
Depicting Women as Sex Objects in Television Advertising: Effects on Body Dissatisfaction

Howard Lavine

State University of New York at Stony Brook

Donna Sweeney

Stephen H. Wagner

Northern Illinois University

This study examined whether exposure to TV ads that portray women as sex objects causes increased body dissatisfaction among women and men. Participants were exposed to 15 sexist and 5 nonsexist ads, 20 nonsexist ads, or a no ad control condition. Results revealed that women exposed to sexist ads judged their current body size as larger and revealed a larger discrepancy between their actual and ideal body sizes (preferring a thinner body) than women exposed to the nonsexist or no ad condition. Men exposed to the sexist ads judged their current body size as thinner, revealed a larger discrepancy between their actual and ideal body size (preferring a larger body), and revealed a larger discrepancy between their own ideal body size and their perceptions of others' male body size preferences (believing that others preferred a larger ideal) than men exposed to the nonsexist or no ad condition. Discussion focuses on the cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral consequences of exposure to gender stereotypic television advertising.

Recent theory and research in social cognition has been directed toward identifying the environmental conditions that facilitate the activation and use of gender stereotypes in social perception and behavior (e.g., Bargh & Raymond, 1992; Deaux, 1995; McKenzie-Mohr & Zanna, 1990; Pryor, Giedd, & Williams, 1995; Rudman & Borgida, 1995). One highly pervasive and naturalistic environmental context within which gender stereotypes may be formed, strengthened, and activated is television advertisements. Television commercials are a pervasive source of social information. More than 90% of Americans own televisions (A. C. Nielson Co., 1989), and the average American views approximately 714 advertisements each week (Brentl & Cantor, 1988). Although the primary objective of TV ads is to create product awareness and to encourage product purchase, social scientists

have often suggested that they may have more wide-ranging effects on viewers' beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors (e.g., Condry, 1989; Pollay, 1986).

In fact, content analyses have revealed that TV ads commonly contain gender-stereotypic ideas and images (Courtney & Whipple, 1974; Furnham & Voli, 1989; Hall & Crum, 1994; Lovdal, 1989; Rudman & Borgida, 1995; Russo, Feller, & DeLeon, 1982; for reviews, see Courtney & Whipple, 1980, 1983). Investigators and commentators have long speculated that repeated exposure to such images may contribute to a broad range of social problems, including sexist attitudes and beliefs, sexual harassment, violence against women, eating disorders, and stereotyped perceptions of and behavior toward men and women (Beckwith, 1994; Kilbourne & Lazarus, 1987; Lazier-Smith, 1989; United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, 1980). One of the most pervasive criticisms of sexist advertising is that it produces distorted body images by setting unrealistic standards of female beauty and thinness.

Although little experimental research has examined the consequences of gender stereotypic television advertising, the few studies that do exist support the notion that TV ads can influence viewers' self-concepts, at least temporarily. For example, women exposed to TV ads depicting reversed gender roles (e.g., husbands serving

Authors' Note: We would like to thank Janet Swim and Cindy Thomsen for their comments on an earlier version of this article. We would also like to thank Laurie Rudman and Gene Borgida for making their TV advertisement videos available to us. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Howard Lavine, Department of Political Science, State University of New York at Stony Brook, Stony Brook, NY 11794, or through the Internet at hlavine@datalab2.sbs.sunysb.edu.

PSPB, Vol. 25 No. 8, August 1999 1049-1058

© 1999 by the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, Inc.

their wives dinner) were found to be less conforming and more self-confident than were those exposed to traditional gender roles (Jennings, Geis, & Brown, 1980), and they reported future aspirations containing more achievement/career themes and fewer homemaking themes than did female participants exposed to traditional gender roles (Geis, Brown, Jennings, & Porter, 1984). Moreover, children exposed to TV ads depicting reversed gender roles rated male-dominated professions as more appropriate for women than did children exposed to TV ads portraying women in the traditional homemaker role (Atkin & Miller, 1975).

Although this research attests to the causal role that gender stereotypic TV ads can play in shaping people's self-concepts, previous studies have focused exclusively on the gender stereotypes associated with a particular gender role—that of woman as homemaker or domestic attendant. Increasingly, however, the content of gender stereotypic TV ads has portrayed women as sex objects rather than as domestic attendants (Hall & Crum, 1994; Rossi & Rossi, 1985; Rudman & Borgida, 1995; Rudman & Hagiwara, 1992; Russo et al., 1982; Schwartz, Wagner, Bannert, & Mathes, 1987). The distinction between these two gender stereotypic portrayals may be an important one. Contemporary research on the structure of stereotypes suggests that stereotypes exist at different levels of specificity (e.g., Deaux, Winton, Crowley, & Lewis, 1985; Noseworthy & Lott, 1984; Six & Eckes, 1991) and that people are more likely to categorize others at the subtype level (e.g., domestic attendant, sex object) than at the general category level (e.g., woman) (e.g., Deaux et al., 1985; Eckes, 1994). Because the domestic attendant and sex object subtypes are associated with different sets of attributes (Deaux et al., 1985; Noseworthy & Lott, 1984; Six & Eckes, 1991), activating one subtype versus the other may produce qualitatively different consequences on cognition and behavior. For example, ads depicting scantily clad women posing as decorative objects may activate the beliefs that women are seductive and frivolous sex objects, whereas ads depicting women as homemakers may activate the beliefs that women are nurturing, communal, and domestically-minded (Clifton, McGrath, & Wick, 1976; Noseworthy & Lott, 1984; Six & Eckes, 1991).

In the present research, we directly examined whether exposure to TV ads that depict women in terms of the sex object gender subtype influence people's self-appraisals. To be specific, we examined whether such ads—because they often portray unattainable standards of thinness and female beauty (e.g., Kilbourne, 1995; Silverstein, Perdue, Peterson, & Kelly, 1986)—activate women's (and potentially men's) concerns and insecurities about their bodies and thereby increase body dissatisfaction.

