

# The Impact of Media Images on Body Image and Behaviours: A Summary of the Scientific Evidence

## Executive Summary

One 9<sup>th</sup> November 2009, we sent a summary of the scientific evidence of the impact of media images on body image and behaviours to the Advertising Standards Agency (ASA) and the Committee of Advertising Practice (see Annex 1). The ASA rightly noted that the summary made reference to more than one hundred scientific studies, and asked for details of those pieces of research.

A research team, supervised by Dr. Helga Dittmar at the University of Sussex, has collated citations and abstracts of published studies, providing comprehensive coverage of research to date (see Annex 2). This evidence is divided into studies that show negative effects of exposure to idealised media images vs. studies that show positive effects. **The overwhelming weight of the evidence shows that exposure to idealised media images has negative effects, not only for adults, but also for under 16s.**

In particular, we draw your attention to the many 'exposure experiments', which show the immediate impact of idealised models on body image and behaviours. The majority of these studies use TV or magazine advertisements, showing that **exposure to models typically used in advertising causes body dissatisfaction for the majority of individuals.**

We already have evidence that **more realistic advertising models offer good alternative images, which do not cause body dissatisfaction and appear equally effective for marketing purposes.** These are models that have body sizes and shapes that are more representative of the general public. A summary of that evidence is provided by Phillippa Diedrichs from the Centre for Appearance Research at the University of West England (Annex 3).

In February 2009, in a meeting with members of the Campaign for Body Confidence steering group, the ASA requested evidence that having a low Body Mass Index (BMI) has negative impacts on health. According to World Health Organisation and Department of Health guidelines, a BMI of 18.5 or below indicates that a person is underweight. Progressive loss of weight leads to increasingly negative mental and physical health consequences, as summarised in a brief report by Eating Disorder Specialists (Annex 4). **We should be concerned about underweight media models providing an unhealthy ideal.**

**Campaign for Body Confidence, 1<sup>st</sup> October 2010**

**ANNEX 1:** Brief summary of evidence of the impacts of media images on body image

**ANNEX 2:** Detailed summary of scientific studies

**ANNEX 3:** Evidence of the impact of more realistic images in advertising

**ANNEX 4:** Health consequences of low Body mass Index

## **Annex 1: The Impact of Media Images on Body Image and Behaviours: A Summary of the Scientific Evidence**

We, the undersigned, are experts and active researchers investigating the impact of idealised media images on how adults, adolescents and children think, feel, and behave with respect to their body and appearance. This paper is a response to the correspondence the Liberal Democrat Party in the UK have had with the Advertising Standards Agency and the Committee of Advertising Practice, in which ASA and CAP request to see the scientific evidence that documents the detrimental effect of idealised media images on body image and related, unhealthy behaviours. We hope that the advertising authorities in the UK, as well as the USA, Australia and other countries, will give this evidence serious consideration and see the urgent need for policy change.

Advertising, the mass media (including the World Wide Web), and consumer culture highly profile 'body perfect' ideals that are both artificial and biologically inappropriate. Media images that depict ultra-thin, digitally altered women models are linked to body dissatisfaction and unhealthy eating in girls and women, and there is also recent evidence of the detrimental effects of unrealistically sized dolls and toys which present role models to children (such as Barbie doll or action heroes), as well as the impact of muscular media models on boys and men.

*1. Body image is highly significant for physical and mental health, and thus well-being.* Body dissatisfaction, the experience of negative thoughts and feelings about one's body and appearance, is a powerful (in fact, the most potent) and consistent precursor of a whole range of unhealthy body-related behaviours. **These include: unhealthy dieting regimes and problematic eating behaviours (starving, bingeing, and purging), clinical eating disorders (anorexia, bulimia), cosmetic surgery, extreme exercising, and unhealthy muscle-enhancing behaviours in boys and men (such as taking steroids or other supplements).** It is also linked to **depression, anxiety, sexual dissatisfaction, and low self-esteem.** Therefore body dissatisfaction is a significant risk for physical health, mental health, and thus well-being. Any factor, such as idealised media images, that increases body dissatisfaction is therefore an important influence on well-being.

