

Citation for published version

Jiménez-Morales, M. [Mònika], de Lenne, O. [Orpha], Montaña, M. [Mireia] & Vandenbosch, L.[Laura] (2020). Body Image in Advertising Messages: The Influence of Television Advertising on the Construction of Children's Body Image. In Lluís Mas Manchón (ed.). Innovation in Advertising and Branding Communication (p. 103-116). New York, NY: Routledge

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003009276>

HANDLE

<http://hdl.handle.net/10609/151311>

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Abstract: Several studies have shown that children build the foundations of their body image between the ages of 5 and 10 and that the development of the body image is affected by audiovisual advertising. The literature has criticized some advertising portrayals for promoting behaviors that harm children's body image. Such effects warrant scholarly attention, as research has shown that about 40 to 50 percent of children are unsatisfied with their physical appearance. This chapter analyzes the most frequent stereotypes present in audiovisual advertising that focuses on children in primary school and the effects of these stereotypes on the construction of children's body image.

Keywords: Advertising, body image, children, television, stereotypes, advertising literacy.

6

Body Image in Advertising Messages

The Influence of Television Advertising on the Construction of Children's Body Image

Mònika Jiménez, Orpha de Lenne, Mireia Montaña, and Laura Vandenbosch

Introduction

Audiovisual advertising portrays models, values, and roles that children internalize and use in the construction of their identities, including their body image. Several studies affirm that between the ages of 5 and 10, children build the foundations of their body image that will accompany them throughout their lives. In fact, research reported that approximately 40 to 50 percent of children between 6 and 12 years old felt dissatisfied with their physical appearance. The literature has pointed at the media as one of the main causes for developing these dysfunctional body image outcomes. In particular, television is believed to play an important role in the relationships between media use and body image among children, especially in preadolescent ages.

This chapter examines which kinds of messages children receive through exposure to television advertising and which roles such messages play in children's development of an unhealthy body image. Two types of detrimental advertising content will be discussed, as research has shown that they both lead to negative body image outcomes: television ads promoting unrealistic appearance standards on the one hand and content promoting unhealthy

food on the other hand. The chapter also focuses on how advertising literacy can be used as a tool to prevent body image disorders among children.

Children and Body Image

Body image is a complex construct comprising thoughts, feelings, evaluations, and behaviors related to one's body. Its construction is the result of neurological, psychological, and sociocultural elements (Hosseini & Padhy, 2019). Children begin to build their body image around the age of five. Within the current literature, children's body image is often studied from two perspectives: 1) dysfunctional body image outcomes as a result of beauty ideals and 2) dysfunctional body image outcomes as a result of unhealthy eating behaviors.

First, a large body of literature has studied how appearance ideals harm the body image of children. Girls and boys already show signs of a dysfunctional body image at a very young age. Research has reported that approximately 40 to 50 percent of children between 6 and 12 years old felt dissatisfied with their physical appearance (Abramovitz & Birch, 2000; Davison Markey, & Birch, 2003; Hendy, Gustitus, & Leitzel-Schwalm, 2001; Mancilla, Vázquez, Mancilla, Amaya, & Álvarez, 2012; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2005; Phares, Steinberg, & Thompson, 2004; Skemp-Arlt, Rees, Mikat, & Seebach, 2006). For instance, some studies showed that young girls reported levels of self-objectification that were similar in strength to those observed among older girls and women (Brown & Slaughter, 2011; Jongenelis, Byrne, & Pettigrew, 2014; Tremblay, Lovsin, Zecevic, & Larivière, 2011). Self-objectification implies that girls observe their body from the perspective of an observer and thus apply a gaze at their own appearance. Just like girls, boys have also been found to worry about their appearance. One study indicated that boys want to increase the size of their muscles in order to attain the male muscular body ideal (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001). Furthermore, research has noted that the number of children diagnosed with restrictive eating disorders has increased alarmingly (Adikey, Kaushal, & Stevens, 2018; Rozzell et al., 2019). According to the World Health Organization (WHO),

about 10 percent of eating disorders occur before the age of ten years. Scholars (McCabe, Connaughton, Tatangelo, & Mellor, 2017; Sand, Lask, Hoie, & Stormark, 2011) have argued that a dysfunctional body image in children has adversarial implications for their physical health (reduced physical activity and lack of healthy behavior patterns) and psychological well-being (depression, anxiety, interpersonal relationship problems).

