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The Effects of Commercial Media Selling an Idealized Body Type

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The Effects of Commercial Media Selling an Idealized Body Type

Today’s society is consumer driven. People wake up and check their social media, and they are bombarded with product promotion and brand campaigns. On their commute to work, they may see billboards advertising local businesses. In the grocery store, they rely on the packaging to guide their purchasing decisions. Advertising is weaved within our society. Advertising itself is not a problem. In fact, we rely on advertising to guide our purchase decisions. While an art form, advertisements at their core portray ideals. A travel company may portray an ideal destination, a furniture store may portray an ideal home, or a technology company may portray the ideal gadget-filled lifestyle – all to make a profit. This promotion of ideals can be dangerous as well, in cases of alcohol, drugs, or – the focus of this study – body image. It is important to note that body weight is not the only factor that constitutes body image, but body image is instead a comprehensive perception of a person’s body entirely in combination with information they consume about their body (Selensky and Carels 2021).

Background

Over time, consumer culture has grown to have a high emphasis on the human body. Because products and brands are being marketed to humans, commercial media often uses human bodies to help showcase their brand and convey messages. Additionally, society has placed an emphasis on bodies in the culture of media consumption as well. Mike Featherstone’s article “Body, Image and Affect in Consumer Culture” acknowledges that “there is a preoccupation in the media with images of beautiful bodies, the stars, celebrities and models who exemplify the good life” (2010). This societal trend of having such keen attention to detail with individuals and lifestyles shown on consumed media with such high praise and criticisms sets the tone for society’s emphasis on the body. Tabloid articles are published to gain views with
headlines that criticize celebrities' bodies, and are quick to point out flaws from paparazzi photos. Society’s key attention to detail with human bodies only fuels the commercial industry to emphasize them more. The commercial industry recognizes the societal emphasis and uses it as an opportunity for profit. We can see this process take place as early as the 90s, when the booming business of Jenny Craig, a popular diet and weight loss program, took the majority of their $400 million revenue and spent it back into advertising that highlighted thin women and an idealized body figure (North 2021)(See Figure 1). This cycle of pointing out flaws to fix became the company’s business model, and was how Jenny Craig became such a dominant force in the dieting industry (North 2021).
EFFECTS OF SELLING AN IDEALIZED BODY TYPE

Figure 1

Jenny Craig Weight-Loss Advertisement

Note. Advertisement highlights a preferred and unpreferred body image of celebrity Valerie Bertinelli linked to confidence and more revealing clothing (Toomey 2013).

Addressing the Research Gap

Although research has been conducted that suggests there is no difference in effectiveness between advertisements with average-sized models or those with idealized body types, the issue of isolating one body type to promote is a continuous cycle that the industry
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faces (Diedrichs et. al, 2011). This may be because of the common counter argument that promoting diverse body types in turn promotes unhealthy lifestyles. This also could be a simple lack of awareness and policy issue. Companies may not admit to purposely promoting an idealized body type, or they may not have any forces holding them accountable to implement inclusive practices. With advancing technology, there are more and more opportunities to digitally manipulate the human face and body to appeal more to society’s idealized standards. It is not uncommon that, in more commercial media pieces than not, images that society consumes in mass media have been digitally manipulated to change the appearance of a human body (Featherstone 2010). Research is needed to identify and convey the harmful ways that this trains the human brain and perception.

Today’s consumer culture runs by presenting an idea of the ‘good life,’ as Featherstone refers to it, and selling that idealized lifestyle along with a brand (2007). This business model has proven to be successful for many companies, but at what cost? There is a lack of research to suggest that even if this idealized media business model has been selling for companies, that it creates the most brand favorability option. Perpetuating societal standards for outward appearance has detrimental effects that may prove to be higher priority than the revenue for a company, but there seems to be an awareness gap between the industry and their consumers. This issue is beyond industry research, for it is sociocultural. It is crucial to understand the theory of body image and the effect that repeated exposure to idealizing content can have on one’s perception and satisfaction of self (Selensky and Carels 2021). In order for one to fully understand the depth and interworkings of this sociocultural dilemma, there must be correlation research completed on the detrimental effects that can come as a result of selling idealized body
types, such as weight stigma, binge eating, low self-esteem, and so on (Selesnky and Carels 2021).

