

Written evidence submitted by a group of UK academics working in Health, Nutrition and Psychology [MRS0063]

Executive summary

- Our academic research on media representations of breasts, penises, stomachs and bottoms shows the ways in which harmful “idealised” stereotypes of body parts are conveyed.
- Teen Vogue magazine, unlike Seventeen magazine, does a very good job of talking to young women about their breasts, and challenging patriarchal messages.
- Men are subject to negative messages about their penises, which tie in with fears of not being man enough.
- The Flat Tummy Co’s tactics are particularly pernicious as they hold up an ideal of slim bodies with one hand, and tell women to binge eat and drink with the other.
- Diversity in models is to be welcomed but they may simply replace one ideal with another.
- It is essential to improve consumers’ media literacy skills so that they can evaluate messages more critically.

Dear Dr Noakes,

1. We are writing in response to the Women and Equalities Committee’s valuable and important inquiry into body image. We are a cross-disciplinary group of academics who have published research on the ways that bodies are portrayed in media. We’ve looked at the way breasts are discussed in teenaged girls’ magazines, the way that penises are represented in men’s magazines, the way that The Flat Tummy Co. market their products using Instagram, and the use of more racially and body diverse models in billboard campaigns by companies such as BooHoo and Pretty Little Things. Our research is focussed on the media, rather than the audience, and we think we have a valuable contribution to make towards your call for information about content that promotes eating disorders, diet culture, cosmetic surgery, and about the responsibilities of companies and the media in ensuring diversity in the images we see. We have identified best and worst practice and we welcome the chance to share our findings with the committee.
2. This report summarises our research that has focused on the representation of specific body parts (breasts, penis, stomach, buttocks) in magazines, social media and advertising campaigns. It covers a number of issues including how audiences are positioned, the need for editors, journalists and companies to be more aware of how they portray the human body, and the need to support young individuals to improve their critical literacy when they view this media. In our research, outlined below, we identify how media perpetuates patriarchal ideas of female beauty and sexuality, primarily by reinforcing the concept of “ideal bodies” which must be aspired to. We also comment on how the male body, masculinity and specifically the penis, are put on display for critical inspection like never before.

Breasts¹

3. Particularly for women, we see the message that physical attractiveness is one of women's most important assets, and something all women should work to achieve and maintain. Exposure to such messages and media representations can contribute to psychological distress, body image concerns and low self-esteem, and thus is an important public health issue.
4. Female adolescence is a critical stage of identity development in which preoccupation with self-image is heightened and feelings of vulnerability about fitting in intensify. However, despite breast development being common to all female adolescents, how breasts are represented in girls magazines has never been researched. This is why we conducted the first review of this content. We compared the way that the two teen girl's magazines with the highest circulation, Seventeen and Teen Vogue, wrote about breasts. We found that Seventeen perpetuated the idea of an "ideal" breast which was not too big, not too small, and even had a specific shape. Girls who didn't fit this ideal were positioned as consumers and told to buy bras to remedy their "problem":

"If your breasts appear to be equally full at both the top and bottom, then you've got round boobs. People with these assets don't tend to need particularly structured, padded bras, as you don't need the bra to help shape the breasts – nature's done that for you."

5. In contrast, the other magazine we looked at, Teen Vogue took a very different approach. They took a feminist informed approach and encouraged girls to reject patriarchal ideas of beauty, to reject the shame associated with their breasts being visible, and to challenge the idea of there even being an "ideal breast":

"Women's bodies are constantly being critiqued. Whether it's unwelcome comments from others, or sometimes even criticism of ourselves, it seems like someone always has something to say. Worse, women are also constantly made to feel like they should look a certain way...The bottom line is that all bodies are beautiful, "trends" or not."

6. Teen Vogue articles were characterised by a deconstruction of media messages as well as an awareness of the role the magazine itself plays. This acknowledgement of responsibility was incredibly refreshing to see, and we are of the opinion that their approach is one that could and should be used as an example of best practice.

Penises²

7. Of course, women are not the only ones who are subject to harmful media messages. Men's magazines are an influential site where masculinity is reproduced and commodified. They act as cultural signposts for men, telling them how they should feel about their penises and their masculinity. In another study we looked at the way men's magazines talk about penises, examining four popular UK titles: Men's Health, GQ, Attitude and Loaded. Even though the magazines are aimed at different demographics, the messages across all four were remarkably similar. Men seem to be very fearful about issues to do with their penis, and we often saw laddish humour being deployed to soften talk about injuries or damage that could occur. Where once size was the only salient factor, the articles were also laced with messages about ideal size and aesthetics with articles entitled things like "Is your penis good looking?". Interestingly though, plastic surgery solutions to size issues were always discouraged. There was a notable lack of discussion of pleasure. When they talk about penises, men's magazines present aspirational goals and also expose men to traumatising imaginings of what could go wrong. Ultimately, they left readers wrestling with a fear of not being 'man enough'.
8. For sexual health practitioners and health psychologists working closely with boys and men, an understanding of the dominant media representations that males are exposed to in mainstream media publications will be valuable when structuring interventions, therapies and sex-education classes.

