

# Body Image, Confidence, And Media Influence: A Study Of Middle School Adolescents

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## ABSTRACT

*For years, we have all been aware of the media's portrayal of the ideal female as unreasonably thin. In recent years, portrayals of males as both thin and muscular have also appeared. While a myriad of research has shown that these images have negative effects on women's body image and self-confidence, few studies have examined what these images do to younger consumers, both female and male. This study examines these issues and also looks at the differences in influence by race. The results show that Hispanic females are the most likely to be influenced, followed by White females. Black females reported no influence. With respect to adolescent boys, only a few reported any influence at all.*

**Keywords:** Body Image and Advertising; Self-Confidence and Advertising; Middle School Adolescents and Advertising

## INTRODUCTION

The controversy over the relationship between body image and media influence is neither new nor much closer to being resolved. While there seems to be a general consensus that the mass media does tend to influence one's perception of body image, many areas remain unexplored. While the vast majority of body image studies have sought to explore the impact of media influences on adult women's perception of body image, fewer studies have examined the influence of media on younger consumers. This lack of attention paid to younger consumers seems to be somewhat negligent as prior sociological research indicates that children often become aware of body image at a very young age. Research conducted by Martin and Kennedy (1993) indicated that the self-perception of physical attractiveness of young females tends to decrease over time and that it is essential, particularly for young girls, that a positive perception of one's self be developed between grades four and twelve. Gardner et al. (1999) also found that girls began to have a desire to become thinner around the age of seven while boys became more aware of their own body size around the age of nine. They further report that between the ages of seven and thirteen, girls desired to be approximately five percent thinner than their actual size. Perhaps even more troubling is the finding that the desire to be thinner was found in young girls at approximately six years of age (Lowes and Tiggemann, 2003).

It is clear, and undisputed, that the awareness of body image, and therefore self-image, begins to form at a very young age and becomes even stronger over time. What is not as clear is whether this desire or pressure to become thin affects all adolescents equally. For example, do adolescents who are African American, Asian, or Hispanic feel the same pressures that White children feel? This research is designed to help determine if media and perceived cultural pressures to become thin, or more muscular in the case of boys, have the same impact on children coming from these different ethnic backgrounds.

## **LITERATURE**

The accusation that the media presents consumers with an unrealistic perception of body image is not new but it does appear to be a continuing problem that begins at a very early age and continues into adulthood. Perhaps the positive news is that the problem is being addressed in the news and small steps are being taken to address the problem. Recently, Hellmich (2006) reported that models participating in a Spanish fashion show were required to meet a specific Body Mass Index (BMI) and Mustafa, (2007) indicates that the requirement to meet a specific BMI to participate in fashion shows is becoming more prevalent worldwide. A casual examination of almost any media outlet will reveal thin female models and muscular male models who present an image that most consumers cannot attain. However, Social Comparison Theory suggests that while consumers may understand that these are unrealistic images they are still likely to compare themselves to these models with the result being an overall increase of negative feelings about their own body image and a corresponding drop in confidence and self-esteem (Festinger, 1954). Richins (1991) also concluded that the use of “perfect” models led consumers to hold lower levels of satisfaction with their own body image. It is also important to note that Wheeler and Miyake (1992) suggest that when social comparisons are made in regard to physical appearance, the direction tends to be “upward” which results in lower levels of satisfaction with one’s body image. Turner and Hamilton (1997) also found and upward comparison when women viewed models in fashion magazines which lead to a desire to weigh less, were less satisfied with their bodies, more frustrated with their weight, expressed more interest in being thin, and were more afraid of getting fat than those who were exposed to news magazines. Morrison, Kalin and Morrison (2004) concluded that the resulting effects of this “upward” comparison were that women tended to engage in traditional dieting practices as well as much more harmful weight control practices. More recently, Gabe and Ward (2008) performed a meta-analysis of the body image literature and report that approximately 57% of experimental studies found that thin-ideal body images are linked to women’s dissatisfaction with their own bodies and that there is strong support for the link between mass medias depiction of thin bodies and women’s dissatisfaction with body image.

