Third-Person Effects of Idealized Body Image in Magazine Advertisements

Yoonhyeung (“Yoon”) Choi  
Hanyang University
Glenn Leshner  
University of Missouri-Columbia
Jounghwa Choi  
KorCom Porter Novelli Inc.

There have been contradictory findings concerning the direct effects of ideal body image advertising on women’s body concerns. Despite numerous studies, the mechanism of how women are affected negatively by such imagery is still unclear. The current study explored why women are influenced negatively by ideal body image in the third-person effect framework. In particular, the authors proposed gendered “others” and hypothesized that when those others were men, exposure to the ideal body would create larger third-person perceptions; there would be a negative relationship between third-person gaps and body area satisfaction. Findings confirmed the importance of gendered others, such that women estimated close male friends would be more affected by ideal body image than close female friends.

Keywords: third-person perception; body image; advertisement

Researchers have argued that idealized female body images in advertising have a direct or/and indirect negative impact on women’s body image satisfaction; self-concept; and, in extreme cases, eating behavior. According to Lucas, Crowson, OaposFallon, and Melton (1999), the thin, idealized female body portrayed in media has coincided with an increase in eating disorders. Although many studies have been conducted in this area, it is still unclear why and how women are negatively affected by ideal media imagery.

A growing body of research found that ideal body image effects on women are not direct but are mediated by their beliefs about men’s expectations of female thinness (Thomsen, 2002). Milkie (1999), for instance, found that female adolescents are affected negatively by ideal body image not because they believe those images...
are real but because they believe that others, in particular, males, will evaluate them according to idealized body images in advertisements. Such explanations stand somewhat in contrast to previous studies where researchers assumed women would perceive the ideal body as a realistic and attainable goal (based on social comparison theory), thus comparing themselves to the ideal bodies (Law & Labre, 2002; Martin & Kennedy, 1993; Richins, 1991).

In the present study, we further explore the indirect impact of the ideal body image on women by using the third-person effect (TPE) framework. The TPE emphasizes the importance of understanding perceived media effects on others relative to self. Davison (1983) argued, “Any effect that the communication achieves may thus be due not to the reaction of the ostensible audience but rather to the behavior of those who anticipate, or think they perceive, some reaction on the part of others” (p. 3). Under the framework, understanding who the “others” are is critical because the others may reveal why and how women are negatively influenced by idealized body images.

In particular, we propose gender-based others (male versus female) in the idealized body image domain and argue the others should be topic specifically defined in TPE research. Second, we explore a behavioral component of third-person perceptions (i.e., TPE). Drawn from reflected appraisal theory, we explore how the third-person gaps (perceived effects on others minus those on self) influence women’s body satisfaction. We accomplish this by conducting an experiment with women at a large midwestern university.

**Literature Review**

**Direct Effects? Or Indirect Effects? The Effects of Idealized Body Image on Women**

“I think they want to be like those models . . . because they think if they’re like that they’re gonna get lots of guys and stuff” (rural White girl; Milkie, 1999, p. 200).

Body image is a multidimensional construct and is defined as a mental construction of oneself (Markus, 1977; Markus & Sentis, 1982) or as the degree of satisfaction with one’s current physical self (Cash & Deagle, 1997). According to Hutchinson (1985), body image is formed via positive and negative feedback from others whose opinions matter to us. Media portrayals of thin, idealized female bodies, for example, have been criticized as one of the sources from which women learn what a beauty norm and a desirable body is in society (Lerner, Karabenick, & Stuart, 1973; Sondhaus, Kurtz, & Strube, 2001).

