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# **BORNEO AKADEMIKA**

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## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE MEDIA AND ADVERTISEMENT WITH BODY IMAGE PERCEPTION AMONG WOMEN

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### ABSTRACT

Research has suggested that exposure to the mass media has affected our perception of things. Previous studies have shown that women tend to internalise messages by the media more often than men, and this has led the industry to target young women as the subject of insecurity manipulation in order to boost the sale of certain products. It has been suggested that exposure to mass media contents depicting a thin body as the ideal shape is linked with body image disturbance among women. A total of 200 *Universiti Malaysia Sabah* female students aged 18-30 were randomly selected to participate in this study to test whether the exposure to today's mass media contents and advertisements has affected their perception of their own body image. The results demonstrate a significant impact of thin-ideal images in the media and advertisements on women's body image disturbance.

*Keywords:* Media; image perception; advertisements

### ABSTRAK

Kajiselidik telah membuktikan bahawa pendedahan kepada media massa boleh mewujudkan persepsi keadaan. Kajian lepas telah menunjukkan bahawa wanita mudah terpengaruh kepada mesej dalam media berbanding dengan lelaki, dan keadaan ini telah mewujudkan industry di mana wanita di jadikan sasaran untuk merangsang jualan produk-produk tertentu. Kajian ini mencadangkan bahawa pendedahan kepada kandungan media massa yang menggambarkan tubuh kurus sebagai bentuk ideal berkait rapat dengan imej tubuh mengganggu naluri wanita. Sejumlah 200 pelajar wanita *Universiti Malaysia Sabah* berumur antara 18-30 tahun telah dipilih secara rawak untuk menyertai kajian ini untuk menentukan samaada pendedahan kepada media massa hari ini boleh menjejaskan imej tubuh mereka. Hasil kajian ini telah menunjukkan impak signifikan ke atas imej kurus-ideal dalam media dan pengiklanan sebagai gangguan kepada imej tubuh mereka.

*Kata kunci:* Media; persepsi imej; pengiklanan

## 1. Introduction

Garner et al. (1980) define body image to include both a self-perceptual component of what we see or think we see in size, shape, feature, movement and performance; as well as an attitudinal and effective component of how we feel about those attributes and how our feelings motivate certain behaviours. High levels of body dissatisfaction and the accompanying eating disorders are generally attributed to sociocultural factors (Thompson et al., year; Tiggemann, 2002). According to Body Image and Advertising (2000), the idealised female body images presented by the media represent standards of femininity that are unrealistic and unattainable for most women. Body Image and Advertising (2000) concurs that current marketing strategies present advertisements that enhance product consumption by promoting unrealistic ideals of body image in women. It further states that continuous exposure to these advertisements can have a negative effect on women's perception of their bodies and their evaluation of their physical attractiveness. Media such as magazines promote these idealised body images and produce insecurities and

body dissatisfaction. Referring to the theory provided by Festinger (1954) on influences of advertisements on body image, Collins (1996) provides a theoretical explanation on how exposure of idealised ultra-thin models may affect women's body image. Fashion models and celebrities depicted in advertisements are mostly the targets of upward comparison since their body sizes and appearances do not represent the entire general population. Exposure to such images may directly influence the audience's perception on body image and how they view themselves when compared to the models in the fashion advertisements. Hence, the purpose of this research is to study the relationship between the media and advertisements with women's body image.

Fashion and beauty magazines, in particular, have been identified as the most prominent media source of unrealistic beauty and thin-body image among women (Harper & Tiggemann, 2008). Such unrealistic media images provoke the feeling of inferiority and insecurity among women and lead to poor body image. With current technological advancement, awareness of images being digitally modified is further enhanced and there are notions that it may affect consumers' perception of the ideal body image itself.

The research objectives of this research study are to examine the effectiveness of media imagery in association with women's perception on body image, to determine the factors that influence women's body perception and to study the awareness level of consumers on digitally modified media imagery. The purpose of this research is to study the relationship between media and fashion advertisements with women's body image. This research was conducted at *Universiti Malaysia Sabah*, and the targeted respondents of this study were female undergraduate and postgraduate students, in accordance with the study by Turner et al. (1997) which found that the media could easily manipulate women's body perception among undergraduate women. This research reveals the importance of understanding media imagery roles and its influence towards perceived body image among women and thus this research will give benefits by increasing our level of awareness on prominent factors that affect societal perceived standards of beauty.

## **2. Literature Review**

Media content analyses have documented a shift in beauty standards in recent decades. Based on the study by Bearman, Presnell and Martinez (2006), approximately 50% of girls and undergraduate women are reported as being dissatisfied with their bodies. Media is all about marketing and whatever that is portrayed and the standards that come can guarantee happiness once it is achieved, which are unrealistic. The majority of media images nowadays portray women as unnaturally thin and flawless. In addition, the media often sexualizes these images as well because such images sell (Mills et al., 2002). These situations create the perception that these ideals promise happiness to those who meet the standards as portrayed in the media. Body image involves perception, imagination, emotions and physical sensations of the body. Grabe and Ward (2008) suggest that body dissatisfaction has been linked to critical physical and mental health problems as it involves body image disturbance - meaning that they are dissatisfied with their bodies and how they look, and this frequently occurs in young women.

