

The Skinny on Celebrities: Parasocial Relationships Moderate the Effects of Thin Media Figures on Women's Body Image

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Abstract

Much research demonstrates that exposure to thin media ideals has a negative effect on women's body image. The present research suggests a notable and important exception to this rule. The authors propose the *parasocial relationship-moderation hypothesis*—that parasocial, or one-sided, relationships (PSRs) moderate the effects of thin media figures on body image. Specifically, the authors propose that having a PSR with a media figure increases the likelihood of assimilating, rather than contrasting, the PSR's body to the self. Study 1 found that women who perceived similarity with a thin model felt better about their bodies than those who did not perceive similarity. Study 2 found that women were more satisfied with their bodies after exposure to a favorite celebrity they perceived as thin than a control celebrity they perceived as thin. Finally, Study 3 suggests that assimilation was the underlying mechanism of increased body satisfaction after exposure to a thin favorite celebrity.

Keywords

social comparison, assimilation, body image, parasocial relationships

One of the most robust, highly replicated, and frequently cited findings in body image research is that exposure to thin media figures has negative and sometimes severe consequences for women (see Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008 for a meta-analytic review). An abundance of research, both correlational and experimental, demonstrates that exposure to thin media ideals leads to body dissatisfaction and the development of disordered eating habits (Birkeland, Thompson, & Herbozo, 2005; Bissell & Zhou, 2004; Halliwell & Dittmar, 2004; Stice, Schupak-Neuberg, Shaw, & Stein, 1994; Strahan, Spencer, & Zanna, 2007). Thus, the dominant narrative on the effects of thin media figures on body image is a bleak one. However, the current research proposes and examines a possible caveat to past research. We propose that having a parasocial relationship (PSR; i.e., a one-sided relationship with a favored media figure; Horton & Wohl, 1956) moderates the effects of thin media figures on women's body image, such that exposure to a thin media figure with whom one has a PSR no longer has negative effects on body image.

The impact thin media figures have on body image is the result of whether they have contrastive (i.e., the self becomes less similar to the target) or assimilative (i.e., the self becomes more similar to the target) effects. It is usually assumed and found that thin media figures have contrastive effects on body image (Grabe et al., 2008). Specifically, thin media figures lead to worse feelings about one's body because by comparison, one feels large. However, it is also possible that assimilation may occur as a result of exposure to thin media figures. In this case, assimilating the

thin media figure to the self would lead to more favorable self-evaluations, because by association, one would feel thinner.

According to the selective accessibility model (Mussweiler, 2003), the direction of change in self-evaluation is determined by an initial holistic assessment of the target to determine overall similarity or dissimilarity to the self. Importantly, this initial assessment is not based on similarity on one specific attribute, but on an overall impression of similarity, such as similarity on one's personality as a whole. A perception that the target is generally similar to the self will lead to assimilation, whereas a perception that the target is generally dissimilar will lead to contrast.

Perceived similarity leads to assimilation via a process called similarity testing. In similarity testing, the initial assumption of overall similarity leads to a cognitive search for other ways in which the self is similar to the target. That search increases the salience of trait similarity. For example, if a thin target is considered similar to the self on overall personality, similarity testing will increase the salience of thoughts about the self

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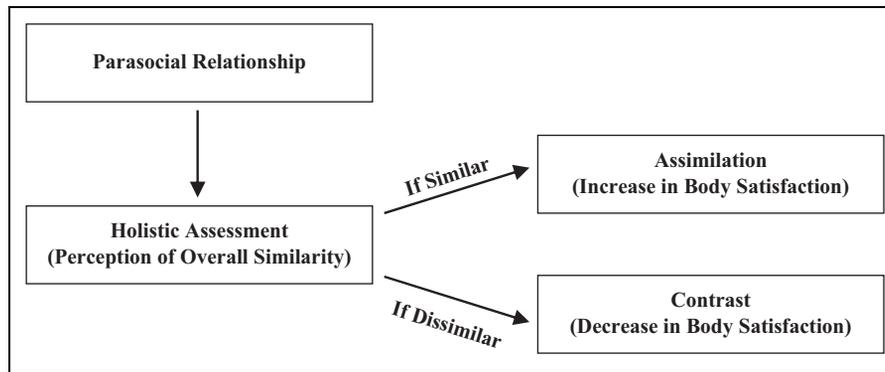