Previous studies have examined the negative effects of idealized body image on women by using social comparison theory (Botta, 1999; Irving, 1990; Law & Labre, 2002; Levine & Smolak, 1998; Martin & Kennedy, 1993; Richins, 1991). Botta (2000), noted that “people will compare themselves and significant others to people
and images whom they perceive to represent realistic, attainable goals” (p. 146, italics added). Some studies, however, found that women are well aware that the images shown in advertisements are illusionary and unattainable (Frazer, 1987; Goodman, 2002; Goodman & Walsh-Childers, 2003; Milkie, 1999; Nichter, 2000). Frazer (1987) argued women are aware of media’s unrealistic way of representing female bodies and consequently show resistance toward the images. Milkie (1999) also reported that female adolescents believe media images of female bodies are not realistic at all, and they complain about the lack of “normal” girls in media. An intriguing question is then, “Why do women keep comparing themselves to unrealistic and unattainable media images?” It has been long argued that how we view or evaluate ourselves is not independent of others (Felson, 1985). Women see themselves through the eyes of others whom they believe have been significantly affected by idealized media images. According to Milkie (1999), individuals exercise significant influence in interpreting media images. The “interpreted” messages by individuals, however, still have a negative impact on women’s self-concept because of females’ perceived media impact on others, particularly men. This perceived media effect on others’ relative self seems to make it difficult for women to avoid unrealistic media imagery. This line of research suggests that perceived media effects on others relative to self deserve further attention to better understand the effects of idealized body image on women’s body concerns. We examine the impact of idealized body image on women in the TPE framework.

Third-Person Effect

The TPE refers to two propositions (Davison, 1983): First, people tend to believe that mass communication has a greater impact on others than on themselves (third-person perception, TPP). Second, this perception may lead to behavioral consequences (TPE).

The TPP applied to idealized body image advertising suggests that women believe others are influenced by idealized body images more than they themselves are. Second, this perceptual gap may result in behavioral consequences such as negative evaluation of their bodies, and extreme diet.

Various psychological theories have been introduced to explain underlying cognitive mechanisms in TPP, such as ego involvement (e.g., Perloff, 1989), the elaboration likelihood model (e.g., White, 1997), attribution theory (e.g., Gunther, 1991; Rucinski & Salmon, 1990), social comparison theory (e.g., Atwood, 1994), and biased optimism (e.g., Brosius & Engel, 1996; Chapin, 2000; Gunther, 1995; Gunther & Mundy, 1993). Recent research suggests that TPP occurs because people use different perceptual processes for self- and other-evaluation (McLeod, Detenber, & Eveland, 2001). According to the study, people use a relatively naïve schema for media effects on others, whereas they use a more complicated conditional-effects model to evaluate media effects on self. An interesting finding from this study is that
the amount of perceived exposure others have to media messages is strongly related to perceived media effects on others. Brosius and Engel (1996) also proposed that TPP might occur based on the perceived media use of others. They wrote, “People imply that others use the media more than they do, or that they use other media than oneself, guided, e.g., by their tastes for the vulgar” (p. 159). When adopting the TPP framework, the question of who the others are becomes crucial because the others may elucidate the underlying reason why TPP occurs and, furthermore, why the perception may lead to negative outcomes. Given the importance of the others, we briefly review how others have been defined in TPP research and propose the importance of gender-based others in the body image advertising domain.

**Others Defined in TPP**

Others have been conceptualized in various ways in TPP studies. Most researchers defined “others” using the social distance corollary (Cohen & Davis, 1991; Cohen, Mutz, Price, & Gunther, 1988; Eveland, Nathanson, Detenber, & McLeod, 1999; Gunther, 1991; McLeod, Eveland, & Nathanson, 1997). Social distance refers to the difference between the self and comparison groups, and the corollary predicts that as social distance between the self and others increases, so does TPP.

Eveland et al. (1999) attempted to conceptualize social distance by age and education differences, whereas others defined social distance by either psychological distance (Brosius & Engel, 1996; Perloff, 1993) or by group membership (Cohen & Davis, 1991; Duck, Hogg, & Terry, 2000). Some scholars conceptualized others using vagueness and closeness (Duck & Mullin, 1995), whereas other studies suggest that others should be defined on the basis of social, demographic groups (Scharrer, 2002) or on the basis of the comparison group size (Tewksbury, 2002).

