

The Impact of Media Images on Body Image and Behaviours: A Summary of the Scientific Evidence

Executive Summary

One 9th November 2009, we sent a summary of the scientific evidence of the impact of media images on body image and behaviours to the Advertising Standards Agency (ASA) and the Committee of Advertising Practice (see Annex 1). The ASA rightly noted that the summary made reference to more than one hundred scientific studies, and asked for details of those pieces of research.

A research team, supervised by Dr. Helga Dittmar at the University of Sussex, has collated citations and abstracts of published studies, providing comprehensive coverage of research to date (see Annex 2). This evidence is divided into studies that show negative effects of exposure to idealised media images vs. studies that show positive effects. **The overwhelming weight of the evidence shows that exposure to idealised media images has negative effects, not only for adults, but also for under 16s.**

In particular, we draw your attention to the many 'exposure experiments', which show the immediate impact of idealised models on body image and behaviours. The majority of these studies use TV or magazine advertisements, showing that **exposure to models typically used in advertising causes body dissatisfaction for the majority of individuals.**

We already have evidence that **more realistic advertising models offer good alternative images, which do not cause body dissatisfaction and appear equally effective for marketing purposes.** These are models that have body sizes and shapes that are more representative of the general public. A summary of that evidence is provided by Phillippa Diedrichs from the Centre for Appearance Research at the University of West England (Annex 3).

In February 2009, in a meeting with members of the Campaign for Body Confidence steering group, the ASA requested evidence that having a low Body Mass Index (BMI) has negative impacts on health. According to World Health Organisation and Department of Health guidelines, a BMI of 18.5 or below indicates that a person is underweight. Progressive loss of weight leads to increasingly negative mental and physical health consequences, as summarised in a brief report by Eating Disorder Specialists (Annex 4). **We should be concerned about underweight media models providing an unhealthy ideal.**

Campaign for Body Confidence, 1st October 2010

ANNEX 1: Brief summary of evidence of the impacts of media images on body image

ANNEX 2: Detailed summary of scientific studies

ANNEX 3: Evidence of the impact of more realistic images in advertising

ANNEX 4: Health consequences of low Body mass Index

Annex 1: The Impact of Media Images on Body Image and Behaviours: A Summary of the Scientific Evidence

We, the undersigned, are experts and active researchers investigating the impact of idealised media images on how adults, adolescents and children think, feel, and behave with respect to their body and appearance. This paper is a response to the correspondence the Liberal Democrat Party in the UK have had with the Advertising Standards Agency and the Committee of Advertising Practice, in which ASA and CAP request to see the scientific evidence that documents the detrimental effect of idealised media images on body image and related, unhealthy behaviours. We hope that the advertising authorities in the UK, as well as the USA, Australia and other countries, will give this evidence serious consideration and see the urgent need for policy change.

Advertising, the mass media (including the World Wide Web), and consumer culture highly profile 'body perfect' ideals that are both artificial and biologically inappropriate. Media images that depict ultra-thin, digitally altered women models are linked to body dissatisfaction and unhealthy eating in girls and women, and there is also recent evidence of the detrimental effects of unrealistically sized dolls and toys which present role models to children (such as Barbie doll or action heroes), as well as the impact of muscular media models on boys and men.

1. Body image is highly significant for physical and mental health, and thus well-being. Body dissatisfaction, the experience of negative thoughts and feelings about one's body and appearance, is a powerful (in fact, the most potent) and consistent precursor of a whole range of unhealthy body-related behaviours. **These include: unhealthy dieting regimes and problematic eating behaviours (starving, bingeing, and purging), clinical eating disorders (anorexia, bulimia), cosmetic surgery, extreme exercising, and unhealthy muscle-enhancing behaviours in boys and men (such as taking steroids or other supplements).** It is also linked to **depression, anxiety, sexual dissatisfaction, and low self-esteem.** Therefore body dissatisfaction is a significant risk for physical health, mental health, and thus well-being. Any factor, such as idealised media images, that increases body dissatisfaction is therefore an important influence on well-being.