Figure 1. Parasocial relationships (PSRs) as a moderator of assimilation and contrast effects (based on the selective accessibility model).

as similar to the target in other specific domains (including being thin). The end result would be a view of the self as thinner (Mussweiler, 2003).¹

An important determinant of whether assimilation versus contrast effects occur is the nature of the relationship between the self and target. When a person has a close, intimate relationship with a target, assimilation of traits and attributes is likely to occur; when the target is not close, contrast effects become more likely (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991; Dijksterhuis et al., 1998; Pelham & Wachsmuth, 1995). This effect can be explained using the selective accessibility model. Specifically, assimilation occurs because people perceive overall similarity with close others, whereas contrast occurs because people perceive dissimilarity with those who are not close (Morry, 2005; Morry, Kito, & Ortiz, 2011).

Given that contrast effects occur when there is not a close relationship with a target, it is not surprising that nearly all of the existing body image research finds women feel worse about their bodies after exposure to thin media figures. However, it is important to note that people sometimes form PSRs with favored media figures. Specifically, people may experience a connection and feel like they “know” a favored media figure (Perse & Rubin, 1989; Rubin & McHugh, 1987). Recent research on PSRs suggests that the psychological bond with a PSR is very similar to a bond with a real relationship partner (Cohen, 2004; Derrick, Gabriel, & Hugenberg, 2009; Gardner & Knowles, 2008). Indeed, just as people assume overall similarity (e.g., similar personalities) with real relationship partners (Morry, 2005; Morry et al., 2011), they also assume similarity to PSRs (Derrick, Gabriel, & Tippin, 2008).

Applying the selective accessibility model to the effects of thin media figures on body image, we propose the *parasocial relationship-moderation hypothesis*—that PSR status with thin media figures determines whether contrast or assimilation will occur (see Figure 1). According to Mussweiler’s (2003) model, an initial holistic assessment of similarity with a target leads to assimilation; conversely, initial judgments of dissimilarity lead to contrast. Thus, we suggest that thin PSRs will lead to increases in body satisfaction (i.e., assimilation effects), whereas thin non-PSRs will lead to decreases in body satisfaction (i.e., contrast effects). This is consistent with findings that

favorite celebrities can improve self-esteem (Derrick et al., 2008) and attractive targets with whom one shares a birthday can increase personal attractiveness ratings (Brown, Novick, Lord, & Richards, 1992). Furthermore, we propose that an increase in perceptions of body similarity with the celebrity is the underlying mechanism of increased body satisfaction. As previously mentioned, according to the selective accessibility model, overall similarity leads to increased salience of similarity information, which then leads to assimilation. Therefore, we suggest that perceptions of overall similarity to a thin PSR will lead to perceptions of body similarity, which will lead to increases in body satisfaction (i.e., assimilation).

Overview of the Present Research

The present research was designed to examine the novel hypothesis that PSR status moderates the effects of exposure to thin media figures on women’s body image. In doing so, it is the first work to apply the selective accessibility model to the domains of body image and PSRs. In addition, it is the first work to propose that PSRs may have protective, and even favorable, effects on women’s body image.

Three studies were conducted to examine the effects of PSRs on women’s body image. Studies 1 and 2 examined the PSR-moderation hypothesis (see Figure 1). Specifically, Study 1 examined the important role of perceived similarity by manipulating similarity with a thin unknown media figure prior to assessing body image. We predicted that women exposed to a thin model that was perceived as similar would feel better about their bodies than those exposed to a thin model that was not perceived as similar. Study 2 manipulated exposure to a PSR (favorite celebrity vs. control celebrity), measured perceptions of the celebrity’s body size, and assessed body image. We predicted that PSR status would moderate the relationship between exposure to media figures and body image. Specifically, we expected that women exposed to a favorite celebrity they perceived as thin would feel better about their bodies than those exposed to a control celebrity they perceived as thin. Finally, Study 3 tested our hypothesis that the relationship between perceived overall similarity to a thin PSR and

body satisfaction is mediated by increased perceptions of similarity between the PSR's thin body and the self.