The occurrence of these dysfunctional body image outcomes is rooted within society's emphasis on appearance ideals. It is important to note that these appearance ideals are multidimensional and gender specific. First, appearance ideals not only include components regarding ideal body weight but also regarding other aspects of the body such as hair (e.g., long hair for girls), tan (e.g., a tanned skin for Caucasians, lighter skin for darker individuals), and clothing (e.g., clothes emphasizing one muscular or thin body shape), among others (Sánchez-Reina, Jiménez-Morales, & Medina-Bravo, in press). Second, appearance ideals differ according to gender. A slim body is promoted for girls, while boys are expected to strive for a muscular physique with a minimum of body fat (Harrison & Rowlinson, 2016; McLean, Wertheim, & Paxton, 2018; Veldhuis, Poel, Pepping, Konijn, & Spekman, 2017; Vizoso Gómez, Vega-Sánchez, & Fernández-Fernández, 2018; Worobey & Worobey, 2014).

Another realm of the literature has studied how unhealthy eating behaviors are related to children's body image. Childhood obesity has increased over the past decades. Research has reported that approximately 17 percent of children are obese (Ogden, Carroll, & Kit, 2014). Such obesity problems are caused by unhealthy eating behaviors. More precisely, literature has indicated that the preference for sweets peaks during childhood (Liem & de Graaf, 2004) and that the food that is produced for a child audience typically exceeds the recommended daily amounts of sugar, fat, and salt (Batada, Seitz, Wootan, & Story, 2008). As such, it is not surprising that a substantial amount of children struggle with obesity. Apart from physical health risks, obesity also has negative effects on children's body image. Research has shown that obese children are more likely to be concerned about their weight and to be dissatisfied with their body (Vander Wal & Thelen, 2000).

The literature has pointed at the media as one of the main causes for developing these dysfunctional body image outcomes. Television is believed to play an important role in the relationships between media use and body image among children ([Moriarty & Harrison, 2008](#); Tiggemann, 2003), especially in preadolescent ages. Specifically, television advertising, often displaying highly unrealistic appearance ideals but at the same time also promoting unhealthy food choices, is criticized heavily ([Derenne & Beresin, 2006](#); [López-Guimerà, Levine, Sánchez-Carracedo, & Fauquet, 2010](#); [Halliwell & Diedrichs, 2014](#)). The next section examines which kind of messages children receive through exposure to television advertising and which roles such messages play in children's development of an unhealthy body image.

Television Advertising: Which Messages Do Children Receive Through Watching Television Advertisements?

Children watch television on a daily basis ([Chassiakos et al., 2016](#)). Although streaming services are available, research indicates that the majority of children still watch two hours of television or more per day through broadcast channels ([Chassiakos et al., 2016](#)). Interestingly one study in Spain showed that children also watch television at time periods in which no child-targeted content is broadcasted. The largest audience was placed in prime time, between 10 p.m. and 12 p.m., reaching 18.3 percent of this target audience. This percentage indicates that more than 1,200,000 Spanish children are exposed to television after 10 p.m. During that period, no protection schedule is active.

It is likely that some of this television content is consumed by the child alone, as up to 32.2 percent of minors in the Spanish study consumed television without the company or supervision of an adult ([Jiménez-Morales, Montaña, & Vázquez, 2019](#)). Apart from traditional broadcast channels, children also use Internet tools like YouTube to watch online videos regularly. One study found, for instance, that one in six children watched YouTube videos

multiple times a week (Buzzi, 2011). Similar results emerged in other studies (Treviño & Morton, 2019; Araújo et al., 2017).

