

IMPACT OF 'IDEAL MODELS' BEING PORTRAYED BY MEDIA ON YOUNG FEMALES¹

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13

Abstract

The objective of this study is to identify and select the variables relating to the impact of idealized female models on females, to develop a relationship of the identified variables, to test the developed relationships based on local perception of the females, and to ascertain whether the behavior and response of the local females are similar to what have been found in western literature. Hypothesis one referred there was a relationship between females that compare themselves with the media models and their self-esteem, satisfaction, and social consequences. Hypothesis two pointed out that there was a relationship between females that compare themselves with the models and dependent variables. The relationships of dependent and independent variables were significant. Hypothesis three mentioned that there was a relationship between females' high level of media exposure and feeling of depression, stress, guilt, and shame. The coefficients of correlations of independent variable (exposure) with the guilt is non-significant. Hypothesis four postulated that females with high level of body dissatisfaction would respond positively to products featuring female model endorsers as compared to those who have low level of body dissatisfaction. This hypothesis was accepted.

Keywords: Media, body image, self-esteem, self-evaluation, self enhancement, self-perception, social consequences.

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Introduction

There is a bulk of literature on the impact of thin and attractive models on females, especially on pre-adolescent and adolescent females. The most common variables used by academicians for measuring the impact of ideal models on females are body image, self esteem, self-perception, etc. However, most of the literature and studies are related to developed countries. The authors could not find any significant study in which the impact of models being portrayed in the media has been measured from Pakistan or India's perspective.

14

Females in Pakistan and India are being continuously exposed to Western media and culture through Internet and TV cables; therefore, their perception on the body image, self-esteem, and self-perception must be changing. Especially, considering that the local female models and female TV anchors taking the leads from the models portrayed in Western countries are not only dressing like westerners, but their body/waist ratio, like in the Western world, also appears to be declining

Therefore, the objective of this study is to (1) review the literature and identify and select the variables relation to the impact of idealized women models on females, (2) develop a relationships of the identified variables, (3) test the developed relationships based on local perception of the females, and (4) to ascertain whether the behavior and responses of the local females are similar to what have been found in Western literature.

The limitation of the study is that the sample was based on university students. Therefore, the findings may not be generalized. Through cable television network females get exposure to local and foreign models and anchors. The study, however, did not make any distinction whether their responses were based on the influence of local or foreign models. In fact, it is also a debatable issue whether a study based on such distinction may give any meaningful results or not.

Literature survey

Academicians and researchers have been doing extensive research on the effect of media and advertising on women and society. Advertising industry, while searching for 'ideal beauty', is often accused of propagating unrealistic feelings, inferiority complex, and the myth that women are not only sex objects but are also inferior to men. In this context the cultivation theory states that advertising in media has also contributed for creating and maintaining 'stereotypical' images of women. Interpellation theory on this issue states that since the media has created stereotypical image of women, women compare themselves with the portrayed images, and since most of them do not conform to the portrayed ideal image, this affects women's self-esteem and self-concept (O'Rourke 1999).

Media such as magazines, television, Internet, and advertising while portray in images of women are emphasizing on beauty, youth, and thinness. Advertisers, while portraying an ideal look, are suggesting that women who are not at par with models being portrayed must improve on their looks by using mascara to make eye lashes longer, and skin cream for hiding their flaws. Dress designer, also, taking clue from the media models are now replacing the traditional sizes with smaller and slimmer dresses and clothes. Cosmetic surgeries are also being offered for achieving the portrayed ideal look. Technological development has made cosmetic surgeries more efficient and cheaper; thus it is no longer restricted to rich and famous women, but has spilled over to women not falling in the strata of rich and famous. Most women do not realize that celebrity models spend thousands of dollars on cosmetic surgery are also being offered for achieving the portrayed ideal look. Technological development has made cosmetic surgeries more efficient and cheaper; thus it is no longer restricted to rich and famous women, but have spilled over to women not falling in the strata of rich and famous. Most women do not realize that celebrity models spend thousands of dollars on cosmetic surgery and wardrobes; they have personal stylist, physical trainer, and chef that care for their diet. Thus, the

exposure and comparison of females with the ideal model adversely affects their self-esteem and positive body image (Body Image, 2008).