**Research Questions**

When body image is promoted alongside products or a brand, it gradually shifts society’s expectations for what bodies should look like. In this research analysis, I will plan to explore the following questions:

1. What impact do commercial media representations of body image have on consumers’ perceptions of themselves, and what are the sociological concepts involved in shaping these perceptions?
2. What are the long-term effects of exposure to media that promotes an unattainable body standard, and how does this contribute to harmful effects from body dissatisfaction?
3. How do inclusive and diverse body representations in commercial media contribute to positive body image perceptions?
4. What benefits does having an inclusive campaign with diverse body types have on a company and their brand?
5. What guidelines could be implemented into the advertising industry to adopt more responsible practices in terms of diverse body representation and media integrity?

This study will dive deeper into the effects of commercial media representation on consumer perceptions of body image and their behaviors. This research will analyze both scholarly and real world case examples to find the relationship between advertising messages, societal expectations, and psychological consequences.
Literature Review

Impact of Commercial Media on Self-Perceptions

The Sociology of Self-Perception

The concept of body image is influenced not only by how people visually see their body in the mirror, but also by representations of body types that they may see in commercial media that they consume. Research on both factors is important to understand the effects that may occur when body types are idealized within commercial media. In order to understand how beauty ideals are spread throughout society, we need to first understand how humans process body image. According to Madeline Altabe and Kevin Thompson in their article, “Body Image: A Cognitive Self-Schema Construct?,” body image is not a configuration of specific physical components, but instead a *schema*, or a “mental representation of information” (1996). It is important to distinguish that body image is not a list of features that people have – but is an internal understanding of something. Featherstone uses the term ‘body schema,’ meaning that our senses work together to not only perceive the world, but to also perceive the way that we sense other bodies in comparison to ourselves as we encounter them in real life or within media (2010). Because body image is entirely up to mental categorization and understanding, it becomes susceptible to influence from outside sources. This self-schema theory helps to understand how external factors can influence one’s body image, and how susceptible our perception of ourselves is to change and influence.

Commercial Media’s Impact on Self-Perception

The argument that external media could influence self-schema is not new to the recent technology developments or smart media. In history, humans have marveled at art pieces that depict human bodies and are idealized for how beautiful they were. However, the art was
accepted to be art. J. Kevin Thompson and Leslie J. Heinberg bring this up in their article titled “The Media’s Influence on Body Image Disturbance and Eating Disorders: We’ve Reviled Them, Now Can We Rehabilitate Them?” as they acknowledge that human art figures “were romanticized as otherworldly and unattainable” (1999). However, as technology advanced and began to capture humans and display bodies on multiple forms of media, the perceptual distance between the audience and the bodies they saw became smaller and smaller. Now, it is common to see bodies in commercials, on billboards, in movies, on social media, and in similar forums. These body images are perceived as reality, when they are still not guaranteed to be real – these images of bodies may have undergone photographic editing practices such as airbrushing, photo filters, lighting techniques, and more (Thompson and Heiberg 1999). These images are made to look as realistic as possible so that they are perceived to be real and untouched. This display of impossible perfection is what makes the idealized body type standard so unreachable, and leaves audiences constantly unsatisfied.

