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# Advertising the Thin Ideal-The Effect on Women

Christine Murphy

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## Abstract

Debate on the thin ideal has been prevalent for many decades, however given the substantial increase in eating disorders and the omnipresent influence of the media the time is now ripe for decisive action in the area of women in advertising. Most research in this area has focused on the psychological impact of the thin ideal. The new research presented in this paper is important as it explores the marketing implications of the portrayal of women in the fashion and cosmetic industry. The success of this industry depends entirely on how receptive consumers are to the images portrayed. This paper explores the effect advertising in the form of television, magazine and billboard media has on the female consumer with regard to body dissatisfaction and eating disorders. It is conclusive from the research that respondents believe that there is an association between the advertising of the thin ideal and body dissatisfaction and eating disorders.

**Keywords:** *Thin Ideal, Body Dissatisfaction, Unattainable Ideals, Socio-cultural Ideals, Airbrushing*

## Introduction

From a young age women are brought up to believe that to be thin is to be perfect. Women are subjected to pressure from family and friends to adhere to this idea of perfection and the media, in the form of advertising influence women to believe that the tall slim women they use in adverts are perfect. Traditionally, companies have used advertising campaigns featuring tall, thin, beautiful women known as the thin ideal to advertise their products. By using these tall, slim women, marketers create aspirational attributes associated with their products, which entices women to purchase their product in the hope they will look like the women in the adverts.

According to The Eating Association of Ireland (2007), eating disorders occur in societies that promote thinness as a means of achieving health, success and happiness and there is overwhelming evidence for the existence of the *thin ideal* for women (Wiseman *et al.* 1992). The link between media and body dissatisfaction and eating disorders is supported by women and girls own reports (Tiggeman *et al.* 2000; Milkie, 1999). While evidence of the use of thin women in advertising is not sufficient in itself to lay the responsibility of eating disorders on advertisers, the crucial issue is the connection between them. For the second half of the twentieth century, there is evidence – anecdotal, interpretive and to an extent scientific – that the culturally ideal shape for female bodies has become much thinner.

It is evident that for at least the past four decades, companies have used idealised body images by means of thin models in their advertisements to promote their products. Even

though there is growing evidence to indicate that consumers realise that the slender models portrayed in the media are unattainable ideals (Lockwood *et al.* 1997), consumers continue to purchase products from companies in the hope that they are purchasing the image of that ideal. Some researchers believe that advertisers purposely endeavor to make unrealistically thin bodies “normal” in order to create an unattainable urge that can drive product consumption (Cusumano, 1997). The portrayal of super-slim women as more fashionable, desirable, and successful can contribute to eating disorders that can kill, and the mass media have been identified as one of the most influential socio-cultural factors contributing to anorexia (Gustafson *et al.* 1999).

### **The Thin Ideal and Body Dissatisfaction**

Although the practice of including highly attractive women may be effective from a marketing standpoint, physical attractiveness and the thin ideal is a very sensitive issue for many women (Gustafson *et al.* 1999). It has been proven through a growing body of research that the exposure to ultra thin women, ubiquitous in the media and advertising industry, leads to body dissatisfaction amongst a large proportion of women (Irving, 1990). The mass media due to their pervasiveness and reach are probably the single most powerful transmitters of sociocultural ideals. Certain formal content analyses of the visual media such as fashion magazines, television advertising and programming, document a ponderance of young, tall and extremely thin women who epitomize the current beauty ideal (Malkin *et al.* 1999). Through television, magazines, billboards and other media, women frequently encounter images of female beauty, that are highly uncommon and largely unattainable (Levine *et al.* 1996). Due to the idealised ultra thin women that are used in advertisements, studies show a decrease in self evaluation following exposure to idealised media portrayals (Posavac *et al.* 1998).

In a celebrity and weight obsessed culture women compare themselves with women who are anomalies of nature. These women are naturally thin and have incredibly long legs and high cheekbones, yet women will still diet and feel body dissatisfaction when they see these women in airbrushed advertisements and will strive to resemble these anomalies of nature. As the media try, on the surface to sort through the weight debate, what is being communicated underneath, in many cases, is society’s strongly held moral and aesthetic prejudice against being heavier than the thin ideal (Hofschire, 2002). It has been suggested that pressure to be thin from ones’ social environment encourages body dissatisfaction because repeated messages that one is not thin enough would be expected to produce discontent with physical appearance (Thompson *et al.* 1999).

