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# **Media Effects on Body Image: Examining Media Exposure in the Broader Context of Internal and Other Social Factors**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study attempts to examine the connection between media use and body dissatisfaction by juxtaposing the media with the internal factor of self-esteem and other social factors such as peer and parental attitudes. A sample of 285 female undergraduates completed measures of media exposure, comparisons with media figures, self-esteem, parental and peer attitudes toward body shape, and peer comparisons, as well as internalization of the thin-ideal and body dissatisfaction measures. Overall, comparison to media figures was associated with internalization of the thin ideal but not as strongly as peer attitudes and self-esteem. Contrastingly, peer comparisons and self-esteem were observed to be the strongest indicators of body dissatisfaction.

Furthermore, social/environmental influences and self-esteem proved to be the strongest indicators of body dissatisfaction, which suggests that the indirect effect of media messages on body dissatisfaction is an important area for further examination.

## **KEYWORDS:**

Media Effects, Body Image, Body Dissatisfaction, Cultivation, Social Comparison

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## Introduction

Thin models and actresses appear to be the standard in today's media, ever-present on television, and in magazines, movies, and Internet sites. Advertisements targeting young women feature thin and beautiful models in desirable circumstances in order to sell clothing, accessories, and other products. There is a mediated norm for body image in present-day culture, and it is characterized by bodies that are extremely thin ([Hendriks & Burgoon, 2003](#)). This mediated thin-ideal is present in mainstream media, and mainstream media are a source women turn to for information about how to look ([Hendriks, 2002](#)). Consequently, women who are heavy viewers of thin-ideal media may develop the attitude that thinness is socially desirable, experience greater body dissatisfaction, and engage in weight loss behaviors and cosmetic surgery in an attempt to measure up to the standard they observe ([Hesse-Biber, Leavy, Quinn, & Zoino, 2006](#)).

Additionally, there exists a weight prejudice in our society that is reinforced not only by media, but also by social interactions with peers and parents ([Triplett, 2007](#)). Thinness often has a very positive connotation, one that denotes success and social desirability ([Hesse-Biber, Leavy, Quinn, & Zoino, 2006](#)). Attractive people achieve more in our society; they are viewed as more successful and happier with their lives ([Hendriks & Burgoon, 2003](#)). Therefore, some women may see their body shape and weight as a sort of "measuring stick" of social value ([Hesse-Biber, Leavy, Quinn, & Zoino, 2006](#)).

In the last few decades, cultivation and social comparison theories have been used to understand attitudes toward thinness as well as body dissatisfaction in women. Frequently, the associations between media and body attitudes and satisfaction are examined in relative isolation (i.e. without much consideration of other social influences). Given that media aren't the only sources of information regarding body shape and appearance, this study examines how media exposure and media comparisons are related to internalization of the thin ideal and body dissatisfaction when considered along with other social sources of attitudes toward body image (i.e. parents and peers), as well as the internal factor of self-esteem.

## Literature Review

### Female Body Image in Mass Media

Park ([2005](#)) noted that the body size of women portrayed in mass media has been steadily getting smaller. Wiseman, Gray, Mosimann, and Ahrens ([1992](#)) studied portrayals of female beauty icons from 1959-1978 and observed that over half of them met the medical criteria for the eating disorder anorexia nervosa. In a follow up study, they observed the same patterns from 1979-1988 ([Wiseman, Gray, Mosimann, & Ahrens, 1992](#)).

There are particular messages associated with body weight in media; media figures are often viewed as the epitome of success and social desirability. Their body weight and beauty are often associated with their success, while overweight actresses and models are frequently ridiculed in media. This is especially apparent in thin-ideal media ([Harrison, 2000](#)). The phrase "thin-ideal media" refers to media that contain noticeably thin female main characters, such as fitness and

fashion magazines and television programs. Thin-ideal media promote the idea that thinness is an advantageous attribute and ascribe the attribute to the most “beautiful, desirable, and successful protagonists” ([Harrison, 2000, p. 121](#)).

Hendriks and Burgoon ([2003](#)) observed that women who are exposed to heavy amounts of thin-ideal media are likely to accept this as a norm. Holstrom ([2004](#)) posited that dissatisfaction arises when heavy viewers begin to see this thin-ideal not only as realistic, but also physically attainable. If women who accept these body shapes as the norm and judge themselves in relation to those images, body dissatisfaction can occur ([Schooler, et al., 2004](#)).

