Seeing the beauty in everyday people: A qualitative study of young Australians'

opinions on body image, the mass media and models

Phillippa C. Diedrichs[a], Christina Lee[a], and Marguerite Kelly[a]

Author Note

[a]School of Psychology, The University of Queensland, St Lucia, 4072, Australia.

Phillippa C. Diedrichs is now at the Centre for Appearance Research, University of the West of England, Bristol, UK.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Phillippa C. Diedrichs, Centre for Appearance Research, University of the West of England, Frenchay Campus, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol BS16 1QY, United Kingdom. E-mail: phillippa.diedrichs@uwe.ac.uk, Phone: +44 117 328 3939, Facsimile: + +44 117 328 3645.

Abstract

While governments have called for greater body size diversity in media imagery to promote positive body image and prevent disordered eating, the fashion and advertising industries often argue that average-size models do not appeal to consumers. Focus groups were conducted with 76 young Australian women and men to provide a previously neglected consumer perspective on this debate. Thematic analysis identified dissatisfaction with the restricted range of body sizes, and the objectification of women, in media imagery. Participants indicated a desire for change and positive reactions to average-size models in advertising, but also suggested barriers to their increased use, including concerns about the promotion of obesity. The results suggest that there is some consumer support for increased body size diversity in media imagery. Consumer and industry barriers, however, will need to be addressed in the future if this is to be an effective public health intervention to promote positive body image.

Keywords: body image, media, advertising, average-size models, focus groups, qualitative

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In 2008, body image was the most significant concern for Australian women and men aged 15-23 years; more concerning than drugs, alcohol, depression and suicide (Mission Australia, 2008). Mirroring these findings, it is estimated that 40-70% of adolescents in Western countries are dissatisfied with their appearance (Kenardy, Brown, & Vogt, 2001; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001). Body dissatisfaction is also prevalent among children as young as five years of age (Davison, Markey, & Birch, 2000), and among women and men over 70 (Schuler, Broxon-Hutcherson, Steven, Stuart, & Isosaari, 2004). The high prevalence of negative body image is a significant public health concern due to its negative physical and psychological health outcomes. People with negative body image are more likely to experience disordered eating (Stice, 2002), depression and suicidal ideation (Brausch & Gutierrez, 2009; Kanayama, Barry, Hudson, & Pope, 2006), and drug and alcohol misuse (Kanayama, et al., 2006; Nelson, Lust, & Story, 2009). Exposure to media images of idealised thin and muscular models is a significant risk factor for poor body image (Levine & Murnen, 2009; Slater & Tiggemann, 2006).

Content analyses demonstrate that the mass media have increasingly presented and promoted a beauty ideal that emphasises thinness for women and muscularity for men. For example, analyses of *Playboy* and *Playgirl* magazines have found that the female and male centrefolds have become progressively thinner and more muscular, respectively, since the 1950s (Garner, Garfinkel, Schwartz, & Thompson, 1980; Leit, Pope, & Gray, 2001; Seifert, 2005; Wiseman, Gray, Mosimann, & Ahrens, 1992). North American prime time sitcoms also feature an overrepresentation of thin and muscular actors, and frequently depict thinner characters making derogatory appearance-related comments about larger characters (Fouts & Burggraf, 2000; Fouts & Vaughan, 2002). Similarly, thin and muscular characters in

children's books and cartoons are more likely to have desirable traits than are characters with larger body sizes (Herbozo, Tantleff-Dunn, Gokee-Larose, & Thompson, 2004).

Many researchers relate the recent increase in the prevalence of negative body image and eating disorders to the increasing media depiction of thin and muscular models (Levine & Murnen, 2009). Indeed, a meta-analysis of 77 correlational and experimental studies found that viewing media images of thin models is associated with increased body dissatisfaction and disordered eating among women (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008). A separate meta-analysis of 25 studies also found that exposure to muscular media images was associated with increased body dissatisfaction among men (Barlett, Vowels, & Saucier, 2008).

To date the majority of body image research has concentrated on predictors of, and ways to prevent, negative body image. Increasingly, however, it has been acknowledged that there is a need for research, policy and clinical practice to focus on strategies to promote and understand positive body image (Avalos, Tylka, & Wood-Barcalow, 2005). For example, in response to the evidence that thin and muscular media exposure is associated with negative body image, governments, politicians and researchers throughout Australia, Europe, and the United States have called for greater body size diversity in media imagery in order to promote positive body image (Australian Government, 2010; Boyer et al., 2009; Liberal Democrats, 2009; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2006). Research that has investigated the effect of exposure to average-size fashion models (i.e., models with body sizes that are more representative of the general population) supports these recommendations (e.g., Diedrichs & Lee, 2010, in press; Dittmar & Howard, 2004a, 2004b; Halliwell & Dittmar, 2004; Halliwell, Dittmar, & Howe, 2005; Lorenzen, Grieve, & Thomas, 2004). These studies have found that viewing average-size female and male models in advertisements is associated with more positive body image among both women and men, in comparison to viewing images of thin and muscular models, or no models. Further, analysis of interviews with undergraduate

women who have positive body image suggests that fostering a sociocultural environment that is accepting of different body shapes and sizes as beautiful may be an important strategy for promoting positive body image among consumers (Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, & Augustus-Horvath, 2010).