## **ADOLESCENT BODY IMAGE**

A myriad of literature points to the connection between the use of thin models and dissatisfaction with a woman’s body image. While adult women struggle with this problem, so do very young children, who are less equipped to deal with the pressures put on them by the media, their peers, and society in general. It also appears that this pressure is felt at a very young age. Gardner et al. (1999) found that the desire to be thinner starts around 7 years of age and increases through age 13. At age 13 respondents indicated a desire to be approximately 5% thinner than their actual size. In a study of 135 children who were between the ages of five and eight, Lowes and Tiggemann (2003) found that 59% of the girls desired a thinner figure as compared to 35% of boys. It was also reported that the majority of children were very aware of dieting as a means of achieving a thinner figure and that their level of body dissatisfaction was directly related to their mother’s level of dissatisfaction, as the mother is thought to be the most important figure in a young girl’s life. Dohnt and Tiggemann (2005) present particularly disturbing data that indicates that by the age of six as many as 42% of girls desire a thinner body and that 43% indicated that they would use some type of diet to obtain a lower weight and thinner body. As many as 84% of the girls reported watching “a lot” of television and 69% reported that they looked at magazines, having a focus on appearance and using thin models, even though many of the girls could not yet read. Those girls who watched music videos had a greater awareness of body image than did those who watched more traditional children’s television. In fact, while discussing the effects of music videos, a teacher stated, “They are watching these videos and these very skinny girls in skimpy clothing and that’s all they want to be, so the media has a huge influence” (Mooney et al. 2004, p.350). Hargreaves and Tiggemann (2004) also believe that exposure to commercials that use thin models led to higher levels of dissatisfaction with overall body image and in general affected girls in a negative manner. They further conclude that the mass media does contribute to the general development of adolescent girls’ body image and that more focus should be placed on the role of media influence.

It appears that young girls are surrounded by images of thinness. One notable source of thinness is of course the Barbie Doll. Dittmar and Halliwell (2006) suggest that while Barbie is the best selling doll in the world and is the source of significant revenue for Mattel, it may also be the source of significant body-esteem dissatisfaction for younger children. They note that very young girls were found to experience increased body

dissatisfaction after being exposed to the Barbie doll that also decreased their levels of body-esteem while increasing the desire to have a thinner body. This effect was evident for girls between the ages of 5½ and 6½ but more pronounced for girls between the ages of 6½ and 7½. The literature paints a rather clear picture of very young girls being exposed to the pressures of a thin culture with the result being dissatisfaction with their bodies and an increasing desire to be thin.

This desire for thinness does not seem to dissipate with age. Indeed, Bearman et al. (2006) examined 428 adolescent boys and girls and found that body dissatisfaction for girls increased significantly during early adolescence and that these rates continued to increase with age while boys showed lower levels of body dissatisfaction. A study of 124 young teens between the ages of 15 and 16 found that many teens were influenced by celebrities and fashion models and expressed a desire to look like them even though they indicated that these celebrities were not representative of the general population (Mooney et al. (2004). They further found that attracting the attention of boys, gaining approval of their girl friends, and increasing self-confidence were among the main reasons for desiring to be thinner. It seems clear that adolescent girls (and boys to a smaller degree) are influenced by the media and other cultural influences to desire and attempt to obtain a thinner body, which in many cases is the cause of dissatisfaction and loss of self-esteem. There is however some question as to whether this dissatisfaction is consistent across all ethnic groups or if some groups are affected more than others.

