Whether or Not Television’s Depiction
of Female Body Image Encourages Eating Disorders in Young Women

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Abstract

This research study seeks to answer the question of whether or not televisions advertisements’ depictions of female body image influences eating disorders in the young women who view such advertisements. The role of the cognitive processes social comparison theory and thin-ideal internalization was also explored as mediators in this relationship, as well as the efficiency of various programs aimed at correcting the problem of eating disorders in young women. Results were obtained by coding and observing the advertisements of various television programs popular among such a demographic. Messages encouraging thinness were recorded, as well as the percentage of thin actresses viewed. After analyzing the results and reviewing recent research on the problem, the conclusion was made there is likely a relationship between eating disorders and the depiction of the thin-ideal in advertising, however such a relationship is largely dependent on the female viewer herself, and many other factors.
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Introduction

“Beauty” is a standard that women and men alike have aspired to for countless centuries, and its definition has been constantly evolving and changing. Unfortunately, our society’s perception of what constitutes true “beauty” has been habitually shaped by the mass media that surrounds us and depends heavily on body composition. (López-Guimerà, Levine, Sánchez-carracedo, & Fauquet, 2010). “Undeniably, a substantial portion of media content consumed by children and adolescents is replete with unhealthy messages about the beauty ideal, body size, food, weight control, and the gender roles of women and girls” (Levine & Harrison, as quoted in López-Guimerà, 2010, p. 389). Thus, it should come as little surprise that only 2% of women actually would consider themselves beautiful (Dove, as cited in Postrel, 2007).

It would be reasonable to infer, therefore, that the constant stream of images which women are exposed to in magazines, movies, advertisements, and television have served the purpose of providing a standard “ideal” body to which they can compare their own. The problem is, however, that images portrayed in the media are often regarded as if they were real and representative of everyday life, even though such body types are extremely difficult to attain (Sohn, 2009). In fact, the body type possessed by female models on television is possessed
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naturally by only 5% of the female population (National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders, 2010).

**Background to the Problem**

“In Western societies, the mass media are typically regarded as the single strongest transmitter of unrealistic beauty ideals, and are often held responsible for the high proportion of women and girls who are dissatisfied with their bodies” (Levine & Smolak, as quoted in Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2003). This is where the relationship between low self-esteem and eating disorders comes into play. Although exact figures are impossible to obtain, low body satisfaction and self-esteem have frequently been implicated as one of the leading causes of eating disorders (Irving, as cited in Craig & Bolls, 2003). Mayra Hornbacher’s 1998 memoir of her experiences with anorexia and bulimia can be seen as a testament to the close connection between the perception of the “ideal body”, low self-esteem, and eating disorders.

The trouble is, I think we are all after that one body. We grew up with the impression that underneath all this normal flesh, buried deep in the excessive recesses of our healthy bodies, there was a Perfect Body just waiting to break out. It would look exactly like everyone else’s perfect body…Somehow we, in defiance of nature, would have toothpick thighs and burgeoning bosoms, buns of steel and dainty firm delts. As Andy Warhol wrote, ‘The more you look at the same exact thing…the better and emptier you feel’ (Hornbacher, 1998, p. 47).

Unfortunately, up to 24 million people in the U.S. alone experience similarly destructive thoughts and feelings about their bodies, and such feelings are manifested in eating disorders (National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and
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Associated Disorders, 2010). Anorexia nervosa is “characterized by emaciation, a relentless pursuit of thinness and unwillingness to maintain a normal or healthy weight, a distortion of body image and intense fear of gaining weight, a lack of menstruation among girls and women, and extremely disturbed eating behavior” (ANAD, 2010, para. 1). Bulimia nervosa involves recurring episodes of eating unusually copious amounts of food, followed by some action, often self-induced vomiting or use of laxatives, to compensate for the binge (National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders, 2010). However, for the purposes of my study, “disordered eating” can also include using unhealthy weight control behaviors such as skipping meals, smoking cigarettes, and fasting. Unfortunately, over one-half of teenage girls have reported such actions (National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders, 2010).

While the media’s role in prompting the social comparison processes of teenaged girls’ body image is well documented, such literature has focused on magazine images and advertisements’ effects. There has been comparatively little research observing television’s role, which is surprising, given TV’s saturation of the American household. In fact, children and adolescents spend more time watching television than any other activity except for sleeping (Levine and Smolak, as cited in Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2003). This research aims to gain a more thorough understanding of whether or not televised female body images can induce low self-esteem and body image and eventually cause eating disorders.

At the same time, however, to explore and simply name the relationship
between the media and disordered eating is entirely distinct from finding a solution. Therefore, this research hopes to study what causes such harmful behavior and what can be done to mitigate the effects on young women. Various programs, ranging from improving media literacy and learning to recognize the unattainable thinness depicted in media to proper guidance on healthy nutrition and weight loss strategies, are being pioneered in efforts to counter the harmful effects of the thin ideal media on young women.

**Research Question**

This study seeks to answer the question: Do the processes of social comparison and thin-ideal internalization prompt low self-esteem and body dissatisfaction in young female viewers after exposure to unrealistically thin actresses in television advertisements? Does this in turn perpetuate eating disorders?

**Rationale**

There is no questioning the fact that eating disorders constitute a disease that results in emotional and physical havoc on those afflicted and their families. Eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any mental illness, and symptoms include: depression, heart, liver, kidney damage, ruptured stomach, malnutrition, shame and guilt, mood swings, low self esteem, tooth/gum erosion, perfectionism, and dehydration (South Carolina Department of Mental Health, 2010). Furthermore, the cost of treatment is often extremely expensive- $30,000 a month for inpatient treatment, and sadly, many families cannot afford such
While statistics and numbers can certainly be a strong indicator of the negative effects of such eating disorders, it can still be difficult to appreciate the true nature of this epidemic. Perhaps no one can convey the sharp emotional pain associated with an eating disorder than someone who has experienced it firsthand.

During my grade school years, I’d wake up with a jolt at 6:30 AM, when the alarm starting blaring 1980s pop music. Into the shower, out of the shower, climb up on the toilet with a hand mirror: look, peer, examine, critique. Frontal view first. Legs too short, too round, thighs touch. Seventeen magazine advises that thighs should not touch. Mine touch. I suck. It’s all over. How can I hide it? How can I stand so I’m not so swaybacked? How can I hide it? How can I hide so I’m not so swaybacked? How can I curve myself inward, as if preparing to implode? Left side: Butt too round, juts out, major gross, ohmigod, the butt, the horrible butt, the butt that is so undeniably a butt. Rear View: hips curve out from the waist.. Are those saddlebags already? Butt, the butt! Two hand spans wide. Oh, fuck it all! Right side: the fucking butt! Who said I wanted a butt? (Hornabacher, 1998, p. 44).

It is clear that the problem of eating disorders must be more thoroughly addressed in order to save young women from such destructive thinking. One of the ways to approach a problem afflicting greater society is to identify and understand the underlying root causes. It has already been proven that exposure to thin models prompts low self-esteem and influences eating habits (Smeesters et al., 2010). It has also been established that the general public recognizes such a relationship and desires a change from such a rigid standard of the ideal body. An Ad Age poll indicates that a strong majority of consumers (63%) believe that the use of “ultrathin” models has a debilitating effect on young women’s self-esteem.
and body image. Interestingly, respondents did not believe that imposing bans on certain advertisements, or even establishing a minimum weight for advertising models was the answer to the problem. (Mazzocchi, 2008).

This is why it is critical that, rather than quickly resorting to legislation or other actions, we continue to investigate the relationship between the media and disordered eating. Specifically, my study will examine the mental effects that the female actresses used in television ads have on young women so that we become more conscious and critical of such unrealistic standards of beauty. Taking this a step further, this study hopes to evaluate the efficiency of recent interventions and programs aimed at protecting young females from the debilitative mental effects that are prompting such unhealthy eating. Ideally this new information can be used to both influence and guide the initiation of even more interventions aimed at finding a solution to the eating disorder epidemic that has been preying on young women across the country.