The pressure on body image comes from various aspects within society. Peers or friends may make comments about weight or size with long-lasting impacts. Parents may make comments about the way clothing is fitting. Partners may urge too strongly for their significant other to be more active or eat better. While body image has many outward factors and pressures, the strongest communicator of societal standards is suggested to be the mass media (Thompson and Heinberg, 1999). Because the mass media is consumed multiple times a day, every day for as long as a person engages in social activities or environments, there is a constant perpetuation of ideas being spread and believed through these mass-communication mediums. After consuming so much of the media, people gradually assume it to reflect the reality of society, even if it does not (Thompson and Heinberg, 1999).
Long-Term Effects of Being Exposed to Idealized Body Standards

Companies with large platforms may publish media isolating one specific body type, or even digitally altered bodies, without realizing that their work could have a negative impact on their audience. Whether this comes from an unawareness of the detrimental effects that come along with the idealized body type that they are selling, or a lack of concern about them, the creative team can dodge responsibility from the issue of perpetuating negative body image issues through their idealization of one body type. The way that their work is perceived can be claimed as out of their control. This mindset is ignoring real sociological patterns that have real effects. Jennifer C. Selensky and Robert A. Carels touch on some of these patterns in their article, “Weight Stigma and Media: An Examination of The Effect of Advertising Campaigns on Weight Bias, Internalized Weight Bias, Self-Esteem, Body Image, and Affect” as they discuss the concept of internalized weight bias. According to the article, “internalized weight bias (IWB) occurs when an individual directs such negative weight-based beliefs, attitudes, and stereotypes toward themselves,” and this internalized weight bias can have a direct, negative impact on body image, mental health, and self-esteem (Selensky and Carels 2021). It should be noted that it is generous to assume that creative team members are unaware of their impacts on the masses – that is quite literally their job. Because it is unlikely that they would admit to instilling insecurities to society, this research will not assume that everyone sells insecurities with malicious intentions.

There is currently a lack of research on the direct effects of this internalized weight bias that stems directly from commercial media, but recent studies show that this continued exposure to idealized images can have more detrimental effects than a single instance of face-to-face stigmatizing experience (Selensky and Carels 2021). If this alone does not feel important enough
to implement restrictions and guidelines, these health factors influenced can in turn have detrimental effects of shame, isolation from social situations, eating disorders, and suicide (Selensky and Carels 2021). If a person only sees people of a certain thinness in the commercial media that they consume, they may begin to perceive themselves as being an abnormal weight, and in turn develop internal weight bias along with its complementary negative side effects. In order to understand how media consumption influences an individual's perceptions of self, researchers apply social comparison theory. This theory suggests that individuals naturally engage in social comparisons by comparing themselves to other bodies that they encounter, such as models depicted in media. This comparison contributes to the way body image and self-perception are formed (Selensky and Carels 2021).

While these commercial media pieces that can strongly impact body image are already dangerous, the problem becomes even more severe when companies can make a profit off of the negative body image that stems from viewing idealizing media. Featherstone writes, “Indeed the consumer culture publicity presents it as an imperative, a duty, and casts those who become fat, or let their appearance go, or look old before their time, as not only slothful but as having a flawed self” (2010). This quotation presents the business opportunity that many companies have found at the expense of their audiences. If they could convince their audiences to realize that they are flawed, they will feel more inclined to purchase their products or services that promise to make them closer to perfect. There are many products and services that acknowledge these flaws directly. Online diet plans, fitness applications, work out equipment, makeup, shapewear clothing, and many more products all may call out the audience’s potential body characteristics, and include within their advertisements that their product or service will “fix” them. There are also ways for this to occur more discreetly. If the advertisements of a clothing brand only
portrays models with one specific body type, they are indirectly promoting that body type’s idealization along with their products. Featherstone writes, “Images invite comparisons: reinforcing who we are not and who we would like to be” (2010). It is important to note that within any image of a human model, there will be differences in body types between the human displayed in commercial media and the person consuming it. People will naturally always look different. The problem lies in the repetitive, isolation of specific body traits. If many companies only use models that have the same trait, such as thinness, the audience will use that repeated information to process within their body image self-schema that they are not thin enough.

One frequent hesitation about including more diverse body types or emphasizing body positivity in commercial media is that it may lead to unhealthy habits and promote unsafe lifestyles, such as obesity. This being said, it sometimes has the reverse effect: body type inclusivity welcomes people with diverse body types into healthy spaces in society that they may not have felt welcomed into before. There is no evidence to date about body inclusive content influencing healthy people to live a more unhealthy lifestyle. There is, however, evidence and testimonials that suggest that larger-bodied individuals used to previously feel unwelcomed in fitness spaces, but after body inclusivity movements have felt empowered to take on fitness activities like yoga or weight lifting themselves (Cohen et al. 2021). By empowering people of various sizes and body types, and encouraging self-acceptance, commercial media can open healthy spaces and practices up to anyone.