Study 1

Study 1 examined the effects of perceived similarity with a thin media figure on women's body image (see Figure 1). To maximize experimental control and reduce potential confounds associated with preexisting PSRs, we adapted our procedure from Brown, Novick, Lord, and Richards (1992; Study 3) to experimentally manipulate perceived similarity (however, the current study used a thin target and our dependent variables focused on body satisfaction). Specifically, participants were told they had the same or a different birthday as a thin unknown media figure prior to reporting their own body satisfaction. This birthday manipulation subtly increases perceptions of overall similarity to a target (Burger, Messian, Patel, del Prado, & Anderson, 2004). According to the selective accessibility model, an initial perception of similarity leads to assimilation. Thus, we predicted that perceived similarity with a thin media figure would make women feel better about their own bodies.

Method

Participants were 34 White, female undergraduates ($M_{\text{age}} = 19.09$). During the study, participants viewed a profile of a female target. The profile consisted of some general biographical information and a full-body picture of a thin unknown media figure. We used a picture of an actual model, which was selected from a modeling agency website. We used pictures of two different models so we could rule out potential confounds associated with a particular model. Pretesting showed the models were perceived as thin by female undergraduates. All participants read the same information about the target (i.e., her name and hobbies), but half were told she had the same birthday as the participant and the other half were told she had a different birthday. Participants were given 1 min to look over the profile and picture. Participants then indicated their current mood on the Positive and Negative Affective Schedule (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Next, participants completed the Multidimensional Body-Self Relations Questionnaire (MBSRQ) Appearance Evaluation subscale (Brown, Cash, & Mikulka, 1990). Participants responded to statements (7 items; $\alpha = .88$) such as "My body is sexually appealing" and "I like my looks just the way they are" on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale. Participants also completed the MBSRQ Body Areas Satisfaction subscale (9 items; $\alpha = .91$), in which they rated their satisfaction with various physical features including "muscle tone" and "weight" on a 1 (*very dissatisfied*) to 7 (*very satisfied*) scale. Finally, participants indicated their height and weight, which was used to compute their body mass index (BMI).

Results and Discussion

Four participants were excluded from the analyses because they reported a desire to gain weight or be a larger-than-average body

size. We conducted a single-factor (Target Birthday: same, different) between-subjects analysis of covariance to test our prediction that sharing a birthday with a thin media figure would have favorable effects on body image. Because BMI predicts body image concerns (Frederick, Forbes, Grigorian, & Jarcho, 2007), we included it as a covariate to control for the effects of participants' body weight on their current body satisfaction. The same pattern of results emerged when BMI was not included as a covariate.

As predicted, analyses revealed a significant main effect of Target Birthday for appearance evaluation, $F(1, 27) = 5.19$, $p = .031$, $d = .73$. Specifically, participants who viewed a profile of a thin model with whom they shared a birthday ($M = 4.90$, $SD = .92$) evaluated their physical appearance more positively than those who did not share a birthday ($M = 4.01$, $SD = 1.53$). The same pattern of results emerged for body areas satisfaction. Analyses revealed the predicted main effect of Target Birthday, $F(1, 27) = 4.39$, $p = .046$, $d = .69$. Participants who viewed a profile of a thin model with whom they shared a birthday ($M = 5.00$, $SD = .94$) were more satisfied with their bodies than those who did not share a birthday ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 1.76$). Finally, there was no effect of Target Birthday on positive or negative mood and a similar pattern of results emerged when controlling for mood in the analyses; thus, it is unlikely our findings could be explained by mood.