Norms of feminine beauty in Western culture have varied considerably over time (Goodman, 1995; Seid, 1989; Wolf, 1991). Although female attractiveness was once epitomized by a plump body shape, the contemporary ideal prominently emphasizes a slender body. Investigators have documented this cultural shift by showing that female magazine centerfolds, Miss America pageant contestants, and female print (e.g., magazine) ad models have become increasingly thinner over time (Garner, Garfinkel, Schwartz, & Thompson, 1980; Seid, 1989; Silverstein, Perdue et al., 1986; Wolf, 1991). Coincident with this increasing norm of thinness, rates of body dissatisfaction and eating disorders among women have risen (Silverstein, Perdue et al., 1986; Silverstein, Peterson, & Perdue, 1986). Research on body image indicates that women consistently perceive themselves as overweight (and as heavier than they actually are) and report a desire to be thinner (e.g., Cohn & Adler, 1992; Mintz & Betz, 1986). Women also tend to report an ideal body size that is significantly thinner than their perceived actual body size (Cohn & Adler, 1992). Finally, women overestimate both men's and other women's preferences for female thinness (Cohn & Adler, 1992).

Would exposure to TV ads that activate the female sex object gender subtype exacerbate these body image perceptions among women? Given the prominent role of the mass media—especially television—in socializing norms of physical attractiveness (including body size), it is reasonable to expect that portrayals of beauty in TV ads play a causal role in shaping women's perceptions of and satisfaction with their bodies. In particular, because TV ads that depict women as sex objects portray and reinforce contemporary standards of thinness, exposure to such stereotypic stimuli may heighten women's concerns and dissatisfaction with their bodies. In fact, research on perceptual contrast effects and judgments of one's own physical attractiveness (e.g., Brown, Novick, Lord, & Richards, 1992; Cash, Cash, & Butters, 1983) has shown that exposure to highly attractive female images may increase body dissatisfaction among women. Thus, we predicted that women exposed to sexist ads would perceive themselves as heavier than women exposed to nonsexist ads. Moreover, we predicted that women exposed to sexist ads would exhibit a greater discrepancy between actual and ideal body size (toward a desire for a thinner body size) than would women exposed to nonsexist ads. Finally, we predicted that women exposed to sexist ads would overestimate both men's and other women's desire for a thin body size relative to women exposed to the nonsexist ads. This latter prediction is based on the idea that women tend to believe that others' ideal body size for women is even thinner than their own ideal (e.g., Cohn & Adler, 1992). To the extent that exposure to sexist ads (of the female sex object subtype

variety) activate or exacerbate such beliefs, this discrepancy may be increased.

Beyond its potential effects on women, would exposure to the female sex object gender subtype influence body perceptions among men? If the female sex object subtype heightens men's beliefs that women are flirtatious and seductive, this may increase the salience of the perceived characteristics of men (e.g., a muscular physique) to which women are attracted. Thus, such ads may increase men's awareness of and concerns about their own bodies and thus increase body dissatisfaction among men. Finally, it may be that TV ads that portray women as sex objects also portray especially attractive, athletic, or muscular men (at least relative to comparable ads that do not employ the female sex object subtype) and thereby cause men to feel insecure about their bodies through social comparison. If this is the case, such sexist ads may exert a similar influence on men's beliefs and satisfaction with their bodies.

Moreover, in contrast to women, some research suggests that men tend to perceive themselves as underweight (and as thinner than they actually are) and report a desire to be larger (Harmatz, Gronendyke, & Thomas, 1985; Miller, Coffman, & Linke, 1980; Mintz & Betz, 1986). Men also overestimate both women's and other men's preferences for a large, muscular physique for men (Cohn & Adler, 1992). Thus, it may be that men exposed to sexist ads would both perceive themselves as thinner than men exposed to nonsexist ads and exhibit a greater discrepancy between actual and ideal body size (toward a desire for a larger body size) than would men exposed to nonsexist ads.

Finally, it is of interest to speculate about whether the influence of gender stereotypic TV images on body perceptions would be moderated by respondents' attitudes toward feminism (i.e., traditional vs. feminist/liberal). Some research suggests that women and men with a feminist orientation toward gender roles are more likely than their traditional counterparts to be aware of the existence of sexism (Henderson-King & Stewart, 1994) and to reject sexist stimuli (e.g., Henkin & Fish, 1986; Jensen & Gutek, 1982; Moore, Griffiths, & Payne, 1987; Swim & Cohen, in press; for a review, see LaFrance & Woodzicka, 1997). Feminists thus might be more likely to reject the sexist images portrayed in stereotypic TV ads and may remain relatively impervious to any influence of such stimuli on body image. In fact, feminists report lower levels of body dissatisfaction than do nonfeminists, and they are more rejecting of society's (current) emphasis on female thinness (e.g., Dionne, Davis, Fox, & Gurevich, 1995).¹ Thus, those with traditional gender-related attitudes may be either less likely to perceive the sexist content of the ads or less likely to reject the content even if they are aware of it.

Finally, Landrine and Klonoff (1997) have argued that because feminism "provides women with a schema for understanding sexist discrimination as an aspect of the *reality of gender* rather than as a response to women as *individuals*" (p. 113, italics added; a schema that nonfeminists presumably lack), sexist events should have a greater negative impact on nonfeminists than feminists. Consistent with this reasoning, Landrine and Klonoff (1997) found that subjective ratings of the frequency of experiencing sexist events (e.g., unfair treatment by teachers, employers, people in service jobs; recipient of inappropriate or unwanted sexual advances) accounted for a greater proportion of the variance in negative physical and emotional symptoms among nonfeminists than feminists. Taken together, research suggests that the influence of exposure to sexist stimuli on body image may be greater among traditional than feminist women.

Although these studies suggest that feminists are more likely to label material as sexist, to disapprove of sexist material when explicitly asked to evaluate it, and to be less influenced (physically and emotionally) by the subjective experience of sexism, it is unclear whether feminists' recognition and rejection of sexist material protects them from more invidious effects that exposure to sexism may produce. That is, even if feminists are more likely than those with traditional attitudes to recognize and reject sexist material, they are not necessarily immune to its more subtle effects—particularly if they are not consciously attuned to the presence of such effects and are actively trying to override them. In particular, if exposure to sexist TV ads influences body image and satisfaction through relatively passive and automatic priming processes (see Rudman & Borgida, 1995), feminists may be no less likely than their traditional counterparts to resist these effects. Analogous findings have been reported with respect to racism; to be specific, Devine (1989) showed that although individuals high and low in racism reported different attitudes toward Blacks when the request was explicit, relatively nonracist individuals were no less likely than racists to show stereotypically biased perceptions of a target person following subliminal activation of the social category Blacks.