2. The weight of evidence documents a detrimental effect of idealised media images. There are over 100 published scientific studies on the impact of thin, 'perfected', media images on girls and women and there are also more recent scientific studies which document the impact of the muscular media ideal on boys and men. Not every single person is vulnerable to detrimental media effects (see Point 4), but negative effects do occur in the **clear majority** of adolescent girls and women. Higher order data analyses that can assess the link between exposure to idealised media images and body dissatisfaction across all studies containing relevant measures (meta-analyses) show that, on average, exposure to the thin media ideal is linked with greater body dissatisfaction and more unhealthy eating beliefs and behaviours in women. Although the overall effect is moderate in size, it is very significant in women who already have some body image issues, and among adolescents. There are fewer studies on men, but meta-analyses show that exposure to the muscular male ideal is also linked to greater body dissatisfaction, with an effect size comparable to that in women. **Thus, the weight of evidence across a great many studies documents that ultra-thin and highly muscular 'body perfect' ideals have a detrimental effect on women and men, respectively.**

3. Detrimental media effects start occurring in early childhood.

The bulk of research studies have been carried out with adults and adolescents, but there is evidence that detrimental effects from exposure to perfected and thin ideal media, start taking hold from a very early age. **Girls aged 5½ to 7½ reported less body esteem and a greater desire for a thinner body after exposure to images of thin dolls (Barbie™) compared to girls who saw images of dolls with a healthy body size (Emme™) or no dolls.** Looking at women's or teen magazines has also been associated with lower appearance satisfaction and greater awareness of dieting in this age group. **One study showed that watching appearance-related television, like soap operas, predicted a decrease in appearance satisfaction one year later in 5-8 year-old girls.**

4. Some groups of people are particularly vulnerable to detrimental media effects.

Since the research literature documents clearly that idealised media images have a detrimental effect, attention has turned to identifying factors that make certain groups of individuals particularly vulnerable. These factors include: age (adolescents appear more vulnerable than adults), heavier body weight, and particularly internalisation of 'body perfect' ideals as personal goals, such as thin-ideal internalisation in women.

5. Exposure to media images has long-term effects.

Exposure experiments have the great advantage of documenting that media images are a direct, immediate cause of body dissatisfaction and unhealthy behaviours, but they do not offer information about long-term effects. However, it stands to reason that, if detrimental effects occur after a single media exposure, they are likely to lead to cumulative harm when repeated frequently. Current estimates suggest that people are exposed to as many as 3,000 advertisements a day. Research on long-term effects is not as well developed as survey and experimental work. **However, there is evidence in children (see point 5) and evidence that a 15-month subscription to a fashion magazine increased body dissatisfaction, dieting, and bulimic symptoms amongst adolescent girls who had low levels of social support.** Another study showed that the amount of immediate increase in body dissatisfaction caused in an exposure experiment predicted increased body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness two years later, consistent with the idea that effects are cumulative.

6. Alternative advertising images avoid harm and are equally effective.

Karl Lagerfeld (head designer of Chanel) said on Radio 4 in October 2009 that "size zero models" are attractive, and advertisers have claimed that "thin models sell better". Yet, we are not aware of any published evidence to support this claim. On the contrary, research examining perceived advertising effectiveness in the UK and Australia demonstrates that **average-size models (UK dress size 14) are just as effective in advertising products as ultra-thin models,** as long as they are equally attractive. Thus, there seem to be no good reasons, not even commercial reasons, for using ultra-thin models in advertising. The idea that "only thinness sells" reflects a strongly established assumption, rather than reality. This independent evidence suggests that if advertisers used attractive models with healthy body sizes to advertise their products, they would still increase sales, but could avoid damaging the body image of many girls and women.

