

# CAP and BCAP's evaluation of the evidence on the impact of advertising on body image

## Introduction

On 29th October CAP and BCAP (B/CAP), authors of the UK Advertising Codes<sup>1</sup> (the Codes), received a letter from Jo Swinson MP on behalf of the Campaign for Body Confidence along with references for 172 studies to demonstrate the harmful effects of media images on body image and behaviours. The letter calls on B/CAP to adopt the following policies and amend the Codes:

- Policy 1. No digitally altered models in advertising aimed at under 16s
- Policy 2. Clear labelling of digitally altered models in all other advertising.
- Policy 3. Models used in Fashion Weeks to have a health certificate from an eating disorder specialist, in order to protect their health and well-being
- Policy 4. Encouragement for use of diverse and healthy body sizes in all media models.
- Policy 5. Media literacy programmes about 'perfected' models as part of school curricula to encourage critical awareness and resilience in children and adolescents.

B/CAP considers that only policy objectives 1 and 2 properly concern the Codes and that the other policies are matters for the advertising industry, not the self-regulatory system.

Ms Swinson's letter indicates that further research on the effects of labeling of advertising that features airbrushed images is currently underway. B/CAP considers that, as an evidence based regulator, it is imperative that it has that research before it can reasonably assess the effectiveness of policy objective 2. Therefore, B/CAP has assessed the studies against policy objective 1 only: that is, the proposal for a ban on all digitally altered models in advertising aimed at those under 16.

## Summary

The studies are separated into three categories: experimental, correlational and longitudinal.

- Some studies argue that the use of unrealistic ideals of beauty in the media are a possible cause of body dissatisfaction amongst girls, while others state that no causal link can be inferred and are equivocal about the cumulative effects of exposure;
- The desire to conform to what the studies variously identify to be the media ideal was found in children as young as 12;
- High levels of body dissatisfaction were more pronounced in girls, yet some studies reported that some girls responded neutrally or even positively to media images. One study indicated that detrimental effects do not always occur when girls were instructed to view images for the purpose of self-improvement or self-enhancement;
- Media images have little to no effect on boys' body image;
- Participants that were shown ads that presented the "body as process" (i.e. the body as functional and of greater importance than its own appearance) reported higher self esteem than those who were shown ads where the body was shown as an "object" evaluated on only aesthetic qualities;
- Girls' perception of their own attractiveness decreases with age;
- Girls who have internalised the "thin ideal" have a greater tendency to compare their bodies with models and subsequently respond negatively towards media images: the tendency to compare one's physical attractiveness with that of models was shown to increase with age;
- Some studies suggest that psychological factors can contribute indirectly to the tendency for social comparison and internalisation. Some girls may be "appearance-schematic" and predisposed to having a strong belief in the importance of appearance;

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<sup>1</sup> Further information about the Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP) UK Code of Non-broadcast Advertising, Sales Promotion and Direct Marketing and the Broadcast Committee of Advertising Practice (BCAP) UK Code of Broadcast Advertising can be found at <http://www.cap.org.uk>.

- In most studies, mothers, peers and the media combined were perceived to encourage girls to lose weight, but most boys and girls reported that the opinions of their peers had the greatest influence over them;
- In some studies, although girls expressed a desire to be thinner, they reported that they were happy with their appearance; however, other studies showed that most girls aged 5-12 were unhappy with their bodies and wanted to lose weight;<sup>2</sup>
- Some studies suggest that “appearance-focused” TV programming, soaps, music videos and sports have a detrimental effect on satisfaction with one’s appearance and body esteem, whereas general TV viewing and “appearance-focused” magazines do not;
- Some studies focus on the harmful effects of fashion magazine images and the way they can predict a drive for thinness, while other studies show that the same “appearance-focused” magazines have no impact on body satisfaction.

## B/CAP analysis

The studies show that some girls have low body satisfaction and that they frequently report that they believe the media places “pressure” upon them to lose weight. However, a substantial proportion of the evidence does not pertain to advertising and the conclusions drawn are markedly equivocal. None of the studies analyse what aspects of the media cause this “pressure” and it is assumed that pressure is attributable to the mere presence of a slender, attractive model.