In the present study, we evaluated whether exposure to television ads that depict women as sex objects influences women and men's perceptions of and satisfaction with their bodies. To be specific, we hypothesized that women exposed to the sexist ads would (a) judge their current body size as larger, (b) reveal a larger discrepancy between their actual and ideal body sizes (preferring a thinner body), and (c) reveal a larger discrepancy between their own ideal body size and their perceptions of others' female body size preferences (believing that others prefer a slimmer ideal) than women exposed to

the nonsexist or no ad control conditions. In contrast, we predicted that men exposed to the sexist ads would (a) judge their current body size as thinner, (b) reveal a larger discrepancy between their actual and ideal body size (preferring a larger body), and (c) reveal a larger discrepancy between their own ideal body size and their perceptions of others' male body size preferences (believing that others prefer a larger ideal) than men exposed to the nonsexist or no ad control conditions. Moreover, we predicted that feminists of both genders would express more negative attitudes than would non-feminist respondents toward the sexist ads and that feminists would express more negative attitudes toward the sexist than the nonsexist ads. Finally, we explored whether the body image predictions discussed above would be significantly stronger for respondents with relatively nonfeminist than feminist attitudes.

To test these hypotheses, we exposed male and female participants to one of the following: sexist ads that have been shown to activate the sex object gender subtype (see Rudman & Borgida, 1995), nonsexist ads (those that are similar in content to the sexist ads but do not portray women in a stereotypic manner), and a no ad control condition.

METHOD

Participants

For extra course credit, 108 introductory psychology students (51 men, 57 women) at Northern Illinois University participated in the experiment. Participants' ages ranged from 18-35 years ($M = 19.31$; $SD = 2.30$). Participants completed the experiment in a group setting. One participant did not complete the attitude measures (described below) and was thus dropped from all analyses.

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two advertisement conditions or to a no ad control condition. Participants assigned to the sexist ad condition ($n = 35$) viewed 15 sexist TV ads and 5 nonsexist TV ads. Participants assigned to the nonsexist ad condition ($n = 34$) viewed 20 nonsexist TV ads. Participants in these conditions were told that the purpose of the study was to determine the pleasantness of a number of television ads for a marketing research project. After viewing each ad, participants rated its pleasantness. Participants were then asked to complete an ostensibly unrelated questionnaire consisting of attitudes and beliefs. Although this latter part of the study was not formally dissociated from the ad exposure/rating part of the study, (e.g., via the use of two different experiments and/or different locations), students at Northern Illinois are typically asked to complete

multiple unrelated studies in a single session. Moreover, upon debriefing, no participant expressed suspicion about either the purpose of the study or that the two parts of the study were related. A final group of participants was assigned to a no ad control condition ($n = 39$). These participants completed the body image and attitude scales (described below) but did not view any ads.

Manipulation of Sexist Versus Nonsexist Ads

The sexist and nonsexist ads used in the present research were developed and used by Rudman and Borgida (1995). The products depicted in the ads were drawn from network and cable television and included beer, car, cologne, and clothing ads. The ads were yoked across the two conditions such that the presence and order of product ads appearing in the sexist ad condition matched the product ads appearing in the nonsexist ad condition (e.g., beer ads, car ads). The contents of the sexist and nonsexist ad conditions were pretested to ensure that they differed in perceived sexism and eroticism but not in terms of enjoyment (see Rudman & Borgida, 1995, p. 498).² The cover story was bolstered by the identification of a fictitious market research company (Midwestern Market Research Company) at the beginning of each of the videotape conditions. A numerical identification of each ad (1 to 20) appeared at the bottom left corner of the screen, and a six second graphical countdown preceded each advertisement.

To determine whether the sexist ads portrayed women and men as sex objects, we exposed additional 17 male and 17 female undergraduates to both the sexist and the nonsexist ads. Using 7-point scales, participants rated the facial and body attractiveness of the men and women in each ad, as well as the extent to which they were portrayed in an erotic manner and as sex objects.³ To evaluate whether male (and female) targets were perceived as more attractive and erotic within the sexist than the nonsexist ad condition, we averaged the four scores for male and female targets within the sexist and nonsexist conditions and submitted the composite ratings to a 2 (ad type) \times 2 (gender of target) \times 2 (gender of participant) mixed-effects ANOVA with repeated measures on the first two factors (i.e., all participants rated male and female targets for both the sexist and nonsexist ads).

In addition to main effects for both ad type, $F(1, 32) = 320.96$, $p < .001$; sexist ad $M = 4.94$; nonsexist ad $M = 3.50$, and gender of target, $F(1, 32) = 173.53$, $p < .001$; female target $M = 4.72$; male target $M = 3.72$, there was a significant ad type by gender of target interaction, $F(1, 32) = 91.15$, $p < .001$. Although both male and female targets were rated as more attractive and erotic within the sexist than the nonsexist condition ($p < .001$), this effect was larger for female (sexist ad $M = 5.70$; nonsexist ad $M =$

3.26) than male (sexist ad $M = 4.18$; nonsexist ad $M = 3.26$) targets.

Measures

Attitudes toward feminism. To assess attitudes toward feminism, 10 items were selected from Spence and Helmreich's (1978) Attitudes Toward Women Scale, Smith and Self's (1981) Attitudinal Inventory, and Renzetti's (1987) scale assessing feminist attitudes. These items were selected based on their relevance to various dimensions of feminist ideology. Items from the Attitudes Toward Women Scale were selected to measure attitudes about women's rights and roles in society (e.g., "Under modern economic conditions, with women being active outside the home, men should share in the household tasks, such as washing dishes and doing the laundry."). Items from Renzetti's (1987) scale were selected to measure attitudes toward gender inequality and the Women's Movement (e.g., "In general, I am not sympathetic with the efforts of women's liberation groups"; "When you get right down to it, women are an oppressed group, and men are the oppressors.") Items from Smith and Self's (1981) Attitudinal Inventory were selected to address attitudes toward women's changing roles (e.g., "Many women in the workforce are taking jobs away from men who need the jobs more."). Participants rated their degree of agreement with each item on a 4-point scale where 1 = *disagree strongly* and 4 = *agree strongly*. These items constitute a broad measure of attitudes toward feminism, and were averaged to form a composite scale ($\alpha = .70$). For the purposes of the analyses reported below, feminist ($n = 60$) and nonfeminist ($n = 47$) participants were identified on the basis of a median split on the composite scale (*median* = 3.15).