Pre-adolescent and adolescent females, while growing up, face challenges such as getting lesser attention than boys, unrealistic guidelines on what they could do and what they could not, 'declining self-esteem, and being judged by their physical appearance'. Girls, therefore, tend to concentrate and focus on becoming pretty and beautiful (Martin et al. 1997). Studies show that self-esteem and self-perception of physical attractiveness adversely affect females more than males (Hartman 1993).

Pollay (1986), while deliberating the role of advertising and media, argues that advertising and media are indirectly responsible for creating a negative perception on women's self concepts. Studies of other academicians have also criticized the role of advertising and mass media for developing obsession on physical attractiveness (Dawn and Harrison 1986; Myers and Biocca 1992; Silverstein et al. 1986). Other studies on this issue show that female college student, adolescent, and pre-adolescent not only compare their physical attributes with the ideal model being portrayed by the media (Martin and Kennedy 1993; Peterson 1987; Richins 1991), but they aspire to be model as well (Martin and Kennedy 1993, 1994a).

Male and female perception of physical attractiveness varies quite significantly. Girls have a tendency to perceive their bodies as an 'object' and their physical beauty is based on self and other people's perceptions. Boys on the other hand perceive that their bodies must be strong, and must be functional (Franzoi 1995). Studies show that female adolescent self-concept is primarily based on body attractiveness. Comparatively, male concept is based on strong perception of physical instrumental effectiveness. In view of these two different perceptions, girls are more inclined to pay attention towards their individual body parts, whereas boys tend to have a holistic view about their body perception (Brown et al. 1990; Cash et al. 1986; Franzoi et al. 1989; Franzoi and Shields 1984).

The media that has been portraying females as body as object is setting up standard of physical attractiveness that are difficult to attain both from the pre adolescent and adolescent (Adams and Crossman 1978; Garner et al. 1980; Stephens et al. 1994). Guillen and Barr (1994) in a study found that models being portrayed in magazines targeted to young age population were less 'Curvaceous' than in the magazines being targeted for adult women. They also found that hip/waist ratio being portrayed in prevailing magazines through models had declined considerably from the models that were portrayed in 1970 to those in 1990, indicating that the models being portrayed are becoming thinner over a period of time (Evans et al. 1991).

Social comparison theory states that people evaluate their opinions and abilities which they tend to satisfy by social comparison with other people (Festinger 1954). Studies based on the framework of social comparison theory have found that female college students pre-adolescent and adolescent compare their physical attractiveness with that of models in advertisement (Martin and Kennedy 1993, 1994b; Richins 1991). This comparison thus affects women's self perception of physical attractiveness (Martin and Kennedy 1993; Richins 1991), or self perception of body image (Hamilton and Waller 1993; Myers and Biocca 1992). Moreover this comparison also adversely affects the self esteem (Harter 1986, 1993; Rosenberg 1986). Stice and Shaw (1994) found that those college students that were exposed to ultra-thin models might suffer from depression, stress, guilt, shame, insecurity and body dissatisfaction.

A few emerging self proclaimed advocating organization such as BAM (Bycott Anorexic Marketing) and media foundation have been extremely critical of the use of 'Waif like models', and 'heroin chic' fashion Ads, and propagate that these kinds of media exposure would have broad social consequences (Koopman 1997).