7. People are neither fully aware of the influence of media images, nor of their artificiality.

There is a great need for information and educational campaigns, because many people are not aware, at least not fully, of the detrimental impact of media images, and the psychological science which documents this. Although most people know in some abstract, general sense that media models are 'artificial' as a creation of make-up artists, hair stylists, and flattering clothing and camera angles, **people are typically not aware of the extent to which models are altered,** particularly by digital retouching and imaging

techniques that reduce or enhance the size of virtually any body part, making eyes larger, waists slimmer, and legs longer and thinner. Two excellent websites graphically illustrate the alteration of models from ordinary person to glamourised, artificial media image. One is a short video by Dove, 'Evolution'¹, showing the make-over of an adult female model, which has already been used successfully in an intervention study. The other is an interactive website produced for a Swedish government awareness campaign entitled 'Girl Power'², which shows a teenage model, before and after she appears on the front page of a teenage magazine, where people can click on every body part to see what it looked like before and after it was digitally altered. Parents, educationalists, and children need to be better informed about the detrimental impact of idealised media images, and the extent to which they are altered.

¹ http://www.campaignforrealbeauty.com/home_films_evolution_v2.swf

² <http://demo.fb.se/e/girlpower/retouch/retouch/index.html>

8. Interventions that curb media influence protect and enhance well-being.

Although we are in need of long-term studies of interventions, we can state with confidence that brief training in media literacy (to increase critical awareness of 'perfected' media models and the harm they can do) reduces the immediate negative effects of exposure, and more systematic, intensive interventions over days or weeks can significantly reduce one important risk factor: internalisation of the slender ideal. This provides further causal evidence, showing that **curbing the impact of idealised media images leads to improvement in body image and body-related behaviours, or at least to harm reduction**. Studies that have asked people about media depictions have also found that both women and men want to see more realistic models. They have also expressed that they, as consumers, are concerned about the effects of 'perfected' ultra-thin and ultra-muscular models on body image, and on young people in particular.

9. Policy debates are longstanding, but change is now happening in the UK and in Europe.

A report by the British Medical Association in 2000 urged the introduction of new advertising policies: **"There is a need for more realistic body shapes to be shown on television and in fashion magazines, and to reduce young women's exposure to extremely thin models. We should also provide children and young people with the skills and information to resist media messages of bodily perfection"** (Dr. Ian Bogle, then Chairman of Council, BMA, p. 2). Although there is a constant media interest in body image issues and there has been the odd summit or comment by politicians until recently, little has actually been achieved. However, in September 2006, fashion houses in Italy and Spain banned catwalk models who are underweight (Body Mass Index less than 18). In August 2009, the Liberal Democrats launched the Real Women campaign³ which champions ambitious proposals on improving the body image of girls and women and has so far generated almost 1000 complaints to the advertising authorities in the UK, from people objecting to the proliferating use of digital retouching (airbrushing). France is also following suit and trying to introduce laws on the use of digital retouching. Most recently, top women's magazine in Germany, 'Brigitte', banned the use of professional models altogether.

³<http://www.realwomen.org.uk>

We therefore urge CAP and parliament to implement proposals such as those set out in the Real Women policy paper and **make policy changes that help curb the use of unrealistic media depictions of 'body perfect' ideals**, thus protecting and enhancing the well-being of individuals, particularly those most vulnerable to negative media effects, and the country as a whole. Lastly, we hope advertising authorities in the USA, Australia and other countries, will also start urgent work towards policy change to tackle body image pressures.

Policy 1. No altered, idealised models in advertising to children.

Policy 2. Clear labelling of altered, idealised models in all other advertising.

Policy 3. Models used in Fashion Weeks, and other media advertising, to have a health certificate from an eating disorder specialist, in order to protect their health and well-being.

Policy 4. Encouragement for use of diverse and healthy body sizes in all media models.

Policy 5. Media literary programmes about 'perfected' models as part of school curricula to encourage critical awareness and resilience in children and adolescents.