Despite the finding that women and men perceive advertisements featuring average-size models to be as effective as those with thin and muscular models (Diedrichs & Lee, 2010, in press; Dittmar & Howard, 2004a, 2004b; Halliwell & Dittmar, 2004; Halliwell, Dittmar, & Howe, 2005), there are concerns among the media, fashion and advertising industries that average-size models do not appeal to consumers. For example, Karl Lagerfeld, head designer for fashion house *Chanel* recently said, "You've got fat mothers with their bags of chips sitting in front of the television and saying that thin models are ugly.... No one wants to see round women" ("Runde Frauen will da niemand sehen [No one wants to see round women]," 2009, para 2). Furthermore, some industry stakeholders have criticised the use of average-size models in advertising and fashion shows by suggesting that it may promote obesity and unhealthy behaviours among consumers (see Rawi, 2010; Wells, 2010). There has, however, been little published research into consumer opinions on the use of average-size models in media imagery, or their views on appearance ideals, body image and the media more broadly. Therefore a consumer perspective is missing from this debate.

To address this gap, we conducted focus group discussions with young Australian women and men, in order to provide a contextualised and in-depth exploration of (a) what these young consumers think about the appearances of people currently displayed in the media; (b) what they would like to see in the media in terms of appearance; (c) what they think about the use of average-size models in advertising and media imagery; and (d) what role they think the media play in influencing body image.

Method

Participants

We recruited 76 undergraduate students (43 women and 33 men), aged 17-25 years, from a large Australian university to take part in focus group discussions on advertising and the media. Participants were from diverse academic programs, but all were enrolled in an introductory psychology course and received course credit for their participation. The mean age was 18.2 years for women and 18.7 for men. The majority identified as White Australian (80% women; 75.8% men), while 24.2% of the men and 8.5% of the women identified as Asian Australian, and 11.5% of the women as 'other'. Although this was a convenience sample, it also reflects the core readership age group of major Australian fashion, lifestyle and fitness magazines (e.g., *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *GQ*) (Roy Morgan Research, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c). Indeed, 77.2% of the women and 45.4% of the men in this study reported that they purchase one or more of these types of magazines every month.

Design

Five focus group discussions were conducted with women and five with men; we decided to conduct single-gender groups because past research has suggested that the social norms and rules for discussing body image are different for women and men (e.g., Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2006). All sessions were moderated by the first author, a woman in her mid 20s, and were run in round-table teaching rooms on the university campus. The sessions each ran for 60-90 minutes and were attended by 3-10 participants. Focus groups were conducted until saturation was reached, a point at which no new themes or information were apparent.

A semi-structured interview schedule was used to guide the discussions (see Table 1), but conversations were allowed to flow naturally and the trigger questions were only used if the relevant topics did not arise during the natural course of the discussions. The first focus group conducted with each gender was used to pilot the interview schedule and protocol, with

the view to make adjustments to both if necessary. No concerns or problems arose during these pilot discussions; consequently, no changes were made to the schedule or protocol, and the pilot sessions were included in the final analysis. Each session was audiotaped and transcribed verbatim by the first and third authors. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants to ensure their anonymity.

Data Analysis

We conducted an inductive thematic analysis in accordance with the steps articulated by Braun and Clarke (2006). After immersing herself in the data by repeatedly listening to the audio-recordings of the discussions and re-reading the transcripts, the first author systematically coded each transcript line-by-line to identify key features and patterns in the data[1]. During this process, field notes, self-reflective memos and thematic maps were used to record any observed patterns, and to highlight particularly insightful excerpts in the data. These notes and maps also included brief reflections on the social context and body image theory and literature that appeared relevant. The transcripts and codes were then reviewed twice more by the first author, with particular attention paid to refining the codes. This iterative process of refinement included collapsing any codes that overlapped markedly and separating those that addressed two or more related but distinctive ideas. The codes were then organised into clusters of similar ideas. These clusters eventually were formed into five main themes, which we believe to best summarise the main patterns and key findings of the data. Meetings were held between all of the authors to discuss the analytic findings and to reach a consensus on the final themes.

