

HIGHLIGHTING MEDIA MODIFICATIONS: CAN A TELEVISION COMMERCIAL MITIGATE THE EFFECTS OF MUSIC VIDEOS ON FEMALE APPEARANCE SATISFACTION?

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Abstract

Exposure to idealized media portrayals of women induces appearance dissatisfaction in female viewers, at least in the short term. Causal effects of exposure to thin and attractive media portrayals on dissatisfaction with appearance have been demonstrated in meta-analyses of experimental studies, with exposure to media portrayals resulting in small but significant immediate increases in appearance dissatisfaction (Grabe, Ward & Hyde, 2008; Groesz, Levine & Murnen, 2002; Want, 2009). This is of concern because such dissatisfaction is associated with negative affect and depression (Thompson & Stice, 2001). Therefore, it is important to investigate means for reducing the detrimental effects that women experience from exposure to thin and attractive media portrayals. Interventions that emphasize the artificial nature of such media portrayals have been shown to mitigate this effect. Such interventions

highlight the fact that the apparent thinness and attractiveness of women in media portrayals is often artificially-enhanced through creative lighting, make-up, and image manipulation (airbrushing and its digital equivalent, “photoshopping”), or that women in media portrayals are a biased sample of women (Posavac, Posavac & Weigel, 2001; Yamamiya, Cash, Melnyk, Posavac & Posavac, 2005; Want, Vickers & Amos, 2009).

The present study investigated whether a short television commercial, that presents 75 seconds of footage demonstrating behind-the-scenes techniques used to artificially enhance media portrayals of women, could be as effective as previous written or audiovisual interventions (Posavac et al., 2001; Yamamiya et al., 2005; Want et al., 2009) at mitigating media effects on appearance satisfaction. Music videos, rather than fashion magazines, were used as the means of exposing participants to idealized media portrayals of women. This choice of media served to replicate the findings of the only two experimental studies which have demonstrated significant detrimental effects of music videos on female appearance satisfaction (Bell, Lawton & Dittmar, 2007; Tiggemann & Slater, 2004).

For the present research eighty-seven Caucasian female undergraduates aged 17 to 26 years ($M=19.31$) were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. The first group of participants viewed music videos and ordinary television commercials. A second group viewed the same music videos and the “intervention” commercial. A final, control, group viewed television featuring no people and ordinary television commercials. All participants then filled out a questionnaire containing dependent measures of appearance satisfaction, distracter questions (regarding their enjoyment of the program,

their current mood, and their personality) and demographic questions. The present study was a post-test only design in which the dependent measures of appearance satisfaction were administered only after the presentation of the experimental stimuli to reduce demand characteristics (Hamilton, Mintz & Kashubeck-West, 2007).

Analysis indicated that viewing music videos resulted in significantly lower levels of self-reported appearance satisfaction compared to viewing control television, $p < .05$, $d = -.67$ (controlling for BMI). These results demonstrate that in the absence of the intervention commercial, watching music videos resulted in a medium-sized detrimental effect on participants' appearance satisfaction compared to watching the control television, supporting previous research. However, exposure to the intervention commercial that highlighted the modifications that media images undergo before they are viewed by the public appeared to counter-act this effect. When exposed to the music videos, participants who viewed the intervention commercial reported significantly higher appearance satisfaction than those who viewed the control commercials $p < .05$, $d = -.55$. Demonstrating the extent to which media portrayals of women are artificially enhanced mitigates their otherwise detrimental effects on female appearance dissatisfaction.

Recent evidence suggests that social comparisons may be rapidly, automatically, and inevitably made (Blanton & Stapel, 2008; Gilbert, Giesler & Morris, 1995; Henderson-King, Henderson-King & Hoffmann, 2002; Stapel & Blanton, 2004; Want, 2009), and previous interventions have been found to be effective by prompting thoughts that act to discount comparisons with idealized media images (Posavac et al., 2001). Given this, we argue that rather than

preventing social comparisons the commercial used in the present study is likely to have been effective by providing viewers with reasons to discount or reject the validity of such comparisons after they are made (Gilbert et al., 1995; Want, 2009). Therefore, highlighting the artificial and unrealistic nature of media images by directly showing the artifice they involve may be a very salient way of mitigating the impact of social comparisons with idealized media images.

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