There have been companies that have begun to try to combat this issue within their brand campaigns. In 2004, the soap company Dove released a “Campaign for Real Beauty,” that showcased women of various body types that were not digitally altered at all (Selensky and Carels 2021). Clothing retail company Aerie, of American Eagle Outfitters, launched a similar
campaign for their clothing and undergarments showcasing different women with no digital touch-ups. These campaigns both received some backlash for attempting to make a feminist campaign while still showcasing women in undergarments, which some audiences found to be objectifying (Selensky and Carels 2021). However, these campaigns were the first to promote body diversity and authenticity that took off. Whether these campaigns themselves were entirely ethical or not, they called attention to the issue that the mass audiences did not realize was occurring. These campaigns paved the way for other companies to promote body diversity while still promoting their products.

**Lack of Legal Protections**

While there are laws against deceptive advertisements and the promotion of unsafe or unhealthy products or behaviors, there are no laws specifically addressing the idealization or digital manipulation of bodies in the United States to date (Kurnit and Taylor 2019). Some could consider the lack of representation of people of average or overweight as discrimination. The digital manipulation of human bodies could be considered harmful to the viewers, as research shows the negative side effects that come with the promotion of unattainable body types. However, the current advertising laws have so much gray area and are up for so much interpretation, that companies have continued to get away with these unethical practices. The detrimental effects of these unsafe advertising practices should require specific laws protecting society and individuals from experiencing harmful effects. The French National Assembly has passed a law for this reason titled the “Photoshop law.” This requires any advertisement media that involves human bodies being digitally manipulated to be clearly labelled as such (Smith 2022). This law protects consumers by persuading companies to avoid these practices out of fear that their audiences will perceive them to be ingenuine, and by showcasing to viewers that the
content they are seeing is not authentic or reliable. This would be a great starting point for advertising regulation in the United States, as inclusivity alone cannot be legally enforced or monitored in an effective manner.

**Method**

**Examining the Effects of Representation on Self-Satisfaction**

The notion that images from mass media can influence an individual's perceptions of self has been backed by research in many studies. In one study conducted in 1992, images of models from popular fashion magazines were displayed to individuals who were given a questionnaire immediately after to analyze their body image perceptions. In another study, with females that did not have an eating disorder, participants were exposed to twelve photographs of models from famous magazines for three minutes straight (Thompson and Heinberg 1999).

**Results**

The studies gathered that these images did have the capabilities of altering perception of self individuals. These studies also noted that women who were experiencing eating disorders exhibited an extremely drastic body image disturbance after being shown images. Whether the participants struggled with disordered eating or not, they showed trends of low self-esteem, guilt, or insecurity (Thompson and Heinberg 1999). The study’s results demonstrated that media representations of other bodies can shape individual body perceptions and attitudes. Because these results were gathered to conclude that these shifts in attitude can occur at an individual level, the mass media society that occurs with social media and technology today makes this a societal problem. Mass media can shape society’s expectations for themselves one image and person at a time.
Examining the Effects of Diverse Representation on Brand Favorability

Participants

Selensky and Carels gathered 475 participants for a study about how diverse body representation impacted brand favorability. These participants were all female, ages eighteen and older. They pulled these participants from a psychology course at a prominent southeastern university. The participants who completed the study were given course credits as an incentive to complete the research (Selensky and Carels 2021).

