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Media Use, Body Image, and Disordered Eating Patterns

JOLANDA VELDHUIS

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Body ideals

Our contemporary Western society surrounds us with beauty ideals and perfect bodies via conventional mass media, like magazines and television, and newer, digital media technologies, like Internet and social media sites. This entry explains what these standards of ideal physical appearance entail in a Western context, and further describes how real-life bodies deviate from idealized media portrayals. Furthermore, it describes various theories clarifying the role of media in impacting body image and eating disorders, as well as some underlying processes guiding this impact. Then the entry elucidates the impact of media-induced ideal body imagery on receivers' body image, and discusses the media's ideal body imagery and their verbal context.

The ideal body from a cultural–historical perspective

While the thinness ideal body prevails nowadays, what is seen as “an ideal body” is subject to changes over time and must be placed in specific sociocultural contexts. For example, seventeenth-century European paintings such as those from Flemish artist Peter Paul Rubens show an admiration for voluptuous women. In some parts of the world, like South Africa, bigger bodies still signify health and prosperity among people with a low socioeconomic status living in rural areas. Aesthetic body preferences also vary cross-culturally. For instance, in some cultures (e.g., Surinamese, African American), bigger and curvaceous body sizes are considered more beautiful than ultrathin bodies. In today's Western society, however, the general body ideal over the past decades pertained to being tall, attractive, *and* ultrathin for women and girls, and being ultramuscular for men and boys (Barlett, Vowels, & Saucier, 2008; Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; López-Guimerà, Levine, Sánchez-Carracedo, & Fauquet, 2010). Such bodies are presented as a prerequisite for being pretty, successful, and having self-control. Lately, well-trained bodies as well as slender bodies with curves in the right places are also considered as bodies having ideal characteristics. However, regardless of the rise of this more varied picture in body shapes and despite voices calling for more open-mindedness regarding body shapes and accepting a wider variety of body sizes—the so-called body positivity

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movement—the specific body ideals of being thin and ultrafit still seem to be anchored in the media landscape.

Both traditional and digital media play a prominent role in conveying body ideals and setting aesthetic standards. Historically, traditional media like television or fashion and fitness magazines were major players in distributing those appearance ideals. Nowadays, a broader and more dispersed spectrum of media is available, adding to the easy and abundant access to appearance ideals. People increasingly attend to digital media outlets, such as Internet-based social media and their associated social network sites (SNS) like Facebook and Instagram (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). For example, magazine covers show ideally-shaped bikini models with accompanying affirmative headlines like “Keep up with the current body trends,” while SNS give home to influencers who, in well-thought-out body poses and with filtered faces, try to inspire their followers by accompanying their images with texts like #beautytips and #fitspiration.

Over the past decade, media use has changed from merely being exposed to content, to an interactive environment enabling the creation of own content (e.g., uploading pictures) and communication with friends in one’s network (Perloff, 2014). Hence, with the rise of digital media, the real, offline world, has become more and more intertwined with the online world. Also, in this online setting, appearance-focused images continue the stereotypical portrayals of beauty, accompanied by texts in the form of descriptive captions like *fitgirl* and *thinspiration* and comments from others. Concurrent with the rise of digital media and the popularity of posting, for example, upper-body pictures and headshots on SNS, appearance portrayals now seem to exceed body weight and shape by additionally emphasizing facial idealness (e.g., having full lips, large eyes, a slim face, and a smooth skin). To date, most empirical studies on media and body image focus on the ever dominating slender and ideally-toned bodies, mainly targeting women.

Real-life versus idealized bodies in media

In general, media consumers are highly influenced by body ideals portrayed in both traditional and digital media, impacting body perceptions and self-image in women and girls as well as in men and boys (Barlett et al., 2008; Grabe et al., 2008; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; López-Guimerà et al., 2010). After all, constant exposure to ideal body portrayals leads to accepting such bodies as sociocultural norms and standards to adhere to, thereby guiding comparison with media figures and imitation behavior to obtain such ideal bodies. Paradoxically, real-world appearances deviate largely from the stereotypical ideal(ized) body representations in media fare. In fact, media figures’ body shapes seem unrealistic because they deviate from actual body sizes for many; contrasting media’s prevailing slim and slender bodies, Western society is currently facing high numbers of people living with overweight and obesity. Moreover, ideal embodied media figures suggest that control strategies like dieting and exercising make that ideal bodies are within reach, while these body shapes are actually unattainable for most people (Grabe et al., 2008; Tiggemann, 2011). Consequently, the impact of idealized media portrayals generally points at detrimental effects on viewers’ body image.