While the codes and themes identified were derived mainly from the data and the participants' accounts, we adopted a contextualist approach throughout the analysis. We recognised and interpreted the social context within which the participants' experiences and

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[1] Nvivo 8 research software was used to assist with highlighting and organising data excerpts and codes, but the coding, analysis and interpretation of the data were all conducted manually.

thoughts are embedded. We also drew upon theories relating to the thin ideal (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999), the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975) and self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) from the body image and feminist literature to understand and interpret the data.

Results and Discussion

We identified five main themes in the data. The first two themes are largely descriptive of media images: participants expressed the view that *the mass media are dominated by narrow appearance ideals* (Theme 1); and both women and men were of the view that *women in the media are objectified* (Theme 2)*. The next theme deals with the participants' view of the extent to which *body image is affected by the media* (Theme 3), while the final two themes focus on participants' interpretations and views of this emphasis on unrealistic and objectified bodies. Both women and men expressed *frustration with lack of appearance diversity and a desire for a new "average and healthy" ideal* (Theme 4). There were also *diverse views on the use of average-size models in media imagery* (Theme 5), with some participants very positive about them and others expressing the view that they might encourage unhealthy behaviours and interfere with advertising strategies that rely on consumer body dissatisfaction. Views expressed were at times internally contradictory, with participants simultaneously internalising and rejecting beauty and health stereotypes and the objectification of people in the media.

Theme 1: The mass media are dominated by narrow appearance ideals

When asked about the appearances of people in the media, both women and men said that the media presented perfected images of beauty. Images of women, however, were seen to be more strongly restricted to a narrow beauty ideal. The perceived appearance ideal for women was consistent with the thin ideal of Western, feminine beauty described frequently in

the body image literature (Thompson, et al., 1999): predominantly thin, young, White, tanned, with long hair, large breasts and clear skin.

> Luke   *They've always got, like, really small bodies. They've always got the same sort of type hair, like supermodel flowing hair. They're just like the picture of a luscious model or girl… like the current picture of beauty.*

Although images of men were often described as reflecting the current Western muscular beauty ideal by being "*muscley, tall, and well-groomed*" (Lauren), most women and men identified greater appearance diversity for men represented in the media. For images of women, "*they don't really give much of an option... they're all very similar, they're all the typical model type*" (Kieran), but both women and men said that it was not uncommon to see "*normal, everyday guys*" (Rima). Nevertheless, some of the women and men commented that although some men portrayed in the media did not conform to a narrowly defined physical type, they still conformed to the narrowly defined social roles of traditional hegemonic masculinity. They were often described as being wealthy breadwinners, the possessors or observers of attractive women, or as engaging in traditionally masculine pursuits (e.g., driving cars, playing sport and drinking beer).

> Tim   *I know in the glamorous world, the one we all want to be in, like in the media, the men have…*
>
> Mike   *Always drive fast cars and are surrounded by beautiful women.*
>
> Tim   *Yeah, they're always successful and stuff like that...*

Theme 2: Women in the media are objectified

Consistent with feminist discussions about the frequent media objectification of women (e.g., Bordo, 1993; Wolf, 1991), there was a consensus that women in the media are valued predominantly for their appearance, and that adhering to the thin beauty ideal was mandatory. Men were often seen to be valued for other traits (e.g., humour, celebrity status,

or specialist knowledge), and fitting in with the muscular beauty ideal was seen as less important.

> Dave   *You've got a better chance of seeing an unattractive bloke on TV than a female, but they've got to have something about them. Like Wally Lewis* [ex professional rugby player] *reads the news and he's not attractive at all. But, he's got a massive sporting background, so people respect him for that. Whereas if you had a retired female that was not attractive at all, I highly doubt she'd get a news reading job. They'd pick someone younger.*

> Natalie   *I think the male image* [in the media] *is more to do with their personality, rather than their appearance. Like, they're always funny or witty, or, like, they have something that's cute about them, but not necessarily their appearance.*

Consistent with Mulvey's (1975) notion of the 'male gaze', participants also discussed the commodification of women in advertisements, whereby their perceived purpose was to be looked at, or obtained, by men. Similarly, idealised women in the media were seen to be role models for female consumers, if they too want to be considered attractive and appealing to men. The quotes below suggest that the message was often seen as "buy the product, get the girl; or buy the product to get to be like the girl to get your man" (Wykes & Gunter, 2005, p. 41).