Women’s magazines, probably more than any other form of mass media, have been criticised as being advocates and promoters of the desirability of an unrealistic and dangerously thin ideal (Wolf, 1990). A study conducted by Nichter *et al.* (1991) showed that adolescent girls endorsed their ideal as the women found in fashion magazines. In addition to print media,

research indicates that television may also be a powerful influence on perceptions of ideal body image in the average home, where the television is on for more than 7 hours a day (Harris, 1995) and unrealistic ideals similar to those found in the print media can be found on television shows. The average woman sees 400-600 advertisements per day, and by the time she is 60 years old, she has received 40 to 50 million commercial messages through the media (Milkie, 1999). Television commercials influence female self concept and achievement aspirations, and television often depicts situations in which thin people prosper and large people are ridiculed (Field, 2000). This constant exposure to female-oriented advertisements may influence girls to become self-conscious about their bodies and to obsess over and consider their physical appearance as a measure of their worth. (Heinberg, 1995)

A meta-analysis of experimental studies indicated that exposure to thin ideal images led to increased levels of body dissatisfaction among women (Grosez *et al.* 2002). Other experimental research showed that exposure to thin media ideals resulted in negative affect (Irving, 1990), or overeating (Seddon *et al.* 1996). It has been proven that brief exposure to print media images of thin female models has been shown to induce greater weight concern, body dissatisfaction, self consciousness, negative mood and decreased perception of ones' own attractiveness (Posavac *et al.* 2001; Shaw, 1995; Wegner *et al.* 2000; Stice *et al.* 1994; Ogden *et al.* 1999). In addition to these studies experimental studies have the potential to identify the psychological processes that translate media content into body dissatisfaction, however as yet relatively little research attention has been directed specifically at the underlying processes (Tiggemann *et al.* 2004).

## **The Thin Ideal and Eating Disorders**

Anorexia nervosa is a psychiatric disorder characterised by an unrealistic fear of weight gain, self starvation and conspicuous distortion of body image. Bulimia nervosa is an eating disorder characterised by recurrent binge eating followed by compensatory behaviors. Both of these eating disorders have existed for a very long time. A disorder similar to anorexia nervosa was first written about by Physician and Minister John Reynolds in 1669 and Philosopher Thomas Hobbes in 1688. Recognition of the disorder as a clinical condition dates from work completed separately in London and Paris in 1873. Anorexia has been characterised as a biopsychosocial disorder resulting in self-image and self-perception distortions that lead some women to develop an intense fear of food and weight gain to the point that many starve themselves to death (Gustafson *et al.* 1999). Bulimia nervosa was not recognised as a clinical condition until Gerald Russell's paper published in the UK in 1979. In Ireland, there are no national statistics available on the prevalence of eating disorders in the country, however, a study in the area was conducted on behalf of Bodywhys, The Eating Disorders Association of Ireland by the Expert Group on Mental Health Policy in 2007. The study reports that up to 200,000 people in Ireland have an eating disorder. The report however, only contains information on the sample of people who have approached Bodywhys for support; it is not viewed as a national statistic. Most research on eating disorders has been conducted with American and British samples.

In the UK, nearly two in every 100 secondary school girls suffer from anorexia nervosa. In 1992 the Royal College of Psychiatrists estimated that about 60,000 people may be receiving treatment for anorexia nervosa or bulimia nervosa at any one time in the UK. However, Beat (2000) currently believes the number receiving treatment to be much nearer to 90,000, with many more people whose eating disorders have not been diagnosed, in particular those with bulimia nervosa.

The unrealistically thin ideals portrayed in the media have been linked to increased rates of body-image disturbance and disordered eating in women. Several surveys have examined the relation between media exposure and eating disorder symptoms. In a sample of undergraduate students, Stice *et al.* (1994) found a positive relation between exposure to media containing ideal body images and disordered eating symptoms associated with bulimia and anorexia nervosa. Harrison and Cantor (1997) examined the relationship between media consumption and eating disorders in college women and found that frequent media use was associated with disordered eating symptoms, drive for thinness and body dissatisfaction.

## **Research Methodology**

To ensure that the necessary information would be generated, qualitative research was conducted for this study. Qualitative research consists of a body of research techniques that do not attempt to make measurements, but seek insights through a less structured, more flexible approach (Birn *et al.* 1990). In short, focus groups create settings in which diverse perceptions, judgements and experiences on a particular topic can surface (Lindlof, 1995) and thus are ideally suited to the present study. Babbie (1998) is of the opinion that the group dynamics that occur in focus groups frequently bring out aspects of the topic that would not have been anticipated by the researcher and would not have emerged from interviews with individuals.