In today's media landscape, not only do the centrally created media display idealized body imagery, but so does user-generated content. That is, the use of photo editing computer software like Adobe Photoshop® can create an artificial ideal by removing imperfections and cutting body size before media models are presented in conventional media. With the rise of easily accessible mobile phone applications to edit pictures, this approach now seems within reach for every media user: applications like Snapchat (Snap Inc.) offer one-click functions to “beautify” pictures. Hence, new media formats make people not only consumers of media content, but also creators, enabling users to strategically select and adapt their appearances in pictures to conform to their preferred standards, before presenting them to an (online) audience. However, the media user's own real-life appearance could be (and probably is) deviant from the user's idealized appearance presented online.

Defining body image and disordered eating

This section first defines core concepts from media effects and body image research. Many studies in this domain focus on body image related measures (with body (dis)satisfaction as one of the most salient measures) and on disordered eating.

Body image and body dissatisfaction

Being a prominent element in research on the impact of media's thin-body ideal portrayals, body image refers to the thoughts, feelings, and perceptions that people have regarding their own body. The development of body image during childhood and adolescence is determined by biological (e.g., sex), psychological (e.g., self-esteem), sociorelational (e.g., family, peers), and sociocultural (e.g., media) factors. As such, body image has been identified as a multidimensional concept that involves a variety of self-perceptions and self-evaluations, such as experiencing body (dis)satisfaction. When views of one's own body weight and shape are negative and dysfunctional, this is called body *dissatisfaction*. Body dissatisfaction is found to be so prevalent nowadays, especially among youngsters, that it is considered a “normative discontent.” Put differently, this term indicates that so many people today are unhappy with their body weight and shape that it seems to be normal. Consequently, feelings of body dissatisfaction can lead to experiencing other negative mental health outcomes, such as lowered self-esteem, anxiety, and depression (Grabe et al., 2008; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016).

Disordered eating

Body dissatisfaction is also related to physical health outcomes and functions as a key predictor of disordered eating patterns. Put differently, body dissatisfaction can subsequently result in unhealthy self-regulatory behaviors to control weight, such as skipping meals and excessive exercising. In turn, such behaviors can contribute to the onset of eating disorders. Please note that eating disorders like anorexia nervosa are very

complex and multifaceted clinical conditions, not directly instigated by media use. Nevertheless, risk factors like internalizing thin bodies as ideal standards and experiencing body dissatisfaction are among the factors that underlie the onset of the eating disorder symptomatology like restraint eating. Importantly, scholars like López-Guimerà et al. (2010) argue that media do not only show ideal body imagery, but also serve more content related to dieting, shaping up, and weight loss, which further emphasizes their importance of having an ideal body and how to achieve it. Hence, besides body image and related self-perceptions, research has focused on the relations between media use and disordered eating.

Explaining media's impact on body image

This section first describes various theories that clarify the role of media in impacting body image and eating disorder symptoms, before further explaining some underlying processes that guide this impact. Various psychological processes can explain why ideal body representations in media lead to experiencing, among others, body dissatisfaction and eating disorder symptomatology in media consumers. Generally, *internalization of body ideals* and *appearance-based social comparison* with media figures embodying such ideals have been identified as major players. These mediating processes hold true in both domains of traditional media (e.g., López-Guimerà et al., 2010) and social media (e.g., Holland & Tiggemann, 2016).

