

Media and Body Image

Exposure to Media and Advertising

It is hard to quantify our daily exposure to media and advertising – we are constantly bombarded with media messages through a huge variety of formats including billboards, television, radio, magazines, newspapers, product placement and digital media.

Media and Body Image

There is a great deal of evidence that what we see and hear in the media influences the way we think and feel about ourselves.

The images we see in the media do not represent a true cross section of society as they almost exclusively feature young people who fit the beauty ideals. The ‘ideal’ body differs between different cultures, and has changed over time. Currently, in western culture, the female body ideal glorifies excessive thinness and the male body ideal tends to emphasise the importance of excessive muscle mass.



It is no secret that many images we see in media are digitally manipulated— in fact the word ‘Photoshop’ is now a part of our everyday language and even appears in the dictionary. Often the images we see in the media are digitally manipulated to reflect societal ideals about body shape (thin women and muscular men). Now we not only see a limited selection of body types, the bodies we see are almost always digitally altered, creating an even larger difference between the images we see and reality. For further information, there are some great online resources such as: <http://mediasmarts.ca/digital-media-literacy/media-issues/body-image> OR <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYhCn0jf46U>

Comparisons with Others

Only a few people in western society have bodies that naturally match up with those ‘ideal’ images. As a result, many people feel bad because they perceive themselves as ‘not good enough’. Additionally, the images we see in all kinds of media are often unattainable as they have been digitally altered—even the person shown in the image does not look like that in real life! So it is unrealistic and dangerous to compare ourselves to those images.

Social Media

Currently it is not only images in professionally created media that affect us. There are many social networking websites and photo sharing applications through which we see snapshots of other people’s lives. It is important to remember that the images shared by other people through these media are often carefully created and selected. For example, people can dedicate significant time and effort into the styling, lighting and pose when taking a photo. There are readily available applications that they can use to filter photos and edit their appearance in photos with little effort and no special technical skills or software. And of course, people only tend to share the images that they feel good about!

Advertising

The purpose of advertising is to persuade consumers to buy a product or service. If consumers can be influenced to feel dissatisfied with who they are or what they have, advertisers can offer their product as a ‘solution’.



What is Media Literacy?

Media literacy refers to thinking critically about the media we are exposed to. It involves taking a step back, analysing and evaluating media with a spirit of scepticism and inquiry. This can include asking questions such as:

- Who created this message?
- Who paid for it?
- What is the purpose of this message?
- Who is the target audience?
- Who might benefit from this message?
- Who might be harmed by this message?
- Is this fact or opinion? How credible is this?
- What are the sources of this information?
- In what ways has this image been manipulated? (e.g. lighting, makeup, camera angles, digital alterations)
- What body shapes are shown more positively or negatively than others? Why is this?
- What body shapes are not shown at all? And why?
- Do I agree with the values in this message?



By becoming more objective and critical about the media messages we are exposed to we are in a better position to decide how much we want to believe these messages.