In summary, Study 1 demonstrated that women exposed to a thin model with whom they shared a birthday felt better about their bodies than those exposed to a thin model with whom they did not share a birthday. Further, the alternative explanation that our results could be attributed to mood was not supported. The results of Study 1 demonstrate the importance of perceived similarity (characteristic of PSRs) in determining whether assimilation or contrast effects will occur and provide initial support for the PSR-moderation hypothesis.

Study 2

The goal of Study 2 was to provide a full test of the PSR-moderation hypothesis (see Figure 1). In order to increase ecological validity, we tested our model with women's actual, real-world PSRs. We used a PSR manipulation based on the procedures of Derrick, Gabriel, and Tippin (2008; Studies 2 and 3). Specifically, participants wrote an essay about their favorite female celebrity or a well-known, moderately liked control celebrity. Following, we measured their perceptions of the celebrity's body size and then assessed their current body satisfaction. According to the selective accessibility model, initial judgments of similarity lead to assimilation effects, whereas initial judgments of dissimilarity lead to contrast effects. We suggest that one's relationship with a media figure directly influences the initial holistic assessment, such that PSRs are perceived as similar and non-PSRs are perceived as dissimilar. Thus, consistent with previous research showing the negative effects of thin media figures (Grabe et al., 2008), we predicted that exposure to a control celebrity who was perceived as thin

would make women feel bad about their bodies. However, we expected that PSR status would moderate this effect.

Method

Participants were 79 White, female undergraduates ($M_{\text{age}} = 18.51$). During the study, participants wrote for 5 min about their favorite female celebrity or a control celebrity (Keira Knightly). We selected Keira Knightly as our control celebrity because pretesting showed she was highly familiar and moderately liked by female undergraduates. Participants were instructed to write whatever they liked about the celebrity, with no explicit instructions to focus on their body. Next, they indicated their perceptions of the celebrity's body size using a scale we developed called the Female Body Size scale (see Appendix A). Participants then completed the MBSRQ Appearance Evaluation subscale ($\alpha = .92$) and indicated their actual-ideal body overlap. To do this, we used a modification of the Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) scale (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992) but changed the labels of the circles to "actual" and "ideal." The circles ranged from barely touching (low overlap between actual and ideal body) to almost completely overlapping (high overlap between actual and ideal body). Participants selected the set of circles that best represented the overlap between their actual and ideal body size and shape. Perceptions of higher overlap between the actual and ideal body reflect greater body satisfaction (see Derrick et al., 2008; Gabriel, Carvallo, Jaremka, & Tippin, 2008 for similar uses of the scale).

Results and Discussion

Five participants were excluded from the analyses using the same criteria as Study 1. We predicted that exposure to a control celebrity who was perceived as thin would make women feel worse about their bodies, whereas exposure to a favorite celebrity who was perceived as thin would make women feel better about their bodies. We tested our predictions using multiple regression analyses (Aiken & West, 1991). For all analyses, the predictor variables were celebrity essay (represented as a dichotomous variable: 0 = *control celebrity*; 1 = *favorite celebrity*), perceived celebrity body size, and the interaction of celebrity essay and perceived celebrity body size. All predictors were centered at their means and the regression terms were entered into the model and interpreted simultaneously. The predicted values for perceived celebrity body size were plotted at 1 *SD* above the mean (defined as normal weight) and 1 *SD* below the mean (defined as thin).²

For appearance evaluation, analyses revealed the predicted Celebrity Essay \times Perceived Celebrity Body Size interaction, $\beta = -.26, p = .034$, semipartial $r^2 = .06$ (see Figure 2). Simple effects tests showed that participants who wrote about a control celebrity they perceived as thin tended to feel worse about their appearance than those who wrote about a control celebrity they perceived as normal weight, $\beta = .37, p = .080$, semipartial $r^2 = .04$. However, participants who wrote about a favorite celebrity