*2. The weight of evidence documents a detrimental effect of idealised media images.* There are over 100 published scientific studies on the impact of thin, 'perfected', media images on girls and women and there are also more recent scientific studies which document the impact of the muscular media ideal on boys and men. Not every single person is vulnerable to detrimental media effects (see Point 4), but negative effects do occur in the **clear majority** of adolescent girls and women. Higher order data analyses that can assess the link between exposure to idealised media images and body dissatisfaction across all studies containing relevant measures (meta-analyses) show that, on average, exposure to the thin media ideal is linked with greater body dissatisfaction and more unhealthy eating beliefs and behaviours in women. Although the overall effect is moderate in size, it is very significant in women who already have some body image issues, and among adolescents. There are fewer studies on men, but meta-analyses show that exposure to the muscular male ideal is also linked to greater body dissatisfaction, with an effect size comparable to that in women. **Thus, the weight of evidence across a great many studies documents that ultra-thin and highly muscular 'body perfect' ideals have a detrimental effect on women and men, respectively.**

*3. Detrimental media effects start occurring in early childhood.*

The bulk of research studies have been carried out with adults and adolescents, but there is evidence that detrimental effects from exposure to perfected and thin ideal media, start taking hold from a very early age. **Girls aged 5½ to 7½ reported less body esteem and a greater desire for a thinner body after exposure to images of thin dolls (Barbie™) compared to girls who saw images of dolls with a healthy body size (Emme™) or no dolls.** Looking at women's or teen magazines has also been associated with lower appearance satisfaction and greater awareness of dieting in this age group. **One study showed that watching appearance-related television, like soap operas, predicted a decrease in appearance satisfaction one year later in 5-8 year-old girls.**

*4. Some groups of people are particularly vulnerable to detrimental media effects.*

Since the research literature documents clearly that idealised media images have a detrimental effect, attention has turned to identifying factors that make certain groups of individuals particularly vulnerable. These factors include: age (adolescents appear more vulnerable than adults), heavier body weight, and particularly internalisation of 'body perfect' ideals as personal goals, such as thin-ideal internalisation in women.

*5. Exposure to media images has long-term effects.*

**Exposure experiments have the great advantage of documenting that media images are a direct, immediate cause of body dissatisfaction and unhealthy behaviours,** but they do not offer information about long-term effects. However, it stands to reason that, if detrimental effects occur after a single media exposure, they are likely to lead to cumulative harm when repeated frequently. Current estimates suggest that people are exposed to as many as 3,000 advertisements a day. Research on long-term effects is not as well developed as survey and experimental work. **However, there is evidence in children (see point 5) and evidence that a 15-month subscription to a fashion magazine increased body dissatisfaction, dieting, and bulimic symptoms amongst adolescent girls who had low levels of social support.** Another study showed that the amount of immediate increase in body dissatisfaction caused in an exposure experiment predicted increased body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness two years later, consistent with the idea that effects are cumulative.

*6. Alternative advertising images avoid harm and are equally effective.*

Karl Lagerfeld (head designer of Chanel) said on Radio 4 in October 2009 that "size zero models" are attractive, and advertisers have claimed that "thin models sell better". Yet, we are not aware of any published evidence to support this claim. On the contrary, research examining perceived advertising effectiveness in the UK and Australia demonstrates that **average-size models (UK dress size 14) are just as effective in advertising products as ultra-thin models,** as long as they are equally attractive. Thus, there seem to be no good reasons, not even commercial reasons, for using ultra-thin models in advertising. The idea that "only thinness sells" reflects a strongly established assumption, rather than reality. This independent evidence suggests that if advertisers used attractive models with healthy body sizes to advertise their products, they would still increase sales, but could avoid damaging the body image of many girls and women.