Media's role in conveying body ideals

Many scholars have elucidated the focus of media on appearances playing a major role in internalizing beauty ideals and instigating comparison with appearances, impacting media consumers' body perceptions. However, before introducing specific theories that commonly try to explain the association between media use, body image, and disordered eating, zooming out to a bigger picture is needed. That is, from a sociocultural approach, it must be remembered that body ideals result from trends and norms within society as a whole; the interplay of social factors, like media and peer influences, contribute to an appearance culture that further forms and strengthens cultural ideals of body shape and beauty (Tiggemann, 2011). Similarly, López-Guimerà and colleagues (2010) in their review argue that effects on body image come both directly through media exposure itself, as well as indirectly, via media impacting the social environment including peers, parents, and so forth. Hence, explaining the effects of idealized body exposure on its viewers is complex because, next to media exposure, many predisposing and reinforcing factors are involved. In all, however, media have been identified as one of the most important sources that generously offer references for such desirable body standards, while also reinforcing their importance and how to attain them (López-Guimerà et al., 2010).

Various theories further accentuate media's role in conveying appearance ideals. On a more general level, Bandura's *social cognitive theory* postulates that individual behavioral patterns and environmental factors, such as media, mutually influence each other

(SOCIAL COGNITIVE THEORY). This is no different for ideal bodies being taken on as representations of social reality and the way a person sees their own body. The modeling principle from this theory further explains how exposure to ideally-shaped media role models may guide imitation behavior (Bandura, 2001). Then, following the principles of the *cultivation theory* (CULTIVATION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL PROCESSES), constantly communicated messages become integrated in perceptions of social reality, especially in heavy media consumers. Hence, the frequent viewing of idealized body figures via media may normalize such figures, especially since media further attribute to such idealization by emphasizing and rewarding such figures.

More specifically focusing on body image, *sociocultural theory* (see Tiggemann, 2011) emphasizes that media can reinforce the internalization of beauty ideals that are displayed as well as activating social comparison to the people shown in the media. The salience of this internalized, yet hard to obtain, beauty ideal leads to negative effects on body image. Similarly, *objectification theory* (OBJECTIFICATION) explains that society's focus on appearances, such as through representations in visual media, may lead to the internalization of an object-focused view of the body. Subsequently, this can encourage women and girls to focus on their outer appearance, thereby constantly observing their bodies as from a third-person perspective, rather than to focus on personality and competences. The resulting objectified body consciousness is classified by repetitively assessing one's looks (body surveillance) and experiencing negative emotions regarding one's body (body shame). This particular effect has been found to occur in both adolescents and (young) adults. In conclusion, the aforementioned theorizing allocates central importance to media in conveying and reinforcing idealized (and unrealistic) beauty ideals. In doing so, they altogether explain how media contribute to people internalizing ideal body images as sociocultural standards and offer abundant references by means of ideal embodied media figures for comparison.

Internalization of body ideals

Generally, research has identified the *internalization of body ideals* as a major underlying psychological process that explains why ideal body representations can foster negative feelings about one's own body, leading to an experience of body dissatisfaction (e.g., Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; López-Guimerà et al., 2010). Internalization of body ideals constitutes that people adopt ideal imagery as normative and realistic representations to comply with. Abundant research considering the setting of traditional media like television and magazines has indicated that people internalize, for example, the portrayed thin-body ideal (e.g., López-Guimerà et al., 2010). And, more recently, such evidence of internalization was also found for new media formats. For instance, the meta-analytic review by Mingoia, Hutchinson, Wilson, and Gleaves (2017) found that internalization of the thin-body ideal also occurred from exposure to Internet-based social media, especially upon engagement in appearance-related activities on SNS, such as posting and viewing pictures. In support, Holland and Tiggemann's review (2016) revealed that the internalization of appearance ideals mediated the relationship between SNS use and a more negative body image.

Appearance comparisons

Appearance-based social comparison with people embodying body ideals in media outings is another major player in explaining the effects of media use on body image. Appearance comparison means comparison in the domain of appearance-related and body specific qualities, such as weight, size, and shape. Generally, social comparison theory (SOCIAL COMPARISON THEORY) differentiates between upward and downward processes that occur consciously and unconsciously. Here, downward social comparison means that people compare themselves to others who are worse off, which has positive consequences. Upward social comparison occurs with people who are considered as better, generally leading to negative responses regarding one's self-image. As argued in Fardouly, Pinkus, and Vartanian (2017), in traditional media as well as social media, comparison processes are predominantly upward in nature, such as with ideal embodied and attractive media figures. On social media, comparison targets are not only celebrities and influencers, but also peers and people closer to the media user. Scholars distinguish various motives to compare oneself with others (see reasoning in Veldhuis, Konijn, & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2017). For upward comparison with appearance ideals, the motive for self-evaluation entails comparing oneself against unrealistic and often unattainable body ideals, probably instigating negative body perceptions. However, upward comparisons might also occur from a self-improvement motive, directing the motivation and inspiration to improve oneself after experiencing self-ideal discrepancies. In doing so, this motive can guide more positive self-perceptions.