Thus, cultivation and social comparison theories should be considered when researching media effects on body image attitudes because heavy viewing may promote internalization of the thin ideal, as well as provide women with media figures that could be used as models of body shape and beauty.

### **Cultivation Theory**

George Gerbner ([1998](#)) defined cultivation as “the independent contributions television viewing makes to viewer conceptions of social reality” ([p. 180](#)). Cultivation suggests that media effects build over time through frequent, repetitive viewing. That is, heavy television viewers were more likely to perceive the real world in accordance with what they had viewed on TV ([Gerbner, 1998; Morgan & Shanahan, 2010](#)).

Heuristic processing and accessibility are key ideas that have been associated with cultivation. Shrum and Bischak ([2001](#)) observed that: “people often construct their judgments on probability of occurrence on the basis of attributes of the information they retrieve from memory” ([p.189](#)). The phrase “heuristic processing” suggests that people tend to seek out small amounts of readily accessible information when making quick judgments, rather than systematically searching their memories ([Shrum, 2009](#)). Constructs and ideas that are frequently activated become more accessible over time.

When considering body image effects, it is important to consider what Shrum ([2009](#)) observed: that cultivation may not always create attitudes, but often serves to reinforce them. The more “thin ideal” images women observe, the more accessible these images become. Additionally, the positive connotations that are associated with the thin-ideal may become more accessible. Contrastingly, the more negative associations with overweight people that are observed, the more retrievable they may be, augmenting the sense of importance of maintaining a thin body shape. These retrieved associations may serve to enforce social attitudes regarding weight and its social implications – i.e., thinness is good, while being overweight is bad. Morgan and Shanahan ([2010](#)) also noted that viewers often seek out programming that reflects and reinforces their existing beliefs, thus further strengthening attitudes.

Another element of cultivation theory that must be addressed is that of resonance. According to Shrum and Bischak ([2001](#)), resonance is the notion that viewers’ life experiences affect their perceptions of television. If the viewers’ life experiences are similar to the media content that they are viewing, the media messages are more likely to have an effect on them. The authors

suggest that direct experiences that are corroborated on television also combine in the viewers' minds, making it more difficult for them to recall whether the notions stemmed from direct or mediated experience. Additionally, the combination of the experiences makes the content more accessible ([Shrum&Bischak, 2001](#)). If a viewer directly observes a negative connotation with being overweight and also observes this situation on television, resonance may cause the connotation to be more readily retrieved during judgments regarding weight and shape.

### **Social Comparison Theory**

Cultivation theory alone does not explain why women develop these attitudes regarding ideal body shape and social desirability. Social comparison theory also offers a useful perspective on how social attitudes regarding weight and internalization of the thin-ideal might be associated with body dissatisfaction.

Social comparison theory proposes that people are constantly evaluating themselves, and do so by comparing themselves to others ([Festinger, 1954](#)). There are two types of comparisons – downward and upward. Downward comparisons occur when people compare themselves to someone else, and find the other person to be lacking. Upward comparisons, however, are when people compare themselves to someone else and find themselves to be lacking.

Tiggemann and Slater ([2003](#)) suggested that “the process of social comparison may provide the mechanism by which exposure to media images induces negative effects” ([p. 50](#)). When women compare themselves to thin media figures while evaluating their own attractiveness, and cannot match what is physically portrayed, body dissatisfaction can occur ([Tantleff-Dunn & Gokee, 2002](#)). Bailey and Ricciardelli ([2010](#)) found that upward comparisons are one of the strongest reasons for body dissatisfaction. Women who are heavy viewers of television – particularly of thin-ideal media – are presented with a multitude of thin actresses and models to which they can compare themselves. As the images become more accessible, they may become internalized, resulting in upward comparisons and greater body dissatisfaction.

### **Social Influences – Peers & Parents**

While it has been observed that media are connected to internalization of the thin-ideal and body dissatisfaction in women, other external environmental factors should also be considered. It may be helpful to examine the influence of peer and parental attitudes regarding weight to better understand how these might resonate with media messages ([Thompson & Stice, 2001](#)).