Early researchers, while using Festinger's original concept of the theory had ignored 'motives' original comparison. They might have assumed that motive

for comparison was 'self-evaluation', only (Gentry and Martin 1997). Researches carried out by (Gentry, Martin, and Kennedy 1996; Martin 1995; Martin and Kennedy 1994a) suggest that female pre-adolescents for any one (or combination) of three motives: self-evaluation, self-improvement, or self-enhancement. Martin and Kennedy (1994b) in their study found that self-evaluation and self-improvement are the main motives in the comparison process of female pre-adolescents and adolescents with models in ads. Self-enhancement on the other hand is not common and significant in the comparison process. Similarly, Martin (1995) also found that self-evaluation and self-improvement were found to be common motives in college students but self-enhancement was not.

Advertisers have recently started portraying ethnically diverse models, actors, and old-age celebrity in the media, but still the bulk of them are beautiful people (Zinkhan et al. 1990; Hirschman and Thompson 1997). Women models in advertisement are still classified as exotic, trendy, classic, girl-next-door, sex kitten, or cute' (Englis et al. 1994). Apparently, the purpose of portraying attractive people in the media is 'to transfer positive effect from the model to the product or possibly to draw them as representatives of an inspirational reference group' (Bearden and Etzel 1982, Englis et al. 1995). Despite the noble purpose of advertisement, repeated exposure of attractive images may have 'broader effects on both individual consumers and a society as a whole' (Pollay and Gallagher 1990).

Generally, the bulk of the consumer advertisements are designed for specific target audiences; however, its exposure is not limited to the target audience, and from the advertiser's perspective, exposure to non-target audience is considered as 'waste audience'. Nevertheless, it affects the viewers whether the advertisements were targeted to them or not. The reasons for such an impact are that (1) children are exposed to advertising since their birth, and continue to get exposed to the advertisements throughout their lives, (2) advertising is 'pervasive and persuasive communication', and (3) it is conceived by experts with the objective of reinforcing 'certain behaviors

and values' (Pollay and Gallagher 1990).

In a study on 'the unintended consequences of advertising', it was found that adolescent and preadolescent females while comparing their physical attractiveness with the ideal models felt low in terms of self-esteem and self-perception (Gentry and Martin 1997). Richins (1991) in a study found that college women while comparing themselves with the portrayed images felt lower 'satisfaction with the self'. From the results of Richins (1991), and Gentry and Martin (1997), Gulas and McKeage (2000) inferred that women and girls would pay psychological cost in view of the comparison to ideal models.

It is a common cultural practice to label people as attractive or unattractive which in essence means that it is a general social understanding is implicitly understood, culturally reinforced and creates a socialized duty to normalize one's body' (Thompson and Hirschman 1995). It is possible that there may be other factors that contribute towards body dissatisfaction, but it is generally understood that exposure to attractive thin models creates an unrealistic comparison standard for women (Richins 1991).

From marketing perspective it may be effective to portray highly attractive models in the media but it has very severe implications on women because they tend to draw their self-concept and self-esteem mainly from their sense of physical attractiveness (Lerner et al. 1976; Harter 1993; Rodin et al. 1985; Striegel-Moore, Silberstein, and Rodin 1986). It has also been established that women who compare ideal image also suffer with negative feelings such as frustration and anxiety (Cash et al. 1983; Irving 1990; Gentry and Martin 1997; Martin and Kennedy 1993; Richins 1991).

In some of the studies the researchers found that the subject responded positively to highly attractive models, and while in other studies the response to the same was extremely negative (Goodman, 1998).

Richins (1991) found that exposure to attractive models

can adversely affect women's dissatisfaction in reference to their facial and overall attractiveness, but such exposure does not increase female dissatisfaction of their body and shape. Richins, in her study, also found that the subjects (college students) were not less satisfied with their physique, face, or overall Attractiveness. Thus, she pointed out that there might be a possibility that the college-age females were highly dissatisfied with their bodies and therefore, the advertising exposure had no impact on them (Richins 1991). However, (Stephens et al. 1994) proposed that the causality might be reversed: 'American females with high levels of body dissatisfaction may respond more positively to products in ads featuring physically attractive (hence thin) female endorsers, when compared to their not-so-dissatisfied counterparts.' While giving this proposition, Stephens et al. 1994, admitted that this proposition had not been addressed either theoretically or empirically.