Stomachs³

9. Of all the media representation studies that we have conducted, the most disturbing was probably our analysis of The Flat Tummy Co Instagram campaign. The Flat Tummy Co sell appetite suppressant products to women through targeted Instagram advertising. They have been criticised by various high-profile public figures, for example Jameela Jamil, but until we did our research no academic analysis of their marketing tactics had been conducted. We concluded that the company's tactic to sell their product is a three-stage process. Step one is to reinforce the message that women should aspire to a thin ideal. Step two is to tell women that they are too weak or lazy to attain it. Step three is the 'logical conclusion' that the only way to attain the ideal is to buy their products. For example, Flat Tummy Co's Instagram feed is full of pictures of exercise equipment, side by side with slogans such as:

"Unless you fell on the treadmill, no one cares about your workout".

Or a picture of a very slim women with her midriff on display would be followed by a slogan such as:

"A banana is 105 calories. A glass of prosecco is 80. Choose wisely babes."

10. We find these marketing tactics particularly concerning because they not only reinforce harmful stereotypical ideals, they go one step further by undermining women's agency,

telling them that they are weak and lazy, and explicitly instructing women to shun exercise and a healthy diet and instead to binge on junk food and alcohol.

Bottoms⁴

11. The final piece of work we'd like to bring to the committee's attention is our latest project, looking at billboard images that were used in campaigns by the clothing companies BooHoo and Pretty Little Things in 2019. These images were notable in that the models were racially diverse and larger than is usually seen in advertising campaigns. In particular, the models had large, powerful looking thighs and bottoms, often emphasised through the poses in which they were captured or the angles from which the photographs were shot. We asked young women how they viewed these images and what sense they made of the messages they conveyed. While we rather naively thought they might welcome diversity, in fact they mostly reported feeling that this was yet another oppressive portrayal of bodily ideals, if anything an even more unattainable one as it combined large bottoms with slim waists.

“So it's like you have to have bigger breasts and a bigger bottom, it's not like you can be bigger anywhere else.”

Our participants also felt that this was a shallow version of diversity:

“Like, picking and choosing the black features that you want.”

12. One reassuring thing to come out of this research was a sense that young women had an awareness about the way in which the images were curated and distorted:

“Obviously I'm aware that I'm looking at curated image that's been photoshopped and airbrushed and, you know, has been very carefully planned.”

However, despite being aware of the artificiality and unattainability of the images, young women still reported aspiring to the bodily ideals represented, albeit somewhat ruefully.

Summary

13. Our research has highlighted areas of poor (and good) practice in the media and the need for editors, journalists and companies to reflect on the approaches they adopt when discussing male and female anatomy. It has also identified that health professionals and educators have an opportunity to support and enable readers to negotiate media content. Furthermore, it highlights the over-arching need to focus on critical health literacy. It is very unlikely that companies such as the Flat Tummy Co. are going to change their marketing tactics, but we can work on getting people to the point where they are ready to critique information, particularly by understanding the context in which it is presented. We need consumers to be able to negotiate media and deconstruct messages using media 'survival skills'. Targeting efforts on improving critical health literacy skills would not alter the messages being distributed, but it would alter the way in which those messages are received.

We would be happy to provide further evidence and information if useful. Please feel free to contact Dr Christine Campbell christine.campbell@stmarys.ac.uk

Yours sincerely,

Dr Christine Campbell, Associate Professor of Psychology, St Mary's University, Twickenham.

Dr Craig Owen, Senior Lecturer in Psychology, Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge.

Dr Nicola Brown, Reader in Female Health, St Mary's University, Twickenham.

Dr Cleo Jaye, Lecturer in Psychology, St Mary's University, Twickenham.

Dr Anne Majumdar, Senior Lecturer in Nutrition, St Mary's University, Twickenham

Dr Atefeh Omrani, Research Associate in Breast Health, St Mary's University, Twickenham

Ms Joanne O'Prey, Research Assistant in Psychology, St Mary's University, Twickenham

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