Support for the social distance effect, however, has been mixed. McLeod et al. (1997), for example, reported that youths from New York and Los Angeles were perceived to be more influenced by violent and misogynic rap lyrics than average people whom researchers expected to be most socially distant. The finding was supported in two other studies (Eveland et al., 1999). On the basis of the contradictory findings, McLeod et al. (2001) argued such research findings cast doubt on explanations of social distance findings of previous TPP studies and proposed the “target corollary.” The target corollary is defined as the perceived likelihood of exposure to the media content and predicts that those considered as likely targets of a communication will generate larger TPP than will generalized others. In the case of the rap music, for instance, there is a certain group of people who are more likely to listen to rap music. Therefore, perceived likelihood of exposure to the content (target corollary) provides a more logical explanation for TPP than does the social distance corollary. The point to be taken here is not that the target corollary is germane to our study but rather that influential others can be conceptualized in ways (e.g., issue- or topic-specific) other than those suggested by the social distance corollary.

A group of researchers examined gender differences in TPP (Lo & Paddun, 2001; Salwen & Dupagne, 1999; Wu & Kim, 2001). Lo and Wei (2002), in particular,
tested the gendered others in TPP in the context of Internet pornography. They found female respondents tended to perceive greater negative effects of Internet pornography on male others than on female others.

Previous idealized body image studies indicate the importance of gendered others, in particular, male others (as opposed to exposed others). In their study, Goodman and Walsh-Childers (2003) found that women are influenced by unrealistic media imagery because they are well aware that men will view those images as real and value them. Milkie (1999) also reported, “Although they [females] generally understood that the images were unrealistic, the girls perceived that other girls in the school, and especially males, valued such an appearance” (p. 201).

In issue-specific fields such as body image advertising, defining others on the basis of the generalized social distance corollary (e.g., female classmates, female students in a university, females persons in the United States) may not explain why TPP occurs and why the perceptions have negatively influenced women. Thus, we suggest that others should be defined on the basis of gender in idealized body image advertisements, and propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Perceived effects of ideal body images on gendered others (men, women) will be greater than perceived effects of idealized body images on self.

Goodman and Walsh-Childers (2003) reported that many of their female respondents did not believe men are savvy enough to know that media images are unrealistic. The threat of men judging women’s bodies and their partial acceptance of the male gaze, they argued, seemed to prevent women from resisting the media images. Body image is indeed a self-attribute that is greatly influenced by others, mostly by the opposite sex. Therefore, despite women’s awareness of illusionary media images, the majority of women still want to have the unattainable body portrayed in media. We, thus, postulate that third-person gaps (perceived effects on others minus on self) will be greater when others are men than when others are women (Duffy & Gotcher, 1996; Frazer, 1987; Goodman, 2002; Goodman & Walsh-Childers, 2003; Milkie, 1999; Nichter, 2000).

Hypothesis 2: Third-person gap will be greater when others are men than women for each level of equal social distance (e.g., close friends, students at their university, etc.).

Previous studies also suggested that women believed others perceived the idealized body image as a beauty norm and that others would evaluate women on the basis of the idealized body image rather than by a neutral body image (Goodman, 2002; Milkie, 1999). Myers and Biocca (1992) also found that their female participants who were exposed to idealized body image commercials overestimated their body sizes more than did women who saw neutral body image commercials. Thus, we propose that those who are exposed to idealized body image ads will demonstrate greater TPP than those who are not.
Hypothesis 3: Perceived effects of idealized body images on gendered others will be greater when participants are exposed to idealized body image ads than when they are exposed to nonidealized body image ads.

What has attracted many researchers’ attention is that the TPP may lead individuals to act on the basis of their perceived effects of media on others. For instance, several studies found that the third-person gap led people to support censorship (Gunther, 1995; McLeod et al., 1997; Rojas, Shah, & Faber, 1996; Salwen, 1998). Some showed concerns over the TPP because people might act on the basis of the overestimation of media effect on others (Davison, 1983). This concern is worth exploring in the context of idealized body image advertising because women erroneously might overestimate the effect of idealized body on men relative to self, thus leading to dissatisfaction with their bodies and excessive dieting behaviors. In the following section, we investigate a behavioral component of TPP (i.e., TPE). Specifically, we explore how the third-person gap may influence women’s self-appraisal of body area satisfaction.