**Theoretical Background**

This research will examine the mediating processes of internalization of the thin beauty ideal and social comparison in perpetuating eating disorders among young women exposed to thin models on television. These two processes are in no way distinct, as it is the thin beauty ideal that promotes body dissatisfaction specifically through the process of social comparison (Dittmar & Howard, 2004).
Internalization of the thin ideal involves more than simply acknowledging the ubiquity of female thinness in our culture and media. For example, awareness can be measured through statements such as “in our society, fat people are regarded as unattractive” (Dittmar & Howard, 2004, p. 770). On the other hand, women who have internalized the thin ideal have incorporated the premium of thinness into their own belief systems and experience anxiety after viewing thin models in studies. Agreement with statements such as “photographs of thin women make me wish I were thin” (Dittmar & Howard, 2009, p. 770), are strong indicators of internalizing, as opposed to simply recognizing, this thin-ideal (Dittmar & Howard, 2004). Halliwell and Dittmar (2004), found that exposure to thin models results in greater body–focused anxiety than exposure to average–size models or no models, but only among women who internalize the thin ideal.

Social Comparison theory contends that individuals measure themselves against other people who they believe represent realistic and ideal goals (Festinger, as cited in Sohn, 2009). (Goodman, 2009) has added to the theory, stating three motives for comparison: self-evaluation, self-enhancement, and self-improvement. How such comparisons affect the individual depends on whether the comparison is upward or downward. “When an individual compares himself or herself with those who are rated higher on an attribute, this unfavorable comparison is called an upward comparison” (Goodman, 2009, p. 197).

Considering that 95% of women weigh more than media models (National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders, 2010), it should
come as little surprise that an overwhelming majority of social comparisons women make in the media are upward. The images of female actresses in advertising naturally elicit a similar comparison process, and after making such evaluations, many women feel as though they do not “measure up” to these idealized and unrealistic portrayals. Indeed, research has consistently proven that women who view thin ideal images report lower self-esteem and higher body dissatisfaction than do those who view neutral images (Grabe, as cited in Smeesters et al., 2010).

Social Comparison Theory could explain how such thin images drive the behaviors associated with eating disorders as well. While Festinger (as cited in Goodman, 2009), pointed out that people frequently avoid comparing themselves to a markedly different comparison group, a strong exception occurs in regards to women and media models. When the comparison group (in this case, the thin models) is portrayed as so socially desirable and beautiful, the individual will want to gain access to such a group in spite of such extreme differences. Therefore, consistently making upward social comparisons to the depictions of ultrathin women in television can drive one to change her behavior to achieve such an idealized standard of beauty and “belong” in the comparison group. These behaviors frequently manifest themselves in the form of restrictive dieting and exercise (Goodman, 2009).

**Review of the Literature**

This review of the literature seeks to present a variety of earlier research
regarding the electronic media, adolescents, and body image, as well as what can be done to remedy the problem. Many of the following studies demonstrate, in some form or another, “immediate and usually problematic effects of exposure to thin-ideal media images on young women” (Freedman, 1984; Irving, 1990; Meyers & Biocca, 1992; Pinhas, Toner, Ali, Garfinkel & Stuckless, 1999; Tan, 1977; Tiggemann & Pickering, 1996, as cited in Harrison, 2006). Such “thin-ideal” media can be clarified as portrayals of thinness as the most desirable trait in female actresses, or at least a trait that accompanies other sought-after rewards, such as social power and male attention. Thin-ideal media is perpetuated when the large majority of television protagonists, both in programs and commercials, are thin.

The teenaged years and early adulthood are an age in which girls can be especially susceptible to low self-esteem and body image. Emphasis on dating, sexuality, and cultivating an ideal look begins early for many girls and persists into college. However, recent studies have pointed to the especially susceptible nature of early adolescent females to abrupt and negative fluctuations in self-esteem. 50% of girls between the ages of 11 and 13 see themselves as overweight, and 80% of 13-year-olds have attempted to lose weight (South Carolina Department of Mental Health, 2010). Such decreased levels of self-esteem may in fact be priming older children and early adolescents for eating disorders in the future.

*The relationship between eating disordered behavior and media consumption*
A recent longitudinal study determined that girls’ body dissatisfaction increased significantly from the ages of 13-15 (Rosenblum & Lewis, as cited in Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2003). This could be attributed to the fact that external and social cues (including the media) have the most influence on body image at this age (Rosenblum & Lewis, as cited in Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2003). Such cultural factors tend to be exacerbated by the physical changes (often including weight gain), a newfound emphasis on appearance, and search for identity that characterizes this young age (Harter & Erikson, as cited in Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2003).

Hargreaves and Tiggemann (2003) performed a comprehensive study measuring younger adolescents’ body dissatisfactions after viewing TV commercials featuring the “thin ideal”. This “thin ideal” can be defined as essentially consistent portrayals of thinness as socially and sexually desirable, as well as a necessary accompaniment to other sought-after traits, such as beauty and popularity (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2003; Harrison, 2006). Over 300 participants viewed either 20 commercials containing idealized female thin images or 20 nonappearance television commercials, with body dissatisfaction measured before, immediately following, and 15 minutes after the viewing. Results concluded that young adolescent girls who viewed television commercials depicting the thin ideal reported greater body dissatisfaction than girls who viewed neutral advertisements (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2003).

The value of this study extends beyond its initial findings; however, as it
also concluded that the impact of such idealized images of females in commercials persisted even 15 minutes after the initial viewing (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2003). While this finding is certainly not exhaustive nor conclusive, it does suggest that such lingering feelings of body image dissatisfaction may facilitate behaviors associated with disordered eating.

Television’s omnipresence among adolescents cannot be overstated. Viewing peaks at 4 hours in the teen years, eventually “dwindling” down to two hours a day in adulthood (Levine & Smolak, as cited in Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2003). Given television’s clear pervasive influence on young adults, it may come as a surprise that there is a dearth of research exploring its effects on body image issues. There have, however, been numerous studies examining the effects of thin images in exclusively magazines on young women. One such study found high correlates between exposure to thinness-depicting messages in magazines to appearance anxiety and body shame in young women (Monroe & Huon, 2005). The study exposed female undergraduate students to 24 magazine advertisements that were entirely identical except the presence of “idealized body images” in half of them. Body shame and appearance anxiety measures, both strongly connected to self-esteem, were found to have increased after viewing the ads featuring idealized images (Monroe & Huon, 2005).

The study also found that women who ranked as high “self-objectifiers” were especially susceptible to such shame and anxiety (Monroe & Huon, 2005). Self-objectification can be deemed an outgrowth of low self-esteem, and is
defined as “the tendency for women to evaluate themselves based on their physical appearance because they believe that this is how others judge them” (Hofschire, 2003). These findings support the fact that exposure to the “thin-ideal” in media is not equally detrimental to all women, and that individual circumstances must constantly be considered.

Regarding the mediating, cognitive effects of social comparison and thin-ideal internalization in eating disorders

Harrison (2006) similarly sought to examine the relationship between exposure to thin-ideal media and body dissatisfaction by administering a shortened version of the Eating Attitudes Test (Graner & Garfinkel, as cited in Harrison, 2006), as well as subscales of the Eating Disorders Inventory (Garner, Olmstead, & Polivy, as cited in Harrison, 2006) to over 300 adolescents, Grades 6 through 9. Television exposure was measured overall as hours viewed on an average weekday, an average Saturday, and an average Sunday. An index of thin-ideal television programs was compiled with the help of 70 undergraduate students who were asked to rate the body sizes ranging from 1 to 7 (conspicuously thin to conspicuously fat) of the main characters on various popular television shows. Results concluded that while exposure to excessively thin models on television was indeed a predictor of low body satisfaction, drive for thinness primarily found it’s roots in magazine reading (Harrison, 2006).

While social learning theory has a potential role in childrens’ reactions to
the thinness-depicting media, This study will contend that social comparison theory plays the most prominent role in creating the low self-esteem that characterizes eating disorders in adolescent and college-aged females. Holstrom (2006) performed a meta-analysis of previous empirical studies examining the relationship between media and body image and found evidence of a link between TV exposure and behaviors associated with attaining thinness. The roots of this connection lie in the self improvement facet of social comparison theory. Holstrom (2006) reasons that the self-improvement motivation of social comparisons may compel women to evaluate themselves against slightly thinner models for “thinspiration” (p. 212). “Social comparison may increase satisfaction on that dimension because people can see the results of an improvement and become motivated. Therefore, some women, particularly those who report engaging in more media use, may seek out thin images in order to gain motivation to lose weight and exercise” (Holstrom, 2006, p. 212).

Previously-mentioned research on Festinger’s social comparison theory provides a possible explanation on how such seemingly innocuous inspiration can spiral rather quickly to eating disorders and low self-esteem (Goodman, 2009).

