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Olivia Merritt

University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

Kathleen R. Smith

University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

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Female college students' perception of self-image based on fashion magazine advertising

Olivia E. Merritt^{*} and *Kathleen R. Smith*[†]

ABSTRACT

The goal of this study was to examine how fashion magazine advertisements affect female college students' perception of self-image. More specifically, do female college students have high or low self-image perception based upon the fashion magazine's model images? Results of the study revealed female college students had positive perceptions of confidence with their physical body and body image. Before viewing the magazine advertising, participants liked their own body and would not change their body. However after viewing the magazine advertising, the participant's confidence level decreased and participants liked their bodies less. While college women were not more likely to change their bodies after viewing the fashion magazine advertisements, college women perceived models to be beautiful, felt they would be more beautiful if they were to look like models, and would attract more people if they looked like the models. Fashion magazine advertising does appear to have an impact on female college students' perception of self-image.

^{*} Olivia Merritt is a 2012 graduate with a major in Apparel Studies.

[†] Kathleen R. Smith, Ed.D. is an assistant professor and faculty mentor in the School of Human Environmental Sciences Apparel Studies program.

MEET THE STUDENT-AUTHOR



Olivia Merritt

I am from Dallas, Texas and will be graduating from the University of Arkansas in August 2012 with a Bachelor of Science in Human Environmental Sciences with a major in Apparel Studies and a minor in Marketing. I am a member of the Agricultural, Food and Life Sciences Honors Program, Advisory Board for the Agricultural, Food and Life Sciences Honors Program, Phi Upsilon Omicron National Honor Society, and University of Arkansas Octagon Chapter of Mortar Board National Honorary Society. I am also Vice president of the Invisible Children's club on campus and Vice president of the Apparel Studies Student Association (ASSA).

I plan on doing an editorial internship in the fall with PaperCity Magazine in Dallas, Texas and I have also considered going to graduate school for graphic design or visual communication.

I would like to thank Dr. Kathleen Smith for all her extensive help and guidance in researching and preparing my honors thesis. With the additional assistance of my committee members, Dr. Lona J. Robertson and Dr. Pasty Watkins, I was able to successfully complete and defend my honors thesis. The research and revisions of such a project will provide a useful experience for future tasks and challenges I may face in my future career path.

INTRODUCTION

Self-image is the way an individual views himself or herself physically and emotionally, whether it is by the way he or she views his or her body or the way he or she compares his or her body to others (Hendriks and Burgoon, 2003). Self-image can only be measured by self-reporting (Frost and McKelvie, 2012).

Media plays a large role in people's everyday lives. The media seems to have drawn females into a never ending cycle of unsatisfied self-image which could lead to changing the physical body. Young women tend to use media as their primary influence and "sources of information and influences" on their attitudes, behaviors and personal appearance (Hendriks and Burgoon, 2003). Magazines have been considered a powerful and persuasive medium for shaping ideals about appearance and body-image (Jones et al., 2004). Media and advertisements will always have methods to improve the female body and physical attractiveness (Hendriks and Burgoon, 2003).

There are limited data focusing on college females, ages 18 and older, and their perception of self-image based on the effect of fashion magazine advertising. The purpose of this study was to test the female college students' perception of self-image based on fashion magazine advertising. The study identified whether fashion magazine advertising had an effect on females' perception of their own self-image. Participants were college females aged 18 and older

studying at a large, mid-southern, tier-one research institution. This study examined demographics within this particular age group including grade level and major. Data were collected to show how often the participants read fashion magazines and which magazines they preferred to read.

Research questions for the study were: (1) Do young college women have more confidence in physical body and body image before and after viewing fashion magazine advertisements?; (2) Do young college women like their body less or want to change their body after viewing fashion magazine advertisements?; (3) After viewing fashion magazine models, do young college women consider the models to be beautiful, want to look like models, like themselves less, feel more beautiful, or would undergo surgery?; (4) If young college women were more like models would they be more liked, have more friends, attract more people, or do better in society?; and (5) Do young college women desire to look like the models and consider themselves more beautiful if thinner?