To minimize participants' suspicion about the gender-related nature of the study, the attitudes toward feminism items were interspersed in a larger group of items consisting of Altemeyer's (1988) Right Wing Authoritarianism and Attitudes Toward Homosexuals Scales, and McConahay's (1986) Modern Racism Scale.

Attitudes toward the ads. Participants expressed their attitudes toward each of the 20 advertisements on a 5-point scale, where 1 = *very unpleasurable* and 5 = *very pleasurable*. These ratings were internally consistent within both the sexist (for the 15 sexist ads, $\alpha = .72$) and the nonsexist ($\alpha = .75$) conditions. We therefore averaged the 15 ratings of the sexist ads within the sexist conditions and the 20 ratings of the nonsexist ads within the nonsexist condition to form a composite index of attitudes toward the ads.

Body image ratings. Body dissatisfaction was assessed using the Pictorial Body Image Scale developed by Stunkard, Sorensen, and Schulsinger (1983). The scale

consists of nine male and nine female figures that range in size from very thin (1) to very heavy (9) (see Figure 1). Participants used these scales to respond to the following four questions used by Cohn and Adler (1992): Which drawing looks most like your own figure? (actual body image); Which figure do you most want to look like? (own ideal body image); Which figure do you think most women (men) want to look like or find most attractive? (own sex ideal body image); and Which figure do you think most men (women) find most attractive? (opposite sex ideal body image). The three ideal body image variables (own ideal, own sex ideal, opposite sex ideal) were highly correlated ($\alpha = .92$); we therefore averaged them to create a composite ideal body image score.

We computed two discrepancy scores based on the ratings described above. First, we created an actual-ideal body size discrepancy score by subtracting participants' composite ideal body image score from their actual body image score. Positive scores on the actual-ideal body size discrepancy variable indicate that one is larger than desired whereas negative scores indicate that one is thinner than desired. Second, we created an own ideal-others' ideal body size discrepancy score. In creating this discrepancy score, we formed a composite others' ideal body size score by averaging the own sex ideal body size and opposite sex ideal body size scores ($\alpha = .92$). We created this own ideal-others' ideal body size discrepancy score by subtracting participants' composite others' ideal body image score from their own ideal body image score. Positive scores on this discrepancy variable indicate that one's own ideal body size is larger than one's perception of others' ideal body size (i.e., men's and women's) for one's own sex whereas negative scores indicate that one's own ideal body size is thinner than one's perception of others' ideal body size (i.e., men's and women's) for one's own sex.

RESULTS

Attitudes Toward Sexist Versus Nonsexist Ads

Our first prediction was that participants' explicit attitudinal reactions to the sexist versus nonsexist ads would be moderated by attitudes toward feminism. To be specific, we expected that feminists (i.e., participants scoring above the median on the attitudes toward feminism scale) would have less favorable attitudes toward the sexist than the nonsexist ads and that feminists' attitudes toward the sexist ads would be less favorable than their relatively nonfeminist counterparts. This prediction translates into a two-way interaction between ad type and attitudes toward feminism. A 2 (ad type: sexist vs. nonsexist ads) \times 2 (gender: male vs. female) \times 2 (attitudes toward feminism: nonfeminist vs. feminist) between-

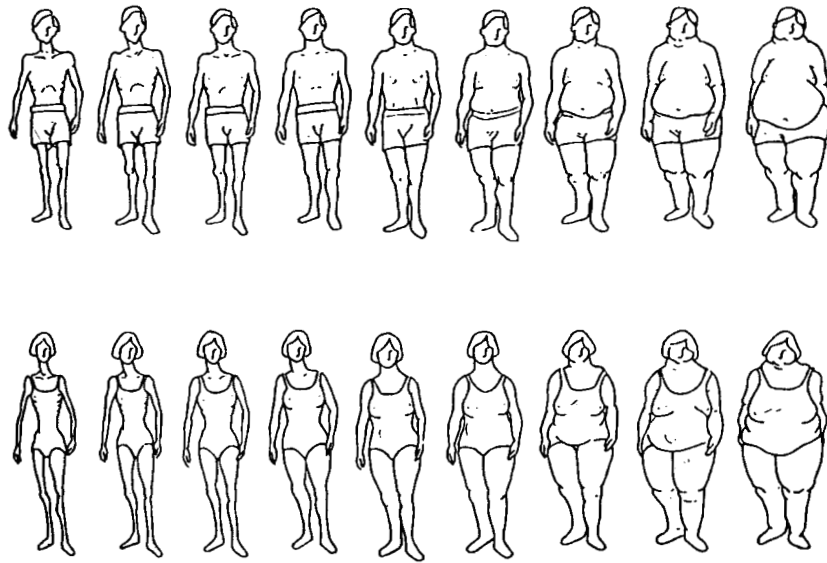


Figure 1 Stunkard, Sorensen, and Schulsinger's (1983) 9-point pictorial body image scale

groups analysis of variance performed on participants' composite ad favorability ratings revealed a main effect of ad type, $F(1, 61) = 6.43, p = .01$ ($\eta^2 = .08$). Participants exposed to the nonsexist ads ($M = 3.33$) had more favorable attitudes toward the ads than did participants exposed to the sexist ads ($M = 3.05$). However, this main effect was qualified by the expected Ad Type \times Attitudes Toward Feminism Interaction, $F(1, 61) = 4.06, p < .05$ ($\eta^2 = .05$). To be specific, feminists held significantly more negative attitudes toward the sexist ($M = 2.82$) than the nonsexist ($M = 3.43$) ads, $t(29) = 3.89, p < .01$; moreover, feminists held more negative attitudes toward the sexist ads ($M = 2.82$) than did their relatively nonfeminist counterparts ($M = 3.27$), $t(33) = 3.06, p < .01$. The three-way interaction was not significant, $F(1, 61) = .18, ns$.