Social comparison theory has been useful for exploring peer influence on body dissatisfaction. If women embrace the mediated thin-ideal but do not meet that standard and have friends that do, they may engage in upward comparisons and potentially experience body dissatisfaction ([Jones, 2001](#); [Krones, Stice, Batres, & Orjada, 2005](#)).

Peers are also an important influence on body image attitudes. Krumar, Giles, and Helme ([2008](#)) found that young women whose peers considered thinness to be an important quality were more likely to value thinness and have lower self-esteem. They also observed that peers can reinforce the mediated thin ideal, making it more likely that these women will embrace it as reality. Peer

influence can have a significant impact on what is considered to be desirable or normal regarding body weight and shape. McCabe and Ricciardelli (2001) observed that women who have high body dissatisfaction were more likely to have felt peer pressure about weight, particularly in the form of criticism for weight gain, and praise for weight loss. Hohlstein, Smith, and Atlas (1998) noted that these sources often emphasize the importance of thinness, which plays a role in the internalization of the thin ideal.

Besides the impact of peers, it is important to consider the relationship between parental attitudes and body image attitudes, because parental influence is one of the most important factors associated with body attitudes during a child's development (e.g. [Ata, Ludden, & Lally, 2007](#); [Krcmar, Giles, & Helme, 2008](#); [Rodgers, Paxton, & Chabrol, 2009](#)). Krcmar, Giles, and Helme (2008) noted that parental comments about children's physical appearance convey body image norms that could lead to negative associations with body shape. It has been suggested that parental influence is a primary influence on body dissatisfaction. For example, Levine, Smolak, Moodey, Shuman, and Hessen (1994) observed that parents who place an importance on dieting and other weight control behaviors can have a negative impact on body satisfaction. If parental attitudes toward body shape and weight resonate with those of the media, they may also be linked to internalization of the thin ideal.

### **Internal Influences – Self-Esteem**

Self-esteem is a significant internal factor to consider when examining body dissatisfaction. Mead (1934) stated that self-esteem is, in part, a reflection of the opinion others hold of you. When people are overweight, the stigmatization and negative opinions that others hold of them can affect their self-esteem ([Miller & Downey, 1999](#)). As noted, thinness is often presented positively in the media, while being overweight is negative. Triplett (2007) maintained that being overweight is seen as a stigma, and considered to be a condition that the individual can prevent. If women are overweight, they risk being perceived in a negative light, which may subsequently lower their self-esteem.

Self-esteem is also related to body mass index (BMI). BMI is the weight/height index used to categorize people into underweight, healthy weight, and overweight. Women with higher BMI are more likely to have higher levels of body dissatisfaction and lower levels of self-esteem ([Hendriks & Burgoon, 2003](#)). Miller and Downey (1999) stated: "Heavyweight people also may devalue themselves because they fall short of internalized social standards of acceptable weight" (p. 69). These ideals can come from many social sources, including media, peers, and parents. Thus, low self-esteem can have a strong association with body dissatisfaction if women are comparing themselves to the thin body ideal that is so prevalent in media.

The purpose of this study was to juxtapose media factors such as television exposure and social comparisons with media figures with other environmental factors (peer and parental attitudes) to examine their connections to internalization of the thin ideal and body dissatisfaction. To that end, we pose the following research questions:

RQ1: How is television exposure related to internalization of the thin ideal when considered along with other media factors (i.e. comparison to media characters) and other social factors (parental and peer attitudes and peer comparisons)?

RQ2: How is television exposure related to body dissatisfaction when considered along with other media factors (i.e. comparison to media characters) and other social factors (parental and peer attitudes and peer comparisons)?

## Methods

### Procedure

Participants were drawn from communication courses at a large southeastern university and offered course credit for participation. Participants in two courses were given a Web address for completing an approximately 15-minute survey via their course website. Online results were filtered such that surveys with a completion time of less than seven minutes were discarded due to fidelity concerns. Additionally, participants from two other courses completed a paper-and-pencil version of the survey under researcher supervision. Independent samples t-tests comparing the online and in-class samples' responses for the independent and dependent variables revealed no significant differences.

### Participants

The survey was distributed to 417 undergraduate students. Of the 417 participants, 68.3% were female. For the purpose of this study, only female results were used for analysis ( $n=285$ ). The age of the female sample ranged from 18 to 37 ( $M=20.0$ ,  $SD=2.22$ ). The ethnic makeup of the female sample included 65.7% Caucasian, 17.7% Latino, 5.8% African American, 4.9% Asian, and 7% multiracial or other.

