

Effect of Television Advertisements on Body Image and Self-Esteem of Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

For many years, we have been aware of the media's portrayal of the 'ideal' body of young male and female genders. The controversy over the relationship between body image, self-esteem and media influence is neither new nor much closer to being resolved. While there seems to be a general consensus that the mass media does tend to influence one's perception of body image and self-esteem, effect of specific subtypes of mass media platform remain unexplored with regard to qualitative literature. This study examines one such vast domain of media i.e., television advertisements with the objective to know its effect on body image and self-esteem of young adults. For this purpose, a semi-structured interview was employed and conducted with 50 participants: 25 females and 25 males, ranging in the age of 18-25 years. The interviews were analyzed using Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis method. Three highlighting themes were elicited: Issues with Television Advertisements; Deteriorating Body Image and Self-Doubt and Newer Perspective. These findings suggest that television advertisements have negatively impacted body image perception and self-esteem of young adults. With respect to television advertisements, the findings of this study also throw light on what modifications brands could bring about to increase their reach, expectations and acceptability by young adult viewers. Limitations of these finding and implications are discussed at the end.

Keywords: *Body Image, Self-Esteem, Advertisements*

Body image is the way a person perceives his/her body to be. It is the representation of one's body that is held within the mind. It is a multidimensional concept and encompasses: Beliefs about appearance, including memories and assumptions; feelings about the body, including its size and shape and perception of the body and the sense of embodiment. Body image is thought to be fluid and dynamic in nature and can be influenced by factors such as interpersonal experience, personality, and social and cultural norms. Originally, it was believed that body image is a mirror image of what objectively exists in the world, but that certain pathologies could interfere with this perceptual process (e.g., phantom limb pain or anorexia nervosa). However, more recent literature suggests that body image is strongly influenced by a variety of factors, including, but not limited to, psychological, social, cultural, biological, historical, and individual factors (Cash &

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Smolak, 2011). Body image satisfaction/dissatisfaction are more than just a relationship between one's self and one's body. Body image satisfaction and eloped concept of positive body image perception occurs when an individual feels a balance or stability in terms of his perceived body image and actual body image. Body dissatisfaction is said to be present when there is a discrepancy between one's perceived ideal body image and actual body image.

Self-esteem refers to an individual's sense/variance of worth, abilities, potential, value, approval, competencies and importance one places on himself or herself. According to Rosenberg (1965), self-esteem refers to "one's positive or negative attitude toward oneself and one's evaluation of one's own thoughts and feelings overall in relation to oneself"^[4]. In a similar notion, Sedikides and Gress (2003) stated that "self-esteem refers to individual's perception or subjective appraisal of one's own self-worth, one's feelings of self-respect and self-confidence and the extent to which the individual holds positive or negative views about self"^[5]. A lot of factors tend to impact an individual's self-esteem including genetics, personality, life experiences, age, health, thoughts, social circumstances, the reactions of others comparing the self to others etc. On a spectrum, self-esteem can range from low to high extremities. Individuals with high self-esteem tend to be appreciate of themselves, lead meaningful lives, see the world in realistic dimensions and accept it for the way it is, and have positive views about their selves. On the other hand, individuals with low self-esteem usually but not generally, tend to place a doubt on their selfhood, have negative views of self, have feelings of not being good enough, are low on resilience etc.

METHODOLOGY

Purpose

There is a vast literature and ample number of studies done to understand the effect of media on body image and self-esteem of young adults. These studies are very widespread and cover a vast domain i.e., media in general and are mostly quantitative in nature and in most of them female subjects are selected as participants. The purpose of this study is focused on television advertisements in particular and to bridge the gap between existing research and thus gain a better understanding of personal experiences, emotions, thought, views and feelings by giving equal representation to both the male and female genders.

Sample

For the current study, convenience sampling method was used. The participants included 25 females and 25 males (total 50 participants), falling in the age range of 18-35 years. This age group was chosen because until recently, majority of the qualitative studies done on this topic focused on other age groups. To ensure a high level of representativeness both genders (male and female) were included in the sampling criterion. Due to the nature of this study, it was crucial to have full, in-depth understanding of the experiences of the participants hence, a small sample size was chosen.