> Kieran   *The first thing that comes to my mind is... there is this stereotypical, blonde female with large breasts and the perfect body. No cellulite and...she is quite slim. And, girls aspire to be that and guys want to, um, get that.*

Lauren   *Like, they just put people up on this pedestal. They airbrush them and make them look perfect. It's what you aspire to be, like "if you buy this product, this is what you will become".*

While women and men were critical of the male gaze as they saw it occurring in the media, some of the men's comments suggested that they also participated in the objectification of women, by discussing women in the media as objects of their own heterosexual gaze.

Rich   *I think we all like to look at the ideal woman* [in advertisements]...

Jake   *Do you actually associate it with the product?*

Rich   *No, not really.*

Blake   *I like the perve* [the act of looking at attractive women in a lewd manner]*, that's it.*

However, although some of the female participants felt uncomfortable about this, it was not just men who had internalised the objectification of women. Some of the women suggested that objectification is the entire point of modelling.

Natalie   *I don't see them as people. I know that's really mean, but I just see them as models. Like they're up there, that's what they do, they're on TV.*

Nicky   *The fashion house employs them to model the clothes, to walk on the catwalk, and not smile... just to wear the clothes like a coat hanger.*

Less common was the presence of the 'female gaze'. Some women suggested that women worry about what other women think about their appearance. The quote below also suggests that, in accordance with objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), being aware of the gaze focused on other women's appearances may lead some women to have a heightened awareness of how they themselves are being seen by others.

Sarah   *I think that girls can be more worried about what girls think, than what guys think. Because girls can be really bitchy. I've been out with some people, and they're like, 'oh I can't believe what she's wearing' and they're so mean, you know? Then subconsciously I'm thinking, like, 'oh no, what do they say about me?' you know? Because I'm not perfect.*

Some of the male participants also referenced the 'female gaze', suggesting that men represented in the media can serve as a reference point for determining what women find attractive.

Rob   *It* [the media] *gives you something to look at, sort of 'oh, so that's what's in'. You know? 'Ok, so that's what women want men to look like', right?*

Kieran   *Yeah, if you want the ideal guy, you have to look in girls' magazines. 'Cause that's where you going find them, you're not going find them in guys' magazines.*

Theme 3: Body image is affected by the media

There was consensus among both women and men that the mass media influence body image negatively. Participants placed particular emphasis on the impact of exposure to the media on women's body image. It was very common for participants to link media exposure to the onset of eating disorders among women. These types of assertions were in line with the rhetoric commonly seen in the popular press that "models fuel eating disorders" (e.g., McVeigh, 2010).

PD   *Ok, so how do you think advertisements in the media affect women's body image?*

Lily   *Negatively. Like, I know when I look at magazines, and watching my sister and her reaction, you look at those girls and you're just like 'god damn it'... it like puts it in your mind that that is what you have to look*

> *like, that this is the expectation that society has on you, because that's*
>
> *what they're advertising.*

Tim   *I know girls who are like perfectly normal, you know... But compared to*
>
> *the average girl on TV they feel ugly. And that image is everywhere. And*
>
> *they actually have that negative image about themselves.*

Participants' views on the influence of the media on men's body image were less straightforward. Some men and women said that they thought the media negatively influenced men's body image, although perhaps not as much as for women, while some men said media had no effect on them personally.

Tim   *When I'm with a group of people that includes girls and I see an ad with,*
>
> *you know, an underwear ad with six pack men in it. I mean, I don't know*
>
> *about you guys, but there's a little twang in me that's just like 'yep'. It's*
>
> *just at that point that I feel a little bit bad about myself.*

Dave   *Yeah, but it doesn't last.*

Rob   *In the long term, I don't think that it personally affects me.*

Several reasons were proposed for why media influence on men's body image may not be as strong, or as straightforward, as it is for women. Some expressed the view that men were protected by the greater diversity in men's appearance in the media. Others suggested that men may be more likely to compare their appearance to peers and people they see in real life, rather than men in the media.

Luke   *I think we're* [men] *less influenced by what we see on TV, as opposed to*
>
> *what we see in real life. So, a buff guy walking down the street, that's more*
>
> *inclined to make me go to the gym and start working out than seeing, like,*
>
> *some male model on TV.*

Adam   *'Cause you see them more commonly on TV than in real life. And then*

            once you start seeing them in real life it makes you think, "well if they can

            do it, I can".

Some women and men suggested that the media did have a negative effect on men's body image, but it was hidden by a social taboo surrounding the discussion of men and body image.

Luke   *Yeah, I think it's* [media pressure] *probably not as much as it is for girls,*

            but there would be a lot of guys that have a body image problem of some

            kind. They just, it's not as socially acceptable for guys to talk about it with

            other guys, as it is for girls to talk about it with other girls.