A large proportion of the studies have small, non-randomized sample sizes meaning their conclusions lack force and are not representative of the wider population of under-16s. While studies conclude that media imagery causes harmful effects, most concede that the correlational nature of their research approach makes it impossible to infer causality and “prove” that the media image has caused a long-term harmful effect. One study states there is no longitudinal evidence for “a direct causal effect of media exposure on body image or disordered eating.”<sup>3</sup> The tendency to infer causality when the evidence base does not support it was highlighted in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) (as was) report on the commercialisation of children last year, which stated “Associations between phenomena may be interesting and important to identify, and they may tell us a great deal. However, they are not evidence of a causal connection, and they should not be presented as such, or mistaken for one.”<sup>4</sup>

Many studies rely on self-reporting which, while not in itself problematic, means that the data cannot be relied upon when trying to ascertain what precisely affects body image: is it the slender nature of the woman, the clothing or the often unrealistic nature of ads that provokes viewers to compare themselves to an image? These studies accept that young people may not be aware of the pressure the media exerts upon them and therefore underestimate its impact but, conversely, they may overestimate the effect of media images. In one study girls reported a low exposure to thin ideal media images, yet they also reported a feeling that society, and the media, placed pressure on them to be thin.

While the experimental studies tend to use images that could be found in conventional ads as stimuli, they are often manipulated or shown in un-naturalistic settings. In one case an image included a headline which stated “Compare yourself...Are you just as beautiful?” which does not reflect the general tone or content of most advertising. Furthermore, the questions participants were asked in many studies directly invited them to think about how their bodies compared to that of a model in an ad, actively engaging the alleged harmful comparative thinking.

It should also be noted that the studies do not refer to airbrushing as cited in the policy objective, and conflate images of beauty with images of thinness. It is therefore unclear whether the appearance of attractive women whether in advertising or real life would have the same purported effects.

The studies also refer to media in a generic form which does not allow a distinction to be made between advertising and editorial material. We know from Ofcom’s Media Literacy report that children have a capacity to be critical about advertising material<sup>5</sup>; however, a significant proportion of children are likely to believe that

<sup>2</sup> In Field’s Exposure to the Mass Media and Weight Concerns Among Girls 59% of girls were dissatisfied with their bodies and wanted to lose weight, whereas in Sand’s Internalisation of ideal body shapes in 9-12 year old girls, 67% were satisfied with their weight and only 22% perceived themselves as too fat.

<sup>3</sup> Tiggemann (2006)

<sup>4</sup> The Impact of the Commercial World on Children’s Wellbeing, p 73

<sup>5</sup> Ofcom Audit on Children’s Media Literacy 2010

documentaries, reality shows and the news present a truthful picture of events. B/CAP considers it integral to an understanding of how children engage with media images that research is able to differentiate between media as it is crucial in assessing how most children are likely to interact and respond to material. This is borne out in the studies themselves. Several studies highlight the effect of soap operas on young people and show that while general TV viewing may not cause harmful effects, watching soaps could. The most common reason for this differentiation is the “realness” that soaps portray: young people are likely to consider soaps as accurate portrayals of real life so that a programme saturated with images of thin people is more likely than other types of programme to affirm that all women should look like that. That is clearly not how children view advertising that, as a form, is distinct in its artifice and commercial aims which children can recognise.

The studies do indicate that girls who are already predisposed to comparative thinking or have low body esteem or satisfaction are more likely to engage with media images in a way that exacerbates those feelings. Although the studies identify this as an area of potential risk, they are not clear that the media causes low self esteem, body satisfaction or exacerbates existing problems. A number of studies suggest that it may be low body satisfaction that drives some girls towards idealised media images as either affirmation for their own views or as inspiration. One study in particular notes that some magazine editorial may “provide the panacea”<sup>6</sup> to the problem through articles that may reduce or relieve body image discrepancy or distress.

### B/CAP conclusions

Images of slim, beautiful women are widespread in advertising, editorial and programming. However, as long as ads do not mislead, harm or offend, B/CAP considers that a ban on digitally altered models in advertising aimed at under-16s would be ineffective and disproportionate. It is worth quoting the conclusions of *The Impact of the Commercial World on Children's Wellbeing* report on children and body image at length:

It is obviously likely that people will be influenced by dominant ideas about physical attractiveness. Even so, evidence of the effects of this material is mixed and inconclusive ... studies do not consistently show that such exposure increases body dissatisfaction. Furthermore, they can only measure short-term effects: there is no evidence that such effects (which sometimes appear relatively dramatic) are lasting or cumulative ... Ultimately, such studies may tell us about what can happen in the artificial context of the psychologist's laboratory (when subjects – who are mostly college students – might perhaps be able to guess the kinds of responses that are expected), but they tell us nothing about what *does* happen in real life.<sup>7</sup>

B/CAP considers that assessment of the evidence applies equally to the studies sent by Jo Swinson MP and that those studies do not offer persuasive evidence to support a proposal to include a rule that bans digitally altered models in advertising aimed at under-16s.

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<sup>6</sup> Harrison (2001)

<sup>7</sup> *The Impact of the Commercial World on Children's Wellbeing*, p 118-119.