The Effect Skinny Models in Advertising have on Young Women’s Body Image
Introduction

There have been many studies done on the effects of advertisements on consumers. There have been many arguments and studies supporting and refuting the power of advertisements and whether these effects are harmful or not. One important aspect of this research is the study regarding advertising towards young women and how these advertisements affect women’s self image. For years now, the use of perfectly thin and beautifully airbrushed models in product advertisements directed towards young women has caused concern for many about how this unattainable image affects how young women feel about their own image. This research asks: Does product advertising on TV, in magazines, on billboards, and on the internet geared towards young women ages 13-35, affect their self image negatively due to the beauty and perfection portrayed by the models in those ads?

This topic is extremely important to look at because previous research that will be discussed later has shown the power of advertising on young women beginning at such an early age, and the negative effects of perfect, skinny models used in those advertisements. The loss of self esteem and the development of eating disorders are serious issues that have been connected to the media’s unattainable image projected towards young women who try to attain the same look as the models in the advertisements. These effects show the seriousness of this topic and why it is important to continue with further research. Continuing proof and research in this area can help bring awareness of the issue and maybe someday help change the way the products are advertised towards young women, or at least help educate women and parents on how to help other young women from falling for this perfect ideal and prevent self image issues and eating disorders.

Even though there have been many other previous studies on this topic, it seems to be that the more research that supports the argument, the stronger the argument becomes. There also still exists some doubt about the extent to which advertisers are responsible for lower self esteem or
eating disorders, so the more research done, the more facts there are to support previous studies, which is why this research is important.

**Literature Review**

**Beauty in Advertising**

There has been a lot of research done in regards to the use of thin beautiful models in advertisements. What kind of beauty is projected and how effective is it to get consumers to buy a product? In an article by Jack Neff (2008) in Advertising Age, he argued that how even though women did tend to feel worse about themselves after viewing ads with thin models, they felt better about the brand and preferred brands that portrayed perfectly thin models. This could be a reason why advertisers choose to use thin models in advertisements, despite their negative effects on women. In relation to this, another study was conducted comparing the use of highly attractive models versus normally attractive models to see which one is actually more effective to use (Bower & Landreth, 2001). They contradicted the belief that highly attractive models are the best in all forms of advertising by splitting up product types by enhancing products and problem solving products and showing that the highly attractive models were more successful in regards to enhancing products such as earrings and lipstick, but as far as problem solving products such as acne cover or treatment, there is no advantage to using the highly attractive over the normally attractive. However, they did find that highly attractive models were overall considered more trustworthy by the consumers they tested.

Another article supporting the fact that the media ingrain ideals of beauty in women and young girls through the type of beauty in advertisements (Englis, Solomon, & Ashmore, 1994) discusses how attractive people are assumed to be better, and therefore advertisers create a look to be projected that will convince consumers to buy the product. The study also shows how cultural
gatekeepers in advertising are in charge of what type of ideal will be projected, telling consumers what is beautiful. For example, the ideal of beauty in the mid 1800s was pale and very delicate looking, and in 1994, the study found that a majority of models projected beauty which they categorized as trendy, classic beauty/feminine, and exotic/sensual, as opposed to other categories they created, which were girl next door, sex kitten, and cute. This study proved that advertisers project a certain type of beauty onto women. They relate how ideals of beauty that have been projected through time affect women physically such as, desiring a small waist led to tight corsets and broken ribs, foot binding in Asia for small feet, and anorexia and bulimia as the effect of using skinny models today.

Another related article that proves the effect the performer in the ad has on the viewer is the study on the effectiveness of celebrity endorsers (Premeaux, 2005). This also relates to beauty in advertisements, though not all as the study shows, but a lot of the celebrities they use in ads directed towards women, such as Halle Berry for Revlon, portray a perfect body or face that has been airbrushed and photo-shopped, giving women the same unattainable beauty ideal as using models they don’t know in ads. The conclusion of this study proves that celebrity endorsers do help advertisements stand out and make the ads more remembered as compared to advertisements without celebrities in them. The study doesn’t look into whether attractiveness of the celebrity has an impact on the consumer, although they do say advertisers should use attractive celebrities over unattractive ones. This study that is going to be conducted isn’t going to research whether attractive celebrity endorsers have the same negative effect or if they have even more of a negative effect on young women than the more unknown models; however that is a comparison that should be studied in further research.

