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Toxicity of Body and Beauty Advertisements and its Antidote

Lara Al Mir

Abstract

This paper examines the effects of harmful beauty standards in advertisements on women and girls. The paper begins by reviewing the consequences of harmful advertising on women and girls and argues that women and girls are disproportionately affected by harmful beauty standards in advertisements. The paper then examines the potentially mitigating role of media literacy and how media literacy can protect women and girls from societal pressure that dictates that they should adhere to these harmful beauty standards. Finally, the paper makes a number of recommendations for future research and policy reforms to protect and support women and girls.

Introduction

Body image is how one perceives their physical appearance based on self-observation and the perception that others have of them. Nowadays, one of the most essential characteristics that one tries to attain is a physical appearance that adheres to social trends, which has led to a higher number of people, specifically women, suffering from a compulsive obsession with how they look (Rhode, 2010). Consequently, the majority of those women are struggling with body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, and are engaging in risky behaviors as a compensation mechanism. One of the major causative agents claimed to lead to these negative consequences is body and beauty advertisements (Albani, 2005). Beauty and health industries present unrealistic and extremely difficult to attain beauty ideals for economic benefits. This perpetuates the idea that the “average” women is not beautiful enough to fit into society (Trøen, 2009). The ideal image of how women should look like includes an average height of 1.56 meters and a weight of 42 kilograms which can only be attained if a woman risks starving herself or undergoes surgeries

(Trøen, 2009). Devastatingly, women are indeed becoming thinner over time, and many women have become extremely underweight (Trøen, 2009).

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, internet traffic has increased and with it, the number of advertisements that portray harmful beauty standards (Clement, 2021). This is coupled with the weight loss trend that dominated public discourse during the first few months of the pandemic, during the spring of 2020. Collectively, these issues have exacerbated the negative effects of advertising, especially for women and girls. This increases the need to find an immediate solution that can mitigate the negative effects of advertisements on women and girls' body image. This paper intends to tackle the rising normalization of harmful beauty standards used in advertisements, and the subsequent internalization of these harmful beauty standards by viewers.

This paper begins with a literature review. The findings from this review are then evaluated, interpreted, and explained in the discussion section. The paper ends with a concluding paragraph where policies and future recommendations are given. Although this paper tries to expand current knowledge about harmful gender stereotypes and body imaging in advertising, it contains some limitations because it does not present any original research. Lastly, this paper only examines the negative effects of harmful beauty standards in advertising on women and girls.

Literature Review: Impacts of ideal body and Beauty Advertisements on Female Viewers' Self-perception and behaviors

The existing research on harmful beauty standards in advertising highlights the disproportionate effects that these advertisements have on women and girls (Tefo, 2019). These advertisements present unrealistic and idealized images of women's bodies that are far too difficult to attain and often include thin, tall-legged, fair haired women with hairless skin and young, wrinkle-free faces (Heiss, 2011). According to McKinley and Hyde (1996), when women and girls start to compare themselves to these harmful beauty standards, they start to believe that they do not match up to

the social standards of beauty and experience body shaming, which can lead to negative side effects.

The inability to meet these harmful beauty standards has disastrous effects on the health of women and girls (Heiss, 2011). This includes body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, and eating disorders (Trøen, 2009). In some cases, this can lead to body dysmorphia (Tefo, 2019) and psychological issues such as insecurity, low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety (Trøen, 2009).

Relatedly, women and girls often engage in extreme dieting or cosmetic manipulation in order to attain the harmful beauty standards portrayed in advertising (Tefo, 2019; Moradi & Huang, 2008). Indeed, young girls are engaging in dietary regimes earlier than ever in order to achieve the desired body image portrayed in advertisements (Trøen, 2009).

Self-objectification is another negative outcome of harmful beauty standards. Self-objectification means that women and girls start to sexually objectify themselves because they understand themselves only as objects whose value depends on their physical and sexual attractiveness (Moradi & Huang, 2008). Fashion and beauty advertisements exploit this process of self-objectification using the “false reward” tactic. By using a highly sexualized model in their product advertisements, companies give their viewers the implicit understanding that if they buy their product, they can become like the model in the advertisement. Thus, women not only fall victim to the “false reward” tactic, but they risk experiencing severe depression and other health outcomes when they inevitably do not become like the model in the advertisement.

Media Literacy as a Solution to the Negative Impacts of Beauty and Body Advertisements

Studies suggest media literacy as a potential solution to harmful beauty standards in advertisements. Media literacy is defined as the ability to analyze and critically evaluate the information portrayed online. Media literacy emphasizes that not everything shared via media is true (Ashlock, 2011). Media literacy is effective in combatting the development of unhealthy and

unsafe attitudes and behaviors that result from exposure to harmful beauty standards portrayed in advertisements (Potter, 2010). In one study, participants that received media literacy training over the span of two years experienced feelings of body dissatisfaction, depression, and weight loss concerns much less than those who had not received media literacy training (Wilksch & Wade, 2009). Similarly, Tylka and Calogero (2011) claimed that young women can critically judge and appraise the deceptive nature of advertisements once they are educated in media literacy. In fact, media literacy education has been shown to lower body dissatisfaction and strengthen women and girls' self-esteem (Tefo, 2019). In other words, media literacy reduces the consequences of these ads, such as low self-esteem and body dissatisfaction, by giving viewers the ability to discern the false nature of bodily representations in print and in virtual media (Potter, 2010). Media literacy also helps viewers to distinguish between bias and credible resources, factual content and opinion, and the hidden meaning of advertisements (Tefo, 2019). Confirming this, findings of a study conducted by Halliwell et al. (2011) showed a significant decrease in body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem in participants who were shown the difference between a model's appearance in advertisements before and after digital altering/photoshop.