Signatories

<u>Name</u>	<u>Institution</u>	<u>Country</u>
Dr. Helga Dittmar Kingdom Author of: Consumer culture, identity, and well-being: The search for the 'good life' and 'body perfect' (2008, Psychology Press)	University of Sussex	United
Dr. Emma Halliwell Kingdom Researcher into Effects of the Media on Body image and Media Literacy Interventions	UWE, Bristol	United
Prof. Marika Tiggemann Expert media commentator on Effects of the Media on Body Image, Dieting	Flinders University, Adelaide	Australia
Prof. Michael Levine Principal Author of: The Prevention of eating problems and eating disorders: Theory, research and practice (2006, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates)	Kenyon College, Gambier, OH	USA
Ms. Philippa Diedrichs Australia Researcher into Effects of the Media on Body image	University of Queensland	
Prof. Nichola Rumsey Co-Director of Centre for Appearance Research and author (with Diana Harcourt) of: The Psychology of Appearance, Open University Press	UWE, Bristol	United Kingdom
Dr. Diana Harcourt Kingdom Co-Director of Centre for Appearance Research and author (with Nichola Rumsey) of: The Psychology of Appearance, Open University Press	UWE, Bristol	United
Dr. Helen Malson Author of The Thin Woman: Feminism, Post-Structuralism And The Social Psychology Of Anorexia Nervosa (Routledge, 1998) and, editor, with Maree Burns, of Critical Feminist Approaches to Eating Dis/Orders (Routledge, 2009).	UWE, Bristol	United Kingdom
Dr. Richard de Visser Kingdom Research interests include gender identity and health-related behaviour	University of Sussex	United
Ms. Eleni-Marina Ashikali United Kingdom Doctoral researcher on the impact of cosmetic surgery media on adolescents' and young women's body image and on attitudes toward cosmetic surgery.	University of Sussex	
Dr. Annette Kluck Assistant Professor of Counselling Psychology and a licensed psychologist	Auburn University	USA
Prof. Eleanor H. Wertheim Australia	La Trobe University	

Researcher into risk factors, prevention, and treatment of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviours

Dr. Brenda Alpert Sigall University of Maryland

USA

(continued on next page)

Signatories (p. 2)

<u>Name</u>	<u>Institution</u>	<u>Country</u>
Frances M. Berg, MS, Adjunct professor Author of "Children and Teens Afraid to Eat: Helping Youth in Today's Weight-Obsessed World," and "Underage and Overweight: Our Childhood Obesity Crisis – What Every Family Needs to Know."	University of North Dakota	USA
Dr. Jean Kilbourne Senior Scholar at Wellesley Centers for Women, Creator of the Killing Us Softly: Advertising's Image of Women film series. Author of Can't Buy My Love: How Advertising Changes the Way We Think and Feel (Simon & Schuster, 1999) and So Sexy So Soon: The New Sexualized Childhood and What Parents Can Do to Protect Their Kids (Random House, 2008)	Wellesley, MA	USA
Laura Kogel, Licensed Clinical Social Worker, Psychotherapist, co-author of Eating Problems: A Feminist Psychoanalytic Treatment Model, Basic Books, 1995., faculty The Women's Therapy Centre Institute, Eating and The Body: A Cultural, Relational Psychoanalytic Training Program.	The Women's Therapy Institute	USA
Andrea Gitter MA, Licensed Creative Arts Therapist BD-DMT		USA
Susan Gutwill, MS, Licensed Clinical Social Worker, Certified Group Psychotherapist Psychotherapist		USA
Dr. Ana R. Sepulveda Researcher into Effects of the Mass Media on Body image and Disordered Eating	Universidad Autonoma de Madrid	Spain
Bridget loves Livingston, Santa Monica Co-founder fedupgirl.org. Educates young girls on body image, self esteem and balanced living to prevent eating disorders		USA
Luisse Eichenbaum, Licensed Clinical Social Worker, Co-founded that Women's Therapy Centre in New York and London	New York	USA
Caren Shapiro, Licensed Master Social Worker Works with girls and women who are adversely affected by perfect airbrushed images of women in the media		USA