_The Effects Models in Advertisements Have on Young Women_
There have been many studies done supporting the idea that using super skinny, beautiful models in advertising has a negative effect on young women’s self image, leading to problems such as loss of self esteem, weight issues, anorexia and bulimia, and unhappiness with their own body. One study focused on the effects of models in ads on female pre-adolescents and adolescents, in which they focused on girls in grades four, six, and eight (Martin & Gentry, 1997). This study proves just how early women start to be affected by the ideals of beauty in advertisements and how early the pressures to be beautiful and thin start. They state that it is true young women do compare themselves to models in ads, and that exposure to thin models in ads can produce “depression, stress, guilt, shame, insecurity, and body dissatisfaction,” (Martin & Gentry, 1997, p.21). They studied young girls by looking at different motives for comparison against models, including self evaluation as a motive, self-improvement, and self-enhancement by discounting the beauty of the models. Their results show that motives do play an important role and that self esteem can be negatively affected, especially when the motive for comparison is self evaluation. Overall they show that between fourth and eighth grade, it is a very crucial time for young girls in their development and they are easily affected by advertisements, although the older grades did seem to show a more skeptical view of advertising and the perfect image they project.

Other studies support the negative effects models in advertising have on young women, saying that the “gap between the average woman’s body size and the ideal is now larger than ever before,” (Tiggemann & McGill, 2004, p. 23). Tiggemann and McGill show how exposure to advertisements, even just after a short time, with thin models resulted in body dissatisfaction and negative mood and the highest body dissatisfaction was produced after viewing ads focusing on body part images. But those advertisements, as opposed to full body advertisements, weren’t remembered as well.
More studies supporting this evidence done by Monro and Huon (2005) also concluded that women exposed to images with idealized bodies experienced more body shame and greater appearance of anxiety as opposed to images without idealized bodies. They also state that “idealized images are an influential source of pressure to meet the thin ideal” (p.89). They do say that obviously not all women are alike and therefore not all women would be affected in the same way. Rajagolopal and Gales (2002) discuss how advertising of perfect models also promotes stereotyping of women such as showing a perfect looking model cleaning the house or putting on makeup looking unrealistic but promoting this idea that women need to look like that. This leads many young girls to eating disorders in an attempt to look like those models, as it has been shown that young girls are easily influenced by these ads. Supporting the idea of a previous study done by Englis, Solomon, and Ashmore (1994), Rajagolopal and Gales (2002) state that, “having advertisers choose what is sexy is not correct or healthy for a society,” (p. 3334). This article also discusses the idea promoted by ads that if women don’t look as beautiful as the women in ads then they won’t be as successful or get a man to like them.

Another study done by Bessenoff (2006) discusses theories such as social comparison theory and self discrepancy theory in regards to media effects. He looked at women with high and low levels of body image self discrepancy and exposed them to advertisements promoting thin models. He first concluded that women exposed to the thin models did show greater body dissatisfaction than women who weren’t. He also concluded that women with high body image self discrepancy showed weight related and weight regulatory thoughts more than women with a low body image self discrepancy. He also showed how levels of depression, agitation, and self esteem were effected negatively by the ads with thin models for women with high levels of body image self discrepancy. He then connected self discrepancies to eating disorders which shows how women exposed to thin models, especially those with high body image self discrepancy, are then more likely to develop
eating disorders and go through severe dieting. Gurari, Hetts, and Strube (2006) support the previous studies as well as show in their study that women exposed to ads with thin models ate less junk food and reached for healthy food than the women not exposed to ads showing thin models, proving the effects these ads on women’s feelings about themselves right after the study.

A related article that shows how some are trying to change the perfect ideal projected in advertising is those who are trying to ban airbrushing in advertising help body image pressure young girls face with advertising which took place in Britain (Allardyce, 2009). The article from the Sunday Times in London announced that the ban was rejected by Britain’s advertising watchdog saying there wasn’t enough evidence that the airbrushing was a problem. More recently Ralph Lauren put out an ad with a model that looked dangerously thin, and when the public was outraged by the image, Ralph Lauren admitted, “…we have learned that we are responsible for the poor imaging and retouching that resulted in a very distorted image of a woman’s body” (Douglas, 2009, p. 1). The article went on to also say that the model in the ad had been fired for being, “too fat to model for them” (p.1). This shows how advertisers admit to using models and airbrushing that puts out an unreachable image and how they are putting pressure on women to be thin. The article also shows that many people are angry with advertisers for putting out such images. Perhaps with more studies supporting the evidence discussed in the previous literature review, it could be proven that the use of perfect thin models in advertising does affect many young women negatively everyday.