The goal of this study was to examine how fashion magazine advertisements affect female college students' perception of self-image and if the individuals would physically change their bodies after viewing selected advertisements. More specifically, do female college students have high or low self-image perception influenced by viewing fashion magazine advertisements? This could impact young girls as they develop their own self-image

based upon a skewed definition of beauty as portrayed by fashion magazines.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The underlying assumption of this study was that female college students' perceptions of self-image can be measured. Additional assumptions were that college students read fashion magazines; young females have a tendency to be influenced by their surroundings and the media; and students surveyed are representative of the sample being studied. Other assumptions were that perceived self-image can be measured; self-reporting of self-image perception is a reliable indication of self-image perception; reliable results can be obtained using a survey measurement tool; and female college students' perceptions of self-image can influence their physical well-being.

The study used a convenience method to obtain a sample from which data were collected. The participants for the study were female college undergraduates, ages 18 and older, attending a large, mid-southern, tier-one research institution. There were a total of 298 participants responding to the survey. The research model selected for use in this study was the survey design method. The responses were collected in a questionnaire format from undergraduates of all majors throughout the institution making up a representative sample of the population. The college female participants were asked to complete the survey which was administered by the researcher in classes on the university's campus.

Development and piloting of the survey instrument was completed prior to administering the survey. The data collected pertained to the participants' perception of self-image before and after viewing various fashion magazine advertisements. Fashion magazines were selected based upon regional preferences of college students. Advertisements from each magazine were selected based upon the models' body appearance and dress.

The instrument used was developed by the researcher and was made up of four main parts. The first part of the survey was designed to collect basic demographic information from the respondents. The second part of the survey was designed to collect confidence levels of the participants before and after viewing the fashion magazine advertisements. The third part of the survey was designed to collect data to see how much the participants like their own body and if they would change their body after viewing the fashion magazine advertising. The final part of the survey was designed to collect data from the participants about their perceptions of the fashion magazine advertisements and the models in the advertising. The survey consisted of a combination of Likert-type statements including rankings of 1-5 and yes/no questions. A 5 point

Likert-type scale (5 = very confident/a lot, 4 = somewhat confident/somewhat a lot, 3 = neither confident/neither a lot or not confident, 2 = somewhat not confident/ somewhat not at all, 1 = not confident/not at all) was used to measure the responses. Respondents were asked to view four advertisements taken from selected current fashion magazines and then respond to all questions.

Institutional Review Board approval was obtained prior to data collection. Data were collected by manual distribution of the survey. Classes were randomly selected with permission granted by the instructors of each class. A brief explanation of the survey was given to each class prior to the survey being administered. Participants were asked to respond to questions regarding their perception of self-image before and after viewing the fashion magazine advertisements. Demographics, including age, class level and major were collected. Descriptive statistics were used. Paired sample *t*-tests were used to determine if advertisements significantly changed students' perception.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results of the demographics of age, class level, and major indicated that over 75% of the respondents were 18-21 year olds (Table 1). There were slightly more sophomores (27.5%); however, the class levels were fairly evenly distributed. Nearly half of the majors consisted of Human Sciences majors (25%) and Apparel Studies majors (23%). Seventy-six percent of the participants reported reading fashion magazines less than one hour per week. Forty-three percent of those surveyed indicated that *Cosmopolitan* was the most read fashion magazine (Table 1).

Research Question 1. Do young college women have more confidence in physical body and body image before and after viewing fashion magazine advertisements? Over 44% of participants indicated they were somewhat confident in their physical body before viewing the fashion magazine advertisements (Table 2). Forty-six percent were somewhat confident about their body image before viewing fashion magazine advertisements. After viewing the fashion magazine advertisements, the percentages dropped to 39% confidence in physical body and 38% confidence in body-image (Table 2). The change in confidence for both questions is statistically significant after viewing the magazine advertising ($P = 0.001$ and $P = 0.005$).