According to Botta (2003), there is a link between exposure to fashion magazines and body image. Groesz et al. (2002) found that women who viewed images of thin models consistently have poorer body images than respondents who viewed average or plus-sized models. Advertisements are consistently aimed at young women and deliver messages that are grossly deceitful to manipulate female insecurities by focusing on perfect aesthetic appearance to attract buyers and boost sales.

Exposure to media contents depicting ultra-thin models has long been the subject of research, especially with regard to its effectiveness on women's body image. According to communication theories, repeated exposure to media content leads viewers to begin to accept media portrayals as

representations of reality (Gerbner, Gross, & Morgan, 2002). Policymakers and governments have suggested that including a more diverse range of body sizes and shapes in media imagery may be an effective strategy for promoting positive body image.

When viewers are often exposed to the same contents for a prolonged period of time, they will begin to accept it as something that is normative and acceptable in today's society.

### **3. Research Questions and Methodology**

The theoretical model applied in this study was extracted from the study by Grabe, Hyde and Ward (2008) which consists of the exposure to the main type of media (which are television and advertisements) and its experimental and correlational relationship with young women's perception on body image. The research questions of this study are:

- (1) Does the media imagery today promote a healthy body image?
- (2) What are the factors that influence women's body image perception?
- (3) Are the consumers aware that most advertisements are digitally modified?

In terms of research population and sampling, the target population for this research is female respondents, as they are commonly subjected to the media and advertisements. According to Hoffman (2005), females generally experience greater body dissatisfaction and tend to internalise messages from the media more often, thus they are consistently targeted. The target population for this research primarily consists of *University Malaysia Sabah* (UMS) Kota Kinabalu female undergraduate and postgraduate students. The primary data in this study was observed or collected directly from first-hand experience, obtained through the aid of questionnaires distributed to respondents and respondents were required to answer all questions stated in the questionnaires.

### **4. Results and Discussion**

Based on the age profile among the participants who took part in this research, 70 of the respondents (35%) were aged 18-21 years old, 105 respondents (52.5%) were aged 22-25 years old and only 2 of them were 30 years old and above, which made up only 1% of the total 200 respondents.

The results show that there is a relationship between each and every dimension mentioned in this study: the fashion and beauty advertisements, the content exposure of the media and media digital modification all had a significant relationship with female perception on body image. From the frequency statistics, the researchers can interpret that most of the female students watch television every day (with a frequency of 184, that is 92% of the 200 respondents). Over 90 respondents answered 'yes' to reading fashion magazines and more than 80 participants answered 'sometimes', meaning that there were more respondents who were exposed to the media and fashion advertisements in magazines than those who were not. Based on the study by Gerbner, Gross and Morgan (2002), repeated exposure to media content leads viewers to begin to accept media portrayals as representations of reality. Such a statement provides answers to the first research question: Does the media imagery today promote healthy body image? The answer is still ambiguous, if we look at the descriptive statistics, where the mean for the subset of questions on body image (3.112) indicates that most people have mixed feelings about their body image. As a multi-million dollar industry, the media only aims to boost sales and thus, images that are deceitful in nature and manipulative of women's insecurities are consistently presented. Answering the second research question, 'what are the factors that influence women's body image perception?', based on the results, media digital modification has a positive and significant relationship with the women's body image perception, whereas media content exposure also has a significant relationship with the body image perception among women but was negatively related. This is consistent with Hoffman's (2005) study that females generally

experience greater body image concerns and tend to internalise messages from the media more often and were therefore consistently targeted. Based on the third research question, Are the consumers aware that most advertisements are digitally modified the results show that most young women were aware that the images in the media were digitally enhanced and altered.

Based on the crosstab analysis, 98 of the 200 respondents agree that digital media modification changes their perception of idealised body image and 94 out of 200 strongly agreed with the statement. According to Kee and Farid (2011), retouched photos are omnipresent and have created an unrealistic representation of aesthetic appearance and physical beauty. The findings highlight that the media should include a label that claims the images are not 'real' or it has been digitally enhanced. Tiggemann (2003) states that inclusion of a disclaimer on digitally enhanced images seems to be a positive step in reducing feelings of body dissatisfaction. The reason behind this is that warning labels will serve to inform the reader that the image is not 'real' and therefore does not present a realistic, relevant body image.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

The findings of this analysis suggest that there is a link between exposure to media and advertisements with young women's perception on body image. A large number of such respondents have demonstrated that acute exposure to thin-ideal images in the media leads to women immediately feeling worse about their bodies. The findings are consistent with Brown's (2002) view that repeated exposure to media content leads audiences to believe that media portrayal is an acceptable presentation of reality.

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