Methodology

A detailed literature review was carried out to find the variables related to the subject study. The relationships of these variables were also based on the literature review. The variables derived in the study were used to develop a questionnaire. The questionnaire was based on Likert scale, showing 1 as very low disagreement and 5 as very high agreement. The questionnaire was administered to a sample comprising 202 female students.

The subject of the study was female students of the university. The female students were from freshers to seniors, and their ages were between seventeen to twenty-two years. Four different hypotheses were developed and tested. In order to have a better understanding the descriptive statistics were not presented and analyzed separately, but were discussed in the respective hypotheses.

Results and Discussions

Hypothesis One

Hypothesis one postulates that there is a relationship

between females that compare themselves with the media models and their self-esteem, satisfaction and social consequences. Since the above hypothesis contains three dependent variables that is self-perception, self-esteem, and feeling, and one independent variable, the hypothesis was tested through Pearson correlation, and significance of the relationships were measured through significance values of the correlations table. The summarized results are presented in Table 1.

At 95 per cent confidence level, and 100 degrees of freedom ($102-2=100$), the correlations are significant if the values of correlation coefficients are greater than 0.1946. In the Table 1 the coefficients of correlations of independent variable (comparison) were higher with all the three dependent variables, i.e., self-perception, self-esteem, and social consequences. Therefore, the null hypothesis was accepted.

Table 1 shows that there exists a very strong inverse relationship with the variable 'comparison' and social consequences with correlation coefficient being (-0.69). For the other two dependent variables self-perception and esteem, comparatively weaker but significant inverse relationships were found with correlation coefficients being (-0.27) and (-0.30) respectively.

Compared to our findings, Richins (1991) did not find any evidence to support that exposure to models portrayed in advertisement would temporarily lower students' self-perception of physical attractiveness. Similarly, Martin and Kennedy (1993) also could not find any evidence to support that comparison with highly attractive models will adversely affect the self-perception. However, our findings show that comparison with ideal female would have strong social consequences which are in conformity with the findings of Koopman (1997).

The respondents' opinions on the four variables are presented in Table 2 and Figure 1.

Table 2 shows respondents' high level of self-

comparison with a mean of 3.87. Whereas the respondents' opinions on the dependent variables self-perception, self-esteem, and self-feeling are low with means of 2.39, 2.1, and 1.39 respectively.

Hypothesis Two

Hypothesis two postulates that there is a relationship between females that compare themselves with the ideal models and their self-evaluation, self-improvement, and self-enhancement.

This hypothesis again has one independent variable and three dependent variables; therefore, Pearson correlation was carried out to ascertain the relationships and significance of relationships were ascertained through significance values of correlation table. The summarized results are presented in Table 3.

At 95 per cent confidence level, and 100 degrees of freedom ($102-2=100$), the correlations are significant if the values of correlation coefficients are greater than 0.1946. In the above table the coefficients of correlations of independent variable (comparison) with all the three dependent variables, namely, improvement, enhancement, and self-evaluation, were higher than 0.1946. Therefore, the relationships of dependent and independent variables were found to be significant.

Table 3 shows that there exists a very strong relationship and significant relationship of independent variable 'comparison' and dependent variable 'self-evaluation' with correlation coefficient of 0.71. For the other two dependent variables 'Improvement' and 'Enhancement', comparatively weaker but significant relationships exist with correlation coefficients of 0.51 and 0.23 respectively. Compared to the above findings, Martin and Kennedy (1994b) found that self-improvement and self-evaluation are common motives, but self-enhancement is not.

The respondents' opinions on the four variables are presented in Table 4 and Figure 2.