When watching television content (which may or may not be intended for a child audience), either online or through broadcast channels, children are likely to frequently encounter television advertisements. Television advertisements typically appear in the commercial blocks on broadcasted channels or are inserted at the beginning of a YouTube clip. Television advertisements tell short stories that are shaped in such a way that they are highly attractive for children. Music, color, and the use of attractive characters are some of the strategies that advertisers use to captivate viewers' attention. The content of advertisements has been criticized regarding its impact on body image for two reasons: the emphasis on appearance stereotypes and the promotion of unhealthy food.

Appearance Stereotypes

Given the format of narrative simplification in advertisements, it is not surprising that stereotypes abound in advertising. These stereotypes present simplified ideas that can reinforce existing prejudices. A rich body of literature has documented the prevalence of stereotypes in advertising. Moreover, as for body image, the literature that has documented the prevalence of beauty stereotypes seems especially relevant.

Research on advertisements targeting adults have shown TV ads often focus on models' appearance by portraying them (partly) nude (Nelson & Paek, 2008; see also Chapter 7 of this book for further details on the use of sex appeals in advertising). Another study, although investigating magazine ads, reported that ads often present women in a sexualized way to advertise appearance-related products, such as makeup and hair care products (Morris & Nichols, 2013). Although these ads target adults, the research discussed earlier showed that children also consume such content from time to time. Scarce research has further examined the role of appearance in advertisements targeting children. A rather old content analytical study has

reported that 22 percent of children's television commercials included references regarding how one could improve one's appearance (Ogletree, Williams, Raffeld, Mason, & Fricke, 1990). A second study that investigated television commercials aimed at teenage girls found that 61 percent of these ads presented appearance-related products such as toiletries and makeup (Signorielli, 1997). Such messages hint at the importance of beauty for one's self-value. Another recent study analyzing television ads (Mas, Fedele, & Larrea, 2018) targeting children found that most characters presented in these ads have a white skin color (88 percent) and a slim body posture (75.2 percent). In addition, most characters were happy (65.6 percent) and part of a high social class (34.4 percent). Such messages teach children what an ideal appearance looks like and encourage them to comply with these beauty stereotypes.

Unhealthy Food

While the characters appearing in television advertisements comply with ideal body standards, these commercials typically promote food that is perceived as unhealthy and a causal factor in obesity. Research has found that 43.8 percent of advertisements displayed in between children's television programs include candy, sweets, or soft drinks. Moreover, 34.2 percent of advertisements included fast food (Harrison & Marske, 2005). These unhealthy foods were often also presented as a snack (58.4 percent) and thus encouraged unhealthy snacking behavior. More healthy foods, such as fruits and vegetables, are typically underrepresented in television advertisements (Harrison & Marske, 2005). A recent study conducted in Spain also reported on the nutritional value of the promoted food (Jiménez-Morales et al., 2019). This study concluded that foods that are poor in nutrients but high in sugar are especially prevalent in advertisements aimed at children. Moreover, these unhealthy foods are also presented in a positive discourse by linking them to positive states and experiences. This research found that the lower the nutritional value of the advertised products, the higher the number of verbs and adjectives linked to positive states and experiences. As such, positive emotions are linked to consuming unhealthy products.

Montaña, Jiménez-Morales, and Vázquez (2019) highlight that such portrayals are problematic and warn against the risk of using arguments such as happiness or other positive feelings to advertise products aimed at audiences as sensitive as children.

In sum, the current literature showed that the ads that children see on television present appearance-related products and/or stereotyped beauty characters, encouraging children to attain these beauty standards, as well as unhealthy food choices promoting unhealthy eating behaviors.

The Effects of Television Advertising on Children's Body Image

The biased elements that characterize advertisements targeted at children deserve attention. More precisely, the literature has argued that advertising plays a relevant role in the construction of body image (Halliwell & Diedrichs, 2014; Sánchez-Reina et al., in press).