Like the internalization of beauty ideals, in many (meta-analytic) studies appearance comparison was revealed as an underlying process through which both traditional media and social media platforms exert their influence on body image (e.g., Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; López-Guimerà et al., 2010). Additionally, Fardouly and colleagues (2017) in their study directly compared appearance comparison processes through traditional media as well as through social media and in person. And although upward comparisons were reported in every domain, they found that especially upward appearance comparisons through social media related to lowered appearance satisfaction and more thoughts of dieting and exercising to control weight and alter one's body shape.

Detrimental effects from media-induced idealized body imagery

Inconsistent findings *within* the large body of research on media affecting body image and disordered eating secure the complexity of media's role in affecting body perceptions: both negative and positive effects have been reported, as well as no effects at all (e.g., Barlett et al., 2008; Ferguson, 2013; López-Guimerà et al., 2010). Many studies, however, have pointed toward negative effects of media-induced ideal body imagery on receivers' body image. Such negative effects include, among others, experiencing body dissatisfaction, lowered self-esteem, distorted body perceptions, depression, and disordered eating.

Detrimental effects from traditional media

Various meta-analyses and reviews considering traditional media have confirmed the negative impact of exposure to idealized body imagery for both girls and women as well as boys and men. More specifically, the review by López-Guimerà and colleagues (2010) focused on the effects of especially thin-body ideal depictions through television and magazines on body image and disordered eating attitudes and behaviors in females. This review included cross-sectional, experimental, and longitudinal studies, and also took earlier meta-analyses into account. In short, from the cross-sectional studies, they concluded that women who made more use of mass media, in particular fashion magazines and television music videos, also experienced more body dissatisfaction and scored higher on eating disorder symptomatology. From experimental studies, they concluded that encountering thin-body ideal images through media increased thin-body ideal internalization, body dissatisfaction, and beliefs and behaviors related to disordered eating. Then, the longitudinal studies in this review revealed that prolonged exposure to media messages focusing on idealized bodies is indicative of developing weight concerns and the onset of disordered eating behaviors. In all, from their review López-Guimerà and colleagues (2010) concluded that (repeated) exposure to media emphasizing thin-body ideals lead to body dissatisfaction, weight concerns, and disordered eating patterns in adolescent girls and young women.

It is important to consider the fact that the majority of studies have focused on females without a clinical background in eating disorders. Here, in studying women and young girls, research revealed adolescent girls as a most vulnerable group for developing media-induced negative body-related responses. Barlett et al.'s review (2008) pointed at similar findings for boys and men. For them, being exposed to muscularity-ideal imagery instigated body dissatisfaction and lowered self-esteem, which further related to depression and eating disorder symptomatology.

In addition, looking specifically at the onset of eating disorders and media's role therein, research revealed direct associations between media exposure, such as reading magazines, and weight control practices. Hausenblas and colleagues (2013) performed a meta-analysis of experimental studies on conventional media effects of ideal body presentations on eating disorders. They found that media exposure to ideal body imagery resulted in small increases in eating disorder symptoms, especially for people who showed higher risks for developing an eating disorder.

Detrimental effects from digital media

More recently, research in the realm of media's impact on body image and related outcomes has additionally turned to new, digital media formats, particularly Internet-based social media and SNS. Especially among young people, social media use is ever increasing today, which raises questions regarding the impact on body image perceptions. Comparable to the studies that consider traditional media formats, research in the specific domain of social media use discovered inconsistencies in how this impacts body image, yet, studies predominantly have shown adverse effects on body image and disordered eating patterns.