The definition of the research problem was open ended but centered on understanding female consumers' attitudes towards advertising the thin ideal. The reason for this was to ensure that respondents were in a position to discuss any issues that they felt were important to them in relation to this issue.

Selection for focus groups is purposive rather than random or convenience selection. Theoretical sampling involves choosing informants driven by the conceptual question and not by a concern for representativeness (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The respondents chosen were women between the ages of 18-35 across different socio-economic backgrounds. Friends and family members were initially chosen for the sample on the basis of convenience. To expand the sample a technique called snowballing, where one gives the name of another subject who in turn provides the name of another and so on was used (Vogt, 1999). The focus groups for this research were demographically homogeneous groups, where same sex and similar age groups were recruited. This is to promote a positive and open atmosphere conducive to information sharing (Calder, 1977). After conducting six focus groups with

32 participating women the researcher believed that no new information was likely to be forthcoming, that saturation had been reached and that a sufficient number of groups had been conducted to fully address the research issues.

The focus groups were generally run in the home of the researcher, but in a number of cases were run in the homes or workplaces of some of the participants. Both lent themselves to informal settings where the participants were both comfortable and relaxed. The sessions lasted on average 1.5 hours. In all circumstances it was believed that this was sufficient time to allow for discussion on all areas of interest that arose. In a number of situations the session lasted two hours, as the groups were particularly open to debate and discussion.

A loosely structured approach to the discussions was followed to allow the moderator to adjust and direct the flow of conversation to ensure that all relevant issues were addressed. A number of topics were identified as important for discussion prior to the focus group sessions, but the discussion was not limited to these, as respondents identified many other topics as being significant. All the group discussions were taped and full transcripts produced as soon as possible after the sessions. Analysis of the data began with an initial reading of the transcripts. This initial reading was focused upon evaluation of the main issues that arose, while subsequent readings focused on making sense of and seeking out points that were relevant and interesting to the subject matter.

## **Research Findings**

The loosely structured interview guide and the open coding process of analysis resulted in the generation of rich detailed information. This section of the paper presents an in-depth exploration on the research data generated. The data will be discussed under the headings of peer influence, age effect, airbrushing and other effects.

The dominant perception among respondents when questioned about the way women have traditionally been portrayed in advertisements is that in general they are extremely thin, beautiful women. Respondents to this research articulated that women generally appear in advertisements as:

*They look fabulous. Their skin and teeth always looks fabulous, their body shape and their hair always looks shiny, the type of women you would like to look like (Shirley, 28).*

## **Role of Peer Influence**

Interestingly, respondents believe that adverts do not cause as much dissatisfaction among women as women's own peers do. It is noted that the thin ideal is interiorised to such an extent that quite often women themselves are the first to stigmatise other women for not conforming to the standard image:

*I think the women you are surrounded by daily do have an influence but I think we are more influenced by the media than we would like to admit. I think the reason we want to look good is fashion, fitness, and body image created by the media and women you go out and see out are the women that are wearing the style that they have seen in a magazine and a look from a magazine so I think it all trickles through regardless (Louise, 25).*

## **Difference between High End Fashion Models and Celebrities**

New significant findings to emerge from this current research, identify that from the female consumers' perspective women are portrayed at either the high end of the fashion industry where models are typically used, or are portrayed at the lower end of the fashion market where the use of female celebrities are prevalent. Respondents to the research differentiate between the way that women are portrayed at both ends and react differently to both portrayals:

*I think there is a difference in the way women are portrayed. When you are looking at high fashion they are anorexic giraffe type women, whereas if you are looking at celeb magazines, while the women are still portrayed as thin and beautiful, maybe they appear as more attainable (Elizabeth, 32).*

Models at the high end of the fashion industry appear untouchable and unattainable because of their slim tall physique, yet celebrities such as actresses who endorse products appear more realistic and tangible to respondents because of the media coverage of their lifestyles and their fluctuating weight:

*I think that the celebrities are more realistic, because they can be normal people. Their lives are to look good that is their job, their job is to advertise products and to look good, I think celebrities are much more attainable (Jennifer, 24).*

It is insightful to discover that although the respondents to the research regard the image of many women as portrayed in adverts to be unattainable and unrealistic they still aspire to that ideal and are encouraged to buy the advertised product. It can be concluded from this that female consumers want aspirational images of women portrayed in advertisements.