Method:

A total of 56 women were surveyed from the ages of 13 to 35. The women surveyed were from various places in New York State and is a small sample that can represent how many young women feel about skinny models and airbrushing used in advertisements. I created a survey consisting of 10 questions based on my own ideas for the research as well as ideas from past research discussed in the literature review. There is a copy of the survey I used in gathering my data.
after the references that shows exactly what questions were asked in the survey. The questions focused around how young women feel about the use of skinny models in advertising as well as how the women felt about their own body image. I also asked the women to answer about how many magazines they look through a week. Magazines (women and fashion magazines) are a medium in which women are exposed to many advertisements at once that are geared towards young women and often employ the tactic of using airbrushing and skinny models, more so than just watching TV or going on the internet. Therefore the question was asked to see if there was a correlation between how many magazines a woman looked through and how they feel about their own body and how they feel about those advertisements. The survey also had a question where the participant had to pick which pair of jeans they would want to buy from two advertisements, both the same jean and same brand, just one on a “plus size” model and one on a skinny model. This question was to see if more women preferred ads for products with the use of a skinny model over a more regular size looking model and then to compare that answer with other answers on the survey like how they feel about the use of super thin airbrushed models in ads. The goal was to use this survey created to be able to answer the research question of whether product advertising geared towards young women ages 13-35, affects their self image negatively due to the beauty and perfection portrayed by the models in those ads.

Results

Of the 56 women surveyed, about 55% said they only looked through about one or two women’s or fashion magazines per week and about 37% said they looked through none. And when asked if they found themselves wishing they looked like models in advertisements, 71% said sometimes, and 21% said never. Of the 21%, 58% of the women were in the age range of 13-17. When then asked what do you think of the use of airbrushing in advertisements to make models appear skinnier and perfect, the majority answered either it is misleading and/or has a negative
effect on young women’s self image. 21% of the women surveyed said that it is a good technique to sell more products. As the women could answer as many as apply, some answered that it is a good selling technique, but also that it is misleading or has a negative effect on women. For the question regarding the choice between two jean advertisements, 78% chose the skinnier model wearing the jeans, and of those that chose the ad with the heavier model, the majority of those women were in the 18-25 age range.

When asked how the women felt about their own body, about 52% said that there are some things they’d like to change and about 34% said they are happy with all or most of their body. The age range that seemed to have the most answers saying there were things they wanted to change was the 18-25 age range. In regards to the question asking if they ever had gone on a diet, 41% said a few, 41% said never, about 12% said many, and the rest said they want to go on a diet. Of the group that said never, 56% were in the 13-17 age range. When asked if they had ever tried to lose weight in an unhealthy way, about 62% said no, 28% said a few times, only 7% said many times, and about 3% said no but they think about doing it. When asked what one thing they could change about themselves, about 67% said skinnier, prettier face, or other. And among other, almost all said something physical they wished they could change, like bigger breasts or a flatter stomach. The rest chose either more intelligent or more money. The last question asked what the women thought of the models in advertisements, and 36% said they were really attractive, but a huge majority answered that they were unattractive; too skinny and perfect looking, and/or they give off an unhealthy body image. The women were allowed to pick as many as applied, and many chose all three of those answers some of those. Of the ones who answered that they were really attractive, the majority were in the 18-25 age range.

From the results it can be concluded that many women do feel that models in advertisements have a negative affect on young women’s self image, although many women prefer ads with skinny
models. It can also be concluded that the number of magazines looked at per week didn’t really affect the rest of the answers such as how women feel about themselves or how they feel about models, as a majority of the answers from all age ranges answered that they either looked at no magazines or just 1 or 2 which isn’t a significant amount to be able to look at a correlation. The graphs below also show some of the results from some of the most significant questions on the survey. The age range of 13-17 seemed to have the most responses saying they are happy with all or most of their body, as well as was the ones who most answered that they never had gone on a diet, which would make sense if they were mostly happy with their body. On the other hand, the 18-25 age range were the group to have the most responses saying they had some things they wanted to change about their body, had gone on at least a few diets, and had the most responses saying that they found models in advertisements really attractive. Overall though, most of the women surveyed, despite their views of their own body or whether or not they found the super skinny models attractive, also answered that models in ads do have a negative affect on women, are misleading, and promote an unhealthy body image.