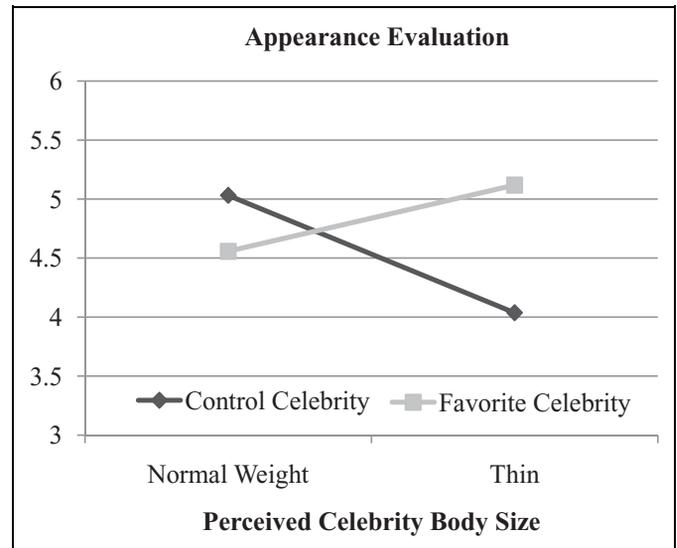


Figure 2. Appearance evaluation as a function of celebrity essay and perceived celebrity body size (Study 2).

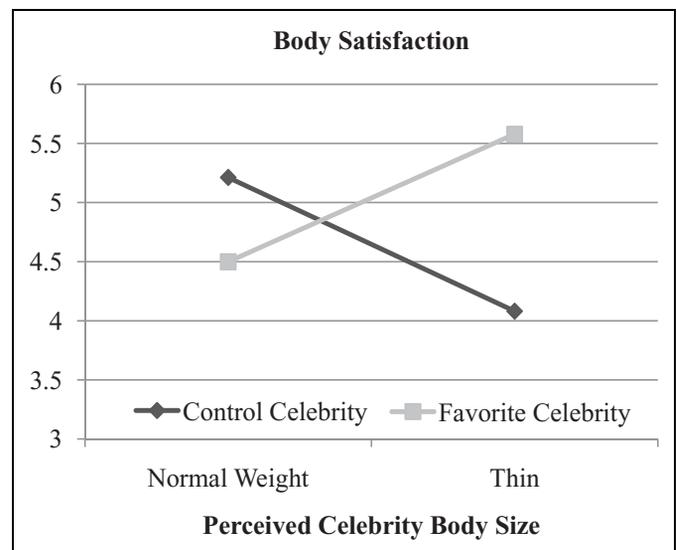


Figure 3. Body satisfaction as a function of celebrity essay and perceived celebrity body size (Study 2).

they perceived as thin felt better about their appearance than those who wrote about a control celebrity they perceived as thin, $\beta = .37, p = .046$, semipartial $r^2 = .05$.

The same pattern of results was observed for body satisfaction (i.e., actual-ideal body overlap). Analyses revealed the predicted Celebrity Essay \times Perceived Celebrity Body Size interaction, $\beta = -.30, p = .014$, semipartial $r^2 = .08$ (see Figure 3). Simple effects analyses showed that participants who wrote about a control celebrity they perceived as thin were less satisfied with their body size and shape than those who wrote about a control celebrity they perceived as normal weight, $\beta = .42, p = .049$, semipartial $r^2 = .05$. However, participants who wrote about a favorite celebrity they perceived as thin tended to be more satisfied with their body size and shape than

those who wrote about a control celebrity they perceived as thin, $\beta = .34$, $p = .063$, semipartial $r^2 = .05$.

To examine whether or not participants were accurate in their perceptions of the celebrities' bodies, we collected data from a similar sample of women who were asked to rate the body size of the celebrities listed by the participants in Study 2. The data indicated that the objective raters' perceptions of the celebrities' bodies were highly correlated with the participants' perceptions, $r(17) = .78$, $p < .001$, suggesting that participants were accurate in their ratings of the bodies of the celebrities and were not altering their views of the celebrities in some way to fit with their views of themselves.