Third-Person Effect, Reflected Appraisal, and Body Satisfaction

Body image and physical attractiveness are largely defined in terms of how one appears to others (Felson, 1985), specifically to the opposite sex. In social psychology, symbolic interactionists have argued that one’s self-appraisal is determined to a great extent by perceived appraisal by significant others. Felson (1985), for example, tested the effect of reflected appraisal of peers on self-appraisal of physical attractiveness and found that perceived peer appraisal has substantial impact on self-appraisal. When the reflected appraisal theory is applied to idealized body image advertisements, it is expected that women’s perceived reflected appraisal, that is, others, in particular, male evaluations of their bodies based on idealized body images shown in advertising, will negatively affect self-appraisal of women’s body areas.

Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4: When others are men, there will be a negative relationship between third-person gap and women’s body satisfaction. In other words, the more women think men would be influenced by idealized body images, the more negative evaluation women would make of their bodies.

Method

Design and Independent Variable

This study used a one-way between-subjects experiment. The independent variable was type of advertisement and had three levels: product ad, normal body type ad, and idealized body type ad. Each participant saw three ads that represented one
level of the independent variable. Participants in the idealized body type condition, for example, saw three idealized body type ads, and those in the normal body type condition saw three normal body type ads. The products advertised were ordinary, non-gender-specific products, not normally associated with physical appearance (wrist watch, chewing gum, soup). In both idealized and normal body type condition, the three products were randomly assigned to three stimulus advertisements.

In the product ad condition, only a picture of the product and its brand name were contained in the ad and served as a control group. These ads were void of people and descriptive text (i.e., the only text was the brand name). The normal body type ads contained a female in the center of the ad with the accompanying product. They were similar to the product ads in that they contained no descriptive text. The idealized body type ads were identical to the normal body type ads except that the female in the ad possessed an idealized body type.

Normal body type and idealized body type were selected from a pretest by a separate group of 20 undergraduate and graduate female students in various majors. Each person rated 25 preselected models on five items: sexiness, slimness, attractiveness, ordinary looking, and average body size defined on the questionnaire as size 10-14 (Anderson, 1989; Lennon, Lilleshum, & Buckland, 1999). Each item was rated on 7-point Likert-type scales from 1 (strongly disagree) and 7 (strongly agree). Three idealized body types were selected that scored highest on sexiness, slimness, and attractiveness, and lowest on ordinary looking and average body size. Three normal body types were selected that scored lowest on sexiness, slimness, and attractiveness, and highest on ordinary looking and average body size.

**Participants**

Eighty-six undergraduate and graduate female students majoring in journalism and mass communication voluntarily participated in this study. Caucasian (83.7%), African American (4.7%), Others (5.8%), Asian (3.5%), Hispanic (1.2%), and Asian American (1.2%) made up the sample in this study. Participants’ mean age was 21 years. Each participant was randomly assigned to one of three levels of advertisement: idealized body image ads ($N = 32$), neutral body image ads ($N = 28$), and product ads ($N = 26$).

**Measured Variables**

**Third-person perception.** TPPs were the primary set of measured variables. For each ad type, participants rated how much they thought one of several targets would be influenced by these ads. The seven targets were the following: (a) self, (b) close female friends, (c) other female students at this university, (d) other female students in the United States, (e) close male friends, (f) other male students at this university, and (g) other male students in the United States. Each target was rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 (not at all influenced) to 7 (highly influenced). Because both age and education may affect TPP (Eveland et al., 1999), we purposely used the word
students (e.g., male students, female students) so that we could measure the role of gender by controlling for the influence of age and education differences. We did not counterbalance question order because previous studies (Perloff, 1996; Price & Tewksbury, 1994) reported that there was no difference between counterbalanced question ordering and constant question ordering in TPP.

Several third-person scores were computed for each participant. Comparisons were made between the three female “others” and self by subtracting the rating score on self from the rating score on the female others. Comparisons were also made between the three male “others” and self in the same fashion. This yielded six other-self comparisons: close female friends, female students at the university, female students in the United States, close male friends, male students at the university, and male students in the United States.