Effects of Exposure to Sexist Ads on Body Image

Results did not differ across the nonsexist and no ad control conditions on any of the body image variables reported below (for the actual body image and actual-ideal body image discrepancy analyses, $F < 1$; for the own ideal-others' ideal body image discrepancy analysis, $F_s < 2.02, p_s > .10$). Thus, in all analyses reported below, we collapsed the means across these two conditions. To be specific, we examine the effects of actual body image, actual-ideal body image discrepancy, and own ideal-others' ideal body image discrepancy as a function of ad type (sexist vs. nonsexist and no ad conditions), gender (women vs. men), and attitudes toward feminism (favor vs. oppose).

Actual body image. A 2 (ad type) \times 2 (gender) \times 2 (attitudes toward feminism) ANOVA on participants' actual body image scores revealed, in addition to a main effect of gender, $F(1, 99) = 15.97, p < .001$ ($\eta^2 = .13$, M for women = 3.23, M for men = 4.04), only the expected Ad Type \times Gender Interaction, $F(1, 99) = 5.06, p < .05$ ($\eta^2 = .04$). As can be seen in Table 1, there was a significant effect such that female participants judged their bodies to be significantly larger within the sexist than the nonsexist/no ad condition, $t(55) = 2.00, p < .05$ (one-tailed); in contrast, male participants judged their bodies to be thinner (i.e., less muscular) within the sexist than the nonsexist/no ad condition, $t(48) = 2.03, p < .05$ (two-tailed).⁴ Thus, activating the female sex object subtype led women to view themselves as heavier and led men to view themselves as thinner. Interestingly, the Ad Type \times Gender Interaction was not at all moderated by attitudes toward feminism (three-way interaction $F < 1, \eta^2 = .006$; simple interaction of Ad Type \times Attitudes Toward Feminism for women $F < 1; \eta^2 = .005$). Thus, it appears that although feminists explicitly reject sexist stimuli when asked to evaluate it, exposure to such stimuli similarly influences feminists and nonfeminists.

Actual-ideal body size discrepancy. We predicted that women's actual-ideal discrepancy scores would be more positive (indicating that they are heavier than their—and others'—ideal) within the sexist than the nonsexist/no ad condition, and we explored whether men's actual-ideal discrepancy scores would be more negative (indicating that they are thinner than their—and others'—ideal) within the sexist than the

TABLE 1: Effects of Ad Type and Gender on Body Dissatisfaction

	Women	Men
Perceived actual body size ^a		
Sexist ad condition	3.61 _b	3.63 _a
Nonsexist/no ad condition	3.05 _a	4.24 _b
Actual-ideal discrepancy ^b		
Sexist ad condition	1.06 _b	-0.35 _a
Nonsexist/no ad condition	0.55 _a	0.25 _b
Own-others' ideal discrepancy ^b		
Sexist ad condition	0.25 _a	-0.34 _a
Nonsexist/no ad condition	0.21 _a	0.15 _b

NOTE: Comparisons not sharing a common subscript within the same column differ at $p < .05$.

a. Scores range from 1 (indicating a very slender body type) to 9 (indicating a very large body type).

b. Scores are discrepancies (actual minus ideal or own ideal minus others' ideal scores).

nonsexist/no condition. Moreover, because women tend to be larger and men tend to be thinner than they would ideally like to be (i.e., their baseline actual-ideal discrepancies are in the opposite direction; e.g., Cohn & Adler, 1992; Miller et al., 1980; Mintz & Betz, 1986), we expected that any gender differences in (valenced) actual-ideal body image discrepancies would be greater within the sexist than the nonsexist/no ad condition. These predictions translate into a two-way interaction between ad type and gender on actual-ideal body size discrepancy scores. Moreover, we explored whether any such effects would be moderated by individual differences in attitudes toward feminism.

A 2 (ad type) \times 2 (gender) \times (attitudes toward feminism) ANOVA performed on participants' actual-ideal body image discrepancy scores revealed, in addition to a main effect of gender, $F(1, 99) = 8.22, p < .01$ ($\eta^2 = .07$, M for women = 0.71; M for men = 0.05), only an Ad Type \times Gender Interaction, $F(1, 99) = 3.75, p = .05$ ($\eta^2 = .03$). Contrasts revealed that women rated themselves as heavier than the composite ideal for women to a greater extent after exposure to sexist than nonsexist/no ads, $t(55) = 1.70, p < .05$ (one-tailed); in contrast, men tended to rate themselves as thinner than the composite ideal for men to a greater extent following exposure to sexist than nonsexist/no ads, $t(48) = 1.82, p < .08$ (two-tailed; see Table 1 for means). Also, as expected, male and female participants' actual-ideal discrepancies differed significantly within the sexist condition, $t(32) = 3.81, p < .01$, but did not differ within the non-sexist/no ad condition, $t < 1$. Finally, as with the actual body image analysis, the Ad Type \times Gender Interaction was not moderated by attitudes toward feminism (three-way interaction $F < 1, \eta^2 = .001$; simple interaction of Ad Type \times Attitudes Toward Feminism for women $F < 1, \eta^2 = .003$).

Own ideal-others' ideal body size discrepancy. Finally, as we noted in the Introduction, women tend to overestimate both men's and other women's desire for a thin body size for women, and men tend to overestimate both women's and other men's preferences for a large, muscular physique for men (Cohn & Adler, 1992). In this section, we explored whether exposure to ads emphasizing female thinness (and perhaps male muscularity) would exacerbate people's own beliefs about others' beliefs regarding the ideal body size for women and men. That is, we determined whether women's own ideal-others' ideal discrepancy scores would be more positive (indicating that women perceive others as preferring thinner female bodies than they do themselves) in the sexist than the nonsexist/no ad condition and explored whether men's own ideal-others' ideal discrepancy scores would be more negative (indicating that men perceive others as preferring larger male bodies than they do themselves) in the sexist than the nonsexist/no ad condition. These predictions translate into an two-way interaction between ad type and gender on own ideal-others' ideal body size discrepancy scores.