This taboo also influenced the course of the discussion during some of the focus groups with men. For example, before disclosing his own body image concerns, one participant felt the need to preface his disclosure with the phrase *"I'm going to go out on a limb here"* (Chris). Similarly, during the discussions some men were pressured by other members of the group to concede that their body image concerns were not as bad as women's, or were not caused by the media.

Despite the consensus that the media influences body image, some women suggested that *'you can't blame it all on media'* (April), and many appeared to have internalised the view that it is up to consumers to manage their responses to the media and their own body image, rather than seeking change in unhealthy media imagery. Instances of victim blaming also occurred when people who were affected by the media were labelled as '*uneducated*' (Marissa) or as '*suckers*' (Candice).

Theme 4: Frustration with lack of diversity and a desire for a new "average and healthy" ideal

Most of the participants said that the narrow representations of feminine and masculine beauty depicted in the media were unappealing, unhealthy and manipulative. They frequently expressed dissatisfaction with the preponderance of thin models, and a lot of the men said that they actively reject advertisements that present the male muscular ideal, because they find them fake.

Courtney   *I find from, like, from a girl's perspective, that's definitely unattractive to see someone that is just so, just like, unrealistic.*

Rich   *With all those things* [advertisements] *we mentioned before... you know, like the Gillette ad, they've got... the attractive men. It's so easy to see through the façade.*

Blake   *You just laugh at it.*

Rich   *Yeah, exactly. You just totally disregard it.*

In addition to expressing dislike for current appearance ideals portrayed in the media, most of the participants said that they want to see change in the appearances, and gender roles, of people represented in media imagery. In contrast to industry arguments that average-size models do not appeal to consumers, women often said that they want more '*diversity*' (Leonie) and '*natural beauty*' (Lauren), and more '*normal*', '*average*', '*real*', '*everyday*' people (Rachel).

Lauren   *Just to see the beauty in everyday items, like everyday people. Like, a good old 17 year old boy running down the road with braces and bad skin and whatever. That's normal and there is some good in that. And, to not show that and not advertise that to people is not a good thing.*

Some women also implied that greater body size diversity in media imagery may reduce the objectifying nature of current media images.

April *A lot of the ads that they have... there'll be an ad for some product with a*

     girl that looks like that [the thin ideal] *and then the next product is the*

     same. If you see someone... and they have curves, like something

     different ... you could identify them as a person not as just a thing.

Moreover, despite the common assumption that all men want and enjoy the presentation of

thin women as objects for the male gaze, several male participants expressed a preference for

more realistic images of women and men.

Wesley [I would like to see] *more realistic women. I mean not like always, um,*

     stick thin models....Just like an everyday person, who's probably not

     necessarily going to be the most good looking person, but, just to make it a

     bit more real.

However, while participants couched their ideas about change in terms of promoting

body size diversity and tolerance of individual differences, they in fact suggested a new but

equally narrow replacement appearance ideal. This new ideal, which we have called the

"average and healthy" appearance ideal, was described by both men and women. It appeared

to be derived from the assumption that anybody whose body shape is not "average" is by

definition unhealthy and unattractive.

PD *So Ben mentioned that he'd like to see more realistic looking women in*

     advertisements and the media. Do you guys agree with that or disagree?

Keith *Um, I agree to an extent, but I don't think they should promote, um,*

     obesity or anything. Rather... a healthy image, like a balance between stick

     thin and... yeah.

Gemma *I think it should change. Like within reason... not obesity and stuff. Yeah,*

     just normal. Average people can be attractive.

When prompted to further define the "average and healthy ideal" or '*normal*', the participants had difficulty articulating how they would identify someone who fit with the ideal. Some participants suggested that they would be '*not too skinny*' (Poppy) and that they would '*actually have a figure or hips*' (Emma). It was clear, however, that the "average and healthy" ideal did not include people who were considered under- or over-weight.

In the context of discussions about changes to media imagery and the "average and healthy ideal", participants voiced concerns about a '*growing obesity epidemic*' (Courtney). Men and women in almost all of the focus groups suggested that showing larger people in advertisements could potentially normalise obesity and encourage unhealthy behaviour. Being larger or overweight was often described or implied as unattractive, repugnant and unequivocally unhealthy.

> Jim   *I think it's not ok to have like things like 'Kenny'* [a popular Australian film starring an overweight actor]... *I think it's good for a comedy, like I can't lie, I love the movie. But, um, I think it shouldn't be promoted that people be overweight or underweight. Because I do believe there is a direct link from obesity to a lot of other problems, including mental health.*

> Melanie   *The problem I have is with people who are overweight on television...and saying that it is ok. Because I don't think it is... I just think that because of the situation now in today's society* [the 'obesity epidemic'] *we should be promoting a healthy lifestyle, a healthy weight range and not these two extremes* [underweight and overweight]. *I think there should be more emphasis on that middle group.*

Similarly, people who were perceived to be too thin were also seen as unhealthy.

