Abstract

People often seek to satisfy the need for self-evaluation by comparing themselves with people who share similar characteristics as themselves. Often however media images form part of the foundation for comparison and idealised self benchmarking. This may have negative effects on more susceptible segments of the population. This exploratory study examines the beliefs of young women about characteristics and benefits of attractiveness and is a precursor to further research on the nature of attractiveness. The data, gained from 15-30 year old females, illustrates that the impact models in the media have on perceptions of self, others, and attractiveness, differs across clusters of the population on which media influence is greater, moderate or low.

Introduction

Advertisements legitimise and confirm societal pressure to emulate to be perfect and offer means of attempting to achieve this ideal (Fay and Price, 1994). The loudest and most aggressive purveyors of images and narratives of ideal slender beauty are the mass media, with current theories emphasising visual media such as magazines and television (Groesz, Levine, and Murnen, 2002).

Analysis of both women’s and men’s use of media and eating disorders suggests larger negative effects for print (magazine) than for TV media (Harrison and Cantor, 1997). Fashion magazines represent a traditional print medium that is directly concerned with beauty. They are an important media vehicle for advertisers who seek to link their products to a particular beauty ideal and are a potent means of socialising young consumers about beauty and fashion and for advertising beauty and fashion related products.

Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) holds that people have a drive to evaluate their opinions and abilities, which can be satisfied by ‘social’ comparisons with other people. Pomer and Koenig’s (2004) study expanded social comparison theory by examining magazine use along dimensions of gender, age, and ethnicity. Their findings suggest that respondent groups aged 18-35 and those 36 and older both compare their body image to magazine standards, but behavioural effects vary. Additionally, one’s physical attractiveness has important implications for many aspects of social life (Winkler and Rhodes, 2005). Attractive individuals are perceived in a more positive light (Till and Busler, 2000), often receive preferential treatment (Sarwer et al., 2004), and attract the romantic interest of the opposite sex more than their less attractive peers (Winkler and Rhodes, 2005).

There appears to be a significant link between exposure to media stereotypes and wishing to emulate them. Research has shown that 70% of women who regularly read fashion magazines consider them to be an important source of beauty and fitness information. Furthermore, a quarter of these women are reported to have a strong interest in imitating
fashion models (Peck and Loken, 2004). Thus, body shape ideals promoted by the media are widespread, and seem to have a significant impact on the formation of cultural ideals of attractiveness.

Marketers and social scientists have suggested that the effects of advertising extend beyond product awareness and product preferences to broader effects on the target audience’s beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviours about issues of relevance in our society (Pollay, 1986; Till and Busler, 2000). Media images that pervasively show exceptionally thin female models in advertising have been viewed as contributing to body-image dissatisfaction, lower self-esteem, excessive dieting, anorexia, bulimia, and depression among girls and young women (Posavac, Posavac, and Weigel, 2001). Body image dissatisfaction is increasingly being recognised as an important target for public health action (Paxton, 2000). Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 1994) states that a disturbance in perception of body shape is an essential feature of eating disorders. This presents an imperative issue for academics and practitioners alike as the extension of the 2004 AMA definition of marketing states that marketing should not cause harm to society (Malhotra, Wu, and Allvine, 2006).

Serving as stimuli, signs, or representations that drive cognition, interpretation and preferences, images influence what we know and believe (Pompper and Koenig, 2004). There is strong support that media presentation of socially ideal body shapes (thin for women and muscular for men) generally leads to an upward comparison for most people. In other words, most people compare their current body shapes with the ideal body shape and feel as though they are lacking (Baird and Grieve, 2006). Such a comparison often leads to feelings of dissatisfaction (Peck and Loken, 2004).

Although we resemble our ancestors and other cultures in our concern about appearance, there is a difference in degree of concern. Advances in technology, and in particular the rise of the mass media has caused normal concerns about how we look to become obsessions. The perception of the body within consumer culture is dominated by the existence of a vast array of visual images. Due to the perverse impact of the media, consumers have become accustomed to extremely rigid and uniform standards of beauty. Exposure to TV, billboards, the internet and magazines means that people see 'beautiful people' all the time, making exceptional good looks seem real, normal and attainable. However, standards of beauty have in fact become harder and harder to attain, particularly for women. The current media ideal of thinness for women is achievable by less than 5% of the female population (Peck and Loken, 2004).

