

How images of other body sizes influence the way women view their own body size

May 9 2018, by Bob Yirka



Example of stimuli used (left: 'underweight'; middle: 'normal weight'; right: 'overweight'). Credit: *Royal Society Open Science* (2018). DOI: 10.1098/rsos.171387

A team of researchers affiliated with several institutions in the U.K. has found that when women of "normal" weight look at pictures of skinny women, they feel less positive about their own bodies. In their paper published in the journal *Royal Society Open Science*, the group describes two experiments they conducted with volunteers and what they found.

Anecdotal evidence has suggested that [negative body image](#) is increased when women compare themselves to other, skinnier women. This issue has been in the news of late as some have suggested that using thinner-than-average women in advertising has a negative impact on women in general. In this effort, the researchers sought to test this notion by asking female volunteers to rate their bodies and then to look at pictures of other women. Afterward, each was given chocolate to eat and asked to rate their own [body](#) again.

The researchers ran two experiments. In the first, 90 young women with "normal" bodies (those with a BMI in the 22–23 kg m⁻² range) were broken into three groups and looked at photographs of women of different sizes. The women in the photographs were actually the same women in the images from the first session—the team manipulated the images to make them look thinner or heavier. They also tested the degree of body dissatisfaction in the volunteers by measuring how much chocolate each of the volunteers consumed afterward.

The second experiment was identical to the first, except that only volunteers who self-identified as having high body dissatisfaction were included. They were also followed up a day later.

The researchers report that the women in both groups were more critical of their own bodies after viewing pictures of skinny women, but not after viewing "normal" sized or heavier women. In fact, the women reported seeing their own bodies and those of others of "normal" weight as being smaller in the latter cases. They also found no change in the

amount of chocolate eaten regardless of what the women viewed.

The researchers suggest their findings indicate that advertisers using images of abnormally thin women contribute to body dissatisfaction in women. Switching to models of [normal weight](#), they suggest, would likely help [women](#) feel better about their bodies. Such a change, they further suggest, might help curb rising obesity rates.

More information: Helen Bould et al. Effects of exposure to bodies of different sizes on perception of and satisfaction with own body size: two randomized studies, *Royal Society Open Science* (2018). [DOI: 10.1098/rsos.171387](#)

Abstract

Body dissatisfaction is prevalent among women and associated with subsequent obesity and eating disorders. Exposure to images of bodies of different sizes has been suggested to change the perception of 'normal' body size in others. We tested whether exposure to different-sized (otherwise identical) bodies changes perception of own and others' body size, satisfaction with body size and amount of chocolate consumed. In Study 1, 90 18–25-year-old women with normal BMI were randomized into one of three groups to complete a 15 min two-back task using photographs of women either of 'normal weight' (Body Mass Index (BMI) 22–23 kg m⁻²), or altered to appear either under- or over-weight. Study 2 was identical except the 96 participants had high baseline body dissatisfaction and were followed up after 24 h. We also conducted a mega-analysis combining both studies. Participants rated size of others' bodies, own size, and satisfaction with size pre- and post-task. Post-task ratings were compared between groups, adjusting for pre-task ratings. Participants exposed to over- or normal-weight images subsequently perceived others' bodies as smaller, in comparison to those shown underweight bodies (p

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