < .001$ , indicating that women reported higher levels of internalization than men. There was no statistically significant difference found between male and female participants on social comparison as measured by the Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM),  $t(31) = .077$ ,  $p = .448$ . (See Table 1.)

Table 1  
Gender Differences for Self-Esteem, Body Satisfaction, Sociocultural Ideal Internalization, and Social Comparison

Variable	Men		Women		t
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Self-Esteem (SES)	23.44	4.20	21.44	4.20	1.35
Body Satisfaction (BES)	96.60	16.92	84.50	14.58	2.14*
Internalization (SATAQ)	47.75	15.61	67.50	12.37	-3.97**
Social Comparison ON COM)	26.88	6.53	28.69	6.80	-0.77

Note. Total Sample: N = 32. Men: n = 16. Women: n = 16.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .001$ .

### Hypothesis 2

The second research hypothesis was that there are differences in each participant's level of self-esteem from media exposure. An independent-samples t-test revealed that there was no statistically significant difference between the self-esteem of those in the control group ( $M = 21.69$ ,  $SD = 4.62$ ) and of those in the experimental group ( $M = 23.19$ ,  $SD = 3.85$ ),  $t(30) = -.10$ ,  $p = .326$ , indicating that self-esteem was similar for those who were exposed to neutral images and those who were exposed to thin-ideal images (see Table 2).

### Hypothesis 3

The third research hypothesis was that there are differences in each participant's level of body satisfaction from media exposure. An independent-samples t test revealed that there was no statistically significant difference between the body satisfaction of those in the control group and of those in the experimental group,  $t(29) = .52$ ,  $p = .61$ , indicating that body satisfaction was similar for those who were exposed to neutral images and those who were exposed to thin-ideal images. The control group did have higher body satisfaction ( $M = 91.88$ ,  $SD = 16.22$ ) when compared to the experimental group ( $M = 88.73$ ,  $SD = 17.55$ ), but it was not statistically significant (see Table 2).



## Research Question 1

The first research question asked whether or not exposure to the media increases the internalization of sociocultural ideals such as the thin-ideal. An independent-samples t-test revealed that there was no statistically significant difference between the internalization of those in the control group ( $M = 58$ ,  $SD = 17.27$ ) and those in the experimental group ( $M = 57.25$ ,  $SD = 17.50$ ),  $t(30) = .12$ ,  $p = .904$ , indicating that internalization was similar for those who were exposed to neutral images and those who were exposed to thin-ideal images (see Table 2).

Table 2

Gender Differences for Self-Esteem, Body Satisfaction, Sociocultural Ideal Internalization, and Social Comparison

Variable	Groups				t
	Control		Experimental		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Self-Esteem (SES)	21.69	4.62	23.19	3.85	-0.10
Body Satisfaction (BES)	91.88	16.22	88.73	17.55	0.52
Internalization (SATAQ)	58	17.27	57.25	17.50	0.12

Note. Total Sample:  $N = 32$ . Control Group:  $n = 16$ . Experimental Group:  $n = 16$ .

## Research Question 2

The second research question asked if there was a relationship between the level of social comparison and internalization of sociocultural ideals. Pearson correlational revealed that there was not a statistically significant relationship between social comparison and internalization,  $r(32) = +.18$ ,  $p = .312$  (two-tailed), (see Figure 2).

## Other Interesting Findings

Gender differences were only seen in body satisfaction,  $t(30) = 2.14$ ,  $p = .04$ , and in the internalization of sociocultural ideals,  $t(31) = -3.97$ ,  $p < .001$ . In addition, exposure to thin-ideal media did not have as much an effect on self-esteem ( $t(30) = -.998$ ,  $p = .33$ ), body satisfaction ( $t(29) = .52$ ,  $p = .61$ ), or the internalization of sociocultural ideals ( $t(30) = .12$ ,  $p = .90$ ) as the author had thought there would be (see Figure 1). The finding that social comparison does not have a significant relationship with internalization was also unexpected [ $r = +.18$ ,  $n = 32$ ,  $p = .312$  (two-tailed)].

The findings were interesting in that they did not exactly turn out as predicted. Evidence was found to only support a portion of one of the hypotheses. Also, it was interesting to find that the mean self-esteem for the experimental group, even though not statistically significant, was higher than the mean for the control group.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects that the media has on college students, and how individual differences affect how susceptible one can be to media exposure.