Over 50 studies have examined the effects of exposure to images of models on people’s body image and mood. In their meta-analysis, Groesz, Levine, and Murnen (2002) reviewed 25 studies that evaluated the immediate effects of images of slender, ideal beauty on female body image. They reported that body satisfaction for women was significantly lower after viewing thin media images compared to viewing media images of average size models, overweight models, or controls. Stice et al, (1994) found that the amount of exposure females had to the media was predictive of eating disorder symptomatology. Table 1 summarises some key studies in the area of media effects.
Table 1: Overview of Literature of Media Effects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author/s</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Key Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hazlett and Hazlett</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>The emotional response of the viewer has been shown to influence attitude toward the ad and the brand increased attention to the ad and increased ad, message, and brand recall.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demarest and Allen</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Among the women, the discrepancies reflected significant dissatisfaction with their figures and distorted perceptions of men's preferences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brumbaugh</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Activating cultural models that are closely linked to the self leads to self referential processing that, in turn, enhances ad attitudes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Callow and Schiffman</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>The consumer's contextual background plays an important role in the effectiveness of visual elements of an advertising campaign</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Park</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Reading beauty and fashion mags increased the drive for thinness both directly and indirectly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baird and Grieve</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Body dissatisfaction experienced through exposure to idealised images of men in the media is only the beginning of possible outcomes such as anabolic steroid use, eating disorders, and muscle dysmorphia.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Recent research has suggested that while media stereotypes do influence body image, the representation of an actual or more realistic body image has been shown to increase the likelihood of purchase to a greater extent than the use of unrealistic beauty stereotypes (Baird and Grieve, 2006). There, thus, remains not only a public interest for research in this area to continue but a responsible monetary one as well.

This study examines the proposition that there are women who are influenced more or less by models portrayed in the media. More specifically, the questions are:

1. Which media sources have the greatest impact on young women?
2. What biological characteristics are associated with attractiveness?
3. What are the perceived benefits of attractiveness?

Methodology

A four page survey instrument was developed in the form of a questionnaire for self administered completion. The questionnaire used a combination of established scales (7 point interval scales), some with minor modification to reflect the most recent literature. This was preceded by a cover letter outlining the purpose of the study. Thirty interviewers were employed to administer the questionnaire. Interviewers were provided with instructions to approach women 15-30 years old, to do another task while the respondent was completing the questionnaire, and not to give any additional information or aid with questions. Respondents were approached by the interviewers at ten locations including shopping centres, public transport, universities, and workplaces and the respondents were chosen randomly using systematic sampling. The data collected yielded 352 questionnaires, four of which were incomplete, leaving 348 usable ones. The sample consisted of 15-30 year old females.

Results

A K-means cluster analysis was used to examine 3 different grouping solutions (2, 3, 4 group). Interpretation of the various solutions suggested that a 3 group cluster best represented the data. Groups were formed based on the responses to a scale on beliefs about
the impact the models in the media had on the respondent, including; self-esteem \[ F(2, 345)=436.68, \ p<0.001 \], perception of body image \[ F(2, 345)=385.74, \ p<0.001 \], and perception of others’ attractiveness \[ F(2, 345)=218.69, \ p<0.001 \]. There was a statistically significant difference at the \( p<0.001 \) level in the scores for the three groups Greater, Moderate and Low.

A one-way ANOVA between-groups analysis of variance was conducted to explore the influence of media on perceptions of benefits and characteristics of attractiveness. Table 2 presents the results.