Focusing specifically on SNS and stereotypical beauty ideals, Holland and Tiggemann (2016) performed a systematic review of the impact on body image and disordered eating-related outcomes. In general, they found that SNS use was related to a more negative body image and more disordered eating. More specifically, some correlational studies in this review indicated that a higher number of hours spent on SNS and of online friends (i.e., the number of people in one's online network) related to indices of negative body image, such as self-objectification, and disordered eating patterns. The longitudinal and experimental studies in this review further cautiously pointed at a causal relation, with SNS use being a predictor of the development of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating.

However, resembling the patterns found for traditional media, not all studies in this review found a clear association between SNS use and more negative body perceptions. In this respect, the review by Holland and Tiggemann (2016) found that engagement in specific appearance-focused activities on SNS, such as posting and viewing pictures, seemed to particularly contribute to the onset of disturbances in body image perceptions and eating disorder symptomatology. Several scholars support this and argue that exposure to appearance-related content, rather than general social media content, is more likely to impact body image related responses (also see Mingoia et al., 2017). Additionally, a recent systematic review examined the relationships between body image and online self-presentations (e.g., content posted online by people to present themselves, for example, through posting selfies; Bij de Vaate, Veldhuis, & Konijn, 2020). Experimental studies included in this review (particularly pertaining to appearance-related content) generally indicated that negative effects of online self-presentations on body image only hold when individuals are exposed to people that are better off than themselves.

A currently popular form of online self-presentation is sharing selfies, which is starting to receive more research attention. Being appearance-focused by nature, a selfie refers to a picture of a person, taken by the subject of the picture. And with selfie-takers being engaged in the various stages of selecting and editing their pictures before posting them online, they appear to be highly in control over how they show themselves to their online network. Investigating the impact of selfie-related activities, research revealed that taking, manipulating, and sharing selfies was associated with higher levels of body dissatisfaction and eating disorder symptomatology (see reasoning in Bij de Vaate et al., 2020). These findings render selfies (and other appearance-related activities in which a person is in control of idealized self-presentation) particularly relevant for research in the domain of body image related responses.

Individual differences

In further explaining responses to ideal body exposure and body image related responses, individual differences in media users are an important point to consider. That is, while appearance ideals may apply to everyone, some people seem to be more sensitive to being influenced by ideal body media portrayals than others (see reasoning in Ferguson, 2013). From the traditional media studies in their review, López-Guimerà et al. (2010) further underpin the importance of carefully considering determinants

underlying the relationship between media and body image. In this respect, they point at the moderating roles of, among others, age, self-esteem, and ethnicity. For example, those with lower self-esteem seem more prone to be influenced by media conveying appearance ideals. Relatedly, also in the field of digital media research, such moderating factors seem to play a role. From the findings in their review on using SNS, Holland and Tiggemann (2016) also call for additional cross-cultural studies. Interestingly, they found no evidence for gender as a moderator of the impact of SNS; a few studies that directly compared responses from women and men generally revealed no significant gender differences regarding the relation between SNS use and body image or disordered eating (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016).

Conclusion

To conclude, ample evidence has confirmed the harmful effects of exposure to media's ideal body imagery and appearance-focused content, as well as engagement in appearance-focused activities, such as posting and viewing pictures online. In both domains of traditional and social media, media consumption seems to be related to a variety of body concerns in youngsters and adults. And while most studies focus on female samples, men are also affected. Previous research also gives reason to properly consider factors that moderate the relations between media use and body image. Moreover, various (meta-)studies also underpin the importance of underlying processes that can further explain how media exert their influence on body image-related perceptions (as discussed in the section on Detrimental Effects from Digital Media).

Beneficial effects from media-induced idealized body imagery

While various models and studies provide strong theoretical and empirical explanations for the negative effects of media coverage showing idealized bodies, some more positive news should also be reported. After all, some meta-analysis studies like the one by Ferguson (2013) concluded that ideal body depictions in media led from small to hardly any effects on media users' body image, while some positive outcomes in body perceptions were even reported. This section considers that traditional and digital media can exert a positive impact on body image, while also providing some theoretical explanations for this.