Research Question 2. Do young college women like their body less or want to change their body after viewing fashion magazine advertisements? Nearly 43% of the participants indicated they liked their body "somewhat a lot" and only 29% indicated they would change their body before viewing the fashion magazine advertising (Table 3). After viewing the magazine advertisements, 41% of the participants still liked their own body by indicating "somewhat a

lot” and 32% were neutral, indicating “neither a lot or not at all” when asked if they would change their body. The results of the paired *t*-test were not statistically significant for whether or not students would change their bodies ($P = 0.130$).

Research Question 3. After viewing fashion magazine models, do young college women consider the models to be beautiful, want to look like models, like themselves less, feel more beautiful if they look like the models, or students would undergo surgery? Ninety-two percent of the participants perceived the models in the fashion magazine advertisements to be beautiful; 59% indicated that they would like to look like the models; 73% said they did not like themselves less after looking at the models; 57% indicated they would feel more beautiful if they looked like the models; and 86% would not undergo surgery to look like the models (Table 4).

Research Question 4. If young college women were more like models would they be more liked, have more friends, attract more people, or do better in society? Sixty three percent felt they would not be more liked; 78% indicated they would not have more friends; 85% felt they would attract more people; and 58% felt they would not do better in society if they looked more like the models (Table 5).

Research Question 5. Do young college women desire to look like the models and consider themselves more beautiful if thinner? Fifty-seven percent of the participants agreed that they did desire to look like the models after view the fashion magazine advertisements. Fifty-five percent agreed that they would consider themselves more beautiful if they were thinner like the models (Table 6).

The goal of this study was to identify whether fashion magazine advertising had an effect on female college students’ perception of self-image and if the participants would physically change their bodies as a result. This group of female college students had confidence in their physical body and body-image before viewing the fashion magazine advertisements. However after viewing the fashion magazine advertisements, the confidence level in both physical body and body-image dropped. This supports the research that claims magazines are shaping ideals about appearance and body-image, which tends to indicate that fashion magazine advertisements do have an effect on female college students’ perception of self-image (Jones et al., 2004).

This group of female college students like their physical bodies and would not change their bodies before viewing the fashion magazine advertisements. After viewing the fashion magazine advertisements the female college students would not change their body, but like the own bodies less which is supported by literature stating magazine images influence enough that they want to change their bodies (Jones et al., 2004).

The majority of these female college students perceived the models to be beautiful and confident in their own self-image after looking at the models in the fashion magazine advertisements. More than half of the students wanted to look like the models and felt they would be more beautiful if they looked like the models in the fashion magazine advertisements. However, the majority of the students would not undergo surgery to look like the models in the fashion magazine advertisements. Research has shown women strongly agree that media and advertising set an unrealistic standard of beauty unachievable by most (Campaign for Real Beauty Mission, 2008). The majority of the participants felt they would not be more liked or have more friends if they were to look like the models in the fashion magazine advertisements. They also felt that they would not do better in society. However, they believe that they would attract more people.

In conclusion, the majority of the respondents were 18-21 years old, with a fairly even distribution of freshman, sophomores, juniors and seniors. The majority of majors were apparel studies majors and other Human Environmental Science majors. Fashion magazines were read less than one hour per week by this group of female college students. Cosmopolitan was the most read magazine. Although responses didn’t change in whether students would change their bodies, confidence level decreased, they liked their bodies less, they think they would attract more people, not do better in society, want to look like models and think that being thinner like the models will make them more beautiful, as supported by literature review. Together these data would seem to indicate that some female college students are negatively influenced by fashion magazine advertisements.

This research study seems to indicate that fashion magazine advertisements do have an impact on female college students’ perception of self-image based on self-confidence, liking and perceptions of models in the fashion magazine advertisements. Overall, the results of the study provide insights into the female college students’ perception and liking of their physical body and body-image, which does have an effect on self-image. Further research should include teenagers in secondary schools to find if any differences exist between the two groups. The study could also be expanded to include other females from other universities as well as including males to determine if the same body image issues relate to advertisements in fashion related magazines.

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Table 1. Participant Characteristics.