*7. People are neither fully aware of the influence of media images, nor of their artificiality.*

There is a great need for information and educational campaigns, because many people are not aware, at least not fully, of the detrimental impact of media images, and the psychological science which documents this. Although most people know in some abstract, general sense that media models are 'artificial' as a creation of make-up artists, hair stylists, and flattering clothing and camera angles, **people are typically not aware of the extent to which models are altered,** particularly by digital retouching and imaging

techniques that reduce or enhance the size of virtually any body part, making eyes larger, waists slimmer, and legs longer and thinner. Two excellent websites graphically illustrate the alteration of models from ordinary person to glamourised, artificial media image. One is a short video by Dove, 'Evolution'<sup>1</sup>, showing the make-over of an adult female model, which has already been used successfully in an intervention study. The other is an interactive website produced for a Swedish government awareness campaign entitled 'Girl Power'<sup>2</sup>, which shows a teenage model, before and after she appears on the front page of a teenage magazine, where people can click on every body part to see what it looked like before and after it was digitally altered. Parents, educationalists, and children need to be better informed about the detrimental impact of idealised media images, and the extent to which they are altered.

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.campaignforrealbeauty.com/home\\_films\\_evolution\\_v2.swf](http://www.campaignforrealbeauty.com/home_films_evolution_v2.swf)

<sup>2</sup> <http://demo.fb.se/e/girlpower/retouch/retouch/index.html>

#### *8. Interventions that curb media influence protect and enhance well-being.*

Although we are in need of long-term studies of interventions, we can state with confidence that brief training in media literacy (to increase critical awareness of 'perfected' media models and the harm they can do) reduces the immediate negative effects of exposure, and more systematic, intensive interventions over days or weeks can significantly reduce one important risk factor: internalisation of the slender ideal. This provides further causal evidence, showing that **curbing the impact of idealised media images leads to improvement in body image and body-related behaviours, or at least to harm reduction**. Studies that have asked people about media depictions have also found that both women and men want to see more realistic models. They have also expressed that they, as consumers, are concerned about the effects of 'perfected' ultra-thin and ultra-muscular models on body image, and on young people in particular.

#### *9. Policy debates are longstanding, but change is now happening in the UK and in Europe.*

A report by the British Medical Association in 2000 urged the introduction of new advertising policies: **"There is a need for more realistic body shapes to be shown on television and in fashion magazines, and to reduce young women's exposure to extremely thin models. We should also provide children and young people with the skills and information to resist media messages of bodily perfection"** (Dr. Ian Bogle, then Chairman of Council, BMA, p. 2). Although there is a constant media interest in body image issues and there has been the odd summit or comment by politicians until recently, little has actually been achieved. However, in September 2006, fashion houses in Italy and Spain banned catwalk models who are underweight (Body Mass Index less than 18). In August 2009, the Liberal Democrats launched the Real Women campaign<sup>3</sup> which champions ambitious proposals on improving the body image of girls and women and has so far generated almost 1000 complaints to the advertising authorities in the UK, from people objecting to the proliferating use of digital retouching (airbrushing). France is also following suit and trying to introduce laws on the use of digital retouching. Most recently, top women's magazine in Germany, 'Brigitte', banned the use of professional models altogether.

<sup>3</sup><http://www.realwomen.org.uk>

**We therefore urge CAP and parliament to** implement proposals such as those set out in the Real Women policy paper and **make policy changes that help curb the use of unrealistic media depictions of 'body perfect' ideals**, thus protecting and enhancing the well-being of individuals, particularly those most vulnerable to negative media effects, and the country as a whole. Lastly, we hope advertising authorities in the USA, Australia and other countries, will also start urgent work towards policy change to tackle body image pressures.

*Policy 1.* No altered, idealised models in advertising to children.

*Policy 2.* Clear labelling of altered, idealised models in all other advertising.

*Policy 3.* Models used in Fashion Weeks, and other media advertising, to have a health certificate from an eating disorder specialist, in order to protect their health and well-being.

*Policy 4.* Encouragement for use of diverse and healthy body sizes in all media models.

*Policy 5.* Media literary programmes about 'perfected' models as part of school curricula to encourage critical awareness and resilience in children and adolescents.

## Signatories

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(continued on next page)

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Research Fellow whose specialises in adolescent body image and the premature sexualisation of girls.

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