### Independent Variables

**Television Exposure Measure.** Following prior research ([Nabi & Sullivan, 2001](#); [Shrum, Wyer & O'Guinn, 1998](#)), a composite measure of weekly viewing was constructed to account for television exposure. Participants reported how many hours they watched television during four time periods (6 a.m. to noon, noon to 6 p.m., 6 p.m. to midnight, and midnight to 6 a.m.) for the average weekday, Saturday, and Sunday. These data were weighted and combined to create an average weekly viewing measure ( $M=25.05$ ,  $SD=17.80$ ).

**Thin-Ideal Television.** In order to construct a measure of television genres that could be considered thin-ideal media, a list of genres was acquired from the Most Popular Shows list on the website TV.com ([CBS Interactive Inc., 2011](#)). Teen drama and reality program genres were identified as thin ideal media content using a definition from prior research ([Heinberg, Thompson & Stormer, 1995](#)): i.e. programs with "female actors who epitomize societal ideals of thinness and attractiveness" ([Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2004, p. 354](#)). Participants were provided a list of

program genres (e.g. teen drama, reality, comedy, etc.) and reported how much they enjoyed watching each genre on a 7-point scale ranging from “Hate it” to “Love it.” Additionally, participants reviewed a list of the most popular programs from each genre ([CBS Interactive, Inc., 2011](#)) and reported how often they watched each individual program using a 7-point scale from “Never” to “As often as possible.”

Principal components factor analysis (varimax rotation) was used to identify related programs within the genres. The analysis of the top ten drama television programs revealed three factors (60.9% of the explained variance). The first factor included *Gossip Girl*, *90210*, and *One Tree Hill* (33.6% of the explained variance) and fit the definition for thin-ideal dramas. Responses for these programs and the overall drama item were averaged for a 4-item, thin-ideal drama index ( $M=2.81$ ,  $SD=1.61$ ,  $\alpha=.79$ ).

Factor analysis of the top ten reality television programs revealed two factors (49.2% of the explained variance). The first factor, dramatized reality, included *Bad Girls Club*, *The Real Housewives of Orange County*, *Keeping up with the Kardashians*, *Jersey Shore*, and *Girls Next Door* (36.5% of the explained variance) and fit the definition for thin-ideal media. Responses for these programs and the overall reality genre item were averaged to construct a 6-item, thin-ideal dramatized reality index ( $M=2.77$ ,  $SD=1.40$ ,  $\alpha = .78$ ).

***Upward Comparisons with Media Figures.*** The Comparison to Models Survey ([Strownman, 1996](#)) was adapted to measure participants’ likelihood to engage in upward comparisons with media figures. The measure was an eight-item index using a 7-point scale ranging from “Never” to “Always.” The instructions for the scale asked: “When you see models and actors/actresses of your own sex on television, how often do you compare yourself to them...” followed by a list of qualifiers for the comparisons, such as “in general” and “in terms of physical appearance” ( $M = 3.25$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ,  $\alpha = .87$ ).

***Upward Comparisons with Peers.*** The Body Comparison Scale by Fisher and Thompson (1998, as cited by [Van den Berg, Thompson, Obremski-Brandon, & Coover, 2002](#)) measures likelihood to engage in comparisons with their peers. Participants reported how they compare their physical attributes, such as “waist,” “thighs,” and “overall body” to members of their own sex. Participants then reported their agreement with seven statements regarding comparisons to same sex-peers using a 7-point scale ranging from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree.” Statements measured likelihood to engage in comparisons, as well how comparisons made participants feel (i.e., “When I am with others, I compare my weight with theirs” and “When I compare my weight with others, I feel that I am overweight”). Cronbach’s alpha for the index was .93 ( $M = 3.95$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ).

***Peer Attitudes Regarding Weight.*** The SATAQ-revised ([Cusumano & Thompson, 1997](#)) was adapted to measure perceptions of peer attitudes toward weight and body shape. Participants rated their agreement with a series of twelve statements using a 7-point scale from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree.” Statements dealt with social attitudes regarding weight and body shape, such as “my friends think attractiveness is very important if you want to get ahead in our culture” ( $M = 5.35$ ,  $SD = .96$ ,  $\alpha = .90$ ).