As for the biased messages on appearance ideals, the literature explains that children can develop an unhealthy body image through three routes.

First, in the advertising discourse, thinness is synonymous with beauty and social success (Morris & Katzman, 2003). Research argues that such messages evoke the internalization of appearance ideals, which can be defined as the development of an intrinsic motivation to comply with socially defined beauty ideals. Such internalization can occur at a very early age (Morris & Katzman, 2003). One study showed that girls who were regularly exposed to television content that promotes narrowly defined appearance ideals reported higher levels of internalization and thus mainly valued themselves for their physical attractiveness (Slater & Tiggemann, 2016). This internalization was, in turn, linked to a negative body image (Slater & Tiggemann, 2016). Other studies have reported similar relationships (Arcan, Bruening, & Story, 2013; Harrison, 2000; Rodgers, Damiano, Wertheim, & Paxton, 2017).

Second, the presentation of models can trigger comparison processes. Social comparison theory notes that individuals have a tendency to compare themselves to others (Festinger, 1954).

By comparing oneself with others, individuals aim to determine how they perform in comparison with the model. If the model is perceived as superior, the comparison process is labeled an upward comparison process. Young children already engage in upward comparison processes regarding their appearance. Such comparison processes can be harmful. In this view, one study showed that children who regularly engaged in appearance-related comparisons with media figures were more likely to report negative feelings about their own bodies (Tatangelo & Ricciardelli, 2017). The same process seems to occur when exposed to biased messages in TV advertising: the emphasis on physical appearance in TV advertising has been linked to body dissatisfaction and potential eating disorders among young children (Ogletree et al., 1990).

Third, the self-discrepancy theory of Higgins (1987) explains that there are several domains of self-including. “Self” and “including” are two different words, so “including” refers to those two elements (actual and ideal self) of which the self consists. Following Higgins (1987), these are the domains of self-including: 1) one’s actual self (i.e. what someone actually looks like) and 2) ideal self (i.e. what someone ideally would look like). Children have been shown to have already developed a sense of who they are and should be. One study showed that 52 percent of girls and 44 percent of boys desired a thinner body and thus experienced discrepancies between their actual self and their ideal self (Ambrosi-Randić, 2000). When children are regularly exposed to ideal appearances in television commercials, it is likely that the discrepancy between their actual self and their ideal self increases. Support for such media effects have been reported in adolescent samples (Harrison, 2001), yet research among children is lacking.

For the biased messages on unhealthy food, literature indicates that ads can prime positive expectancies of an unhealthy diet (Harris, Bargh, & Brownell, 2009). Priming literature further explains that such positive expectancies will be more powerful when children are more frequently exposed to the advertising messages on unhealthy food. Moreover, the priming effects will be stronger when a child has recently watched a television advertisement promoting unhealthy food (Hansen & Hansen, 1988). Because of the reward cognitions that are primed

through exposure to television advertisements on unhealthy foods, children will long more strongly for such food and accordingly consume them more frequently. Studies have supported this reasoning and repeatedly found that exposure to television food commercials increases children's food intake ([Boyland et al., 2016](#); [Halford, Gillespie, Brown, Pontin, & Dovey, 2004](#)).

Advertising Literacy as a Body Dissatisfaction Prevention Tool

According to [Morris and Katzman \(2003\)](#) the literature suggests that children and adolescents are particularly vulnerable to messages conveyed through the mass media. Many children cannot discriminate between what they see on television and what exists in the real world.

In this sense, research has pointed to the need to give children critical tools in order to process advertising messages ([Fenton, Brooks, Spencer, & Morgan, 2010](#); [Teletov & Ivanova, 2015](#); [Yamamiya, Cash, Melnyk, Posavac, & Posavac, 2005](#)). Such critical skills are typically developed through media literacy trainings.