In summary, the results of Study 2 support the PSR-moderation hypothesis. Replicating previous research demonstrating the negative impact of thin media figures on body image (Grabe et al., 2008), we found that women exposed to a control celebrity they perceived as thin felt worse about their bodies than those exposed to a control celebrity they perceived as normal weight. Conversely, women exposed to a favorite celebrity they perceived as thin felt better about their bodies than those exposed to a control celebrity they perceived as thin.

Study 3

In Study 3, we examined our hypothesis that the relationship between perceived overall similarity to a thin PSR and body satisfaction is mediated by increased accessibility of ways in which the PSR's body is similar to the self. Participants wrote an essay about their thin favorite female celebrity and then completed measures of overall personality similarity, body similarity, and body satisfaction. According to the selective accessibility model, initial perceptions of similarity lead to similarity testing (a process where information that confirms similarity becomes salient), consequently influencing self-evaluation via assimilation (Mussweiler, 2003). Therefore, we predicted that a belief in a similar personality to a thin favorite celebrity would lead to a perception of having a similar body, which would then lead to greater body satisfaction.

Method

Participants were 44 White, female undergraduates ($M_{\text{age}} = 18.64$).³ During the study, participants wrote about their favorite female celebrity. They were instructed to write whatever they wanted about the celebrity, with no explicit instructions to focus on their body. Participants wrote for as long as they liked before they proceeded ($M_{\text{time}} = 2.58$ min). Next, they were asked to indicate the degree of similarity between themselves and the celebrity in terms of their: (a) overall personality; (b) body size and shape. To do this, we used modified versions of the IOS scale in which we changed the labels of the circles to "self" and "celebrity." The circles ranged from barely touching (low similarity between the self and celebrity) to almost completely overlapping (high similarity between the self and celebrity). Finally, participants were asked to indicate

their current actual-ideal body overlap (the same measure of body satisfaction used in Study 2).

Results and Discussion

We predicted that exposure to a favorite celebrity would lead to the process of assimilation. Specifically, we expected that the more participants perceived similarity to the celebrity's personality (i.e., initial holistic similarity), the more they would perceive similarity to the celebrity's body (i.e., similarity testing) and the more satisfied they would be with their own bodies (i.e., assimilation). However, we predicted that the relationship between greater personality similarity and increased body satisfaction would be mediated by increased body similarity, revealing the process of similarity testing as the pathway to assimilation. To test our predictions, we conducted a mediation analysis (Baron & Kenny, 1986). We included BMI as a covariate in every step of our analysis; however, the same pattern of results emerged whether or not it was included. For the sake of simplicity, we report the results without BMI.

As expected, greater personality similarity predicted both increased body similarity ($\beta = .52$, $p < .001$) and increased body satisfaction ($\beta = .47$, $p = .001$). Increased body similarity also predicted increased body satisfaction ($\beta = .67$, $p < .001$). To test for mediation, we regressed body satisfaction on personality similarity and body similarity simultaneously. Body similarity still predicted increased body satisfaction ($\beta = .58$, $p < .001$), but the relationship between personality similarity and body satisfaction was no longer significant ($\beta = .17$, $p = .208$; see Figure 4). A Sobel test confirmed the mediation was significant ($z = 3.26$, $p = .001$). In other words, overall similarity with a thin favorite celebrity predicted liking one's body size and shape because of perceptions of similarity to the celebrity's body. The alternate mediation model, with body satisfaction as a mediator of the relationship between personality similarity and body similarity, was not supported. Specifically, personality similarity remained a significant predictor of body similarity when body satisfaction was added to the model.

In summary, the results of Study 3 found that the more women perceived overall similarity to a celebrity, the more they perceived similarity to the celebrity's body and experienced greater satisfaction with their own bodies. Importantly, it was not merely initial perceptions of similarity that predicted assimilation effects; rather, perceived body similarity mediated this relationship. Thus, Study 3 provided evidence that assimilation occurs following exposure to thin PSRs.