Indeed, many anorexics use models as “thinspiration;” thus some women’s comparison to media models may inspire their drive toward thinness….Because most women are ‘inferior’ to media models in terms of level of thinness, then comparing oneself to media models may well spawn body dissatisfaction (Goodman, 2009, p. 198).

The salience of the social comparison theory in prompting the low self-
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Esteem associated with eating disorders for female viewers in particular has been elaborated upon in recent literature. Sohn (2009) evaluated and compared men and women’s social comparisons to TV models and their resulting body perceptual gaps and body satisfactions. Body perceptual gap was determined by subtracting one’s current body size score from their ideal body size score. Body satisfaction was measured on a 17-item scale asking participants to evaluate features such as their arms, legs, chest, thighs and overall bodies. Finally, participants were measured on their tendencies to compare themselves with the actors/actresses with statements such as “I wish I was in his/her shape”. Female participants were found to exhibit significantly higher levels of social comparison than their male counterparts. Additionally, as women compared themselves more frequently to the television actresses, their body perceptual gap also increased, in turn resulting in a lower body satisfaction (Sohn, 2009).

The degree to which an individual internalizes the thin-ideal portrayed in media images of women is also said to play a critical role in prompting eating disorder symptoms and behaviors. G. López-Guimerà et al.’s (2010) meta-analysis of multiple studies examines the moderating and or mediating effects of social comparison theory and internalization of the thinness ideal. The study found that overall, the experimental studies indicate that exposure to the thin beauty ideal featured in the media increases both internalization of thin ideal and disordered eating behaviors and beliefs. More specifically, López-Guimerà (2010) cited a study of 14- to 16-year old Swiss girls by Knauss, Paxton, and Alsaker.
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(2007) that found a closely interrelated relationship between internalization of the thin-ideal, perceived media pressure, and body dissatisfaction. The meta-analysis concluded that college-aged girls who “reported an unstable, poorly defined sense of self were more likely to report internalization of the thin beauty ideal and, in turn, greater levels of negative body image and dieting concerns.” (López-Guimerà et al., 2010, p. 403).

Not only have researchers found that, in the United States, 94% of female characters in television programs are thinner than the average American woman, but television is often ridden with explicit and covert messages on how to attain such body types by dieting, exercising, and surgery (Gonzalez-Lavin & Smolak, as cited in Yamamiya, Cash, Melnyk, & Posavac, 2005). Furthermore, these “thin-ideal” messages can be extremely debilitating regarding the mental health of female consumers—women report feeling significantly more dissatisfied with their own bodies following exposure to thin media images versus average, overweight, or nonbody (neutral) images (Groesz, Levine, and Murnen, as cited in Yamamiya et. al, 2005).

Dittmar and Howard (2004) sought to test the moderating effects of social comparison theory and the internalization of the thin-ideal in female viewers. They hypothesized not only that viewing thin images compared with normal sized images would result in an increase in body-focused anxiety, but that such effects were amplified largely by the internalization of the thin ideal and the social comparison process. In order to ensure the wide application of the results,
participants included 150 women from a diverse range of professions. 50 of the participants were exposed to two neutral, non-body images that consisted of landscapes. Another 50 participants were exposed to computer-generated thin models that wore a dress size of 2. Finally, 50 participants were exposed to “average-sized” models that were manipulated using computer software to appear at least 25% heavier than the thin models, wearing a dress size of 14. The two models were identical except for body shape in order to control for all other appearance related variables in assessing their impact on female viewers (Dittmar & Howard, 2004).

Each group of 50 participants were administered questionnaires during staff meetings in their workplace. They were informed that the study would last 15 minutes, and the study was introduced as “Advertising Effectiveness and Consumer Personality”. Participants in this section were asked to assess how often they compare themselves with advertising models’ various attributes, including physical appearance, happiness, career success, and eating and exercise habits (Dittmar & Howard, 2004).

Participants viewed two advertisements showing thin models, average-size models or landscapes (no models control). The study measured body anxiety by including measures from the state version of the Physical Appearance State and Trait Anxiety Scale, (PASTAS; Reed, Thomson, Brannick, & Sacco, 1991, as cited in Dittmar & Howard, 2004). This scale measures the immediate anxiety
associated with various body sites, asking participants to indicate how anxious they feel at the moment on a five-point scale regarding various body parts.

Results concluded that there exists a strong correlation between social comparison and thin ideal internalization levels in women, \( r_{147} = .47; p < .001 \), suggesting that “…habitual social comparison with media models is linked to the strength with which women internalize a thin body as their personal ideal” (Dittmar & Howard, 2004, p. 778). A multiple regression analysis was carried out in an effort to determine the mediating effects of social comparison and thin ideal internalization in the relationship between body anxiety and viewing the models. Results also indicated that the addition of measures on the questionnaire assessing how much participants internalized the models proved significant \( \Delta F_{2,142} = 4.52; p = .01 \). This supported the hypothesis that the degree to which women internalize the thin ideal magnifies the impact of media images on their anxiety levels. In contrast, the hypothesis that social comparison with same–sex ideals in the media moderates the relationship between body anxiety and exposure to thin models was not supported. However, according to Dittmar & Howard (2004), it was the combination of both social comparison and the thin ideal internalization that had the most profound impact on body anxiety. This confirmed that social comparison tendency still has the potential to affect the impact of media exposure on anxiety, but primarily only through working with the internalization of the thin ideal. In fact, the presence of these two social cognitive processes in the
participants predicted 46.8% of the variance in women’s anxiety scores, which is considerable (Dittmar & Howard, 2004).

The role of social comparison theory in prompting body dissatisfaction, as well as subsequently eating disorders, was affirmed by a recent study performed by Krones, Stice, Batres, and Orjada in 2005. 119 women were randomly assigned to interact and be compared with either a 21 year-old confederate who either fell into the normal body dimensions of women in the U.S., or an 18-year-old confederate who, at 125 lbs and 5’8, was considered to conform to the “thin-ideal” model. The pretext of the experiment was that the participant and the confederate were both being photographed and subsequently evaluated by two college-aged men outside of the room as part of a study on college dating. The experimenter also measured the height, weight, and body dimensions of both the confederate and participant in order to enhance the social comparison effect. Results confirmed the hypothesis that participants who compared themselves with the thin-ideal confederate experienced greater body-image dissatisfaction compared with those who merely interacted with the “average” woman. (Krones, 2005).

Another finding of this study appears relevant to the significant impact of social comparison to thin models in encouraging eating disorders. Firstly, it should be noted that both of the confederates were rated by independent coders as “above average” in attractiveness. This control condition heavily implies that the discrepancy in body dissatisfaction between experimental groups can largely be
attributed to the one confederate’s thinness. Clearly, there was something else being evaluated than mere attractiveness, and it is highly likely that this factor was body size (Krones, 2005).

The Effectiveness of Media Literacy as a Potential Prevention Method/Solution

An average consumer is exposed to approximately 16,000 ads each day. (Savan, as cited in Richards Bullin, 2009). The prevalence of advertisements in our everyday lives cannot be questioned. What, however, is our reaction to all of these images and messages that surround us? According to Richard Bullins (2009), “To avoid the inundation of images we protect ourselves by avoiding the flood of information and moving into a state of automaticity. The problem with this is the conditioning that occurs while our minds are on autopilot” (p. 149). Results of this subconscious processing are manifested in the way young women perceive and evaluate themselves against the characters they view in the media. In fact, 57% of girls and 59 percent of boys say the female characters in the television shows they watch are “better looking” than the women and girls they know in real life, and (69%) of women say they have wanted to look like, dress, or fix their hair like a character(s) on television” (The Kaiser Family Foundation and Children Now, as cited in Richards Bullin, 2009).

With the relationship between internalizing the thinness depicted by female actresses in the media already established, many research studies have begun to evaluate the effectiveness of various solutions. Richard Bullins (2009)
champions the emerging trend of female-centered media literacy, which aims to encourage and prepare girls to avoid simply passively imbibing the idealized portrayals of thinness which surround them, and instead “take them apart and critique them in a very poignant way, (so that) they are able to choose how they see them” (p. 149). Such programs include Reel Grrls, TVbyGIRLS, and Beyondmedia Education. Their methods include having the young female participants fill out critique forms following viewing TV ads and programs, prompting questions and discussions centered around the “realness” of what they have viewed, as well as in general using more inclusive, diverse, and healthy images of women from around the world in content (Richard Bullins, 2009). Thus far, results have been encouraging, with parents and mentors alike noting increased self-confidence, body attitudes, and eating behaviors among the girls participating (Richard Bullins, 2009).