> Lily   *I hate really, really, really ridiculous skinny girls. Like especially in like*

your more high market magazines... It just like, smacks of bulimia! It puts

me off immediately.

Comments such as these suggested that, for the participants, appearance was a measure not only of a person's beauty, but also of their health, and that only people who were "average" should be considered healthy and beautiful.

Theme 5: Diverse views on the use of average-size models in media imagery

While participants expressed health concerns about showing people who were considered too large in the media, increasing the use of more average-size (or 'plus-size') models was seen as helpful for promoting positive body image. Both women and men thought that exposure to average-size models in the media could reduce the current felt pressures to obtain and maintain a perfected and unrealistic appearance.

PD   *So, if there were more average-size models or people in the media, how do*

you think that would affect people's body image?

Lauren   *It could only be positive. Promoting a healthy body can't be negative at*

all, I don't think.... It would drop the pressure.

Rima   *Because people would be seeing normal people, like average people on*

TV. So they won't be like "oh, I have to be like them", because you're

already kind of like them.

For some participants, however, the view that average-size models can promote positive body image was often held in tension with the idea that unrealistic thin and muscular models provide consumers with something positive to aspire to. Again, this was couched in terms of health and illustrated how a particular body shape was implicitly assumed to be the only one associated with good health. It was thought that exposure to thin and muscular models may prevent consumers from becoming "*too relaxed*" (Lily) with their health and

appearance, while seeing average-size models may promote unhealthy behaviours, including overeating and weight gain.

> Will   *'Cause you want to see people happy, and you want to see them fit and*
>
> *healthy. And to see them starving themselves, or something, then it's*
>
> *just not healthy.... But in the same respect though, because we do have*
>
> *an obesity problem, you don't want to see them go the other way as*
>
> *well, like if you were to have maybe too many bigger people and it gets*
>
> *too socially acceptable. You don't want people to think "oh, it's ok to*
>
> *eat more" and then they get into that habit ... I don't know, it can be a*
>
> *vicious circle.*

In terms of the effectiveness of advertisements featuring average-size models, participants' views were often in contrast to industry concerns and in agreement with quantitative average-size model research (e.g., Diedrichs & Lee, 2010, in press; Halliwell & Dittmar, 2004; Halliwell, et al., 2005). It was frequently argued that seeing models that have body sizes and shapes more reflective of the general population might boost the appeal of a brand or product. In particular, using average-size models in advertisements was seen as a mechanism that would allow consumers to better relate to models, and therefore the brand being advertised. This sentiment was expressed by women and men.

> Marissa   *Because I think it* [seeing thin models in advertisements] *does make the*
>
> *audience feel, sort of, like it lowers their self esteem. Because it makes*
>
> *them, like we were saying before, go you know 'oh, there's no way I am*
>
> *going to look as good as that'. But if I saw someone who had a similar*
>
> *figure to me, normal size, like normal height, pretty much the average*
>
> *Joe, I'd just be like 'sweet, cool, I'll buy that. That looks good on her*
>
> *similar figure, so maybe it will look good on me too'.*

Ben   *They* [average-size male models] *would be probably more effective* [than muscular models], *'cause most of us are just like average Australian guys. So, you could easily see yourself holding that beer..., rather than you know Arnold Schwarzenegger..., 'cause you can't really relate to that much.*

Additionally, when discussing the consumer appeal of average-size models in the media, participants often made reference to the Dove™ Campaign for Real Beauty advertisements, which featured more average-sized women. Most of the women commented that it was positive and refreshing to see more realistically sized women represented in the media.

PD   *Are there any types of people you'd like to see more often in the media?*

Jasmine   *More like, realistic people. As in like, you know the, um, I think it's the Dove ads.*

April   *Yeah, I love it when you see someone who you know is a real person.*

Jasmine   *Yeah, like they're proud of it and stuff. Instead of having like, you know, those makeup ads and like clothing ads with, like you know, size zero women, they should bring out, like, normal, size 12 women as we normally are. And, um, so that it kind of like, to like the public, it shows, like, they're beautiful too.*

On the other hand, some women said they were annoyed that Dove™ had made a selling point of their use of more realistically sized models, rather than simply using them because they looked good. They also noted that these models were still artificial and unrealistic, as they were styled and digitally perfected through airbrushing.