Advertising literacy includes the skills of recognizing, analyzing, and evaluating persuasive messages across a variety of contexts and media formats ([Young, 2003](#)). This concept thus refers to in-depth knowledge about the advertising discourse and implies that a media user has the skills necessary to critically cope with advertising messages ([De Jans, van de Sompel, Hudders, & Cauberghe, 2019](#)).

[John \(1999\)](#) points out that there are three phases in how children learn to comprehend and cope with advertising messages. The first phase is called the “perceptual phase” and involves children aged three to seven years old. In this phase, children are positive about advertising and have difficulties understanding the persuasive intentions of the ads. As described by [Vanwesenbeecket et al. \(2016\)](#), children in this phase “have a positive but naïve attitude towards advertising, a limited understanding and a very limited ability to develop deep thought on appropriateness and fairness”.

The second phase is the “analytical phase” and includes children from 7 to 11 years old. These children have more advanced knowledge about how advertising works. They recognize commercial content and have developed more critical thoughts about advertising. The third phase is called the “reflective phase” and corresponds to the preadolescence stage (age 11 to 16). Children are more critical at this age and usually show a negative attitude towards advertising.

Although children typically have different levels of advertising literacy according to their age, it is relevant to stimulate such skills in children. [Rozendaal, Lapierre, van Reijmersdal, and Buijzen \(2011\)](#) argued that educational programs are needed to improve children’s ability to recognize the persuasive intent of advertising. Research has indeed demonstrated that such programs increase children’s understanding of messages, the selling intent, and the persuasive strategy of the advertisements ([Nelson, 2015](#); [Sekarasih, Scharrer, Olson, Onut, & Lanthorn, 2018](#)). According to [Wolf-Bloom \(1999\)](#), possessing skills to deconstruct such images would enable children to challenge the myths and beliefs about physical stereotypes depicted in advertising. As such, advertising literacy could be used as a tool to prevent disturbing body image outcomes, even at early ages ([O’Dea, 2005](#); [Wiseman, Sunday, & Becker, 2005](#)). Research on food advertising literacy, for example, found that participation in a media literacy intervention increased children’s nutritional knowledge and prevented them from making purchasing decisions based on superficial elements, such as the color of the packaging or the spokesperson used in the ad ([Liao, Lai, Chang, & Lee, 2016](#)). Similarly, research on body image has found that media literacy lessons helped to reduce the internalization of body ideals among early adolescent boys and girls ([Wilksch, Tiggemann, & Wade, 2006](#)).

Overall, the processes described earlier between TV advertising and body image can be visualized in [Figure 6.1](#).

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Figure 6.1 Relations between promotion of beauty ideals and unhealthy food choices in television ads, literacy skills, and body image

Conclusion

This chapter analyzed the most frequent stereotypes that children encounter in television advertising and how such media content affects their body image. We indicated that television advertising includes contradictory content. The literature demonstrates that television advertising promotes appearance ideals but at the same time also encourages unhealthy snacking behavior. So, while the advertising discourse pushes children to consume products that lead to obesity, they also remind them of the need to be thin or muscular to succeed in life. This combination of a focus on unhealthy foods and on beauty and thinness in advertising leads to confusion and dissatisfaction among children. More specifically, these dual messages may trigger children to develop obesity (because of the promotion of unhealthy food) and body dissatisfaction (because of deviating from the promoted appearance ideals). Both obesity and body dissatisfaction enhance the development of eating disorders and other disturbing body image outcomes. With regard to these adversarial outcomes of TV ads, research has pointed at advertising literacy skills to protect children from such outcomes and teach them how to critically evaluate advertisements. An adequate educational base that trains in media literacy from an early age would thus give children useful tools to interpret the persuasive messages they receive daily. Besides advertising literacy, we consider that more efforts should be made to ensure children's well-being. Taking into consideration that television viewing by children is not limited to child-protection hours, both the advertised products and their persuasive strategy should be more regulated.

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