## **Age Effect**

A dominant perception that emerged among respondents is that women feel dissatisfied because they are constantly being exposed to this ideal of young, tall and thin women since they were young. They are ever more aware that if they do not try to fit into this ideal they will become more dissatisfied with their appearance and physique as it does not fit into society's idea of perfection. This supports research by Malkin *et al.* (1999) who suggests that the mass media due to their pervasiveness and reach are probably the single most powerful transmitters of sociocultural ideals:

*I don't think it is a conscious thing to feel dissatisfied. I would think people become dissatisfied, because you are being exposed to this ideal and you become even more aware over time as you get older how you don't conform to that ideal that is in society and that is celebrated. I think that is how you develop dissatisfaction, as a child you are manipulated. I think dissatisfaction starts young. (Alison, 24)*

## **Airbrushing**

The dominant perception among respondents is that the image of women used in adverts is unattainable and unrealistic and that these women do not portray the “real” woman.

*The women in the ads are completely unattainable. They have perfect skin, toned body, nothing ever seems to be out of place, every part of them is perfect and of course they have great jobs so that only increases how unattainable they are (Linda, 24).*

When further probed on the impact of airbrushing and digital enhancements, respondents indicated that activity such as airbrushing and computer modification further differentiates women in adverts from women in real life and heightens their unattainability:

*I don't think the portrayal of women in ads is attainable or realistic because a lot of the pictures are digitally perfected before they are inputted for a magazine so therefore it is not reality (Karen, 35).*

Respondents are aware that the women used in adverts are digitally enhanced and computer modified to such an extent that the shape of any woman can be changed from lengthening her body to changing her skin tone. Despite this awareness, however, it emerges from the research that when viewing women in adverts the reality of airbrushing etc. does not appear to register. They still prefer to adhere to the ideal of perfection broadcasted by the media and fashion and cosmetic industry.

## **Other Effects**

Predominantly respondents believe that women in advertisements are portrayed as thin, and interestingly respondents articulated that they are often portrayed as housewives. This supports findings by Gustafson *et al.* (1999) who states that women are portrayed as dumb blondes, indecisive, childlike, frivolous, obsessed with or submissive to men, simple housewives, superwomen, sexual objects, beautifully or successfully slim or dieting for a “waif” look:

*Look at the use of women in advertising, there is the housewife who believes that germs are her worst enemy, there is the skinny model and there is no in between. The yummy mummy might be in for one or two things but its either housewives or skinny models. That's how women are portrayed (Elizabeth, 32).*



A dominant perception among respondents was that the media via advertising portray the thin ideal to encourage women to want to look like the women in the adverts and to encourage them to want to be excessively thin.

*The advertising industry portrays the thin ideal to make women want to be excessively thin. I think that is the way it is portrayed in the media (Margaret, 24).*

Respondents are also of the opinion that when consumers are viewing the adverts they are aware that they are unrealistic and unattainable yet they still watch the adverts and they still buy into the ideal behind the products.

*You are aware that they are unattainable and unrealistic when you are looking at the advert yet you still look (Martina, 35).*

A leading observation among respondents indicated that being subjected to thin attractive women in adverts can lead the respondents to develop dissatisfaction with regard to their own self image and physique.

*I would definitely develop dissatisfaction, you obviously see the women in the ads and think God I wish I looked like her (Niamh, 22).*

Further discussion on the issue of extreme dieting highlighted that although extreme dieting is complex with many contributing factors, respondents do believe the portrayal of women in adverts can be a contributing factor. Respondents believe that some women can develop an obsession with the tall thin women portrayed as perfection in adverts. This obsession results in these women wanting to mirror the perfect physique and lifestyle that is portrayed, perhaps in an attempt to fit with a socio-cultural idea of perfection. In these situations low self esteem and extreme dieting can occur as these women want to feel and look like the women they aspire to be. Therefore, the media can play a dangerous role influencing women through adverts into extreme dieting:

*I suppose you are looking at larger people saying "thank God I don't look like that", but then you look at skinny women in adverts and think "but I wish I looked like that" (Caroline, 31).*

It further emerges from the research that respondents accept as true that to be thin and project this ideal means that one has one's life under control and not just your weight. Respondents believe that in general employers are also influenced by the thin ideal as projected in the media and are more likely to employ a woman who is thin than they are to employ an overweight woman:

*From the outside you see that thin women have their looks under control and so everything else must be under control. I got this email in college telling us that in interviews employers automatically are drawn to people who look good, who are well presented and not overweight (Jennifer, 24).*

Respondents essentially believe that the media continue to encourage women to want to be thin by using the thin ideal in their adverts. While some elements of the media might portray the thin ideal as inappropriate, the majority of adverts continue to promote the thin ideal.