A 2 (ad type) \times 2 (gender) \times 2 (attitudes toward feminism) ANOVA performed on participants' own ideal-others' ideal body size discrepancy scores revealed, in addition to a main effect of gender, $F(1, 99) = 5.66, p < .05$ ($\eta^2 = .05$; M for women = $-.01$; M for men = $.22$), only an ad type by gender interaction, $F(1, 99) = 4.95, p < .05$ ($\eta^2 = .04$). Contrasts revealed that men rated their ideal as thinner than others' ideal for men to a greater extent within the sexist than the nonsexist/no ad condition, $t(48) = 2.72, p < .01$ (two-tailed; see Table 1 for means). Moreover, although women rated their ideal as heavier than others' ideal for women to a greater extent after exposure to sexist ads versus nonsexist ads, this difference did not approach significance, $t < 1$ (see Table 1 for means). Finally, as expected, male and female participants' own ideal-others' ideal discrepancies differed significantly within the sexist condition, $t(32) = 2.84, p < .01$, but did not differ within the nonsexist condition, $t < 1$. Finally, as with the actual body image and actual-ideal body size discrepancy analyses, the Ad Type \times Gender Interaction was not moderated by attitudes toward feminism (three-way interaction $F < 1, \eta^2 = .001$; simple interaction of Ad Type \times Attitudes Toward Feminism for women $F < 1, \eta^2 = .007$).⁵

DISCUSSION

Increasingly, the gender stereotypic content of TV advertisements has shifted from woman as homemaker or domestic attendant to woman as sex object (e.g., Rudman & Hagiwara, 1992; Russo et al., 1982). The purpose of the present study was to experimentally examine the causal influence of exposure to TV ads that depict

women as sex objects on women and men's perceptions of and satisfaction with their bodies. Past research suggests that women often view themselves as overweight and would like to be thinner, whereas men tend to view themselves as underweight and would like to have a more muscular physique (e.g., Cohn & Adler, 1992; Mintz & Betz, 1986). We investigated whether TV ads that activate the woman-as-sex-object subtype—because they portray unrealizable standards of female beauty and thinness—increase women's (and men's) dissatisfaction with their bodies. Results were generally supportive of this hypothesis. Compared to women exposed to nonsexist ads (or no ads), women exposed to sexist TV ads perceived that their actual body size was larger and that there was a larger discrepancy between their actual and ideal body size (preferring to be thinner than one's perceived actual body size). In contrast, compared to men exposed to nonsexist ads (or no ads), men exposed to sexist TV ads perceived that their actual body size was thinner, that there was a larger discrepancy between their actual and ideal body size (preferring to be larger than one's perceived actual body size), and that others' ideals for men's bodies were even larger than men's own ideals. We should add that these effects, observed as they were in a laboratory context, are probably temporary in nature. However, given their seemingly high degree of mundane realism, we would expect that repeated exposure to such stimuli over time may lead to more chronic or long-term effects.

Beyond these main findings, two additional findings are noteworthy. First, although we found that explicit attitudinal reactions to the sexist and nonsexist ads were conditioned by participants' levels of feminism (i.e., feminists held more negative attitudes toward the sexist ads than did nonfeminists, and feminists held more negative ads toward the sexist than the nonsexist ads), feminism did not exert any moderating effects on body image. Thus, although feminists were more rejecting of the sexist ads when explicitly asked to evaluate them, they were no more impervious to their influence than were nonfeminists. This dissociation raises an interesting question about the conditions under which feminism acts as a buffer against the negative impact of sexist events. Previous research indicates that feminists are more likely to perceive discrimination than nonfeminists (e.g., Henderson-King & Stewart, 1994) and to be less negatively affected by the subjective experience of sexism (Landrine & Klonoff, 1997). Perhaps the buffer effect depends on whether the sexist stimuli invoke relatively controlled and deliberate or automatic responses. Consistent with Landrine and Klonoff's (1997) analysis, feminism may provide a "cognitive framework for under-

standing sexism . . . and increase active coping skills and [thereby] decrease the negative impact of these events" (p. 27). If, however, the stimuli do not directly invoke feminists' cognitive framework (and thus fail to engage such coping skills)—perhaps because the stimuli automatically activate gender stereotypes or are not adequately interpreted as sexist—feminist beliefs may be less likely to provide a buffer against the negative influence of exposure to such stereotypes. Future research should more directly explore the conditions under which and the manner by which progressive in-group (and intergroup) attitudes (e.g., racial and gender equality) moderate the effects of exposure to stereotypic information.

A second noteworthy aspect of our results was that the influence of exposure to sexist ads decreased body dissatisfaction among men as well as women. Although we cannot provide a definitive explanation of the processes through which these effects occurred for men, they raise the possibility that activating the female sex object subtype increases the salience of aspects of men's physical attractiveness such as their body size. That is, the female sex object subtype might activate not only culturally desired attributes of women (e.g., thinness) but also activate desired attributes of and expectations for men (e.g., muscularity). This is particularly likely to have occurred, as the sexist ads that we employed also portrayed especially attractive, athletic, and/or muscular men. Thus, portrayals of idealized male muscularity and beauty may shape the body images of men just as portrayals of female thinness and beauty shape the body images of women.

Finally, because a distorted body image and body dissatisfaction have been linked to various negative outcomes such as chronic dieting (Miller et al., 1980), low self-esteem (Mintz & Betz, 1986; Thompson & Thompson, 1986), and depression (Mintz & Betz, 1986; Taylor & Cooper, 1986), our results have direct and socially consequential implications for psychological adjustment and well-being. To be specific, our results suggest that depression and loss of self-esteem may be indirectly facilitated by exposure to sexist TV ads (or activation of the female sex object subtype) through its direct influence on body dissatisfaction. These expectations are consistent with Higgins' (1989) self-discrepancy theory, which predicts that actual-ideal discrepancies (in the present research with respect to body image) are associated with depression and dejection-related emotions. Our results also extend self-discrepancy theory by identifying a situational variable (i.e., activation of gender stereotypes) that may influence actual-ideal discrepancy. It would be interesting to determine whether discrepancies between one's perceived actual body size and the

body size one believes one ought to have trigger anxiety and agitation-related emotions.