In spite of encouraging findings from Bullin’s study mentioned above, the impact of media literacy programs on mitigating the negative mental effects of exposure to the “thin-ideal” in television advertisements has yet to be confidently determined. Lopez-Guimera et. al’s meta-analysis of the effects and processes of eating disorders on females concludes that media literacy is an encouraging prospect, however results remain inconclusive at this time (2010).

To date, there have been no direct, well-controlled, long-term studies of whether media literacy in particular can prevent development of negative body image and the spectrum of disordered eating. We can with confidence state that (a) brief training in media literacy as a critical social perspective can
mitigate the immediate (or “state”) negative effects of exposure to the thin ideal; and (b) more systematic, intensive interventions over days or weeks can significantly reduce one important dispositional risk factor: internalization of the thin beauty ideal. (Lopez-Guimera, 2010, para. 23)

A study performed by Heidi and Steven Posavac (2001) attempted to evaluate three media-literacy interventions intended to prevent women consumers from experiencing body image disturbance following exposure to slides of thin female fashion models and actresses. Body image disturbance is defined as when a person experiences a distortion in perception, behavior, or cognition and affect related to body weight and shape (Cash & Brown, as cited in Posavac et. al, 2001). The hypothesis being tested was that the interventions would serve to disrupt the social comparison processes that work to encourage body dissatisfaction following exposure to thin media images. According to Posavac et. al, (2001),

Women were induced to perceive the media standard as an unrealistic image of female attractiveness, they might be less likely to compare themselves with media images because the fashion models pictured may be perceived to be “dissimilar others” (and accordingly, inappropriate targets for social comparison). If women did not engage in social comparison with media images, they might be less likely to perceive a discrepancy between themselves and the media ideal. Even if a discrepancy were perceived, it would appear exaggerated and unrealistic and therefore less valid. (Posavac et. al, 2001,p. 327).

Three experimental targeted interventions were developed and presented to the experimental groups, with the overarching goal of encouraging the women to realize that media depictions of female beauty are inherently dissimilar to themselves and other women, and therefore are inappropriate comparison targets
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(Posavac et. al, 2001). The “Artificial Beauty” (p. 328) intervention focused largely on showcasing the excessive amount of effort that goes into fabricating the “beauty” that is seen in television actresses. The “Genetic Realities” (p. 328) intervention attempted to assert that the media images of women are inappropriate subjects for social comparison because an overwhelming majority of women are genetically predetermined to be heavier than the models they see. Finally, a Combination intervention was developed in order to maximize the chances of participants accepting that media images are not appropriate for social comparison. In addition, a fourth, control intervention was presented to the control group in which a psychologist lectured on parenting advice. (Posavac et. al, 2001).

Participants in the experimental groups then viewed one of the 3 Intervention videos (Artificial Beauty, Genetic Reality, or Combination), and then viewed slides of fashion models rated by independent judges to be very high in attractiveness. As for the control group, participants viewed the Parenting Intervention video and then viewed slides of automobiles. The experimenter than administered the Body Esteem Scale to all participants, as well as a Thought Listing Form and two minutes to write down any thoughts they had upon viewing the slides (Posavac et. al, 2001).

The results showed that participants who viewed the experimental intervention videos were compared to those who simply viewed the neutral
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parenting videos. Those participants who viewed one of the videos before being exposed to the slides of attractive women reported significantly less Weight Concern than participants who simply viewed the parenting videos (Posavac et. al, 2001). Furthermore, the free response data offered at the end of the experiment noted that those participants who viewed an experimental intervention were less likely to make statements indicating body image disturbance (either a Negative-Self statement or a Drive for Thinness statement) compared with those in the control group. Finally in comparing the effectiveness of the three interventions offered, results showed little differences among the Artificial Beauty, Genetic Realities, and Combination videos. (Posavac et. al, 2001).

Researchers Yuko Yamamiya, Thomas F. Cash, Susan E. Melnyk, Heidi D. Posavac, Steven S. Posavac (2004) based their own study assessing the impact of media literacy information prior to exposure to images of female models on Posavac et al’s, with results indicating a similarly preventative effect on body image disturbance and body dissatisfaction among female participants. Participants included 123 white females at Old Dominion University between the ages of 18-29. The procedures were modeled after Posavac’s 2001 study, with three main distinctions. Firstly, Yamamiya et al. (2004) did not exclude body-satisfied women. Second, they included a state measure to assess a wider range of emotions associated with body image disturbance, as opposed to simply the trait measure scale utilized by Posavac. The reasoning behind using the state measure was that it would be more apt to record the range of feelings and body image
evaluations directly after media exposure. Finally, in Posavac’s 2001 study, the male narrator explicitly encouraged participants to not compare themselves with the media images, while the current study urged viewers to engage in comparison (Yamamiya et. al, 2004).

It was hypothesized that:

(1) without the psychoeducational, media-literacy information described above, women’s state body image experiences would be negatively affected by thin-and-beautiful media image exposure
(2) giving the psychoeducational, media-literacy information would reduce these media-exposure effects; (3) having individuals construct arguments against thin-ideal based on the media-literacy information would also reduce the effects (Yamamiya et. al, 2004, p. 349).

Results supported the value of media-literacy prevention programs among females with high tendencies to internalize the thin ideal. “The adverse effect on body dissatisfaction and body image disturbance was significantly reduced among high-internalization women when they were given the preventative videos to watch prior to the slides, as well as when they were asked to make written arguments against the media’s thin-ideals based on the information they learned. Low-internalization women were unaffected by any of the preventative videos and experienced a consistency throughout the manipulations (Yamamiya et. al, 2004). The authors conceded, however, that while the media literacy preventions indeed had a positive impact among high-internalizing females, it was unlikely that such protection against negative self-esteem would last much longer than the study’s duration (Yamamiya et. al, 2004).
The Effectiveness of Socio-Cognitive Models in Prevention Methods/Solutions

Levine & Piran (2005) attempted to explore the efficiency of a slightly different solution to disordered eating stemming from media consumption, focusing on a Social Cognitive Model aimed at reversing the negative body image that results from internalizing the thin ideal. According to Levine & Piran,

Negative body image… in turn increases the probability of three interlocking components of eating pathology: dietary restraint, binge-eating, and negative affect. In summary, this research suggests that if negative body image could be prevented, the incidence of eating pathology would be reduced. (Levine, p.58, 2005)

Levine & Piran elaborate that the motivation behind the Social Cognitive Model (SCM) of Prevention is that “the female gender role, negative body image, binge eating, uncontrollable fear of fat, and unhealthy weight-management practices all stem from cognitive processes” (p. 59, 2005). SCM programs aim to decrease such risky and negative behaviors and increase healthy attitudes related to eating and exercising. Basic tenets of the program include exercises for understanding and improving body image, instruction in nutrition and exercise as aspects of healthy weight control, and instruction in individual strategies for critically analyzing and resisting messages from the media that assert that calorie-restrictive diets is a healthy way to attain thinness (Levine & Piran, 2005).

For their study, Levine and Piran (2005) evaluated and assessed the effectiveness of numerous programs based on the Social Cognitive Model. To clarify what constitutes a successful program, Levine and Piran explain,
A truly effective prevention program would reduce the number of new cases, i.e., the incidence, of eating disorders by minimizing the existence or impact of risk factors such as negative body image. Compared to a similar group of healthy people who did not receive the preventive intervention, valid assessment of program participants would reveal that they had fewer instances of disordered eating over a meaningful period of time. (Levine & Piran, 2005, p. 60)

Results showed that certain SCM programs experienced conditional success. In one specific study, Levin and Smolak (2001) provided school-aged boys and girls with a 10-lesson curriculum involving brief presentations, individual and group activities, as well as homework assignments that aimed to promote positive body image, healthy eating and exercising, and an appreciation for natural diversity in weight. A two-year longitudinal follow-up study concluded that those who participated in the program were more knowledgeable regarding health and nutrition, and uses less unhealthy weight management techniques compared to those participants in the control group, who received no intervention (Levine & Piran, 2005).