Demographic Variable	Number	Percentage
Age		
18-19	105	35.4
20-21	126	42.4
22-23	48	16.2
24+	18	6.1
No Response	1	
Total	298	100
Class Level		
Freshman	70	23.7
Sophomore	81	27.5
Junior	69	23.4
Senior	73	24.7
No Response	3	
Total	298	100
Major/College		
Arts and Sciences	35	11.8
Apparel Studies	67	22.6
Business	33	11.1
Education	10	3.4
Other Human Environmental Sciences Majors	75	25.3
Other University of Arkansas Majors	69	23.2
No Response	9	
Total	298	100
How often fashion magazines were read by participants		
Less than 1 hour per week	227	76.4
1-2 hours per week	52	17.5
2-3 hours per week	13	4.4
More than 3 hours per week	5	1.7
No Response	1	
Total	298	100
Magazines most read by participants		
Cosmopolitan	126	42.9
Vogue	38	12.9
Seventeen	23	7.8
InStyle	27	9.2
Other	35	11.9
No Response	49	
Total	298	100

Table 2. Frequencies for confidence levels.

	Before Viewing		After Viewing	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Physical Body				
Very Confident	21	7.1	23	7.8
Somewhat Confident	132	44.4	116	39.3
Neither Very Confident or Unconfident	111	37.4	104	35.3
Somewhat Unconfident	27	9.1	44	14.9
Not Confident	6	2	8	2.7
Non Response	1		3	
Total	298	100	298	100
Body-Image				
Very Confident	21	7	29	9.8
Somewhat Confident	136	45.6	113	38.3
Neither Very Confident or Unconfident	112	37.7	108	36.6
Somewhat Unconfident	22	7.4	36	12.2
Not Confident	6	2	9	3.1
Non Response	1		3	
Total	298	100	298	100

Table 3. Frequencies for Liking Own Body and Changing Own Body.

	Before Viewing		After Viewing	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
“Do you like your own body?”				
A Lot	27	9.1	24	8.1
Somewhat a lot	127	42.8	121	41
Neither a lot or not a lot	110	37	113	38.3
Somewhat not at all	27	9.1	28	9.5
Not at all	6	2	9	3.1
Non Response	1		3	
Total	298	100	298	100
“Do you want to change your own body?”				
A Lot	47	15.8	45	15.3
Somewhat a lot	86	29	78	26.4
Neither a lot or not a lot	82	27.6	95	32.2
Somewhat not at all	62	20.9	47	15.9
Not at all	20	6.7	30	10.2
Non Response	1		3	
Total	298	100	298	100

Table 4. Perceptions of Participants.

Question		Number	Percent
Do you perceive the model to be beautiful?	Yes	272	91.9
	No	23	7.8
	No Response	2	
	Total	298	100
Do you want to look like the models?	Yes	173	58.6
	No	121	41
	No Response	3	
	Total	298	100
Do you like yourself less after looking at the models?	Yes	79	26.7
	No	216	73
	No Response	2	
	Total	298	100
If you were to look like the models would that make you feel more beautiful?	Yes	170	57.4
	No	1125	42.2
	No Response	2	
	Total	298	100
Would you consider undergoing surgery to look like the models?	Yes	37	12.5
	No	257	87.1
	No Response	3	
	Total	298	100

Table 5. Perceptions of Participants "If like the models".

Question		Frequency	Percent
If you were like the models: Would you be more liked?	Yes	109	36.9
	No	185	62.7
	No Response	3	
	Total	298	100
Would you have more friends?	Yes	64	21.7
	No	230	78
	No Response	3	
	Total	298	100
Would you attract more people?	Yes	250	84.7
	No	44	14.9
	No Response	3	
	Total	298	100
Would you do better in society?	Yes	124	42
	No	170	57.6
	No Response	3	
	Total	298	100

Table 6. Agree/Disagree Questions.

Questions		Frequency	Percent
Do you desire to look like the models in the fashion magazines?	Agree	166	56.5
	Disagree	127	43.2
	No Response	4	
	Total	298	100
If you were thinner would you consider yourself to be more beautiful?	Agree	163	55.4
	Disagree	130	44.2
	No Response	4	
	Total	298	100