In conclusion, in the present research, we sought to explore the influence of exposure to sexist—but commonplace—TV ads on men and women's perceptions of and satisfaction with their bodies. The results of this study offer empirical support for the contention that exposure to such images may indeed have significant consequences. More broadly, our results attest to the potential power of the media in shaping people's self-concepts. It is reasonable to suppose that media other than TV ads (e.g., television programs, print advertising), in depicting women as sex objects, also contribute to body dissatisfaction among both men and women.

NOTES

1. The question of whether variations in feminism are related to body dissatisfaction has produced mixed results. Although Dionne, Davis, Fox, and Gurevich (1995) found a physical attractiveness subscale of feminist beliefs (but not a general measure of feminism) to be negatively linked to body dissatisfaction in women, other investigators have found that feminist attitudes are unrelated to body dissatisfaction (e.g., Mintz & Betz, 1986; Kelson, Kearney-Cooke & Lansky, 1990; Xinaris & Boland, 1990).

2. Rudman and Borgida (1995) provided construct-related validity for the advertising manipulation by showing that the sexist ads automatically activated the female sex object gender subtype. To be specific, participants exposed to the sexist ads subsequently responded faster to sexist words on a lexical decision task than did participants exposed to the nonsexist ads.

3. For ads in which more than one man or woman appeared, participants were asked to make an average rating of the targets for each gender.

4. Because we advanced clear a priori hypotheses for women, we supplemented omnibus ANOVAs with one-tailed planned contrasts. However, because our hypotheses were exploratory for men, we supplement ANOVAs with two-tailed contrasts (simple effects analyses produced highly similar results).

5. We also analyzed each of the body image variables using only female participants to determine whether feminism among in-group members (i.e., women) would provide a buffer against exposure to the sexist ads on body image. However, the two-way interactions between ad type and attitudes toward feminism among women on actual body image, actual-ideal discrepancy, and own ideal-others' ideal discrepancy did not approach significance, $F(1, 30) < .51, ns$.

REFERENCES

- A. C. Nielsen Co. (1989). *Nielsen report on television*. Northbrook, IL: Author.
- Atkin, C., & Miller, M. (1975, April). *The effects of television advertising on children: Experimental evidence*. Paper presented at the meeting of the International Communication Association, Chicago, IL.
- Altemeyer, B. (1988). *Enemies of freedom: Understanding right-wing authoritarianism*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bargh, J. A., & Raymond, P. (1992, August). *An automatic power-sex association in men likely to be sexual harassers*. Paper presented at the Meeting of the Society for Experimental Social Psychology, San Antonio, TX.
- Beckwith, J. B. (1994). Terminology and social relevance in psychological research on gender. *Social Behavior and Personality, 22*, 329-336.

- Brentl, D. J., & Cantor, J. (1988). The portrayal of men of women in U.S. television commercials: A recent content analysis and trends over 15 years. *Sex Roles, 18*, 595-609.
- Brown, J. D., Novick, N. J., Lord, K. A., & Richards, J. M. (1992). When Gulliver travels: Social context, psychological closeness, and self-appraisals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 62*, 717-727.
- Cash, T. F., Cash, D. W., & Butters, J. W. (1983). "Mirror, mirror on the wall . . .?": Contrast effects and self-evaluations of physical attractiveness. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 9*, 351-358.
- Clifton, A. K., McGrath, D., & Wick, B. (1976). Stereotypes of woman: A single category? *Sex Roles, 2*, 135-148.
- Cohn, L. D., & Adler, N. E. (1992). Female and male perceptions of ideal body shapes. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 16*, 69-79.
- Condry, J. (1989). *The psychology of television*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Courtney, A. E., & Whipple, T. W. (1974). Women in TV commercials. *Journal of Communication, 24*, 110-118.
- Courtney, A. E., & Whipple, T. W. (1980). *Sex stereotyping in advertising: An annotated bibliography*. Cambridge, MA: Marketing Science Institute.
- Courtney, A. E., & Whipple, T. W. (1983). *Sex stereotyping in advertising*. Lexington, MA: Lexington.
- Deaux, K. (1995). How basic can you be? The evolution of research on gender stereotypes. *Journal of Social Issues, 51*, 11-20.
- Deaux, K., Winton, W., Crowley, M., & Lewis, L. L. (1985). Level of categorization and content of gender stereotypes. *Social Cognition, 3*, 145-167.
- Devine, P. G. (1989). Stereotypes and prejudice: Their automatic and controlled components. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 56*, 5-18.
- Dionne, M., Davis, C., Fox, J., & Gurevich, M. (1995). Feminist ideology as a predictor of body dissatisfaction in women. *Sex Roles, 33*, 277-287.
- Eckes, T. (1994). Explorations in gender cognition: Content and structure of female and male subtypes. *Social Cognition, 12*, 37-60.
- Furnham, A., & Voli, V. (1989). Gender stereotypes in Italian television advertisements. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media, 33*, 175-185.
- Garner, D. M., Garfinkel, P. E., Schwartz, D., & Thompson, M. (1980). Cultural expectations of thinness in women. *Psychological Reports, 47*, 483-491.
- Geis, F. L., Brown, V., Jennings, J., & Porter, N. (1984). TV commercials as achievement scripts for women. *Sex Roles, 10*, 513-525.
- Goodman, W. C. (1995). *The invisible woman: Confronting weight prejudice in America*. CA: Gurze.
- Hall, C. C., & Crum, M. J. (1994). Women and "Body-isms" in television beer commercials. *Sex Roles, 31*, 329-337.
- Harmatz, M. G., Gronendyke, J., & Thomas, T. (1985). The underweight male: The unrecognized problem group in body image research. *Journal of Obesity and Weight Regulation, 4*, 258-267.
- Henderson-King, D., & Stewart, A. J. (1994). Women or feminists? Assessing women's group consciousness. *Sex Roles, 31*, 505-516.
- Henkin, B., & Fish, J. M. (1986). Gender and personality differences in the appreciation of cartoon humor. *Journal of Psychology, 120*, 157-175.
- Higgins, E. T. (1989). Self-discrepancy theory: What patterns of self-beliefs cause people to suffer? In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 22, pp. 93-136). New York: Academic Press.
- Jennings, J., Geis, F. L., & Brown, V. (1980). Influence of television commercials on women's self-confidence and independent judgment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 38*, 203-210.
- Jensen, I., & Gutek, B. A. (1982). Attributions and assignment of responsibility for sexual harassment. *Journal of Social Issues, 38*, 121-136.
- Kelson, T., Kearney-Cooke, A., & Lansky, L. (1990). Body-image and body beautification among female college students. *Perceptual and Motor Skills, 71*, 281-289.
- Kilbourne, J. (Director). (1995). *Slim hopes: Advertising and the obsession with thinness* [Film]. (Available from Media Education Foundation)