## **Codes of the Advertising Standards Authority for Ireland**

Ireland currently has no legislation preventing thin or extremely thin models appearing on magazine covers and television adverts, however, there is an organisation that monitors the content of advertising in the fashion and cosmetic industry. The Advertising Standards Authority for Ireland (ASAI) is a founder member of the European Advertising Standards Alliance (EASA) who aim to extend effective advertising self regulation across the European Union. The ASAI is not a law enforcement body and does not provide legal advice. The self-regulatory system is subordinate to and complements legislative controls on advertising and sales promotions and provides an alternative low cost and easily accessible means of resolving disputes. Section 9 of the Advertising Standards deals with health and slimming advertising. This section is divided into subsections two of the subsections relating to weight are 9.8 and 9.13:

- 9.8: Marketing communications for products and services in this category should not suggest that to be underweight is acceptable or desirable. Where testimonials or case histories are used, they must not refer to subjects who are or appear to be underweight.
- 9.13: For the purpose of the advertising code, normal weight means a body mass index between 18.5 and 24.9. Underweight means a body mass index of below 18.5.

## **Conclusion**

It emerged from the current research findings that there are different factors operating at different levels that influence women to adhere to the thin ideal as female perfection. Firstly, it can be noted that respondents see a difference between the use of high end fashion models and low end fashion icons where celebrities are prevalent. It is apparent from the research that in general women do not aspire to look like the women at the high end of the fashion industry as they appear untouchable and unattainable because of their tall “giraffe like” slim physique. As evidenced by Ruggerone (2006) the objective at this end of the fashion industry is often to create sophisticated images to comply with high aesthetic standards. This research recommends closer collaboration between the creators of these images and the marketers of these images given the possibility of negative responses among the audience.

An interesting finding to emerge from the research suggests that women influence other women to conform to the “thin ideal” as the standard image of perfection. This suggests that women can cause dissatisfaction among each other as much as the media and adverts, if not more so. This influence among ones peers can cause dissatisfaction to develop into

extreme dieting and in worse cases eating disorders, and is dangerously prevalent among young women. It can be concluded that the media largely determines society's standard of perfection and women in turn perceive the thin ideal as the standard of perfection, resulting in them influencing each other to adhere to this perfect ideal.

Developing this conclusion in more depth it could be said that an overall cultural change regarding ideal body image is needed. Respondents in the research assumed that to be thin is to have one's life under control. This research concludes however that health as an aspirational issue would be more appropriate than thinness. A cultural change from thinness to healthiness could be suggested. Women need to be made aware that to be healthy is more important than to be thin e.g. a woman that is a size 8-10 can be perfectly healthy while the same applies for larger women e.g. a woman can be a size 14-16 and still be healthy. Therefore, the issue should not be the size of women but their health in relation to their size.

It was discussed during the research that culturally women are growing up too fast and that from a young age the idea of female perfection is implanted in young minds. To be thin and pretty is a standard as is evidenced in children stories such as Cinderella, where Cinderella was thin and beautiful while the sisters were larger and ugly. This influences girls from a young age and enhanced with the media's perceptions of beauty and their peers, puts significant amounts of pressure on young women to adhere to this thin perfect image. Therefore, culturally a focus on health issues instead of size issues might be required. In the long term this might have a positive impact on eating disorders and extreme dieting.

Airbrushing, computer modification and digital enhancements are widely becoming accepted as normal in adverts. Indeed, airbrushing is prevalent in the fashion and cosmetic industry so much so that it can lengthen a woman's neck and change her hair colour. The respondents were aware that airbrushing took place in advertisements that women are subjected to on a daily basis.

Developing this in more detail it is suggested throughout the research that although respondents are aware of what occurs behind the scenes of the adverts, women will still develop dissatisfaction from comparing themselves to the thin ideal in adverts. This is particularly insightful considering that the respondents know that the women in the adverts are altered and their appearance changed and enhanced.

In particular, the research generated data which paves the way for immediate action at a practical level for the industry to promote more positive body images for women. It could be said that an overall cultural change regarding ideal body image is needed. Respondents in the research assumed that to be thin is to have one's life under control. This research concludes however that health as an aspirational issue would be more appropriate than thinness. A cultural change from thinness to healthiness could be suggested. In the long term this might have a positive impact on eating disorders and extreme dieting.

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