Katherine   *But even if they claim to be using like average people, like even the whole like Dove body image thing... They still airbrush and they kind of still*

point out their flaws in a way, by saying 'look they're real people, buy

our product, it can still help you' kind of thing, you know?

Another perceived barrier to the effectiveness of average-size models suggested by both women and men was the notion that the advertising industry relies on body dissatisfaction to sell products. Specifically, some participants said that a common advertising strategy is to make people feel dissatisfied with their appearance so that they will buy the product being advertised, in the hope that it will make them more attractive. It was suggested that using more representative models in advertisements might interfere with this strategy.

Poppy	*I think with makeup and stuff, they show beautiful skin to make you feel bad so you will buy the product.*
PD	*Do you think that applies to body size as well?*
Poppy	*Um, well depending on what the product is, but I think so probably yeah. Like if they are showing like gym membership with someone great* [thin]*…I'm like, I should go to the gym.*
Rowena	*It would be great to see more average, normal looking people, but the point of advertising is that it is about fantasy. I mean, why would we buy anything if it wasn't? The whole foundation of advertising has to be about encouraging us to look different.*

Finally, consistent with suggestions that they personally were not affected by advertising but that other, possibly less educated, people were, some women and men also suggested that it may be difficult for other consumers to find average-size models appealing because they may have already internalised current cultural beauty ideals which emphasise thinness and muscularity.

PD   *Does it matter what the body size of the person in the advertisement is?*

Emma   *Well, I think it does. We've been trained to think that way, so that what's we think. Like we all want to think differently, I think, that's what we're coming to. That we'd love to love an ad with, you know, a size 20 girl. But we've been taught to think that the other side is beautiful.*

Leonie   *Yeah, but in reality... there's a chance it won't work.*

Conclusions

This study provides a previously neglected consumer perspective on the current debate surrounding the use of average-size models in the media and their ability to promote positive body image and appeal to consumers. While it is a single study that relied on a convenience sample of university students, it suggests that there may be some consumer support for political (e.g., Australian Government, 2010) and academic (e.g., Diedrichs & Lee, 2010; Dittmar & Howard, 2004a; Halliwell & Dittmar, 2004) calls for the use of more average-size models in media imagery to promote positive body image. The results, however, also suggest some conflicting views and potential barriers to consumer acceptance of body size diversity in media imagery and, in turn, some important directions for future research in this area.

In regards to consumer opinions on the current state of body size diversity for women in media imagery, the participants were largely dissatisfied with the overrepresentation of thin women in the media. Consistent with media content analyses (e.g., Fisher, Dunn, & Thompson, 2002; Seifert, 2005), participants felt that women in the media are predominantly valued for their appearance, and are restricted by the current Western ideal of feminine beauty which emphasises thinness. This was seen to have a negative effect on women's body image and health. Both male and female participants also agreed that women in the media are objectified, and that this increases the pressure for women to aspire to unrealistic appearance

ideals. At the same time, however, it was evident that some participants had internalised this view of women as objects. Women reported various degrees of self-objectification, while some men suggested that they liked looking at women in the media regardless of what was being advertised.

Conversely, both women and men said that the media depicts some diversity in men's appearance, despite research showing an over-representation of muscular men in the media imagery (Fouts & Vaughan, 2002; Pope, Olivardia, Borowiecki, & Cohane, 2001). They also believed that men are less influenced by media images than are women. Consistent with other qualitative research (e.g., Adams, Turner, & Bucks, 2005; Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2006; Ricciardelli, McCabe, & Ridge, 2006), however, both women and men suggested that it is not socially acceptable for men to discuss body image. Therefore, the dismissal or minimisation of media influence on men's body image may have been driven by this social taboo. Indeed, a growing body of evidence suggests that body image is a concern for young men, and media images of muscular models do negatively influence how they feel about their own appearance (Barlett, et al., 2008; Mission Australia, 2008).

Views on increasing body size diversity and the use of average-size models in the media were varied. On the one hand, some participants suggested that the use of average-size models might increase the effectiveness of advertisements by providing attainable images and an indication of how an average-sized person would look wearing or using the product. This view is in contrast to industry concerns about the consumer appeal of average-size models (e.g., Rawi, 2010; Wells, 2010) and is consistent with the findings from quantitative average-size model research (e.g., Diedrichs & Lee, 2010, in press). On the other hand, some participants did suggest that using more realistic models might interfere with advertising strategies which rely on consumer body dissatisfaction to sell products. Others also suggested

that average-size models may not appeal to those who have already internalised the thin and muscular ideals of beauty.