**Body area satisfaction.** The Body Area Satisfaction Scale (BASS; Brown, Cash, & Mikulka, 1990) was used to measure body area satisfaction after participants were exposed to each ad type. The nine-item BASS is one of the subscales of the Multidimensional Body Self-Relations Questionnaire (MBSRQ). MBSRQ is a self-report inventory for the evaluation of self-attitudinal aspects of the body-image construct. This measurement is known to have adequate psychometric properties (Thompson, 1996; Thompson, Penner, & Altabe, 1990). Thompson et al. (1990), for example, reported internal consistencies ranging from .75 to .91 and test–retest reliabilities from .78 to .94. BASS assesses satisfaction with one’s body areas such as face (facial features, complexion), hair (color, thickness, texture), lower torso (buttocks, hips, thighs, legs), mid torso (waist, stomach), upper torso (chest or breasts, shoulders, arms), weight, muscle tone, height, and overall appearance. Reliability of the nine items was .65. After dropping height and upper torso, reliability of the seven items was increased to .70. Each item was rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 7 (very satisfied).

**Attitude toward the ads.** The measures of attitudes toward the advertisements were 7-point scales anchored by bipolar items: unattractive/attractive, unrealistic/realistic, unconvincing/convincing, negative/positive, dislike/like, uninformative/informative, and unpleasant/pleasant. After seeing each ad, participants reported their attitudes toward the ad. Reliability of the seven items was .86.

**Models’ attractiveness.** The measures of models’ attractiveness were 7-point scales from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Models in each ad were rated on three items: models’ sexiness, slimness, and attractiveness. Reliability of three items was .93.

**Procedures**

Each participant was given a packet that contained three ads (either product, normal body, or idealized body) and a paper-and-pencil questionnaire. Participants were
instructed to answer the questionnaire asking such information as their media use, perceived media use of others (e.g., “on average, how many hours do you think fe/male college students watch TV per day?”) and demographics after seeing all three ads. Participants were told to use as much time as needed to complete the questionnaire. They were permitted to complete the questionnaires either in class or outside the classroom and were instructed to return them to a central location the same day. Participants were told that the study involved people’s responses toward advertising. After the experiment, they were thanked and debriefed.

Results

Manipulation Check

Participants who were exposed to idealized body type advertising rated the models in the advertising more attractive (\(M = 5.90, SD = .77\)), sexier (\(M = 5.57, SD = .83\)), and slimmer (\(M = 6.42, SD = .68\)) than those exposed to normal body type advertising did (attractiveness, \(M = 4.12, SD = 1.05\); sexiness, \(M = 3.20, SD = 1.05\); slimness, \(M = 3.63, SD = .76\)). Participants who were exposed to idealized body type also rated the models less ordinary looking (\(M = 2.60, SD = 1.03\)) and having less ordinary or average body type (\(M = 1.57, SD = 1.02\)), whereas those exposed to normal body type rated their models high on the dimensions of ordinary looking (\(M = 5.45, SD = .69\)) and ordinary body type (\(M = 4.34, SD = 1.02\)).

Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis 1 predicted the perceived effect of idealized body image on gendered others would be greater than perceived effect on self. Table 1 presents the results of paired t tests that demonstrate overall support for Hypothesis 1. Overall, the TPP differentials were significant for comparisons of self to close male friends (self, \(M = 4.63\); close male friends, \(M = 5.41\); mean difference = 0.78, \(t(31) = 2.52, p = .017, d = .51\)), self to male students at their university (male students at their university, \(M = 5.72\); mean difference = 1.09, \(t(31) = 3.50, p = .001, d = .72\)), and self to male students in the United States (male students in the United States, \(M = 5.63\); mean difference = 1.00, \(t(31) = 3.22, p = .003, d = .66\)). The TPP differentials were also significant for comparisons of self to female students at their university (self, \(M = 4.63\); female students at their university, \(M = 5.56\); mean difference = 0.94, \(t(31) = 3.53, p = .001, d = .62\)), self to female students in the United States (female students in the United States, \(M = 5.50\); mean difference = 0.88, \(t(31) = 3.26, p = .003, d = .58\)), but no statistical significance was found for a comparison of self to close female friends (close female friends, \(M = 4.91\); mean difference = 0.28, \(t(31) = 1.50, p = ns\)).