### **ADOLESCENT BODY IMAGE AND ETHNIC BACKGROUND**

Past research has presented information that indicates differences may exist in the desire to be thin between various ethnic groups. In-depth interviews were conducted by Milkie (1999) using 49 white and 11 minority girls (grades 9 and 10) in an attempt to determine if the concept of thinness was felt equally across ethnic groups. The results of these interviews indicated that Black girls tend to interpret media influences differently than did White girls. While the majority of the White respondents indicated a desire to look like the thin models shown in advertisements, Black girls were more likely to criticize the appearance of thin models (as they said that Black men desire women who were not extremely thin) and were found to be generally less affected by images presented in media advertisements. Levine and Harrison (2004) confirm that White females who were exposed to fashion magazines reported greater levels of body dissatisfaction. They also found that Black girls indicated that they did not compare themselves to these images or wish to look like these images, as the images were White ideals and did not appeal to them. Levine and Harrison further concluded that White females appeared to be more influenced by images of thinness than were women of color. However, Shaw et al. (2004) conducted a total of 63 different tests in a study of 785 women of various ethnic backgrounds. Only one of these tests indicated that both Blacks and Hispanic women experienced less internalization of the thin-ideal than did White and Asian women while the other 62 tests conducted found no significant difference between ethnic group behaviors. Indeed, they concluded that socio-cultural factors may now have the same effect across all ethnic groups. The similarity of ethnic groups was also found by Grabe and Hyde (2006) as they conclude that while White women are slightly more dissatisfied with body image than other ethnic groups, those differences are very small and may indicate that body image issues are not the sole providence of white women. For example, the main effect results of the Grabe and Hyde study reveal that White women are slightly more dissatisfied than Black women (.29), slightly more dissatisfied than Asian American (.01), and slightly more dissatisfied than Hispanic women (.09). When comparing Black women to these various groups it was found that Asian American women were more dissatisfied (.12), Hispanic women more dissatisfied (.18), and Hispanic women more dissatisfied than Asian American women (.07). These results seem to indicate that while the differences are quite small, differences do exist although perhaps for differing reasons.

The literature is once again rather unclear as to whether the media influence toward thinness is primarily a White issue or if it is now so wide spread that it is an issue that effect women of all ethnic groups. This study is designed to insight into of these issues.

### **METHODOLOGY**

To gain additional insight into the influence of the media on various cultural groups, an open-ended survey was distributed to a group of seventh grade students, ages 12-15, attending a diverse middle school in Florida. Three main cultural aggregations were represented in this survey: African American, Caucasian, and Hispanic.

Seventh grade is a stage in life where teenagers begin to shape themselves and their ideals; thus, the objective of this study was to determine what extent the media affected this process.

The open-ended survey administered consisted of three questions all pertaining to the effect of society and media’s influence on body image and self-confidence. In total, there were 53 student participants, as shown in Table 1 below.

**Table 1**  
**Sample Characteristics**

	<b>African American</b>	<b>Hispanic</b>	<b>Caucasian</b>
<b>Total</b>	12	33	15
<b>Male</b>	7	16	6
<b>Female</b>	5	17	9

Each of these surveys was grouped into cultural categories and the student was determined to be either: yes, influenced by the media; or no, not influenced by the media. There was then a separation within cultural categories into male and female to obtain further possible data relationships.

**RESULTS**

Out of the three cultures surveyed, African American females showed the lowest amount of influence from the media, while Hispanic females showed the greatest media influence. In all three categories, the majority of males were consistently uninfluenced by media pressure to look a specific way. In each culture, only one male per category listed media influence on the way they look and feel about themselves. A complete listing of results is below in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
**Influence of Media on Body Image**

	<b>African American Males</b>	<b>African American Females</b>	<b>Hispanic Males</b>	<b>Hispanic Females</b>	<b>Caucasian Males</b>	<b>Caucasian Females</b>
<b>Yes</b>	1	0	1	10	1	4
<b>No</b>	6	5	15	7	5	5
<b>Total</b>	7	5	16	17	6	9