The respondents' opinions on the independent variable

'compare' was high with a mean of 3.85. For the dependent variables, the mean for 'improvement' was highest at 3.89, followed by 'enhancement' at 3.60. The response on 'self-evaluation' was the lowest with a mean of 3.32. It may be pointed out that despite the respondents' lowest opinion on self-evaluation, its relationship with the independent variable 'compare' was highest with a coefficient correlation of 0.71.

Hypothesis Three

Hypothesis three postulates that there is a relationship between females' high level of media exposure and feeling of depression, stress, shame, guilt and body satisfaction.

Again the above hypothesis contains three dependent variables that are feeling of depression, shame, guilt and body satisfaction and one independent variable exposure. Therefore, the hypothesis was tested through Pearson correlation and the significance of relationships were measured through values of correlation table. The summarized results are presented in Table 5.

At 95 per cent confidence level, and 100 degrees of freedom ($102-2=100$), the correlations are significant if the values of correlation coefficients are greater than 0.1946. In the above table the coefficient of correlations of dependent variable (exposure) with guilt is non-significant, but all the three dependent variables depression, shame, and body satisfaction are higher than 0.1946. Therefore the relationships of these dependent variables with the independent variable were significant.

Table 5 shows that there exists a moderately strong relationship and significant relationship of independent variable 'exposure' with dependent variables 'shame', 'depression', and 'body satisfaction' correlation coefficients being 0.44, 0.42, and 0.31 respectively. The other dependent variable 'guilt' has non-significant relationship with the independent variable 'exposure'. In our findings, exposure and guilt have no significant relationship. On the contrary, Stice and Shaw (1994) found a significant relationship of exposure and with the dependent variables, namely, depression, shame, and guilt.

The respondents' opinions on the variables are presented in Table 6 and Figure 3.

The respondents' opinions on the independent variable 'exposure' were high with a mean of 3.34. For the dependent variables, the means for depression, shame, guilt, and body satisfaction were 2.62, 2.72, 1.99, and 3.37 respectively.

Hypothesis Four

Females that have high level of body dissatisfaction may respond positively to products featuring female endorser models as compared to those who have low level of body dissatisfaction. The respondents gave their opinions on their perception of body satisfaction and on the models portrayed in the media. Those models who have rated themselves up to three on the scale of 5-1 were segmented into the category of low satisfaction towards their body image, and those who have rated themselves on the level of four and higher were segmented into the category of respondents who are highly satisfied with their body image. Z-test (two samples) was applied on the attitude of these two categories. The summarized results are presented in Table 7.

The respondents that have low level of satisfaction towards their body images have more positive response towards the models portrayed in the media with a mean of 3.76. Comparatively, the models that have high self-model image have responded less positively towards the model portrayed in the media with a mean of 3.21. The difference in the two opinions is significant at 95 per cent confidence level, as the Z- critical value is [+ or -] 1.96, and Z-calculated value is 2.56 that falls in the critical region. It may be pointed out that Stephens et al. 1994, while developing the above premises, have admitted that the same has been developed without any support of any theory or empirical test. Probably this is the first time the proposition has ever been tested.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the major findings are summarized below: Hypothesis one referred that there was a

relationship between females that compare themselves with the media models and their self-esteem, satisfaction, and social consequences. The coefficients of correlations of dependent variable (comparison) were higher for all the three independent variables self-perception, self-esteem, and social consequences. Therefore, the null hypothesis was accepted.

Hypothesis two postulated that there was a relationship between females who compare themselves with the models portrayed in the media and their self-evaluation, self-improvement and self-enhancement. The relationships of dependent and independent variables were significant.

Hypothesis three said that there was a relationship between females' high level of media exposure and their feeling of depression, shame, and guilt and body satisfaction. The coefficient of correlations of dependent variable (exposure) with guilt was non-significant, but all the three dependent variables of depression, shame, and body satisfaction were highly significant.

Hypothesis four postulates that females that have high level of body dissatisfaction may respond positively to products featuring female endorser models as compared to those who have low level of body dissatisfaction.

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