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Number of women in each age range who chose the ad with skinny model and ad with heavier model

Age Range

Age groups and how the women feel about their own body
How women surveyed feel about models in ads in each age range

The women’s opinions of the models

age range and whether or not they have ever gone on a diet
Discussion

Overall, the research project was successful and did answer a lot about my research question. It is clear there is a problem as shown by previous studies in the literature review and in my research, with advertisements directed towards women today. The use of super skinny models and airbrushing to make models look unattainably perfect is affecting women negatively and making them feel less about their own bodies. On the other hand, there are a few things I found in this research that I wasn’t expecting. I first of all assumed the biggest problem would be among the 13-17 age range. I thought they would be the ones dreaming of being like the models in ads and the ones going on the most diets, especially in an unhealthy way. What I found was that they seemed to be way less affected than the 18-25 age range. Maybe this could be because I didn’t survey enough from each age or because I didn’t survey equal numbers for each age, which in further research I would want to do to get a clearer and more accurate answer.

I also assumed that there would be a correlation between number of magazines viewed per week and how women feel about themselves and about models. I chose magazines in the first place because that is a place where women would be exposed to large numbers of ads all at once. However, there appeared no correlation and most of those surveyed said they didn’t look through many magazines anyway. As far as why there is no correlation, I have concluded that this could be because people are just exposed to so many ads everyday, all day, everywhere they go, that looking through a magazine wouldn’t really change anything. While years ago when there wasn’t as much advertising all over the place, especially before TV was common, it would be interesting to see if women who did look through magazines would have different answers than those who didn’t, as that would be a large part of their access to media and advertising.

As far as some things I would do differently if I did this research again, I would as I said before, survey the same number of people in each age from 13-35. I would also make sure I
surveyed more women in the 26-35 age range than I did this time, as I found it harder to get a large number from that age range. I think if I had an equal amount in each age from 13-35, maybe try to get 5 in each age, which would bring my data equaling 110 total, I would get more accurate results. For further studies, I think it would also be interesting to survey half of the group with just giving them the survey, and the other half first showing them about 3-5 advertisements with skinny models and then give them the survey, to see if that would show a difference in answers.

Clearly there is and always has been a certain image pushed onto women in which they are supposed to emulate if they want to be considered beautiful. However, as more and more studies are done showing the negative effects this has on women, hopefully society will become more aware, and make an effort to change how the media portrays women and how they advertise to young women. Maybe by changing how women are portrayed in the media, there wouldn’t be as many problems with women’s body image which can lead to serious health problems and eating disorders.
References


Douglas, J. (2009, October 14). Was the photo shopped Ralph Lauren model fired for being overweight?. Message posted to http://shine.yahoo.com/channel/beauty/was-the-photoshopped-ralph-lauren-model-fired-for-being-overweight-525248/


Neff, J. (2008, August, 4). Study: Stick to skinny models for fat profits; ultra-thin bodies make women like brands more but themselves less. Advertising Age, p.4.

Advertising Survey

1. How old are you? _____________________

2. On average, about how many fashion and/or women’s magazines do you read or look through per week?
   A. None                      B. 1 or 2              C. 3-5                         D. More than 5

3. Do you find yourself wishing you looked like the models in the advertisements you see in either magazines, on TV, internet, or on billboards?
   A. No                      B. Sometimes                C. Always

4. What do you think about the use of airbrushing in advertisements to make models appear skinnier and flawless? (Choose as many as apply)
   A. It is a good technique to sell more products       B. It is misleading
   C. It makes me think about my own body negatively    D. It has a negative effect on young women’s self image.
   E. Other________________________________________________________________

5. Of these two advertisements for jeans, which style would you most prefer to buy?

A. B.

6. How do you feel about your own body?
   A. I am happy with all or most of my body       B. There are some things I’d like to change
   C. There is a lot I wish I could change               D. Other____________________________

7. Have you ever gone on diets?
   A. Never       B. Yes-A few       C. Yes-Many       D. I want to go on one

8. Have you ever tried to lose weight in an unhealthy way?
   A. No       B. Yes- once or twice       C. Yes- A lot       D. No but I think about doing it

9. If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be? (You can choose as many as apply)
   A. More intelligent  B. More money  C. Skinnier  D. Prettier Face  E. Other________

10. What do you think of models in advertisements? (You can choose as many as apply)
    A. They are really attractive   B. They are too skinny and perfect looking-They look fake
    C. They are unattractive       D. They give off an unhealthy body image   E. Other__________