Three hypotheses were analyzed in order to evaluate the effects of the media. First, gender differences in the effects that the media has on self-esteem, body satisfaction, internalization of sociocultural ideals, and social comparison were examined. Then the difference in each participant's level of self-esteem from media exposure was analyzed. Then differences in each participant's level of body satisfaction from media exposure were evaluated. The research questions that were analyzed asked whether or not exposure to the media increases the internalization of sociocultural ideals, and if there was a relationship between the level of social comparison and internalization of sociocultural ideals.

The finding that the media does affect men and women differently was the only significant result. Men tended to be more satisfied with their bodies than women. Botta (2003) and Miller and Halberstadt (2005) also found that men were more satisfied with their bodies than women. They also did not internalize sociocultural ideals as much as women. The media was not as important an influence on men as it was on women. Women seemed to feel more pressure from the media to look a certain way, and they also used the images in the media more as a standard for fashion and attractiveness. Miller and Halberstadt (2005) had similar findings. They found that women internalized sociocultural ideals more than men, and that there were no gender differences in the level of social comparison. Even though it was not statistically significant, women did on average have lower self-esteem than men and they had a higher level of social comparison. Yet Furnham, Badman, and Sneade (2002) also found that there were no statistically significant differences in self-esteem between men and women.

It was unexpected to find that exposure to images of thin attractive women and muscular men did not have a significant effect on men and women. Self-esteem and body satisfaction were similar for both those exposed to our society's ideal images and for those exposed to neutral images. This finding was unusual since a number of previous studies have found that exposure to physical ideal images does in fact lower body satisfaction in both men and women (Bessenoff, 2006; Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006; Hawkins et al., 2004; Hobza et al., 2007; Miller & Halberstadt, 2005). There have been mixed findings on the effect that media exposure has on self-esteem. Media exposure has been found to not affect self-esteem (e.g., Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006; Hobza et al., 2007), while other studies have found that exposure does lower self-esteem (e.g., Bessenoff, 2006; Hawkins et al., 2004). Perhaps participants' exposure to media on a daily basis has already shaped how they feel about themselves. More research needs to be done to examine this more closely.

Another unexpected finding was that exposure to images reflecting sociocultural ideals of attractiveness did not significantly affect the internalization of those ideals. The internalization of sociocultural ideals was not affected by the type of images that were seen. Those who watched neutral images had a very similar level of internalization as those who watched images with attractive people. This finding was in agreement with that of Hawkins et al. (2004) and Tiggemann (2003). Yet Miller and Halberstadt (2005) found that media exposure does effect internalization. Internalization was seen to be more of a gender difference than of a group

difference. This might help explain why the images did not make much of a difference since there were an equal number of males and females in each group.

The finding that there was not really a relationship between social comparison and internalization was unexpected. Not many studies have examined this relationship. Even though the relationship was not significant, it was positive. Internalization did increase as the level of social comparison increased, but it was too small of a relationship to be significant. Miller and Halberstadt (2005) had similar findings.

There were some limitations to this study. First, there was not enough time to conduct the experiment with more participants. A larger sample size would have been preferred. Also, it is hard to determine if the media exposure had a direct effect on self-esteem and body satisfaction since both of these were unknown for each of the participants before they watched the DVDs. Another limitation is that other factors that were not considered (e.g., race, SES) could have affected participants' answers to the survey questions. There is also a chance that evaluation apprehension occurred. Even though the surveys were anonymous, some of the participants may have wanted to appear confident and satisfied with themselves. Another limitation could be the DVDs themselves. They may not have been effective in representing each construct. It may have been better to know how much media exposure each participant experiences daily, and what types of media they are exposed to.

The findings of this study, while not all expected, can contribute to the knowledge about the effects of media exposure. From the findings one can better understand how the media affects men and women. Men and women had similar levels of self-esteem and social comparison, and men had higher body satisfaction and lower levels of internalization than women. Also, the positive relationship between social comparison and internalization can be used to better understand how the media affects some people more than others. The findings are also important because they can be used to further advance programs that are meant to curb the negative effects of media exposure.

Future research is needed that better examines the effects that the media has on individuals would be useful. Gender differences should be explored in more depth to better understand the pressures that are exerted on each gender individually, and how those pressures affect men and women differently. Also, while many factors influence body satisfaction and self-esteem, the specific aspects of the media that most affect body satisfaction and self-esteem should be examined more closely. More research on social comparison would also be useful in understanding if it predisposes people to be more adversely affected by the media.

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