Hypothesis 2 postulated that TPP differentials would be greater for comparison of self to male others than of self to female others for each level of equal social distance. Hypothesis 2 was partially supported. Third-person gap was larger when
others were close male friends than when they were close female friends (close male friends, $M = .78$; close female friends, $M = .28$; mean difference $= .50$, $t(31) = 2.55$, $p = .008$, $d = 0.29$). There were, however, no significant differences in TPP differentials between comparison of self to male students and self to female students at their university and in the United States, respectively (see Table 2).

Hypothesis 3 stated that the perceived effect on gendered others would be greater when participants were exposed to idealized body image ads than when they were exposed to nonidealized body image ads. As Table 3 shows, moving from product ads, neutral body image ads to idealized body image ads, there were significant increases in perceived effect of the ads on close male friends, $F(2, 83) = 19.62$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .32$; male students at their university, $F(2, 83) = 24.10$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .37$; and male students in the United States, $F(2, 83) = 25.00$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .38$. There also were significant increases in perceived effect of the ads on close female friends, $F(2, 83) = 12.10$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .23$; female students at their university, $F(2, 83) = 16.52$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .29$; and female students in the United States, $F(2, 83) = 18.64$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .31$. Participants who were exposed to idealized body image ads reported greater effects on all others than those exposed to neutral body image ads or product ads. It should be noted, however, that perceived effects on self were also higher among those who were exposed to idealized body image ads than those exposed to nonidealized body image ads, $F(2, 83) = 12.17$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.23$.

### Table 1

**Paired $t$-Test Results Showing Third-Person Gaps for Ideal Body Image Group ($N = 32$)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Third-Person Gaps (others minus self)</th>
<th>$t$-Values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close male friends</td>
<td>0.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.80)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male students at their university</td>
<td>1.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.77)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male students in the United States</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.76)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close female friends</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female students at their university</td>
<td>0.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female students in the United States</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.52)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Cell entries are mean differences; standard deviations are in parentheses.  
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. 


Hypothesis 4 is concerned with when others are defined as men, there will be a negative relationship between third-person gap and women’s body satisfaction. Before exploring this hypothesis, we first tested whether perceived effect of the ad on self and that of others alone (i.e., TPP) influenced participants’ body area satisfaction score. For the test, third-person perception variables for men and for women were created by separately calculating means of the perceived effect on each gender. For example, the male third-person perception variable was created by calculating the mean of the perceived effect on close male friends, male students at their university, and male students in the United States. A total of three regressions were computed (perceived effect on self, male others, and female others, on body satisfaction). None of the beta weights were significant. Therefore, perceived effect on self and perceived effect on others alone did not affect participants’ body area satisfaction.

To test Hypothesis 4, the third-person gap variable for men was created by calculating the mean of each third-person gap (perceived effect on close male friends, male students at their university, male students in the United States minus on self, respectively). Then regression analysis was conducted. When others were defined as men, the third-person gap significantly affected women’s body satisfaction ($\beta = .48$, $R^2 = .23$, $p = .007$) not negatively but positively. Interestingly, when others were women, however, the third-person gap between women and self did not significantly influence women’s body satisfaction ($\beta = .02$, $R^2 = .00$, $p = ns$).

### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Others</th>
<th>Close Men</th>
<th>Close Women</th>
<th>Difference</th>
<th><em>p &lt; .05.</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Product ads (n = 26)</strong></td>
<td>–0.08</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>–0.31*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Neutral body ads (n = 28)</strong></td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>–0.07</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ideal body ads (n = 32)</strong></td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.50*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>University Men</strong></td>
<td>–0.04</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>–0.42*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Neutral body ads</strong></td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td>–0.42*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ideal body ads</strong></td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>U.S. Men</strong></td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>–0.38</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Neutral body ads</strong></td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ideal body ads</strong></td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Significance level for *p < .05.*
Discussion

By using the TPE framework, the present study explored how women are influenced negatively by idealized body image. In particular, we proposed gender-based others and tested how gendered others would differentially interact with self and how the self-other comparisons then affect women’s body satisfaction.

