

Images of thin women help self-esteem, study suggests

'Moderately heavy' models found to be a negative force

By MISTY HARRIS
CANWEST NEWS SERVICE

The fashion industry, long criticized for its use of skinnier-than-thou models, has found some support for its practices in a study in the March issue of the Journal of Consumer Research.

The new report suggests media images of thin women actually have a positive impact on self-esteem because they focus the female viewer's thoughts on her likeness to the models — not, as was previously believed, the ways in which her body is different.

For the same reasons, "moderately heavy" models were found to be a negative force on self-esteem because women assimilated the images as a reflection of their own physical flaws.

"Our findings might explain why Mode magazine, which featured only plus-sized models, folded after just four years because of low circulation rates," write study authors Dirk Smeesters and Naomi Mandel, both assistant professors of marketing.

"Fashion and beauty magazine readers may aspire to achieve the thin ideal on the cover, and without promises of attaining such an ideal, there might be no reason to buy the magazine."

In pretests, randomly selected women were asked to rate the attractiveness and weight of the models in a series of advertisements. Based on these evaluations, researchers selected for their experiments four ads featuring models of equal beauty but different size — extremely thin, moderately thin, moderately heavy and extremely heavy.

Questionnaire

In the first experiment, participants — none of whom were aware of the study's intention — had their conceptions about appearance and self-esteem gauged through a questionnaire after viewing each ad. A second experiment had participants view the ads then perform a test in which their responses to weight-related words were timed.

Mandel, who teaches at Arizona State University, says the positive influence of the images depends on how extreme the models' weight was. An "ex-



SKINNY: A model wears an outfit by British designer Giles Deacon during his catwalk show Friday at London Fashion Week in London. A new study suggests viewing such thin models may boost women's self-esteem. AP photo: Alastair Grant

tremely thin" model will bring about a reversal of the self-esteem effect because women begin comparing themselves to the image rather than identifying the similarities.

Mandel believes this is likely the reason high-fashion advertisers and magazines such as Vogue have resorted to using models whose emaciated frames weigh less than their designer clothes.

"You have to first create a problem in the consumer's mind and then offer a credible solution," she says. "It's better to use extremely thin models because that's what makes women feel bad about themselves and want to buy the products advertised."

The study, conducted in partnership with the Netherlands' Tilberg Univer-

sity, consisted of two experiments in which groups comprising 62 and 84 female students were assembled. Most participants were young and had a body mass index within the normal range, which may have affected the results.

Jennifer L. Pozner, director of the media analysis and advocacy group Women In Media & News, believes the bigger concern may be in the pretests' determination of each model's size.

"One woman's 'moderately thin' is another woman's 'I'm never going to be pretty enough' albatross," she says.

"We have airbrushed out, starved out, photo-collaged out every bit of 'excess flab,' muscles and pores so these women presented as 'moderately thin' are the same ones who, 20 years ago, would be considered underweight."

Wonder Woman's cellulite

Where Linda Carter's Wonder Woman was once considered a pillar of female beauty, Pozner says "today, they'd sell her (cellulite) reduction cream and get her a membership to Curves or Bally's so she could lose that bulge in 10 days."

Andi Zeisler, editorial director of the magazine Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture, says the way a model's size is interpreted "really depends on how much you've internalized the dictates of advertising and pop culture."

"The infamous Dove ads, for instance, feature women who in the context of traditional advertising would be considered 'moderately heavy'; given the looks of most real-world women, however, they could just as easily be considered 'moderately thin.'"

Mandel says her research leads her to believe Dove's recent success is linked to the immense publicity the company received for using "real women," not the appeal of the women themselves.

A spokeswoman for the company disagrees.

"This is only one study," says Sharon MacLeod, Dove marketing manager.

"In contrast, we have heard from thousands of women who have thanked us and asked us to continue to represent women in a way that is genuine and real."

BELATED VALENTINE SENT

Firefighters braved sleet to rescue a valentine that got snagged in a tree after a boy sent it into the sky by balloon for his mother, who died of cancer last fall.

Seven-year-old Joel Enriquez had made the valentine — a pink heart with purple heart stickers and the message "I miss you" — for Maria Enriquez at a grief support group in Lincoln, Neb. The first-grader took the valentine to his school, attached it to balloons and went outside with his 13-year-old brother and classmates to release the balloons. But the curly ribbon got tangled on tree branches.

Thursday, Capt. Arnold Jensen climbed 12 metres up an extended ladder and, after a couple of attempts, grabbed the deflated balloons, cut the ribbons and brought down the valentine. Another firefighter pulled three red balloons from the truck, helped Joel attach the valentine, and the boy released the balloons.

"I think she got your valentine," a school official said, and Joel smiled. — AP

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Canadian warships, fighter jets and the country's only operational submarine will head out of Halifax harbour Monday to begin exercises with the U.S. navy.

The three-week mission, to be conducted off Nova Scotia, Norfolk, Va., and Boston, will also include Auroras and Canadian land forces. The exercises are aimed at testing combat capabilities dealing with anti-submarine warfare, electronic warfare and boarding operations.

HMCS Montreal will be the flagship in the exercise and will be joined by HMC Ships Ville de Quebec, Preserver, Summerside and Moncton and the submarine, HMCS Windsor.



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