**Prof. Susan J Paxton La Trobe University
Australia**

President of the Academy for Eating Disorders

Dr Susie Orbach The New School USA

Psychoanalyst and writer, author of numerous books on Body image including *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, *Hunger Strike*, *On Eating, Bodies*. Senior Scholar, The New School, convenor of www.any-body.org, former Visiting Professor, LSE (UK)

Leah Kramnick, Licensed Clinical Social Worker, New York USA

**Dr Margo Maine, Hartford Hospital USA
Fellow of the Academy for Eating Disorders,**

Expert in the treatment and prevention of Eating Disorders and author of *Effective Clinical Practice in the Treatment of Eating Disorders: The Heart of the Matter* (Routledge, 2009); *The Body Myth: Adult Women and the Pressure to Be Perfect*, (John Wiley, 2005); *Father Hunger: Fathers, Daughters, and the Pursuit of Thinness* (Gurze, 2004); *Body Wars: Making Peace with Women's Bodies* (Gurze, 2000).

Prof. Paschal Sheeran University of Sheffield UK

Research interests are in self-regulation, body satisfaction, and social influence

Ms Amy Brown Royal Holloway University of London UK

Research interests include the effect of the media on body image and the treatment of eating disorders.

Joyce Horowitz, Licensed Clinical Social Worker USA

**Dr Bryony Bamford St. Georges, University of London
UK**

Clinical Research Psychologist

Lela Zaphiropoulos, Licensed Clinical Social Worker, New York USA

Dr Victoria Mountford Eating Disorders Service, Maudsley Hospital UK

Co-author of *Cognitive behavioural therapy for eating disorders - A Comprehensive treatment guide*. Clinical psychologist, researcher and trainer in body image and eating disorders.

Dr Eric Stice, University of Texas at Austin USA

Scientist who investigates factors that increase risk for body image and eating disturbances and who evaluates prevention programs for these conditions.

**Silvia Freitas State Institute of Diabetes and Endocrinology Rio de Janeiro
Brazil**

Coordinator of the Obesity and eating disorders team in State Institute of Diabetes and Endocrinology Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Member of the Academy for Eating Disorders

Dr Christine C. Ganis USA

Dr Sheril. Szuch, Washington USA
Licensed Clinical Psychologist. Has worked in the field of eating disorders with the whole spectrum of eating/body image issues for over 20 years.

Dr Amy Slater Flinders University Australia
Research Fellow whose specialises in adolescent body image and the premature sexualisation of girls.

Deirdre Ryan BSc, MLitt Ireland
Works in schools in Ireland to promote media literacy modules and has just completed a research masters which evaluated a prevention programme for eating disorders.

Dr Lucy Serpell, Doctorate Clinical Psychology, London, UK
Clinician and researcher working with people with eating disorders

Dr Rachel Calogero, University of Kent UK
ESRC Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the School of Psychology at the University of Kent.

Dr Christine Ganis, Harrisburg, PA USA

Prof. Sarah Grogan Staffordshire University
Author of *Body Image: Understanding Body Dissatisfaction in Men, Women and Children*. (2008: Routledge)

Sarah Riley, University of Bath UK
Department of Psychology, University of Bath, co-editor of 'Critical Bodies: Representations, Identities and Practices of Weight and Body Management' (Palgrave, 2008).

Chris Thornton B.Sc (Hons), Masters in Clinical Psychology Sydney AUSTRALIA
President of the Australia and New Zealand Academy of Eating Disorders.

Miss B T Bell University of Sussex United Kingdom
Doctoral researcher on the impacts of media type on body satisfaction and eating behaviour