- Kilbourne, J. (Lecturer), & Lazarus, M. (Producer and Director). (1987). *Still killing us softly* [Film]. (Available from Cambridge Documentary Films)
- LaFrance, M., & Woodzicka, J. A. (1997). No laughing matter: Women's verbal and nonverbal reactions to sexist humor. In J. Swim & C. Stangor (Eds.), *Targets of prejudice*. San Diego: Academic Press.
- Landrine, H., & Klonoff, E. A. (1997). *Discrimination against women: Prevalence, consequences, remedies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lazier-Smith, L. (1989). Advertising: Women's place and image. In P. J. Creedon (Ed.), *Women in mass communication: Challenging gender values*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Lovdal, L. T. (1989). Sex role messages in television commercials: An update. *Sex Roles, 21*, 715-724.
- McConahay, J. B. (1986). Modern racism, ambivalence and the modern racism scale. In S. L. Gaertner & J. Dovidio (Eds.), *Prejudice, discrimination and racism: Theory and research*. New York: Academic Press.
- McKenzie-Mohr, D., & Zanna, M. P. (1990). Treating women as sexual objects: Look to the (gender schematic) male who has viewed pornography. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 16*, 296-308.
- Miller, T. M., Coffman, J. G., & Linke, R. A. (1980). Survey on body image, weight, and diet of college students. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association, 77*, 561-566.
- Mintz, L. B., & Betz, N. E. (1986). Sex differences in the nature, realism, and correlates of body image. *Sex Roles, 15*, 185-195.
- Moore, T. E., Griffiths, K., & Payne, B. (1987). Gender, attitudes toward women, and the appreciation of sexist humor. *Sex Roles, 16*, 521-531.
- Noseworthy, C. M., & Lott, A. J. (1984). The cognitive organization of gender-stereotypic categories. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 10*, 474-481.
- Pollay, R. W. (1986). The distorted mirror: Reflections of the unintended consequences of advertising. *Journal of Marketing, 50*, 18-36.
- Pryor, J. B., Giedd, J. L., & Williams, K. B. (1995). A social psychological model for predicting sexual harassment. *Journal of Social Issues, 51*, 69-84.
- Renzetti, C. (1987). New wave or second stage? Attitudes of college women toward feminism. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 37*, 146-153.
- Rossi, S. R., & Rossi, J. S. (1985). Gender differences in the perception of women in magazine advertising. *Sex Roles, 12*, 1033-1039.
- Rudman, L. A., & Borgida, E. (1995). The afterglow of construct accessibility: The behavioral consequences of priming men to view women as sexual objects. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 31*, 493-517.
- Rudman, W. J., & Hagiwara, A. S. (1992). Sexual exploitation in advertising health and wellness products. *Women and Health, 18*, 77-89.
- Russo, N. F., Feller, L., & DeLeon, P. H. (1982). Sex role stereotypes in television advertising: Strategies for change in the 80's. *Academic Psychology Bulletin, 4*, 117-134.
- Schwartz, N., Wagner, D., Bannert, M., & Mathes (1987). Cognitive accessibility of sex role concepts and attitudes toward political participation: The impact of sexist advertisements. *Sex Roles, 17*, 593-601.
- Seid, R. P. (1989). *Never too thin: Why women are at war with their bodies*. New York: Prentice-Hall.
- Silverstein, B., Perdue, L., Peterson, B., & Kelly, E. (1986). The role of the mass media in promoting a thin standard of bodily attractiveness for women. *Sex Roles, 14*, 519-532.
- Silverstein, B., Peterson, B., & Perdue, L. (1986). Some correlates of the thin standard of body attractiveness for women. *International Journal of Eating Disorders, 5*, 895-905.
- Six, B., & Eckes, T. (1991). A closer look at the complex structure of gender stereotypes. *Sex Roles, 24*, 57-71.
- Smith, M. D., & Self, G. D. (1981). Feminists and traditionalists: An attitudinal comparison. *Sex Roles, 7*, 183-188.
- Spence, J. T., & Helmreich, R. C. (1978). *Masculinity and femininity: Their psychological dimensions, correlations, and antecedents*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Stunkard, A. J., Sorensen, T., & Schulsinger, F. (1983). Use of the Danish adoption register for the study of obesity and thinness. In S. Kety (Ed.), *The genetics of neurological and psychiatric disorders* (pp. 115-120). New York: Raven Press.
- Swim, J. K., & Cohen, L. L. (in press). Overt, covert, and subtle sexism: A comparison between the Attitudes Toward Women and Modern Sexism scales. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*.
- Taylor, M. J., & Cooper, P. J. (1986). Body size overestimation and depressed mood. *British Journal of Clinical Psychology, 25*, 153-154.
- Thompson, J. K., & Thompson, C. M. (1986). Body size distortion and self-esteem in asymptomatic, normal weight males and females. *International Journal of Eating Disorders, 5*, 1061-1068.
- United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. (1980). *Women in the media*. Paris: Author.
- Wolf, N. (1991). *The beauty myth: How images of beauty are used against women*. New York: William Morrow.
- Xiniris, S., & Boland, F. (1990). Disordered eating in relation to tobacco use, alcohol consumption, self-control, and sex-role ideology. *International Journal of Eating Disorders, 9*, 425-433.

Received December 31, 1997

Revision accepted June 5, 1998