

# Media Effects and Body Image Perceptions on Youth

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## INTRODUCTION

Youth are becoming more obese and making poorer lifestyle choices. With the ever-expanding power of the media, it is important that youth practitioners recognize the media's potential to influence youth to have a poor body image and an overall unhealthy lifestyle. Although it is easy to solely blame the media, media has more power than ever before and adolescents are especially susceptible to these influences because they are often susceptible to undue media influence as they search for their own identity and self-concept (Derenne & Beresin, 2006).

## RESEARCH TO PRACTICE POINTS

1. Television advertisements have significant impact on youth including product choices and overall perceptions of gender roles.
2. The tendency for preadolescent and adolescent females to compare their bodies to women represented in the media increases with age.
3. Increased exposure to television, magazines and movies put youth at a higher risk of adopting unhealthy lifestyle habits.

## DETAILS ON RESEARCH TO PRACTICE POINTS

*Television advertisements have significant impact on youth including product choices and overall perceptions of gender roles (Aruna, & Shradha, 2008)*

Television advertisements impact youth of both genders. For example, patterns of consumption of products, fashion choices, and memory of a product are greater when an attractive spokesperson is used or a celebrity personality is present in the advertisement (Aruna, & Shradha, 2008). Spokespersons are often thinner, weighing 23% less than the average woman. Some researchers even believe that advertisers portray unrealistically thin bodies, in order to create an unattainable desire that can drive product consumption. Research often shows that women frequently compare themselves to others they see around them. Therefore, when female adolescents look at thin models, they feel less confident in themselves. Additionally, young males are increasingly receiving pressure from advertisements to become more muscular. This effect has also caused youth males to become increasingly insecure with their physical appearances (Body Image and Advertising, 2000).

*The tendency for preadolescent and adolescent females to compare their bodies to women represented in the media increases with age (Martin & Kennedy, 1993).*

Female adolescents tend to compare themselves to models in television advertisements more frequently as they age. Although this comparison sometimes begins as early as fourth grade, the frequency of the comparisons in terms of self-perceptions of individual physical attractiveness rises as females get older—especially for those with lower levels of self-esteem. Additionally, even one time exposure to attractive advertising models raises comparison standards for physical attractiveness.

*Increased exposure to television, magazines and movies put youth at a higher risk of adopting unhealthy lifestyle habits (Derenne & Beresin, 2006).*

Based on powerful media messages, female youth are more likely to adopt unhealthy eating habits at an earlier age, while male youth are more likely to become more concerned with their body image, e.g., shape and weight. Girls will often resort to unhealthy diets, bulimia, and anorexia after viewing images of unattainable models in advertisements while boys will often resort to the use of anabolic steroids and over exercising to achieve a perceived aesthetic standard.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

While efforts need to be made to get advertisers to redefine gender roles, it is also imperative that parents and practitioners take the necessary steps to help promote healthy projections of body image for men and women alike. This can be done by parents and youth practitioners as they interact with youth concerning media messages and healthy lifestyles (Derenne & Beresin, 2006).

Research does show that the comparison to models in advertisements decreases over time (Martin & Kennedy, 1993). Overall, it is merely important to recognize the fact that since this comparison decreases over time that the socialized period between fourth and twelfth grade is crucial in terms of developing positive perceptions of the self (Martin & Kennedy, 1993). Therefore, it is crucial that efforts take place during adolescence to help youth confirm realistic body images and promote healthy body perceptions.

Other strategies to incorporate at home include parents providing regular family meals, limiting the amount of time children watch television to one to two hours per day and accompanying this with discussion of what is seen while viewing in order to reinforce reality versus perception in terms of body image and gender roles (Derenne & Beresin, 2006).

Parents often forget the examples they set are the ones that leave the greatest impression on their children. Therefore, parents who maintain healthy attitudes and model healthy behaviors will teach their children to make healthier choices and view themselves as healthier individuals (Natenshon, 2006).

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