Table 2: Comparison of Benefits of Attractiveness and Perceptions of Attractiveness by Media Influence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceived Media Influence</th>
<th>Greater</th>
<th>Moderate</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>( F )</th>
<th>Sig group differences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Media sources and perceived influence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV</td>
<td>5.28</td>
<td>4.91</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>13.29***</td>
<td>High&gt;Mid&lt;br&gt;High&gt;Low&lt;br&gt;Mid&gt;Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magazines</td>
<td>5.95</td>
<td>5.56</td>
<td>4.76</td>
<td>19.70***</td>
<td>High&gt;Mid&lt;br&gt;High&gt;Low&lt;br&gt;Mid&gt;Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cinema</td>
<td>4.37</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>11.51***</td>
<td>High&gt;Low&lt;br&gt;Mid&gt;Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics of attractiveness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waist-to-hip ratio</td>
<td>4.96</td>
<td>4.52</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>10.92***</td>
<td>High&gt;Mid&lt;br&gt;High&gt;Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youthfulness</td>
<td>5.34</td>
<td>5.11</td>
<td>4.44</td>
<td>11.81***</td>
<td>High&gt;Low&lt;br&gt;Mid&gt;Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural appearance</td>
<td>5.93</td>
<td>5.56</td>
<td>6.07</td>
<td>5.12**</td>
<td>High&gt;Mid&lt;br&gt;Low&gt;Mid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits of attractiveness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easier to socialise and make friends</td>
<td>5.51</td>
<td>5.04</td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td>15.08***</td>
<td>High&gt;Mid&lt;br&gt;High&gt;Low&lt;br&gt;Mid&gt;Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better prospects of promotion at work</td>
<td>4.92</td>
<td>4.73</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>14.43***</td>
<td>High&gt;Low&lt;br&gt;Mid&gt;Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better partners for romantic relationships</td>
<td>5.55</td>
<td>4.90</td>
<td>4.59</td>
<td>14.24***</td>
<td>High&gt;Mid&lt;br&gt;High&gt;Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being provided superior customer service</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>7.70***</td>
<td>High&gt;Low&lt;br&gt;Mid&gt;Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More attention paid to advertising</td>
<td>5.35</td>
<td>4.51</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>18.43***</td>
<td>High&gt;Mid&lt;br&gt;High&gt;Low</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\*\( p<.05 \); **\( p<.01 \); ***\( p<.001 \)

Discussion and Implications

The results indicate that within the female 15-30 year old population, there are three groups: those on which media influence is Greater, Moderate, and Low. The respondents on which media has a greater influence spend a great deal of time interacting with traditional mediums such as magazines and TV. The respondents on which media has a moderate influence spend some time interacting with traditional mediums. And finally, the respondents on which media
has a low influence spend minimum time interacting with traditional mediums and prefer intellectual and creative activities.

The results revealed that all three clusters find the following biological characteristics attractive: smaller waist-to-hip ratio (a narrow waist), youthful appearance, and a natural appearance (not airbrushed). In particular, the low cluster found natural appearance the most appealing. This supports the psychology literature which strongly suggests that these biological characteristics signal reproductive potential, which plays an important role in the perceptions of attractiveness (Sarwer et al, 2004).

Consistent with the literature, the results indicate that the respondents believe that attractiveness makes it easier to socialise and make friends, have better prospects of promotion at work, find better partners for romantic relationships, are provided with superior customer service, and pay more attention to advertising (Furnham, Lavancy, and McClelland, 2001).

There are several initial implications from this exploratory research. Advertisers regularly pursue strategies designed to attract attention to their communication and to distinguish their products from competing products with the hope of influencing purchase (Kamins et al, 1989). They search for a way to break through clutter and draw attention to their messages. Therefore, significant contribution is made by understanding the media effects on different population groups. Hence, based on the literature review and discussed results, practitioners are well advised to design campaigns with greater use of model diversity that more than 5% of the world’s population can emulate. This is in the interest of public policy and effective communication. Shifting emphasis from the current stereotypical model to one more representative of the population may be an effective communication strategy as exemplified by the success of the Dove beauty advertising using real women.

This research has made a start to gaining a better understanding of the media effects on different female groups within a population. Future research is required to explore the media effects on men, in particular the use of male models in the media. On a methodological note, little marketing research that defines attractiveness has been undertaken, and previous studies asking respondents to list or check the attributes they associate with physical attractiveness had problem of validity (Till and Busler, 2000). Thus, it appears that there does not exist a study that thoroughly defines dimension of attractiveness. This study has public interest implication and will be extended to investigate media models’ impact on health and related eating disorders
References