Beneficial effects from traditional and digital media content

In some studies, media users reported experiencing more positive body perceptions after being exposed to idealized bodies. From there, scholars have argued that idealized body portrayals in media might have inspiring or motivating effects on some users. Whether this is the case seems to depend on the users' motive to allow exposure and on how the imagery is presented. For example, magazine content not only

offers ample ideal body images, but often accompany this imagery with inspirational headlines like “Get ready for action and get a beach body now” or article content that explains how to attain such an ideal body by working out and eating healthily. A study by Knobloch-Westerwick and Romero (2011) found that magazine readers who were dissatisfied with their body spent more time on ideal body depicting advertisements when their magazine contained improvement articles (compared to body-unrelated articles). Subsequently, viewing magazine covers that simultaneously portray stereotypical body ideals and headlines hinting at self-improvement of viewers’ own bodies, proved to increase body satisfaction in women and men (Veldhuis et al., 2017). Consequently, from such media content having an ideal body might seem within reach and instigate efforts for improvement, leading to experiencing positive feelings when it comes to one’s own body perceptions. This reasoning aligns with the aforementioned self-improvement motive for social comparison (Veldhuis et al., 2017). Alternatively, the systematic review by Bij de Vaate et al. (2020) detected positive effects on users’ body image, when individuals were exposed to online self-presentations of others whom they considered to be worse off than themselves (i.e., following downward comparison processes). Hence, positive responses regarding one’s own body seemed to be predominantly guided by the motives of attainability and enhancement as evoked by media’s content and portrayed figures.

User-created content

Social media differ largely from traditional media in their interactive format, adding an extra dimension of social media users not only being consumers but also active contributors in generating content, for example, by posting pictures such as selfies (also see Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). Today’s digital technologies and digital applications not only allow people to create content easily, but also enable them to adjust and improve content. For example, with mobile phones people can take multiple photos and select the one that best suits their looks. Additionally, they can manipulate and optimize their appearance on this picture by applying filters (such as Snapchat) or editing software (like the PhotoWonder application created by Guo Xin in 2018). In doing so, people are in control and can bolster their self-image and appearance before they post their picture online. This allows media users to be in control and carefully consider how they show themselves and their appearance to the outside world, which is called selective self-presentation (SELF-DISCLOSURE AND SELF-PRESENTATION).

Some underlying theories specifically shine a light on the digital and online world and their potential to evoke a positive body image and appearance-related outcomes such as self-esteem. For example, following principles of *empowerment theory* (Tiidenberg & Gómez Cruz, 2015; see also EMPOWERMENT), posting idealized pictures of oneself can foster media users’ feelings of being in control, resulting in more positive evaluations of one’s own appearance. Such reasoning also aligns with the more general *uses and gratifications theory* (USES AND GRATIFICATIONS), in that media users can select specific media to meet specific needs (e.g., to have positive feelings regarding one’s body and look). In a similar vein, Walther’s *hyperpersonal model* underpins this selective use of media, and further postulates that the social media affordances allow selecting

positive aspects of oneself and reinforcement by peers, which can in turn increase positive feelings about oneself (see reasoning in Walther et al., 2011). Yet, Bij de Vaate et al.'s systematic review (2020) found no positive body image related effects from specifically editing self-presentations and posting these online. Also, the review of Holland and Tiggemann (2016) reported no such particular positive effects from SNS use on body image specifically. Further empirical testing of the aforementioned theory-based assumptions on how social media and related behaviors such as selecting and editing pictures might exert positive effects on users' body image seems warranted.

Conclusion

Although the majority of studies in the field showed adverse effects of traditional and social media use on body image, some studies also reported outcomes relating to a more positive body image. Feelings of body improvement, feasibility of attaining an ideal body, and enhancement compared to other bodies form the underlying motives for positive responses to centrally created media content. Furthermore, the current technical affordances and possibilities especially in social media can be used to enhance, empower, and reinforce one's own appearance. Consequently, being in such control might lead to experiencing a more positive body image, yet, further empirical testing is needed.