Our results suggest that significant TPP occurred when others were defined on the basis of gender. TPPs seem to occur from the perceived media use of others. When asked, “On average, how many hours do you think female college students watch TV per day?” there were significant differences, $F(1, 31) = 44.40, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.60$, among self ($M = 3.13, SD = 1.10$), female college students ($M = 4.09, SD = 0.86$), and male college students ($M = 4.91, SD = 1.17$). Even though the current study did not use TV ads, considering the prevalent idealized body images shown on TV, female participants might think male and female college students were more exposed to the idealized body images than themselves, thus being more influenced by the ads.

Participants who were exposed to idealized body image ads reported greater effects on all others than those exposed to neutral body ads and product ads. These findings are consistent with previous studies that found women believe other people will accept the idealized body as a beauty norm and that others will evaluate and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceived effect on . . .</th>
<th>Experimental Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Product Ads ($n = 26$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self***</td>
<td>2.62 (−1.68)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close male friends***</td>
<td>2.54 (−1.84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male students at their university***</td>
<td>2.58 (−1.86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male students in the United States***</td>
<td>2.62 (−1.86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close female friends***</td>
<td>2.85 (−1.89)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female students at their university***</td>
<td>3 (−2.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female students in the United States***</td>
<td>3 (−1.98)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Cell entries are means; standard deviations are in parentheses. ***$p < .001$. 

Table 3
ANOVA Tests Results Showing Perceived Effect on Self and Others by Each Ad Type
judge them by an idealized body image (Goodman, 2002; Milkie, 1999) rather than by a neutral body image.

Participants, however, did not strongly differentiate perceived effects of the ads on close female friends from the perceived effects on self. This likely occurred because of the gender in-group and out-group bias (Tajfel, 1981). Gender in-group bias is exemplified by favorable evaluations of, and attitudes toward, the in-group, whereas gender out-group bias is shown as unfavorable appraisal of the out-group (Deaux, 1996). Our participants likely perceived close female friends as in-group members who have the same social identity, which seems to make them distinguish close female friends from self less. Contrarily, the participants differentiated close male friends from self as a gender out-group more likely to be influenced by, and more likely to favor, the idealized female body image. These findings seem to imply the importance of gendered others in third-person effects of idealized body image advertising. From the generalized social distance corollary, the closeness of both close female and close male friends is presumed to be equal. However, our data showed that within the generalized closeness (e.g., close friends), gender played a significant role. As the generalized social distance increased from close friends to distant others, however, the third-person gaps were not significantly different when others were men or women. Even though the differences were not significant, the means were in the predicted direction. TPP differentials were greater for comparison of self to male others than of self to female others. It would be valuable for future studies to test the third-person gap differences beyond the close friends’ category.

In testing Hypothesis 4, we found an interesting result. That is, the third-person gap between male others and self led female respondents to a more positive evaluation of their body area satisfaction, whereas the gap between female others and self did not have any significant impact on their body satisfaction score. This finding is surprising because previous studies reported women’s perceived effects of idealized body on others; in particular, men seemed to cause women to be depressed and drive them toward extreme diet.

This finding suggests at least two explanations. First, Myers and Biocca (1992) reported that body image advertising made young women feel thinner. They wrote that “advertising’s presentation of the idealized body image led to a light euphoria, a lessening of depression levels” (p. 127). They concluded that commercials invited young women to fantasize about their future idealized bodies and that their participants felt better about themselves right after the exposure. From their explanation, our participants likely fantasized about their bodies even more than they normally would because they were encouraged to imagine the men’s gaze (i.e., third-person question). This might lead them to evaluate their bodies more satisfactorily. It is important to note here that when others were women, third-person gaps did not significantly influence the body satisfaction. This result may demonstrate the nature of the body image that is largely determined by the opposite sex and the importance of gendered others in understanding TPP of idealized body image on women.
An alternative explanation can be found in reflected appraisal theory. Felson (1985) claimed that as a number of studies showed (Bohrnstedt & Felson, 1983; Felson, 1981; 1985; Sherwood, 1967), “the self-esteem motive, i.e., the tendency for persons to think favorably about themselves, is more likely to operate when information from others is vague or unavailable” (p. 77). As Felson noted, under the situation in which only perceived appraisal of others is available (as opposed to accurate evaluations), the self-esteem motive seems to come into play in the process of evaluating their body areas.