Regarding young women who already have negative body image, however, a different approach was found to be most effective. Since such women are already more prone to suffer from low self-esteem, depression, and social anxiety, it was reasoned that Cognitive-Behavioral Therapies (CBT) would be most helpful in combating such processes. Levine and Piran (2005) examined Cash and Rosen’s widely-used CBT program, which includes education about the nature of body image, training in self-monitoring to assess certain situations which affect body image more than others, and guided exercises for challenging negative
thoughts and instead creating new, positive ideas of one’s self. Meaningful improvements in body image, self-esteem, and social confidence for the young women were shown in 3-6 month follow up periods. While Levine and Piran acknowledge that more research is needed to confirm the CBT programs’ prevention effects in for sustained periods of time, the study is nonetheless promising in that the programs’ treatment is relatively brief (1-3 months), and can be equally practical in group and individual settings for women suffering from body image disturbances (Levine & Piran, 2005).

Yet another program addressing the socio-cognitive aspect of body image disturbance evaluated by Levine and Piran (2005) was called Student Bodies. It is an 8-week intervention aimed at increasing body satisfaction and alleviating weight concerns in college women. Participants received psycho education about body image, consequences of eating disorders, and healthy nutrition and exercise alternatives. This educational information is supplemented by cognitive-behavioral exercises seeking to help participants evaluate themselves more healthily and challenge negative thoughts. Participants were also encouraged to interact with and support one another through three moderated face-to-face discussions, as well as various computer-aided exchanges (Levine & Piran, 2005).

After three months, the female participants who had received the Student Bodies intervention had exhibited significantly healthier attitudes regarding weight, body shape, and eating compared with those women who were placed in the wait-list control group. Levine and Piran (2005) also noted that the broadest
improvements were found in those girls who were identified as high-risk for developing eating disorders and exhibited a strong motivation to change, according to pretest results.

Because many females suffering from eating disorders and low body image rarely will seek treatment on their own, (Welch & Fairburn, as cited by Stice, Chase, Stormer, & Appel, 2001), attention and research has been recently growing towards developing and assessing prevention programs. Not only do such prevention-based programs have great potential to stymie and limit the epidemic of eating disorders among young women, but they are also ultimately far more cost-effective than the treatment options associated with eating disorders (Stice et. al, 2001). As mentioned earlier, the cost of treatment for anorexia and bulimia is often extremely expensive- $30,000 a month for inpatient treatment (National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders, 2010), and far greater good can be accomplished by preventing such disorders from materializing in the first place.

_Literature Review Summary_

The subject of eating disorders and their causes has been the focus of much research. Unfortunately, despite the literature available that has explored the relationship between disordered eating and the thin-ideal that is depicted in media, such research seems to be somewhat disjointed. As we have seen, media pressure, the elevation of the thin-ideal and attractiveness, and thus the roots of low-self esteem can be sown as early as the pre-teen years. However, many such studies
commonly refer to Bandura’s social learning theory as the prime motivating source behind such behaviors (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2003), whereas this study looks more towards social comparison theory and thin-ideal internalization as the mediator for older females.

While research exists on eating disorders in young women and exposure to thin actresses and models, the literature is either exclusively based on magazine images and articles, or collectively subsumes television, magazines, and other sources of media. Studies exclusively examining television’s influence on female viewers are more difficult to come by. It is encouraging nonetheless to read studies that affirm the relationship between drive for thinness (Harrison, 2006, & Goodman, 2009), and body shame and appearance anxiety (Sohn, 2009, & Monroe & Huon, 2005), to exposure to idealized images of thinness.

This review of the literature presents evidence for the roles that social comparison theory and internalization of the thin ideal play in mediating the low-self esteem measures that are related to disordered eating. Holstrom (2006) concluded that females often compare themselves to the thin models they view on TV, and consequently use them as motivation to attain such a desired level of thinness. Links between body perceptual gap and body dissatisfaction and the process of comparing oneself to the models they were exposed to was found specifically for the female participants in Sohn’s 2009 study.

Overall, the literature on the subject of eating disorders and thinness depicted on television is promising. Although the studies are a bit broad and
Television's depiction of female body image and eating disorders

lacking unity, they serve to underpin this study as I attempt to understand the relationship between viewing thin images on television commercials and the perpetuation of eating disorders in young women.

Methodology

In order to investigate the relationship between female body images portrayed on television advertisements and their effect on young women and disordered eating, this study utilizes both primary and secondary research. I began by viewing television commercials using both quantitative and qualitative methods. I tracked the total number of actresses I viewed, as well as the total number of thin actresses. I then computed the percentage of total actresses that were “thin” in each Data Set I viewed. In order to gain a “standard” to compare the models to, I began by researching the average body dimensions of an American woman (63.4 inches tall, 164 lbs., waist circumference of 37 inches) (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011). I then evaluated whether or not the actresses shown in the commercials were thinner than such dimensions.

Secondly, I coded the number of instances I observed the message that women should be striving to attain and maintain a slender body shape(TM=Thinness Motivation). Examples included women (often for weight-loss products) proudly standing in front of their “before” pictures when they were much heavier, saying how much weight they lost and how much better they felt after using X product. I recorded instances of the message that thinness is a trait associated with male attention and social and professional power(TR=Thinness Rewards).
Specific examples included a thin woman being proposed to by her boyfriend while outside their large house and a thin, beautiful woman exchanging flirtatious glances with an attractive man on a bus and then sitting together. Finally, I searched for the message that being overweight or obese had negative connotations, namely that overweight women were the products of shame, ridicule, or disdain from others in society. I coded this as Overweight=Disdain (OD).

Throughout my coding, I took note of the few commercials that featured solely regular-sized females as the main characters in order to attempt to further my understanding of the role that thinness plays in advertising. For example, I hypothesized that a commercial attempting to sell a “sexy” product such as shoes or eyeglasses would feature thin actresses.

It is important to bear in mind that I was not searching exclusively for commercials aiming to sell products specifically related to weight-loss and attaining thinness (although such commercials certainly proved relevant). Rather, I analyzed each commercial for the afore-mentioned messages, regardless of the product they were attempting to market. Furthermore, in order to ensure the validity of my coding, I decided to use stringent standards in coding my messages. For example, simply viewing a thin and attractive female actress laughing and styling a certain pair of shoes did not qualify under the message of Thinness as a Reward. Only if I witnessed a thin actress being explicitly rewarded in some way, such as perhaps meeting an attractive man or succeeding
at an interview, would I code the commercial as TR.

Considering that the first part of this study focused on the effects the thin ideal has on young females, I performed my analysis on programming that caters to such an audience. I researched the most-watch programs by the demographic of females aged 18-34 and found that Oprah, Dr. Phil, Dr. Oz, LIVE!, Ellen, Maury, The Doctors, and Rachael Ray were the top ranked shows. Fortunately, the top two shows- Oprah and Dr. Phil (with respective ratings of 1.7 and 1.0), are available on the Boston College cable network, and run back-to-back from 3PM to 5PM (Nielsen Media Research, as cited in Albinak, 2010). I recorded these shows on the dates March 28th, 29th, and 30th. To supplement my coding and gain a variety of programming to view commercials from, I also recorded two episodes of 30-Minute Meals with Rachael Ray from 2PM to 3PM on April 22.

In assessing my data collection, I tallied up the total number of instances I observed each message during my coding. I also calculated the percentage of thin actresses seen during the commercials, and attempted to gain an overall understanding of the thinness ideal depicted on television commercials, and evaluate if there is a strong pressure coming from such advertisements to attain thinness.