Media's ideal body imagery and their verbal context

From the previous paragraphs, we can conclude that exposure to idealized appearances and perfect bodies encountered through media instigates divergent reactions, varying from negative to some positive body-related responses. While this divergence can be partially explained by media consumers' individual predisposing factors like self-esteem, some scholars, like Veldhuis, Konijn, and Seidell (2012) and Veldhuis and colleagues (2017), argue that the impact of ideal body portrayals may be dependent on how the imagery is contextualized by, for example, verbal references and peer feedback. Put differently, they propose that the verbal context in which ideal body portrayals are embedded, guides media users' psychological responses, including body image perceptions. Conventional media like magazines generally show joint images and texts, like, for example, headlines and articles, rather than images only. Likewise, in the online world, social media platforms typically portray appearance-focused visuals accompanied by descriptive texts from those who post these pictures (e.g., by means of captions and hashtags). Further elaboration on the principle of contextualization arises from peers interacting with media portrayals. That is, the online environment also easily allows direct feedback from others through posting comments or handing out likes on uploaded pictures. Scholars like Perloff (2014) emphasize that with their solid presence of peers, social media secure their influence on body image perceptions through processes of social comparison and peer norms. Such reasoning also ties in with the sociocultural view on body image and other scholars call to cautiously study the interplay of media and peer influences in impacting media users' body image

(e.g., see López-Guimerà et al., 2010; Veldhuis et al., 2012). In all, considering ideal body imagery in their direct verbal contextualization—being either centrally created by media or user-generated by peers—accurately represents the situation in real-life media and deserves proper research attention.

In providing empirical support, studies like that by Veldhuis and colleagues (2012) have confirmed that verbal references to ideal body imagery indeed had directing effects in determining body-related responses in their sample of adolescent girls. For example, they found that, especially for those with lower self-esteem, short informative textual labels confirming the underweight status of extremely thin media models reduced negative body perceptions (compared to other label types). They called this the counteracting effect; undesired effects from ideal body exposure may be countered by bringing the actual weight status of the idealized media models to the fore. In contrast, they also found that labeling extremely thin media models as being of normal weight leads to increased negative responses such as more body dissatisfaction among the adolescent girls. Being referred to as a normalization effect, this outcome illustrates that expressing acceptance of depicted thin-body ideals by explicitly calling them normal, further normalizes such figures with subsequent negative responses. In line with the counteracting effect, a related study among emerging adult women and men then showed that accompanying ideal body depictions by magazine headlines expressing the possibility of improving one's body increased feelings of body satisfaction, at least in the short-term (compared to baseline measures; Veldhuis et al., 2017). This study again shows the directing impact of texts accompanying idealized body imagery.

To date, studies that systematically consider the mutual impact of idealized bodies conveyed through the media and their direct verbal context on body image perceptions are still scarce. Especially given the newer digital and social media formats that increasingly allow interactions between media users, it is important to further investigate the interplay of media content and reactions of others, expressing their approval or disapproval of this content, and how this impacts users' body image. Moreover, the two-sided coin of media effects should also be considered in this perspective: although encountering idealized media images clearly has detrimental effects, mass media also are ubiquitous and popular venues for providing other information to negotiate social standards along the lines of media-literacy. In doing so, media content may be able to counteract or redirect negative effects on users' self-evaluations and body perceptions. Such an intervention approach ties in with edutainment principles of using media channels generally used for entertainment, to also educate the public (EDUTAINMENT). For example, social media platforms and online support groups offer room to talk back to media and peers about body image, negotiate the stereotypical ideal body norms, and advocate body positivity talk.

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SEE ALSO: Cultivation and Psychological Processes; Edutainment; Empowerment; Media Use and Self-Esteem in Childhood and Adolescence; Objectification; Self-Disclosure and Self-Presentation; Social Cognitive Theory; Social Comparison Theory; Uses and Gratifications; Youth Social Media Use and Well-Being

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Jolanda Veldhuis is an assistant professor in the fields of health and risk communication and media psychology at the Department of Communication Science at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Her research interests include communication strategies to negotiate the effects of media exposure, processing of media in social contexts, and health communication applications, focusing on the topics of body image, well-being, and stigmatization. She has published in important international peer-reviewed journals in her field (e.g., *Computers in Human Behavior*, *Health Communication*, *Media Psychology*), and also guarantees research valorization in (national) public media. She is a member of the Media Psychology Program Amsterdam.