

# How does media exposure affect self-esteem in overweight and underweight women?

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Overweight women's self-esteem plummets when they view photographs of models of any size, according to a new study in *Journal of Consumer Research*. And underweight women's esteem increases, regardless of models' size.

Authors Dirk Smeesters (Erasmus University, the Netherlands), Thomas Mussweiler (University of Cologne, Germany), and Naomi Mandel (Arizona State University) researched the ways individuals with different body mass indexes (BMIs) felt when they were exposed to thin or heavy media models.

"Our research confirms earlier research that found that normal [body mass index](#) (BMI) females' self-esteem can shift upwards or downwards depending on the model they are exposed to," the authors write. "Normal BMI females (with BMIs between 18.5 and 25) have higher levels of self-esteem when exposed to moderately thin models (because they feel similar to these models) and extremely heavy models (because they feel dissimilar to these models). However, they have lower levels of self-esteem when exposed to moderately heavy models (because they feel similar) and extremely thin models (because they feel dissimilar)."

This research provides important new insights into how [media exposure](#) affects the self-esteem of overweight and underweight women.

"Underweight women's self-esteem always increases, regardless of the model they look at," the authors explain. "On the other hand, overweight women's self-esteem always decreases, regardless of the model they look

at." Perhaps surprisingly, overweight and underweight women showed comparable levels of self-esteem when they weren't looking at models.

Advertisements also affected participants' eating behavior and intentions to diet and exercise. For example, overweight participants ate fewer cookies and had higher intentions to diet and exercise when exposed to heavy models than when exposed to thin models.

"We recommend that overweight consumers attempt to avoid looking at ads with any models, thin or heavy (perhaps by avoiding women's magazines)," the authors conclude.

More information: Dirk Smeesters, Thomas Mussweiler, and Naomi Mandel. "The Effects of Thin and Heavy Media Images on Overweight and Underweight Consumers: Social Comparison Processes and Behavioral Implications." [Journal of Consumer Research](#): April 2010

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