According to Leary and Baumeister (2000), when possible damage to self-esteem is experienced, people are motivated to gain, maintain, and restore self-esteem. Given that physical attractiveness is one of the determinants of self-esteem, especially for women, women exposed to idealized body image ads may imagine a possibility for other people to negatively rate their bodies (i.e., potential damage to their self-esteem). To maintain and enhance their self-esteem, they seemed to evaluate their body areas satisfactorily.

There have been contradictory findings concerning the direct effects of idealized body image advertising on women’s self-esteem, depression, and anxiety (Cash, Cash, & Butters, 1983; Richins, 1991; Stice, Schupak-Neuberg, Shaw, & Stein, 1994). Our data show that the negative impact may not be direct, and it needs careful interpretation because participants’ self-esteem likely plays a self-defense role.

This study has several implications for idealized body image research. As the TPE framework suggests, if the effects of idealized body image on attitudinal and behavioral outcomes are not due to the direct impacts of the idealized body images themselves, it is encouraging to let female participants be exposed to what men really think about idealized female bodies. Studies show that women misperceive men’s notions of attractive female bodies. Fallon and Rozin (1985) found that the female figure that female participants rated as most attractive to men was significantly thinner than the figure preferred by men. Demarest and Allen (2000) also reported that women believed that men preferred shapes thinner than those that men actually reported. Thus, it may be valuable to test whether the exposure to magazine articles that report men’s views on attractive female bodies can reduce women’s TPP to the adjacent magazine ads portraying idealized female body image. This may help to reduce the occurrence of the negative outcomes from idealized body image exposures.

There are some limitations in this study. Our sample was heavily skewed to Caucasians, and self-concept likely varies across race and cultures (Watkins & Gerong, 1997). Future research may explore how TPPs vary as functions of ethnic differences. Also, the analyses undertaken to explain the result of Hypothesis 4 are correlational in nature. Thus, causation cannot be determined.

Female participants said they believed other people would be more influenced by idealized body image advertising (David & Johnson, 1998; David, Morrison, Johnson, & Ross, 2002). Nevertheless, critical questions have yet to be fully explored: Who are the “others”? and What influences do the differently defined “others” have on women’s
body concerns? We proposed and tested the importance of gendered others in idealized body image advertising to better connect the TPP to undesirable outcomes frequently debated in the idealized body image domain. If the nature of the body image lies in the eyes of the beholder, future research should explore men’s third-person perceptions when they are exposed to women’s idealized body image ads. In addition, how women view men’s’ idealized body image will also provide a richer picture to better understand the role of gendered others in the idealized body image domain.

References


Goodman, J. R., & Walsh-Childers, K. (2003, July 30-August 2). We must, we must, we must increase our bust: How college women negotiate the media’s ideal breast image. Paper presented at the annual conference of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Kansas City.


Yoonhyeung Choi (PhD, University of Missouri-Columbia) is an assistant professor in the Department of Advertising, Public Relations, & Retailing at Michigan State University. Her research interests include crisis and risk communication, media effects, and public relations.

Glenn Leshner (PhD, Stanford University) is an associate professor of strategic communication and codirector of the Missouri School of Journalism PRIME Lab. His research interests focus on social and psychological processing of news media, health, and political communication.

Jounghwa Choi (PhD, Michigan State University) is a chief consultant in the Institute of Communication Strategies at KorCom Porter Novelli Inc. Her research interests center on mass media and public opinion, public relations management, and health communication.