Procedure

For this study, semi structured interview(s) were utilized for data collection. Semi structured interview is a type of interview in which the interviewer asks the interviewee open ended questions and he/she is expected to answer in detail about the same and it provides freedom around direct questions. The interviewer usually probes the interviewee during the interview to elicit a broad domain of responses for a better and detailed understanding of his/her experiences, thoughts, views, opinions etc. This builds up a framework and structure around the entire process yet, leaves space for flexibility of answers. An interview guide was

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prepared after reviewing the literature. Before conducting the interview(s), participants were made to sign an online consent form and were made aware that their responses would be recorded via an audio recorder, confidentiality was ensured and right to voluntary participation and leaving the study for any reason at any time was notified. After obtaining consent from the participants, interviews were carried out according to their suitable timings. On average, each interview lasted for about fifteen minutes. Probing technique was utilized by the researcher whenever it was required. The participants were thanked for their time, cooperation and valuable responses. Thematic analysis was performed on the accumulative data and the findings were coded and themes were emerged from the same.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After analyzing the data, three themes emerged; namely- Issues with Television Advertisements, Deteriorating Body Image & Self-Doubt and Newer Perspective.

Theme 1 – Issues with Television Advertisements

In response to questions on atypical depiction/prototypes of bodies participants gave detailed responses along with citing examples and giving references. Most of them stated that there is a certain ‘type’ of body that is depicted in these advertisements in terms of both male and female bodies. Male bodies were shown with six pack abs, being tall, dark, having heavy beard and moustache, chiseled face and a proportionate and muscular body. Their female counterparts were showcased with having a slim figure, being fair toned, having long silky-smooth hair, no body hair, lots of makeup, and with a clear face (without any blemishes/acne). A common word which came up in most of the interviews was ‘fake’. Participants remarked how the television advertisement portrayals are unrealistic and unachievable in real life. All 50 participants agreed to the question “do you think because of tv ads there is a specific definition of ‘perfection’ that most people want to achieve or do you think tv ads creates a standard for one's body, or beauty, that is almost unattainable?”.

The most common notion which came up while interviewing female participants was the inclination of Television Advertisements towards ‘fair tone’. The common emotion expressed by these females was of discomfort which they felt and the irrational thought(s) that got embedded in their mind to be ‘fair’ and to look ‘lovely’ or ‘white’ or have ‘clear skin’. When stating her experience with ‘fairness creams’, a female participant, aged 23 mentioned that “I was always a dark baby. My mom made me use this fairness cream after seeing the ad on TV. I was too young to understand how wrong it was. Few years back, I took the decision of not using it anymore. I am glad I don’t use it anymore. Even rebranding their name to ‘glow and lovely’ seems stupid to me because it makes me feel that till the time I am not glowing I won’t be lovely. There are so many girls till today also who would continue using the cream just because they want to be ‘glowing’.”

In terms of weight and body shape, there were two distinct and extreme experiences i.e., of losing weight to become slim and gaining weight to become muscular which were highlighted. The first was by a female participant, aged 28 who mentioned how she felt trapped and betrayed because a body slimming advertisement “... because I was so fat and everyone used to make fun of me. Not only my friends but my parents too. I used to cry and think ‘*mai patli kab houngi*’ (when will I be slim) and right after this I made the worst decision of buying a sauna slim belt. ‘*Weight toh kam hua nahi par self-confidence kam ho gaya*’ (I didn’t lose weight but I lost my self-confidence).” The second response throws light on the male perspective on being ‘muscular’ as noted by a participant, aged 26 “yes yes, I have been a victim of this. I have tried so many weight gainers like endura mass and

they protein because they used to show a boy eating it and becoming broad. Did not work for me as much as it showed on tv.”

Theme 2- Deteriorating Body Image and Self-Doubt

This was a major theme that came out as about 45 participants stated that wrongful depiction of Television Advertisements affected their Body Image in a negative way and led to placing a doubt on themselves. It led to a state of instability and experiencing negative emotions and questioning one's selfhood and put them in a state of mind in which they started comparing their body and success with models depicted in these advertisements.

In terms of self-esteem, there was a mixed response, with females' self-esteem being less impacted by tv advertisements than their male counterparts. The following can be highlighted by the response of a male participant who mentioned “I am 31 and I have many responsibilities at my hand. It is very negative vibe to come back home from work and see ads of policies being sold and only the husband or dad or brother of the girl signing the paper and paying off the loan etc. It makes me feel as though I am not doing enough in my life to support my family.” Another male participant, aged 21 stated that “it is very easy to show in an ad that you spray some perfume or deodorant and all the girls come running to you... in reality this of course never happens. I was in school and I was fooled because of such an ad and eventually girls in my class laughed at me. I was so embarrassed for years and I think I will put the blame on such pointless ads.”