General Discussion

It is often assumed in existing research and popular belief that thin media ideals inevitably have negative effects on women's body image. The present research challenges this assumption and demonstrates that exposure to a thin media figure is not always harmful, and may even be beneficial, when a PSR exists. Study 1 demonstrated the importance of perceived

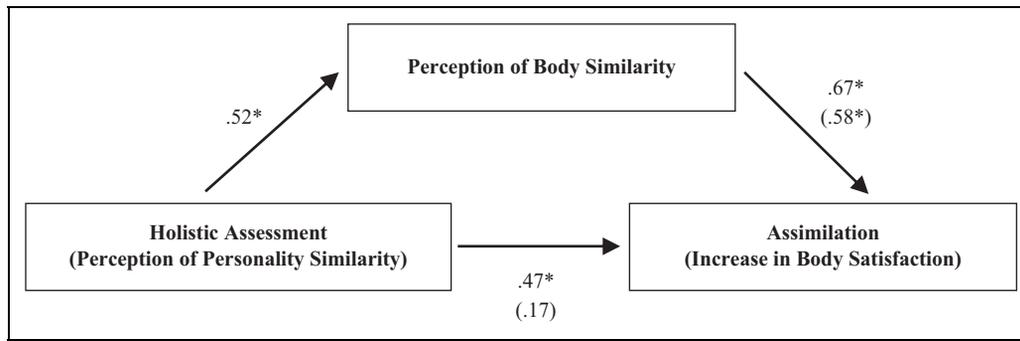


Figure 4. Results of the analysis of body similarity as a mediator of the relationship between personality similarity and body satisfaction (Study 3). Asterisks indicate significant coefficients ($*p \leq .001$).

similarity and found that women who perceived similarity with a thin unknown media figure were more satisfied with their bodies than those who did not perceive similarity. Study 2 found that women felt better about their bodies after exposure to a favorite celebrity they perceived as thin than a control celebrity they perceived as thin. Finally, Study 3 suggested that assimilation was the underlying mechanism of increased body satisfaction following exposure to thin PSRs. Thus, the current research presents a notable caveat to past work and demonstrates that PSRs are an important exception to the long-accepted wisdom that thin media figures are harmful to women's body image.

The fact that we found these results among female undergraduates is particularly notable. College-aged women tend to be thinner on average than women in the general population; thus, they would seemingly have less to gain by assimilating the thin body type of PSRs. Yet, participants in the current research still experienced gains to their body satisfaction following assimilation. Because women in their late adolescence and early adulthood are particularly at risk for experiencing body dissatisfaction and the development of eating disorders (e.g., Phelps, Johnston, Jimenez, & Wilczenski, 1993; Stice, Killen, Hayward, & Taylor, 1998), it is especially important to investigate methods of protecting and promoting body image among this age group. It would also be interesting to examine the PSR-moderation hypothesis among older and/or heavier women. We would expect the same cognitive processes to be at work, although the effects might be more pronounced for heavier women because there is more to gain by assimilating a thin PSR's body. Future research should examine this possibility.

The present research expands our understanding of the influence of PSRs on women's body image. Interestingly, the handful of studies that have been conducted to date examining this relationship have all suggested the opposite relationship: that PSRs are associated with an increase in harmful outcomes (Greenwood, 2009; Harrison, 1997; Maltby, Giles, Barber, & McCutcheon, 2005; Shorter, Brown, Quinton, & Hinton, 2008; Swami, Taylor, & Carvalho, 2009). We suggest that the discrepancy between previous work and the current work is due to the correlational nature of previous studies. For example,