In relation to body image, most participants felt that increasing the diversity of body sizes depicted in the media would be helpful in promoting positive body image, and many women and men said that they would like to see more average-size models in the media for this reason. However, while agreeing that viewing thin female models encourages poor body image and disordered eating, some participants simultaneously argued that average-size models might fail to provide adequate beauty and health inspiration for consumers. In accordance with the views expressed by some industry stakeholders (e.g., Wells, 2010), it was thought their use in media imagery could encourage people to overeat and contribute to an 'obesity epidemic'.

A potential barrier to consumer and industry acceptance of average-size models in the media, therefore, appears to be the stigmatisation of overweight and obesity, and a set of inaccurate assumptions about body size and weight, body dissatisfaction and health. These assumptions include the notions that all overweight and obese people are unequivocally unhealthy, and that it is possible to judge how healthy a person is by their appearance. These assumptions are, however, challenged by research which shows that some overweight and obese people are metabolically healthy despite their weight (e.g., Wildman et al., 2008), and that it is possible to be both overweight and physically fit (Lee, Blair, & Jackson, 1999). Furthermore, the suggestion that body dissatisfaction associated with viewing thin models may promote healthy behaviours aimed at achieving a thinner body, or at least promote behaviour that is healthier than that induced by viewing larger models, is not supported by empirical evidence. Indeed, longitudinal and prospective research actually suggests the opposite: body dissatisfaction increases the likelihood of engaging in disordered eating,

resistance towards physical activity, and weight gain (e.g., Neumark-Sztainer, Paxton, Hannan, Haines, & Story, 2006; van den Berg & Neumark-Sztainer, 2007).

The rich and complex nature of the current findings suggests several directions for future research and practice focused on the promotion of positive body image. Firstly, they suggest that advocacy and interventions to change and deconstruct media imagery might usefully focus on the objectifying and gender stereotyping nature of media imagery, in addition to its reliance on narrow and unhealthy appearance ideals. Secondly, in relation to research and practice surrounding men's body image, the findings suggest that researchers and clinicians should be mindful of social norms regarding the discussion of this topic, and avoid an overreliance on theories, research and clinical methods that are merely derived from women's experiences. For example, the presence of a female moderator and same-sex peers in the present study may have influenced the ideas and opinions expressed by the male participants, particularly given the concerns voiced during the focus groups about body image being a taboo subject for men. Future studies could address this by exploring the influence of researchers' and clinicians' characteristics on research and practice with men, and by comparing the use of individual interview and focus group methodologies to explore body image among young adults.

Thirdly, it should also be noted that the participants tended to discuss their own and others' reactions to thin, muscular and average-size models in terms of psychological reactions (e.g., *it like puts it in your mind that that is what you have to look like'*, Lily*)*, rather than behavioural reactions. Previous quantitative research has shown that thin and average-size models can also influence eating behaviours in different ways (Anschutz, Engels, Becker, & Van Strien, 2008, 2009). Therefore, it would be useful for future qualitative research to explore behavioural reactions to media imagery, in order to provide a more in-depth exploration of these potential effects. Finally, and perhaps mostly importantly,

it is evident that the participants in this study held a range of restrictive appearance ideals and inaccurate underlying assumptions about body size and weight, body image and poor health. Therefore there is a continuing role for researchers, clinicians and health promoters to challenge such attitudes and beliefs. This includes challenging the assumption that "average equals healthy" and the stigmatisation of overweight and obesity. Without addressing barriers to the promotion of body size diversity, such as those identified in the current study, there is a risk that research, advocacy and practice in this area will not broaden current beauty ideals but merely replace them with another equally prescriptive and potentially harmful set of ideals.

In summary, these findings suggest that there is some consumer support for government calls to increase body size diversity in media imagery. Further research into consumer and industry opinions, and into interventions which address potential barriers to the acceptance of average-size models as healthy and effective alternatives to current media imagery, however, is necessary for this to be an effective and accepted public health strategy to promote positive body image.

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Table 1

Focus group discussion schedule

Questions
1. When you think of the people shown in advertisements and the media, what comes to mind?
2. What sort of people do you like to see in advertisements and the media?
3. What sort of people do you not like to see in advertisements and the media?
4. What types of people do you want to see more often in the media?
5. In your opinion, is the way you perceive the effectiveness of an advertisement affected by the appearance of the person in it?
6. Think back to when you saw an advertisement with an average-size or plus-size model. Was the advertisement as effective as an advertisement with thin or muscular models?
7. How do you think advertisements and the media affect women's body image?
8. How do you think advertisements and the media affect men's body image?
9. Does it matter to you if advertisements and the media affect body image?
10. If you could change anything about the people displayed in the media, what would you change?
11. Considering everything we have discussed today, if you could say one thing to the media and advertising industry, what would it be?