Similarly, media literacy prevents viewers from internalizing harmful beauty standards promoted in advertisements (Yamamiya et al., 2005). Indeed, individuals who received media literacy training internalized harmful beauty standards portrayed by advertisements less than those without media literacy training. Consequently, they experienced less body dissatisfaction (Richardson et al., 2009). Media literacy can strengthen a person's self-image (Tefo, 2019). In conclusion, media literacy can be implemented as a great mean to reduce the effects beauty and body advertisements pose on female viewers.

Discussion

This literature review has provided an overview of the existing research on harmful beauty standards in advertising and its effects on women and girls. The review has also discussed some of the techniques or strategies that exist to combat these effects, in particular, media literacy.

Importantly, this paper found a number of gaps in the literature. While significant research has shown that media literacy is a sufficient solution to mitigate the effects of harmful gender stereotypes and body image in advertising, there are several issues with this strategy. First, media literacy courses and trainings fail to tackle the reasons that make women and girls compare themselves to the models used in advertisements. Second, these studies do not examine what factors can make women and girls susceptible to being affected by these advertisements. Finally, the studies reviewed in this paper failed to tackle whether media literacy would be adequate and beneficial in online settings, rendering it less useful in times of the COVID-19 pandemic as internet usage has sky-rocketed.

The majority of research on the effects of harmful beauty standards in advertising emphasizes that women and girls try to conform to these standards, but ultimately fail. This failure leads to lower self-esteem, less confidence, insecurity, body dissatisfaction, and self-objectification. As a result, these women and girls start to suffer from alarming psychological problems including eating disorders, anxiety, and depression (Trøen, 2009).

One potential explanation for the above findings would be that first, according to the social comparison theory, women and girls, just like men and boys, start to engage in social comparison as young as late childhood. For example, they might compare their grades, athletic abilities, and their beauty with others in order to evaluate their self-achievements and to value themselves in comparison to the rest of society. However, women and girls are more affected by these ideals because of gender roles and stereotypes. For example, increasing social and parental comments that draw attention to women and girls' bodies—"cover up your chest, lower your skirt, do not wear that skirt it is too short your private areas might show"—coupled with the contradictory depiction of women and girls as sexual, perpetuates the sexual objectification of women and girls (Goldman et al., 1991).

Existing research generally recommends media literacy as a positive solution to immunize viewers against the negative effects of harmful beauty standards in advertising. A majority of the research

has shown that media literacy equips women and girls with critical thinking skills to adequately evaluate media advertising ideals, and to differentiate between forgery and credibility to correctly criticize the meaning of advertisements (Tefo, 2019). Such research has also shown that by acquiring these skills from media literacy, women and girls no longer internalize harmful ideals. Consequently, they suffer less from low self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, and psychological problems. When women and girls become aware that harmful beauty standards exist, they are better equipped to reject these ideals.

My own personal experiences seem to support this idea. Last summer, my cousin started showing signs of low self-esteem and confidence and for so long, she would not accompany us to the beach. She communicated this to me by showing me a picture of a teenager with the body of a young woman. I tried to empower her to make her believe that her body was perfect the way it is. A few months later, we were provided the same exact picture of this teenager as a representation of a healthy teenager by the professor of my nutrition class. I stared at the picture in disbelief: this time, the picture was portrayed without all of the digital editing and makeup. The same teenager was portrayed with much smaller breasts, shorter neck, rounder face, less elevated cheeks, and a definitely larger waist than what was shown in the original picture that my cousin had showed me. I showed my cousin the picture right away and that is when we both learned the ugly truth about beauty standards in advertisements.

Conclusion

The consequences of harmful beauty standards in advertisements on women and girls are severe. Therefore, immediate action must be to eradicate this issue thoroughly and completely. First, future research should explore how societal pressure plays a role on how women and girls react to these advertisements. Future research must also take into consideration the effectiveness of online media literacy in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Second, concrete action should be taken alongside this research. For example, governments should consider banning advertisements that promote harmful beauty standards, a step already taken by Mayor Sadiq Khan in the city of London back in 2016 (Jackson, 2016). Relatedly, another important policy can mandate an expert to evaluate whether an advertisement uses body shaming techniques or if it is offensive before it is published. Third, advertisements should include healthy and average sized women. This can help restore a positive and healthy attitude in women and girls. In fact, research has shown that average sized women are as effective at selling products as unrealistically thin women (Trøen, 2009). Fourth, overly thin models should not be used in advertisements. Such an action was taken in 2006 when extremely thin models were prevented from performing on the catwalks of couture fashion shows (CNN, 2006). Fifth, any agency that encourages its models to engage in unhealthy dieting or supplements must be punished by the law and prevented from working. Sixth, awareness-raising campaigns could include women and girls speaking about their experiences suffering from negative body image as a result of advertisements. These campaigns could help warn the public about the dangers of this type of imagery in advertisements. Additionally, experts such as medical personnel, psychologists, life coaches, and nutritionists can all help to raise the public's awareness about the consequences of harmful beauty standards in advertisements.

Several other strategies could help to reduce the number of women and girls who suffer from negative body image as a result of harmful beauty standards promoted in advertising. For example, training and educating the public about the ways that these advertisements are digitally modified could help to raise awareness among women and girls about the harms of such advertisements. Similarly, it is essential to include online media literacy courses for students in elementary and high school. Finally, parents themselves must be educated about the harmful nature of these advertisements so that they can support their children (Potter, 2010).

In order to protect women and girls, it is imperative that we challenge the continued use of harmful beauty standards in advertisements. This is especially important today, as COVID-19 has increased internet usage over the past two years.

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