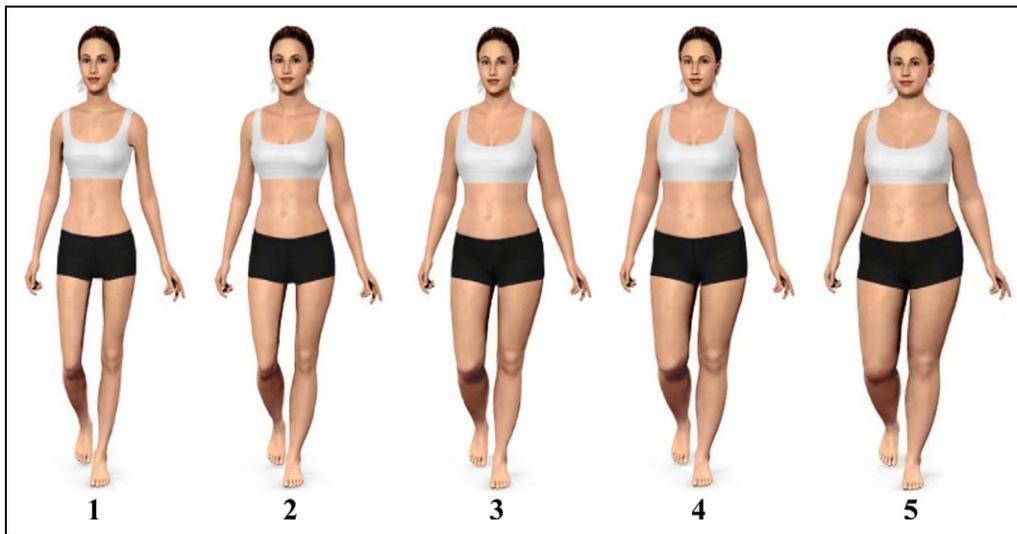
past research found a correlation between attraction to thin PSRs and body image concerns (Maltby et al., 2005). This was interpreted as evidence that favored media figures contribute to the development of poor body image. The results of the present research suggest an alternate explanation for previous correlational findings: perhaps women who feel bad about their bodies are drawn to thin PSRs, because they make them feel better about themselves. Thus, a major strength of the current research is that we employed experimental methodology to disentangle the nature of the previously found correlational relationship.

In addition, the present work provides further empirical support for the selective accessibility model (Mussweiler, 2003), as well as extends the model to the domains of body image and PSRs. The present research also extends the model by providing direct evidence that a psychological bond can lead to an initial holistic assessment of similarity. In addition, by tying the literature on the effects of thin media figures on body image to the selective accessibility model, the current research expands what is known about the underlying cognitive processes involved when women are exposed to thin media figures and thus provides a social cognitive framework for the much studied effects on body image.

This research also increases knowledge of PSRs. Our findings are consistent with previous research that people assimilate traits of PSRs to the self (Derrick et al., 2008) and extend this work by suggesting that women even assimilate physical attributes of media figures, including the body. The present research also provides additional evidence that PSRs function like real close relationships. Specifically, comparing the self with PSRs led to assimilation effects typical of comparisons with real close others (Dijksterhuis et al., 1998; Pelham & Wachsmuth, 1995).

Although the current work will do little to change the constant barrage of images of photoshopped perfection that permeate our society, it will increase understanding of how the images affect women and of an important moderator of the effects. Ironically perhaps, it is not rejecting the images as unrealistic and undesirable that will protect young women from blows to their body image, but instead embracing the media figures and pulling them toward the self.

Appendix A



Female Body Size Scale: Used in the present research to assess women's perceptions of media figures' and personal body size. A digital, color version of the scale (and accompanying items) is available from the first author upon request.

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Notes

1. Although a complementary process occurs with contrast effects, we will not discuss it here due to limited space and our specific focus on assimilation within PSRs.
2. All but one of the participants considered the celebrity's body a three or below on the Female Body Size scale, indicating that they saw the celebrity as generally thin. We use the terms "normal weight" and "thin" relative to the typical female undergraduate, whose body is thinner on average than older women.
3. All 44 participants indicated that their favorite celebrity was thin (i. e., 1 or 2 on the Female Body Size scale). Because we were specifically interested in the underlying mechanism associated with thin PSRs, we excluded 18 participants from the original sample who wrote about a heavier celebrity. The results looked highly similar when all participants were included.

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