Results

The following results include the coding which I performed during a total of nine hours of television programming between the dates of March 29th, 2011 to April 22nd, 2011. The three shows in which I coded the commercials for were Dr.
Phil, Oprah, and 30-Minute Meals with Rachael Ray. I recorded the total number of actresses I viewed in the commercials, as well as the total number of thin actresses. I also coded for the three messages (Thinness as Motivation, Thinness as Reward, and Obesity=Disdain) and noted the few commercials that did not include thin actresses.
Table # 1: Cumulative Data Sets 1-8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Set #</th>
<th>Total Advertisements</th>
<th>Total Actresses</th>
<th>Total Thin Actresses</th>
<th>Percentage Thin Actresses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
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<td>82%</td>
</tr>
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<td>35</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following, Table 2, summarizes the findings represented in Data Sets 1-8.
Table # 2
Summary of Thin Actress % on Television Commercials

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Advertisements</th>
<th>Total Actresses</th>
<th>Total Thin Actresses</th>
<th>Percentage Thin Actresses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>270</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After nine total hours of programming, I viewed 270 advertisements. Within these advertisements, I noted a total of 276 actresses, 245 of which were coded as possessing less weight than the average 5’4, 164 lb American woman (CDC, 2011). In conclusion, 89% of the actresses I observed in the advertisements for the programs *Dr. Phil, Oprah,* and *30-Minute Meals with Rachael Ray* were determined to fit my criteria for thin.
Table # 3

Code: Thinness as Motivation (TM)

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Data Set #</th>
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<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary of the message Thinness as Motivation

While the Thinness as Motivation message only appeared 13 times during coding, such messages were consistently the most explicit and weight-related, often directly exhorting female viewers to lose weight. One such commercial featured “Ronnie”, from the popular MTV show The Jersey Shore looking very tanned and muscular, explain how the weight-loss supplement Xenedrine helped him get fit. The scene then cuts to a woman, very slim, in a bikini with blonde
hair. As she stands in front of her “before” and “After” photos, she happily states “Xenedrine helped me lose an incredible 50 lbs and change my life!” Another example was for Dr. Phil’s 17-Day diet, which included various overweight individuals happily exclaiming how much weight they lost on the 17-Day Diet. Images included such overweight females and males struggling to do push ups and other physical activity before cutting to thinner and more attractive individuals. The product packaging states “Get Your Body Back!”. A similar example of overt pressure to attain thinness was seen in the advertisement for QuickTrim, another weight loss supplement. The commercial begins with the very thin celebrity/socialite Kim Kardashian saying to viewers “You can change the way you look” as she is walking on a pool patio in a bikini, with her hair blowing in the wind. Then cuts to a thin woman explaining how QuickTrim helped her lose weight after having her kids. She concludes by saying, “I went from a size 14 to a size 6, and I love my body!”

Moderma Stretch Mark Remover produced a commercial containing the message that women should be striving to be thin, however instead of focusing on encouraging female viewers to lose weight, it instead explained how the evidence of weight-gain and loss can be hidden. The advertisement features an attractive, young woman laughing and smiling as the voiceover narrates: “No More miracle stretch mark creams…no more hiding”. The commercial ends with the voiceover saying “Wear your skin proudly” as a woman’s thin midsection is shown.
Table # 4

Code: Thinness as Reward (TR)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Set #</th>
<th># of TM codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary of the Thinness as a Reward Messages

Of all of the messages I have coded for, *Thinness as a Reward* was the most numerous. The majority of these messages highlighted thin female actresses receiving attention from attractive males, either in the form of awe and admiration, or gifts. For example, an advertisement for Ritz Jewelers featured a young woman washing her car with her boyfriend outside, laughing and having a good time. The boyfriend then proposes to her in the middle of the driveway.
Another commercial, for Fios Cable, featured two “competing” male neighbors who were bestowing their wives with various expensive gifts and attempting to “one-up” each other. An advertisement for Crest Whitestrips featured a tall, thin and beautiful woman on a public bus. An attractive man on the bus is smiling at her as the woman smiles back flirtatiously and begins to move closer and closer to him. The narrator begins by saying “When you smile, the world smiles back” and the screen cuts to the product, Crest toothpaste. After the narrator is finished extolling the benefits of the toothpaste, the screen returns to the woman and man, sitting together. The woman smiles at the man and asks, “So, when is your stop?” The man smiles sheepishly and says, “Oh, about three stops back”. These are simply a few of the more explicit messages I observed in which exclusively thin females were the recipients of male attention and admiration.

While many of the Thinness as Reward messages included thin actresses garnering the attention of males, there were also many instances of only thin females feeling social security and approval. An advertisement for DSW Shoe Warehouse highlighted this message. The setting was a high-class party with elegantly dressed young and attractive people holding cocktails outside of a pool in the evening. A tall, slender, and beautifully dressed woman walks by confidently as men turn their heads and stare. Another advertisement for Townhouse Crackers shows several different shots of young, attractive, and thin adults having fun and doing recreational activities together, such as having a picnic, sitting at a bar, and eating crackers in a well-furnished and beautiful living
room. Throughout the beginning of the commercial, the narrator says, “There’s a place where everyone feels at home. Where the company, the conversation, and the food make all who enter feel welcome.”

Another commercial ironically attempted to reassure the viewers of Oprah’s show that confidence apparently is more important than outside appearances, however ironically the commercial included mostly thin women. The actresses are in a studio smiling and posing. Oprah narrates: “Dove believes that confidence can make a beautiful difference, in every woman. Discover the Dove Difference.” However, two of the three women are tall and slender, while the third one is only slightly overweight, and still appears attractive.

Finally, I observed an instance of a thin woman being rewarded professionally in a commercial for Kohls. It showed a slightly nervous-looking, yet attractive and well-dressed, thin woman waiting in a waiting room on a couch. The narrator says: “When Karen Tomlin was going on an interview, she wasn’t sure if the job would be exactly right for her. She also wasn’t sure if she would be exactly right for the job. But she was sure she would find an outfit that would be exactly right for the interview”, as the camera pans across the actresses’ body and confident smile. The commercial concludes with Karen (the actress) confidently striding up to shake the hand of her interviewer.
Television’s depiction of female body image and eating disorders

Table # 5

Code:  Obesity = Disdain (OD)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Set #</th>
<th># of TM codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<tr>
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<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Summary of the Obesity = Disdain Messages**

I only observed one instance of this message during my coding. It was from a preview for a comedy, called Madea’s Big Happy Family. The main character, Madea, was a comically oversized black woman played by a man. Also features two other actresses who are overweight, and it appears as though the context of the film is one that plays off of their obesity as a joke.
Table # 6
Advertisements Featuring Heavyset or Normal BMI Women

March 29th-April 22, 2011

Expressway Toyota

Lyrica –Fibromyalgia Medication

Bernie & Phyl's Furniture Store

Aspen Dental

Discussion

Perhaps the most striking aspect of my findings was the abundance of thin actresses portrayed on television commercials. According to Levine & Smolak (1995), the average female actress depicted on television programming is thinner than 94% of the female population in America. I sought to discover if this ubiquity of thinness has remained true regarding the commercials that are associated with such programming. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the average American woman weighs 164 lbs (2011).

Furthermore, It is estimated that 5% of women have the body build required to be a fashion model (Jhally, as cited in Irving, 2001), and that one in 40,000 women meet the approximate height, weight, and shape requirements to be a fashion model (Wolf, as cited in Irving, 2001). My research aimed in part to assess the validity of such facts, and after viewing 270 total advertisements from 9 hours of television programming, I found that an overwhelming number of female
actresses shown on television presented a standard of thinness that the majority of American women do not measure up to. I counted 245 thin actresses out of a total of 276 actresses. This equates to 89% of the actresses I viewed likely weighed less than the average American woman. Not only that, however, but the actresses I viewed coded as “thin” likely weighed far less than the 164 lb benchmark which I was using.

From this initial statistic alone, it is clear that the “reality” that female consumers view on TV does not in any way accurately reflect the reality of our everyday lives. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2011), 20% of adults over the age of 20 are obese, and 34% are overweight. This equates to a total of 54%- more than half, of adults who are overweight or obese, and yet on television we are consistently exposed to models and actresses (primarily female) who weigh far less than the average American.

Jean Kilbourne (as cited in Irving, 2001), contended that Americans are exposed to 3,000 advertisements, in some form or another, daily. Given the saturation of advertising in our daily lives, it should come as little surprise that the depiction of thin female actresses has quickly become the new “standard” for women to compare themselves to. This presents a potentially grave problem for the average-weighted American television viewer, as the distinction between reality and the television world is blurred. The models I coded as thin often receive the benefits of airbrushing, photo manipulation, personal trainers, and expensive nutrition plans to attain their slender body types. Considering that the
median household income in America was just $49,777 (U.S. Census 2010), it is highly unlikely that the average American woman can afford such luxuries intended to aid in achieving such a desired body weight. “The problem is that many people regard the images portrayed in the media as if they were real, even though such body types are not easily attainable in reality…. Thus, the mass media produces unrealistic images of the ideal body shape while sending out a false impression of how real and attainable these body shapes are” (Sohn, 2009, p. 20).