**Parental Attitudes Regarding Weight.** The parental influence section from the Tripartite Influence Model of Body Dissatisfaction and Eating Disturbances with Adolescent Girls (Van den Berg, Thompson, Obremski-Brandon, & Covert, 2002) was used to measure perceptions of parental attitudes toward weight and body shape. The index included twenty statements using a 7-point scale from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree.” Statements included items like “My mother is on a diet to lose weight” and “My father has made comments or teased me about my appearance” ( $M = 3.10$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ,  $\alpha = .92$ ).

**Self-Esteem.** The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1979) was used to measure self-esteem. Participants rated their agreement with a series of ten statements using a 7-point scale from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree.” Statements included “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself” and “I feel that I’m a person of worth” ( $M = 5.61$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ,  $\alpha = .89$ ).

Table 1  
Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations for Hierarchical Regressions (N = 236)

	Internal. of Thin Ideal	Body Diss.	Self- Esteem	Parental Attitudes	Peer Attitudes	Peer Comparisons	TV Exposure	Drama TV	Reality TV	Media Comparisons
1	1.00	-	-.25***	.30***	.48***	.32***	-.13*	.10*	.08	.38***
2	-	1.00	-.52***	.30***	.07	.55***	-.10	-.05	-.04	.26***
3	-	-	1.00	-.26	-.02	-.38***	.05	.14	.17	.27***
4	-	-	-	1.00	.20**	.40***	-.12	-.02	.03	.32***
5	-	-	-	-	1.00	.17	-.05	.06	.11	.28***
6	-	-	-	-	-	1.00	-.08	.09	-.02	.46***
7	-	-	-	-	-	-	1.00	.13	.16	-.11
8	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1.00	.36	.17
9	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1.00	.15*
10	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1.00
<i>M</i>	4.43	3.77	5.60	3.06	5.39	3.97	24.79	2.80	2.79	3.21
<i>SD</i>	.92	1.37	1.01	1.15	.92	1.15	17.89	1.64	1.43	1.26

Note: \* $p \leq .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

## Dependent Variables

**Internalization of the Thin Ideal.** The Ideal Body Internalization Scale Revised (Stice, Ziemba, Margolis, & Flick, 1996) was used to measure participants’ internalization of the thin ideal. Participants rated their agreement with a series of ten statements using a 7-point scale from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree.” Statements dealt with attitudes toward body shape and level of attractiveness, such as “Thin women are more attractive” and “Women with toned bodies are more attractive” ( $M = 4.46$ ,  $SD = .93$ ,  $\alpha = .83$ ).

**Body Dissatisfaction.** The Body Dissatisfaction Subscale from the Eating Disorder Inventory (Garner, Olmstead & Polivy, 1983) was used to measure body dissatisfaction. Participants rated their agreement with nine statements using a 7-point scale from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree”. Statements focused on satisfaction with various physical

attributes, such as “I think that my waist is too big” and “I think my buttocks are too large” ( $M = 3.81$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ,  $\alpha = .90$ ).

Table 2  
*Hierarchical Regression Predicting Influences on Internalization of the Thin-Ideal*  
( $N = 229$ )

Variable	B	SE B	$\beta$
<b>Step 1</b>			
Self-Esteem	-.23	.06	-.25***
<b>Step 2</b>			
Self-Esteem	-.15	.05	-.16**
Parental Attitudes	.09	.05	.11
Peer Comparisons	.10	.05	.13*
Peer Attitudes	.44	.05	.44***
<b>Step 3</b>			
Self-Esteem	-.15	.05	-.17**
Parental Attitudes	.07	.05	.09
Peer Comparisons	.06	.05	.07
Peer Attitudes	.40	.06	.40***
TV Overall	.00	.00	-.08
TV Drama	-.04	.03	.07
TV Reality	.02	.04	.03
Media Comparisons	.10	.05	.14*

Note:  $R^2 = .06$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .26$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .03$

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

## Results

Two hierarchical regressions were used to examine the independent variables' relationships with the two dependent variables: internalization of the thin ideal and body dissatisfaction (see Table 1 for correlations, means, and standard deviations). The order of the blocks was based on social proximity of the factor. Three blocks were used to reflect internal, interpersonal, and mass communication factors.