Procedure

Participants in the study were divided randomly into groups. Each group of participants received a unique video to watch. One condition was designated for watching a media clip from the brand Aerie. They viewed a “Share Your Spark Experience” video from the Aerie Real campaign. The purpose of the campaign and video was to highlight “real” women and promote body positivity. The video has joyful interactions and upbeat music (Selensky and Carels 2021). Another group of participants watched a video from a Dove campaign, titled ‘Beauty standards of weight are a form of bias.’ This campaign video is intended to raise awareness about harmful societal stigmas about size or weight that occurs among women. The video consists of clips of different women being asked questions in brief interviews on the sidewalk, asking questions about body size and weight stigma. One group watched the ‘Victoria’s Secret Dream Angels’ commercial from 2018, which is an advertising campaign that is commonly thought of when picturing a thin, idealized, societal perfection portrayal. This video had upbeat music and thin women in Victoria’s Secret apparel. Another control group was assigned to watch a segment from the HBO film “Weight of the Nation,” which addresses obesity studies. There was also a control group, who only watched a video that had nothing to do with bodies or weight, but
Instead a documentary clip about Denali National Park and Preserve. This group was a control group to monitor any effects that may be attributed to their surroundings, or being instructed to watch a clip and answer questions for a research study. (Selensky and Carels 2021).

After viewing the video, participants were given a checklist to rank statements as they felt applied to themselves. These involved statements such as:

1. The video made me more accepting of diverse body shapes and sizes.
2. The video made me feel bad about myself or my body.
3. The video made me dislike persons with overweight and obesity
4. The video had a positive, uplifting, and empowering message.
5. The video had a good production quality.
6. I liked the video.
7. The video was entertaining

They asked participants to rank these statements from one to five, one representing very false and five representing very true, the subsequent numbers correlating accordingly. After viewing the videos, the participants also engaged in discussions to gauge how the videos made them feel in their own words. Participants’ responses were monitored both before and after viewing the media to gauge the difference that the media made (Selensky and Carels 2021).

**Results**

There were various differences in the results from the different experiment groups. Those who participated in the Aerie Real campaign video felt significant improvements in their body satisfaction and self esteem, while those who watched the Victoria’s Secret media or the Weight of The Nation segment felt less appreciative of their own body. Participants in the Aerie condition even reported feeling empowered. The general findings of the study were that
participants exposed to Aerie, Dove, or HBO reported greater acceptance of diverse body shapes and sizes, while those who watched the Victoria’s Secret clip reported a higher dislike towards individuals who they perceived as overweight. Both Aerie and Dove video participants had similarly positive reactions and affects, while Victoria Secret’s video participants left with negative feelings about their bodies. The HBO documentary did not reduce negative attitudes towards individual perceptions of self or to diverse body types (Selensky and Carels 2021).

The vast difference between reactions within the experimental groups demonstrates the strong influence that media has over not only the audience’s actions, but the audience’s perception of themselves and society around them. Aerie and Dove’s positive effects on participants proves how much of a positive difference brief advertisements can make on psychological well-being. After analyzing all the scores, it was concluded that Aerie’s campaign resulted in the greatest improvement in positive affect from before watching and after watching the video. Researchers hypothesized that this was due to the upbeat and positive mood portrayed in the video. The HBO video did not reduce negative affect, but did not have detrimental responses either. The researchers conducting this study attributed this to the fact that it had a lot of medical, factual content in it. While it highlighted the negative side-effects of obesity, it also portrayed the detrimental effects of weight stigma. After watching the Victoria’s Secret video with thin idealization, participant’s responses resulted in a decrease in positive affect with well-being and societal expectations that the individual held (Selensky and Carels 2021). The positive feelings experienced by viewers of the inclusive content can serve as motivation for companies to include more diverse representation in their commercial media.
Implications for Future Research

The Negative Effects on Men

These research studies were conducted solely on women, with media that consisted of women and that were targeted to sell to women. This is likely because the researchers conducting the experiments knew that “women report double the frequency of weight-based discrimination as men” (Selensky and Carels 2021). With women being the primary demographic affected by the issue, it makes sense to make them the focal point of the research. However, any gender can be affected by commercial media’s portrayal of idealized imagery, it just may look different. For example, many commercials targetted to men involve a man not in a necessarily thin body, but a muscular one (Featherstone 2010). This idealization can have similar effects on the men of society, but with different desired individual outcomes and detrimental effects. Featherstone writes that “anxiety about their body image coupled with excessive workouts in the gym can apparently lead to a new condition, dubbed ‘athletica nervosa.’” (2010). Even though the societal standards pushed onto men may not require them to strive for thinness and stop eating, they still can develop devastating conditions, such as working out far too often in manners too intense, that damage their health and body image (Featherstone 2010). The research being done is heading in the right direction to address the problem, but there are more than just women being affected by society’s idealizations that need to be acknowledged.