**DISCUSSION**

Past research has shown a lack of media influence on African American females as well as Hispanic females. These findings were likely due in part to a greater cultural acceptance of larger bodied women. African American or Hispanic publications may be presented with fuller figured women models, while Caucasian publications continue to show models with unachievable thin frames. For example, one African American student responded, “I think that I am perfect the way I am, nobody can change my image.” One point to note, while there may not be pressure from the media directly influencing this culture’s ideals; several respondents reported they felt pressure in other areas of their lives. One respondent said, “The only pressure I get is from my family and my friends,” another stated, “The only pressure I feel is at school,” and another responded he was not influenced by the media, but went on to say, “The NBA kind of affects me because when I see them play really good, I know I have to practice and get bigger to play.” Additional evidence of outside influence is clear in the following comment made by a female student, “I do want to be skinny, just not anorexic looking.”

Prior research showed also, Hispanic women, much like African Americans do not undergo a large amount of pressure from the media to look a certain way. The culture admires and accepts full-figured women, so less pressure to be thin is placed on the women of the culture. However, through the survey results obtained; Hispanic women do feel pressure from the media to adhere to the social norm. A 12-year-old Hispanic girl surveyed responded she did feel pressure from the media to be thinner and followed with, “I’ve started a diet with my sister yesterday... I need to fit into my dresses for a lot of graduations.” Another female wrote, “You have to be skinny,

tall, beautiful and plastic. That's what I think when I hear the word model. They make them look amazing in photos, which sometimes makes me feel ugly." Hispanic boys, however, seem to be unaffected by media influence. A thirteen-year-old Hispanic male stated, "I pretty much have my own style, I don't want to be anyone else."

In previous studies, results show Caucasian females of all ages tend to be heavily affected by upheld media standards. Unlike African American and Hispanic media outlets, Caucasian magazines and television advertisements display female models with exceedingly thin bodies and a perfect appearance, as well as male models with sculpted muscles and acutely groomed features. Rather than measuring oneself to a full-figured, socially accepted woman, Caucasian women are pressured to equate to this practically unachievable body. The collected survey results of Caucasian boys showed very little media influence. Of the 6 males surveyed, only one wrote of pressure felt from media images. One unaffected male wrote, "I feel no pressure from the media to look a certain way, because if we all looked a certain way none of us would be unique." However, the one male feeling the effects of media influence stated, "Sometimes when I am watching T.V., I think that I should be a little bit skinnier." While Caucasian girls did not show a significant amount of media influence, the group reported more of an influence than female African Americans. One thirteen year old female reported, "Sometimes I feel sad when I see advertisements because the girls I see are all pretty and I don't feel like I am that pretty," another said, "When I see people dressed certain ways, people with flawless faces and sometimes the way people act make me uncomfortable and definitely brings me down," she later wrote, "While I'm swimming in my full piece bathing suit with a skirt that's long enough to cover up my enormous thighs, I look at others and think 'I wish I could look like that.'" However, out of the sample, six white females said they were in no way affected by the media and societal standards. "When someone says I am ugly, sure I get a little offended, but then I think, 'I don't care how you feel about me' and I walk away."

One unexpected correlation was found; students with higher GPA's reported a greater amount of media and societal influence than those with lower grade averages. Within the sample group, one of the surveyed classes was an "advanced" class. These students, regardless of gender or cultural orientation, reported feeling a significant influence from the media and society.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study reports an exploratory examination of adolescent's experiences with body image and self-confidence based upon exposure to media images. As has been found in previous research, females were much more likely than males to report being influenced by media images. However, in contradiction to previous research, Hispanic girls were found to be the group reporting the most influence. This may be due to the increased use of young Hispanics in television shows (such as Disney's I-Carly), movies (such as High School Musical) and even in advertising. The young Hispanic females shown in these media tend to represent the White ideal of thinness.

What do these results mean for the world of marketing and advertising? It seems that much of our advertising is not designed to make us feel good about our bodies and ourselves. As such, companies who work to portray young women as they truly are, i.e., not rail thin, may gain a competitive advantage over firms who portray impossibly thin ideals.

## **AUTHOR INFORMATION**

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