In this research, I simply recorded the number of instances in which I saw thin actresses on television advertisements- I did not record specific messages intended to encourage thinness in women or portray it as desirable and rewarded. Therefore, one may question what is the harm in the seemingly innocuous portrayal of thin actresses. The answer may be traced back to the Social Comparison Theory outlined in the theoretical framework of this study. Social Comparison theory asserts that individuals consistently tend to evaluate themselves against both realistic and idealistic examples. (Festinger, as cited in Sohn, 2009). There exist three motives for engaging in social comparison: self-evaluation, self-enhancement, and self-improvement, and the effect of the comparison depends largely on whether it is upward or downward. (Goodman, 2009). Given that 89% of the actresses I observed on television commercials were thinner than the average American woman, it is safe to infer that a majority of such comparisons are made in the upward direction. The result of such consistent
upward social comparisons with idealized and thin media images is low body satisfaction, high body perceptual gap (Sohn, 2009), and increased body shame and appearance anxiety (Monroe & Huon, 2005, Groesz, Levine, and Murnen, 2002). Such negative emotional and cognitive processes are listed as symptoms of the Eating Disorder Inventory (Garner, Olmstead, & Polivy, as cited in Harrison, 2000) and have been shown to have correlations with behavior indicative of eating disorders. (Goodman, 2009).

The next question may be: How can constantly viewing and comparing oneself to these thin actresses on television commercials prompt eating disorders? When one compares herself to a comparison group as socially desirable and beautiful as the actresses I observed in this study, the individual will often want to gain access to such a group (Goodman, 2009). Excessive dieting and exercise are often the means young women will resort to in order to attain “entry” to such an exclusive membership, and unfortunately these behaviors often have the potential to spiral into full-blown eating disorders. (Goodman, 2009). Women are especially at risk, as they tend to make social comparisons with media models much more rapidly and easier than their male counterparts do (Sohn, 2009).

This finding likely corroborates the theory that exposure to thin images on TV (as well as other media) is likely to perpetuate eating disorders almost on a subconscious level that we routinely overlook while viewing media. A young female suffering from an eating disorder may not directly indict viewing thin actresses as a cause of her condition, however perhaps the habitual and
subconscious social comparisons she has made throughout her upbringing played a strong role in it.

Smeesters (2009) reaffirms the ubiquity of the thin ideal in television and our inability to recognize it at times when he explains,

Many women may find it difficult to escape the effects of social comparison processes that are spontaneous and automatic. Individuals may be able to correct for social comparison information, but only when they are aware of the biasing influence of this information. (Smeesters, 2009, p. 946)

Therefore, while it may appear relatively harmless and is routinely accepted that female actresses on television advertisements are largely thin, it must be recalled that such prevalence of thinness can have damaging effects on female viewers that slip undetected, below our conscious processes. Such a finding provides support for media literacy programs discussed in the Review of the Literature, as they seek to educate female viewers on the unrealistic standards they tend to measure themselves up to.

The second measure of my quantitative analysis concerned the frequency with which a thin woman was “rewarded” in some form during the advertisements. Such rewards varied from displaying wealth and desirable fashion, feeling part of a social group, and, most commonly, receiving attention from attractive men. I noted 24 explicit instances of a female in the commercials shown receiving such awards, and 100% of such females were determined to weigh less, and have smaller body dimensions, than the average 164 lb woman.
A majority of such messages were found in commercials that featured a male, or several males, devoting excessive attention and admiration towards the thin female actress. One example of this message was seen in the advertisement for Foster Grant Reading Glasses, in which two attractive waiters at a fancy restaurant notice a beautiful, elegantly dressed woman sitting alone at a table reading a menu. The men are clearly in awe of the woman, and whisper to each other, “Isn’t that Raquel Welch wearing those Foster Grant sunglasses?” One of the waiters approaches her table and says nervously, “See anything you like?” (regarding the menu), and she glances seductively up at him and says “Indeed I do” with a smile.

Apparently, one has to be thin to enjoy the comforts of friends and family as well, according to the commercials I viewed. One such example is the series run by Amica Insurance, in which a young, attractive, and thin woman is shown blowing bubbles and laughing with her family as the text on the screen reads: “It’s that ‘always there for you’ feeling”, and “It’s that ‘part of something’ feeling”. When the only females being rewarded and enjoying life featured in an advertisement such as Amica’s are consistently thin, it should be little wonder that many female consumers come to internalize this “thin-ideal” and begin to accept the notion that thinness should be the ultimate standard women aspire to.

I also noted examples of products or commercials that highlighted the need to be thin, or to attain a certain slender body type (*Thinness as Motivation, TM*) While I did not limit my search to such products, I did find that a majority of
these examples were found in advertisements for weight loss products. My results reaffirm what I have found in my prior research and literature review—there is an overwhelming, if not urgent, message for women to attain a standard of thinness present in television. I noted 12 examples of the code TM in my television viewing. In analyzing these results, it is important to bear in mind that I only coded an advertisement as containing the Thinness as Motivation message if it contained explicit instructions, products, or encouragement for the viewer to lose weight. I also noted numerous similar messages in my viewing, however it in the interest of the legitimacy and validity of this study, I decided to solely record those instances containing implicit messages. Furthermore, I understand that 12 instances of this message may seem a bit scarce, especially in the context of 9 hours of television viewing and 270 total commercials. I did, in fact, anticipate viewing more than this number in my data collection. Upon reflection, however, it seems that there is a powerful message that even a few of such commercials, in conjunction with the Thinness as Reward message, can present to impressionable, young, and female viewers. In fact, it has been proposed in recent research that such direct, implicit messages encouraging female viewers to become thin is even more powerful than simply constantly being exposed to thin actresses without directions. Goodman (2009), explains,

These women have been exposed to years of thin images that have created varying levels of perceived media pressure; therefore, it is not so much the current level of exposure that influences media pressure and the other variables in the model but it is the accumulation of years of exposure to these images. In other words, the constant use of thin models, presenting these models as
ideally beautiful, and telling women how to achieve thinness accumulated over time in these women’s psyches so that simply exposing them to thin media no longer has an effect. However, what the media do is remind women that to be beautiful and socially desirable, they must be thin. Thus they feel constant pressure from the media to achieve that goal…. Another possible explanation is that the verbal thin-ness messages in media may be more powerful than the visuals because they instruct women on how to achieve thinness as well as tell them that thinness is valued, or maybe it is the combination of both that causes the greatest impact. (Goodman, 2009, p. 209)

The commercials I viewed containing the Thinness as Motivation message strongly indicated that the media is constantly delivering the message to young female viewers that they should be thin. For example, the very first commercial I viewed for my coding was for a product called Mega T Green Tea, and began with the narrator literally shouting at the viewer: “Hey, you! Your ‘muffin top’ is showing!” The commercial then proceeds to cut to a computer-generated image of a woman’s mid-section being decreased as the product is introduced. The commercial ends with the narrator exclaiming “Come on! Lose your Muffin Top with Mega-T!” With a statement such as “Your muffin top is showing!” being shown consistently on national television ( I viewed this particular commercial two times during my coding), it should be little wonder that impressionable female viewers (Sohn, 2009) would quickly internalize the idea that anything straying away from a sleek body physique is undesirable and must be taken care of.

Stretch marks, defined by the Merriam Webster Dictionary as triae on the skin (as of the hips, abdomen, and breasts) from excessive stretching and rupture
of elastic fibers especially due to pregnancy or obesity (2010) are yet another component of the average female body that has come under attack by commercials. Moderma Stretch Mark cream aired a commercial 4 times during my coding session that featured happy, skinny, and beautiful women laughing and caressing their skin while wearing towels. The narrator exhorted viewers to “Stop hiding” because of their stretch marks, and then to “Wear your skin proudly”. Such commercials contain the strong sentiment that stretch marks, often caused by obesity, are something that female viewers should “hide” from, and only until they have found a solution to them (in the form of Moderma Stretch Mark Cream, of course), can they feel pride for their skin and appearance.

Perhaps what was most unsettling regarding the Thinness as Motivation message was that 1/3 of the commercials containing this message were found during the one hour of 30-Minute Meals with Rachael Ray programming. One of the products, QuickTrim, opens its commercial with the very thin celebrity Kim Kardashian standing on a pool patio, wearing a bikini, and having her hair and towel flow in the wind. She happily tells viewers “You can change the way you look!” The commercial then features a thin woman explaining how QuickTrim helped her lose the weight she had gained after having her two kids, and then concludes with her saying, “I went from a size 14 to a size 6, and I love my body!”

Even if such commercials featuring explicit weight-loss messages do not necessarily overwhelm the advertising landscape, their presence nonetheless can
be felt by young women, especially those who tend to internalize the thin ideal quickly. As mentioned earlier, women who internalize the thin ideal do more than simply acknowledge the prevalence of thin models and actresses in our media; they also report wishing to be like such models as well as experiencing increased body anxiety after viewing such images. While a direct correlation is yet to be proven, I hypothesize that if simply viewing thin media models on television advertisements induces body anxiety in such females, than explicit, and often harsh, messages such as “Your muffin top is showing!” can only serve to exacerbate the degree to which one experiences the negative emotional effects associated with eating disorders.