Another point worth mentioning is that all the participants who stated that these advertisements affected their Self-Esteem in some way or the other also clearly mentioned that it was in their childhood that they used to view these ads and let it impact them which further led them to having a pessimistic view towards advertisements altogether in the future. The following statement can be supported by the response of a male participant, aged 26, who said “I am glad our future generations won't have to deal with this 'ad drama'. Our childhood was ruined because of them, along with wasting a lot of time and money too. I guess one major reason I have switched to seeing things on OTT platforms is because I don't want to surround myself with more negativity in these ads especially while we are in a pandemic.”

Theme 3- Newer Perspective

The general consensus among the participants was that even though they all understood the underlying motive of brand(s) was to earn money through advertising, they would appreciate it more if it were done so in an ethical and more realistic manner. A wide variety and diversity of responses were obtained to the question “If you could change the way people are portrayed in tv ads, how would you do that or what changes would you make?”. The most important factor stated by many participants was that they would want advertisements to be inclusive of all body shapes, sizes and colour; instead of promoting or giving supremacy to 'fairness', 'slimness' and 'masculine body'. Suggestions were also put forward about models to be representative of the people who they could relate to and a demand for general models, representative of the common man should be casted rather than just casting celebrities. It was also noted that there should be a modification in terms of practicality, logic and applicability of these advertisements. Participants were of the opinion that brands should invest more time and money on research to know what their consumers actually want or expect from them and this will further increase their outreach, acceptability and consumption by the viewers. This can be supported by the response of a female participant, aged 22 who said “... because this is for the people then brands should give us what we

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actually want to see. Someone should actually do a survey on what people actually want to see on tv. I don't want ads to tell me to have a 'hairless body' or not have 'white hair'." The majority of the participants also noted the need to include the third gender i.e., transgenders (trans-men and trans-women both) in the cultivation of television advertisements. One female participant passed a remark "... I also feel that this has been very delayed but it is never too late and if tv ads actually want to add meaning and give a real depiction, they should show transgender models also in commercials. Why should only two genders be shown and the third one not be shown at all? This is a weakness of tv ads also because I feel almost every other type of media now focuses on them too but ads don't."

Implications, Limitations, and Future Suggestions

Research on effect of Television Advertisements on Body Image and Self-Esteem is an area which lacks psychological research and thus, this study could aid in future researches as it bridges the gap between the existing literature. In terms of brand advertisers, this study provides a broad scope of what is liked and what is disliked in television advertisements by young adults. It provides a detailed account of what aspect of the advertisements mostly tend to have a negative impact on Body Image and Self-Esteem. By taking these findings into account, brands could avoid including these elements in their advertisements and they could also make the possible changes as suggested by the participants to ensure a future for their brands and to produce meaningful and positive advertisements which are looked upon in the future. This study does not solely focus on experiences of females (for which there is abundant literature review) but also on experiences of males and in the future, research can be done on a similar topic by including the 'transgender' community in the participant sample.

The sample size used for the study was relatively small. This study consisted of fifty participants; therefore, it should be considered that a limitation of the research is generalization as it does not cover a wide range of young adult's perspectives. Furthermore, the interviews only lasted around fifteen minutes each, which is difficult to develop on an individual's life experience during this time period. Future research in this area could explore a larger sample size to increase validity and increase the duration of the interviews to gain a deeper insight into Body Image and Self-Esteem. Another limitation of this study was that the semi structured interviews were collected on a telephonic call which might have caused some variance in the responses by the participants in terms of nonverbal cues (facial expressions, tones, eye movement etc.) or network issues. The last limitation of this study is that it was carried out during the COVID 19 pandemic which could have had an impact on the participant's emotional, mental, and psychological wellbeing thus causing him/her to not being able to provide as accurate responses as he/she would have in indifferent times.

CONCLUSION

This study has thrown light on the adverse negative effect of Television Advertisements on Self Esteem and Body Image of young adults of both male and female genders. The findings indicate that the sample group has majorly been affected by such advertisements while they were in school, in their childhood. We gathered a clear understanding as to what seems to be the problem/issue in these advertisements and how they directly harbor one's selfhood. This study could also aid in future researches within this dimension and could also help brands to understand what their viewers actually want to see on screen and bring about the required modification to their branding in the future.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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