Inclusion without Tokenization: A Fine Line

The famous body positivity movement began in 2012 but has been undergoing a resurgence in the past couple of years. This movement aims to celebrate differences in body types and shift societal attitudes toward body image by challenging the conventional appearance and beauty standards (Cohen et al. 2021). More and more brands have acknowledged the
movement, working to redefine already limited beauty standards and to foster inclusive and respectful media spaces (Cohen et al. 2021). While this movement has received praise and is a step in the right direction, there are still criticisms of the media for continuing to put more of an emphasis on the body than the brand or message at hand. Cohen’s work highlights how the body positivity movement commercial media from brands typically consists of bodies and features who are under-represented, such as people with cellulite, stomach rolls, and stretch marks (2021). This is a positive direction, as these natural features are never showcased, creating the perception that they are unnatural and societally unwanted. Bringing attention to these features with messages of body positivity is highlighting them. This still can be effective, but if these brands do not have models or actors with these underrepresented features in any other media or messaging, problems of tokenization arise. If the only time diverse body types are portrayed are when the brand is pointing out the differences, this can still create isolating tendencies. In order for positive change to occur and diverse body stigmas to be broken, society would need to weave in diverse body types to all media, not just social movement media alone.

**Suggested Practices for Media Planners**

Awareness campaigns about body positivity, or any issue that brands feel needs brought to the spotlight, are a positive way to contribute to society. To ensure that these messages are not tokenizing, brands can implement positive practices to their work processes, such as researching and sampling ideas to gauge reactions, and making a point to be aware of bias in their media planning with all scopes of work – not just social justice campaigns. In the instance of body inclusivity, companies may ask themselves why a body, or certain body is necessary to effectively communicate their message. Cohen urges media planners to promote positive messages using other creative media, such as quotes, typography, and illustrations (2021). The
same question could be asked when applying digital alterations to media. Are these manipulations necessary to spread the message? Why do the media planners feel that the body needs to be edited for the message to be communicated? Decision makers in advertising messaging and campaigns making the simple choice to hold themselves accountable could make a vast difference on society’s image of themselves.

**Conclusion**

In today’s consumer driven society, advertising saturates our media landscape. Digital media is more prominent with the extensive use of social media, and many commercial media viewed on a daily basis is for a profit. The point of advertising is to guide purchasing decisions for a profit, but advertising’s persuasive nature gives it the power to perpetuate societal ideals, including those involving body image and body expectations. Bodies have continued to be emphasized in marketing materials, fueled by society’s obsession with images of living a perfect lifestyle that is demonstrated by celebrities and models in commercials. The commercial industry has learned to use this obsession with appearance as an opportunity for profit. This business model has morphed society’s expectations of bodies and their perception of reality. The lack of legal protections against this isolation of idealized body types or digital manipulation of human bodies has allowed this problem to snowball, leaving more and more individuals vulnerable to negative body image perceptions and detrimental mental health consequences.

While there is a long way to go, the consumer industry has taken strides over the last decade. Brands like Aerie and Dove paved the way for calling out the issue and promoting body diversity, and social media has fueled a body positivity movement to empower individuals. While these are examples of growth, there is more work to be done in making commercial media an inclusive space for people of all shapes and sizes. It is important to represent diverse body
types without tokenizing or isolating them further. Ideally, society will head in a direction of
empowerment and appreciation of bodies, rather than an emphasis on them. Because advertising
is such a prominent force in the field of mass media, industry decision makers have the
capability and opportunity to create positive societal change.
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