The final message that I observed was that the opposite of thinness; obesity, is often received negatively by the rest of society. I anticipated viewing some examples of obesity, or even overweight individuals, being met with disdain and negativity from others as a result of their physical condition. I was somewhat surprised to note that in a total of 270 advertisements, I noted only one Obesity = Disdain (OD) message. The message was contained in a preview for an upcoming comedy. It featured the main character, Madea, as a comically oversized black woman played by a man wearing a fat suit. The preview also features two other actresses who are overweight and bumbling throughout the ad with the main character, Madea. Although the preview appears innocent and good-natured, I could still imagine an overweight or obese woman (or a woman who feels that she
is overweight) suffering a loss of self-esteem after viewing the trailer for a movie that’s comic effect relies almost entirely upon an obese woman.

Finally, I took note in my findings of the few instances where I viewed commercials that contained exclusively regular-sized or heavier actresses. The very few commercials that featured actresses that were more indicative of the average female in America were for medications, car dealerships, or dental services—none of which can be considered appealing and exciting products that consumers want to purchase. The remaining few commercials featuring regular-BMI females were the products of low-budget productions, such as Bernie and Phyl’s Furniture Store, or Safeway Toyota. It is very significant to note that in my findings among the only opportunities to view a regular-BMI female was in the local commercials that featured regular people, and not Hollywood actresses.

A critical factor to consider when discussing the results of my coding was the definition of “thin” that I used. I labeled the actresses I saw on the advertisements as thin if they appeared to have a body mass index of less than 28, or that of the average American woman (63.4 inches, 164 lbs). However, it is important to note that an adult who has a Body Mass Index (BMI) of between 25 and 29.9 is considered overweight, and a BMI of over 30 is considered obese, thereby placing the “average” American woman standard which I used in the upper-end of the overweight continuum for body mass index. According to a recent report from the U.S. Surgeon General, almost two out of every three Americans are
overweight or obese, and one out of every eight deaths in America is caused by an illness directly related to overweight and obesity (2003).

While the purpose of this research was to explore the causes and factors of eating disorders, I propose that the nation’s problem with obesity has a potentially critical connection to the cognitive processes attached to disordered eating. While an extremely large majority of the actresses I viewed still likely had a BMI that was close to being underweight, I believe that this represents a possibility for further research and investigation.

From the prior research and literature review I have performed, as well as my independent coding, it is clear that there exists a strong disparity between the thin and (at times) ultra-thin actresses represented as the “norm” for females on television advertisements, and the current “obesity epidemic” that many medical professionals believe is affecting our nation. Experiments have demonstrated that it is the thinness of fashion models, not their attractiveness, that accounts for the negative mental impact on female viewers, (Dittmar & Howard, Halliwell & Dittmar, as cited in Sohn, 2009), and this research study supports this idea. Body perceptual gap is determined by subtracting one’s current measurements from their one’s idealized and desired body dimensions (Sohn, 2009). In a study examining the mental effects of exposure to thin models on advertisements, it was found that after exposure to thin female actresses, participant’s (especially women’s) body perceptual gaps increased. In other words, “…media depictions of
such ideal body shapes increase the distance between our actual self-perception and our ideal self;” (Sohn, 2009, p. 20).

The combination of the current obesity epidemic, as well as the idealized saturation of thinness in the media, presents a fertile ground for eating disorders to grow among young women. This research suggests that there exists a disconnect between the reality that surrounds us in everyday life, and the “reality” that many media consumers have grown to internalize from advertisements. It should come as little surprise then, that the vast majority of men and women believe that they are more overweight than they truly are when they compare themselves to images in the media (Brodie et al, as cited in Sohn, 2009). Furthermore, more than three-fourths of normal-BMI American women think they are “too fat” (Gordon, and Kilbourne, as cited in Sohn, 2009). I believe that this widening gap between young females’ ideal body images and current bodies can be attributed to both the current obesity crisis and the idealized depiction of thinness in television advertisements. This sharp divide between reality and media will only exacerbate the feelings of low self-esteem, body shame, and anxiety within young females— all of which are considered symptoms and precursors of eating disorders (Monroe & Huon, 2005, Groesz, Levine, and Murnen, 2002).

**Conclusion**

The question I sought to answer through my own research was: Do the processes of social comparison and thin-ideal internalization prompt low self-esteem and body dissatisfaction in young female viewers after exposure to
unrealistically thin actresses? Does this in turn perpetuate eating disorders?

Reflecting upon the results and discussion of this study, a few conclusions can be drawn. It was extremely difficult to come to a clean and tidy conclusion regarding the relationship between eating disorders and depictions of thinness on television. In fact, one of the first points that can be derived from this paper is that there can be no blanket diagnosis, nor scapegoat, for the eating disorder epidemic that so many young women are suffering from today. That said, however, I have come to conclude that the influence of thin images on television advertisements can in fact be considered a variable in the equation for eating disorders.

There was little questioning the fact that thinness is omnipresent in television advertisements, with 89% of the actresses observed being thin. There were numerous instances, however, of solely thin females being rewarded with male attention and social and professional power as well as advertisements exhorting viewers to attain thinness. I believe that the prevalence of the thin-ideal on television, when coupled with the processes of social comparison and thin-ideal internalization, can serve to perpetuate disordered eating in certain young female viewers.

An important caveat to this conclusion, however, lies in the words “can” and “certain”. This research, as well as any other studies regarding the subject, will be limited in their failure to be applied universally. Some females are far more susceptible to prompts of eating disorder behavior than others, depending
upon their degrees of social comparison, thin-ideal internalization, self-objectifying tendencies, family and peer influence, reception to media literacy, and a plethora of other factors (Halliwell and Dittmar, 2004, Harrison, 2006).

This should come as no surprise to anyone who has experience studying human behavior—people cannot, and will not, react in uniform, precise ways to stimuli. Therefore, a definitive conclusion to my research question cannot be applied to all young females.

This research has demonstrated that there is a relationship between depictions of thinness on television advertisements and eating disorders. While feeling as though your thighs are a bit too heavy, or eating less cookies after an experiment may appear innocuous enough, such effects of viewing thin models may easily and rapidly spiral into eating disorders for some women (Goodman, 2009). Indeed, “Eating in response to external cues rather than internal hunger signals is one of the first steps involved in the development of disordered eating, be it anorexia, bulimia, or compulsive eating” (American Psychiatric Association, as cited in Harrison, 2006, p. 20).

Limitations

As a lone researcher conducting this study in the limited time span of 4 months, I must acknowledge an important limitation to my study, as well as present an alternative viewpoint regarding the causes of eating disorders.

One limitation of this study is its lack of comprehensiveness. I analyzed
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only 9 total hours of television programming. My findings could have been
different if a larger sample of programs, airing at different times, was used.

There is some merit in providing some alternative viewpoints on the issue.
Some critics contend that the media and advertising industries are not responsible
for such comparison processes— that what we see on television is simply a
reflection of the image-obsessed culture that surrounds us. Indeed, studies have
determined that the American public itself finds female television program
characters to be most desirable in their thinnest forms (Shapiro, Barrigam &
Jhaveri, 2005). However, it may not matter whether or not television and other
media sources are generating such lofty ideals of thinness themselves or simply
mirroring the greater social context we live in. The fact remains that the media,
including television advertisements, is surrounding young women is perpetually
reinforcing such expectations of thinness.

If women are continuously making both subconscious and conscious
evaluations of themselves based on these unrealistically thin models and
actresses, then there exists a problem to be addressed. Regardless of whether or
not such social comparisons drive eating disorders or simply low self-esteem, this
study shows the need for further research on the issue. More study on the
relationship between thin ideal media and disordered eating would present and
begin to provide practical solutions to the eating disorder problem. Perhaps the
networks and other television outlets would consider inducing stricter limitations
and standards regarding the depiction of thinness in the media should more
research be generated suggesting this relationship. A second, and more likely solution is using this research to lay a foundation for further media literacy and social cognitive-based solutions. Ideally such programs can help young women receive the media messages of thinness that surround them with a strong critical filter, and begin to move past such idealized and unhealthy images of “beauty.”
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