### TV Exposure and Internalization of the Thin Ideal

The first research question (RQ1) asked whether television exposure plays a role in the internalization of the thin-ideal when juxtaposed with other media measures (comparisons to media figures), the internal measure of self-esteem, as well as parental and peer attitudes and peer comparisons.

The model for the first block, self-esteem was significant,  $R^2 = .06$ ,  $F(1, 234) = 85.35$ ,  $p < .001$  (see Table 2). Self-esteem had a negative association with the internalization of the thin ideal ( $\beta = -.25$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In the second block, social/environmental variables – parental and peer attitudes regarding weight and body shape and comparisons with peers – were added to the model. Peer attitudes ( $\beta = .44$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and peer comparisons ( $\beta = .13$ ,  $p < .05$ ) combined with self-esteem to make a significant model,  $\Delta R^2 = .26$ ,  $F(4, 231) = 40.63$ ,  $p < .001$ . The third block included media variables – television viewing measures (overall, thin-ideal drama, and thin-ideal reality TV) and comparisons with media figures. Only the comparisons with media figures ( $\beta = .14$ ,  $p < .05$ ) contributed to a significant yet small increase of  $R^2$  ( $\Delta R^2 = .03$ ,  $F(8, 227) = 15.76$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Table 3  
*Hierarchical Regression Predicting Influences on Body Dissatisfaction*  
(N = 227)

Variable	B	SE B	$\beta$
<b>Step 1</b>			
Self-Esteem	-.69	.08	-.52***
<b>Step 2</b>			
Self-Esteem	-.48	.07	-.35***
Parental Attitudes	.07	.07	.06
Peer Comparisons	.47	.07	.39***
Peer Attitudes	-.02	.08	-.01
<b>Step 3</b>			
Self-Esteem	-.49	.08	-.36***
Parental Attitudes	-.01	.08	-.01
Peer Comparisons	.49	.07	.41***
Peer Attitudes	.40	.06	.04
TV Overall	.00	.00	-.05
TV Drama	-.04	.05	-.05
TV Reality	.06	.05	.06
Media Comparisons	-.05	.07	-.05

Note:  $R^2 = .27$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .15$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .01$

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

### TV Exposure and Body Dissatisfaction

The second research question (RQ2) asked whether television exposure plays a role in body dissatisfaction when juxtaposed with other media measures (i.e. media exposure and comparisons to media figures), self-esteem, and other social influences such as parental and peer

attitudes and peer comparisons (see Table 3). Again, the first block only included self-esteem and led to a significant model,  $R^2 = .27, F(1, 234) = 85.35, p < .001$ . The second block included interpersonal variables and was significant,  $R^2 = .31, F(4, 231) = 40.63, p < .001$ . However, of the social factors in the block, only peer comparisons ( $\beta = .39, p < .001$ ) combined with self-esteem ( $\beta = -.35, p < .001$ ) to predict body dissatisfaction. The third block, consisting of media variables, was not significant,  $\Delta R^2 = .01; F(8, 227) = 20.56, p > .05$ .

## Discussion

This study of body dissatisfaction in women is important because body dissatisfaction may lead to harmful disordered-eating behaviors such as anorexia or bulimia nervosa ([Garner, Olmstead, & Polivy, 1983](#)). Body dissatisfaction has been connected to media consumption in that media are often identified as sources women turn to for information about their physical appearance, and thin models and actresses are ostensibly the standard in current media. Cultivation and social comparison theories have been used to examine the association between media consumption and body dissatisfaction. The goal of this project was to draw from the two theories to examine the impact of media exposure on internalization of the thin ideal and body dissatisfaction in context with other social/environmental factors like peer and parental attitudes.

The first stage in the project was dedicated to understanding the basic relationships among internal and social/environmental factors – including media, peers, and parents – and the internalization of the thin ideal. When entered into the regression analysis, the media exposure measures did not appear to have significant connections to internalization of the thin ideal. Overall television exposure and drama exposure appeared to have significant correlations to internalization of the thin ideal but their impact seemed to be overshadowed by other factors. This result adds to the questions about the relevance of overall television exposure versus exposure to specific genres, and their association with young women's acceptance of thinness as a social and cultural value. However, the lack of evidence of a connection between genre-based exposure and some thin-ideal reality programming has to be viewed carefully due to the skewed nature of the exposure measures. The lack of a normal distribution for those viewing measures makes it difficult to reach conclusions about their associations with internalization of the thin ideal. Although overall media exposure was not linked, a media connection was evident. Upward comparison with media figures was the strongest media factor related to internalization of the thin ideal and its contribution to the model was comparable to self-esteem. However, broadly speaking, peer attitude toward thinness was the primary factor associated with internalization of the thin ideal.

This observation suggests the resonance may play an important part in shaping the attitudes that are correlated with the internalization of the thin ideal. According to Shrum and Bischak ([2001](#)), resonance broadens the reach of existing stereotypes on television (such as stereotypes of thin female protagonists). It also corroborates existing attitudes – such as the idea that thinness is a necessary attribute in order to achieve success and social desirability. This may result in peers who are heavy viewers of thin-ideal media sharing similar attitudes regarding weight and body shape, especially if their media consumption reinforces existing attitudes regarding thinness.

This is where resonance may have an effect. Resonance is the notion that viewers' life experiences affect their perceptions of television ([Shrum&Bischak, 2001](#)). If the viewers' life experiences are similar to the media content that they are consuming, the media messages are more likely to have an effect on them. Resonance suggests that peer and media attitudes to reinforce one another, strengthening these attitudes regardless of their origin.

Resonance may then tie internalization of the thin-ideal into social cognitive theory. Social cognitive theory states that people learn through observation, and modify their behavior accordingly in order to obtain desired outcomes ([Bandura, 2001](#)). This may encourage women to try to emulate the thin-ideal that they see on television and in their peers (who may maintain similar views) by engaging in weight-loss behaviors. When comparisons to peers and media figures that possess the thin-ideal occur, body dissatisfaction may arise.

Although media messages appear to play a role in the internalization of the thin ideal, they may not have a direct impact on body dissatisfaction. The second stage in the project was dedicated to understanding the basic relationships among internal and social/environmental factors – including media, peers, and parents – and body dissatisfaction. After entering all the internal and external factors, no significant link was observed between media exposure or media comparison and body dissatisfaction. In fact, only self-esteem and peer comparisons were significant predictors of body dissatisfaction. The lower a young woman's self-esteem, the more likely she is to experience some body dissatisfaction. Peer comparisons were as important a contributor to the negative effect. These two factors account for about a quarter of the explained variance. Therefore, more factors have yet to be examined.

A theme that is evident in both parts of the project is the clarity with which the act of comparing one's body shape to others – whether peers or media figures – appears important to notions about body image and attitudes toward one's own body. Media figures and peers serve as references for body image standards that are also likely to connect in some way to eating or exercising behavior. The connection to body dissatisfaction in particular appears to highlight the self-reflection component of social learning theory ([Bandura, 2001](#)).

## **Limitations**

Although the results of this study indicate that the influences on internalization of the thin-ideal and body dissatisfaction are clearly different, it remains unclear exactly how internalization of the thin-ideal is connected to body dissatisfaction. There were several limitations to this study; the sample consisted of undergraduate students primarily from communication students, resulting in a fairly homogeneous sample that may be more attentive to media. While the student population was useful for this particular study, the topic is certainly not limited to students. A significantly younger or older sample may prove useful in gathering information for shaping effective health campaigns (as most data in previous research has centered around adolescents and college students).

Finally, as previously noted, effective measurement of genre-specific television exposure (drama and reality television) is a particular challenge. Therefore further exploration into measurement

of exposure to these genres and examination of their associations with the internalization of the thin ideal and body dissatisfaction is needed.

### **Conclusion**

So, what is the media's role? Are media mostly connected to overall body dissatisfaction through a link between attitudes like internalization of the thin ideal and therefore not directly observable? Or do other social/environmental or internal variables have the potential to explain the people's negative attitudes toward their bodies? Although specific significant correlations between media and both internalization of the thin ideal and body dissatisfaction were observed in regression analyses, it is important to remember that all of these variables interact in a much larger context. It is nearly impossible to find the exact origin of body image attitudes. Instead it may be more useful to consider that the variables serve to reinforce one another and strengthen existing attitudes, despite where they originate. Therefore, all of the variables noted herein should be considered significant influences on body image attitudes, and the knowledge should be applied to eating disorder prevention/intervention and media literacy campaigns to help attenuate the negative effects.

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