For years, social scientists have studied the effects of exposure to media on the psychology of females. Most specifically, the portrayal of women in advertising and other visual media, including movies, sitcoms, and even the news has long been suspected of being psychologically damaging to both female and male viewers. Such exposure unconsciously provides the viewer with ideas about how women should look, feel, think, and act, and how men and women should relate to each other. Exposure also provides the viewer with the image of the ‘ideal’ woman and outlines the societal ‘ideals’ of desirability and beauty for females. Unfortunately, these ideals are often based on a greatly exaggerated kernel of truth or are completely incorrect, they are often limited and rigid, and tend to be unattainable for most women.

Research has linked exposure to such media to lowered body satisfaction (Botta, 2003), disordered eating (Becker, 2004; Hawkins, Richards, Granley, & Stein, 2004), and higher levels of anxiety (Hallimer & Dittmar, 2004; Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008) among women. Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge (1998) found that women’s academic performance suffered after attention was drawn to their bodies by the wearing of a swimsuit as opposed to a sweater. Similar research with men failed to find the same effect. Other research has shown that exposure to images of the ideal for beauty and sexiness caused women to report higher body dissatisfaction as well as higher negative mood (Tiggemann & Mcgill, 2004). Further, men who were exposed to similar images later rated the picture of a female confederate as less attractive than did men who were not exposed to idealized female beauty (Kenrick & Gutierrez, 1980).

Jean Kilbourne (1999) launched a campaign against the treatment of women in the advertising industry more than 30 years ago, insisting that the included messages about sex, sexuality, body type, and violence were damaging to society. This issue has become so pressing that recently, the American Psychological Association (2010) appointed a task force to explore the societal sexualization of young girls. The task force identified the media as a major source of information about ideals for beauty, sex, and sexuality, and determined that an inordinate amount of this information is targeted toward young women and girls. The idealized female body type in advertising is extremely thin, tall, long-legged, and large-breasted with a flawless face and perfect hair. This ultra-thin and tall body type represents approximately 5% of the female population: in addition, most models’ bodies have been altered through extreme dieting or cosmetic surgery, and virtually all images have been computer-graphically enhanced (Kilbourne, 1999). The resulting image represents an ideal that is virtually impossible for any woman to obtain, however, the prevalence and persistence of this ideal has made it the standard by which females judge themselves (APA, 2010).

In the abovementioned research, the focus has been on the overtly sexual messages contained within advertising and film. Possibly much more disturbing are the subtle messages that are received by unsuspecting viewers. The current research seeks to explore the effects of another aspect of media: the Disney princess films. In these films, viewers are exposed to similar standards of beauty; however, in many cases, the standards can be much more extreme since the entire image is created through computer graphics. For example, Ariel the mermaid’s breasts are impossibly perky, Sleeping Beauty’s waist is so small that it could not support her upper half if she were human, and Jasmine’s hair is disproportionately full and voluminous. These images and their potential effects on viewers have not yet been studied, possibly due to their seeming innocence and their marketing as childhood movie staples; however, these are the very things that could result in these images being incredibly psychologically damaging to viewers. Children are repeatedly exposed to these images from a very young age and often believe that they are real. Older viewers, even those who think critically about advertisements, may see these movies as benign and fail to recognize possible implications of exposure to the images contained therein. It may therefore be logical to think that these images shape viewers’ ideals about beauty as much or more than other popular media images.

In this study, the effect of exposure to the Disney princess ideal of beauty on viewers’ body satisfaction, self-esteem, and perception of self will be explored across several age groups. The study design is a modification of the Halliwell, E., & Dittmar, H. (2004) studies. First, groups of college-age females will be exposed to either a Disney princess montage or a control video. Following a distractor task, participants will complete measures of body image, body satisfaction, and self-esteem. Participants will also rate their own attractiveness on a scale of 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest) and will choose which drawn image (Singh, 1993) of varying size (body mass index-BMI) most closely represents their own body type. Lastly, participants will complete a demographics questionnaire which will include actual height and weight data. Participants will
privately weigh themselves on a digital scale provided at the session to ensure accuracy. Actual height and weight data will be used to calculate participants’ actual BMI and to determine proportionate distance from estimated BMI for each group.

Second, researchers will seek permission to conduct the same experiment in local schools with females in 6th grade (puberty-age females) and 3rd grade (pre-pubertal females) to determine the difference, if any, between effects of exposure for these life stages. For these ages, data collection may be reduced to participant ratings of their own attractiveness, size, and actual height and weight data.

Should the results for the 3 age groups mentioned above be similar, researchers will seek permission to conduct a similar experiment in a local pre-k program with 4-year-old females. This will allow researchers the opportunity to explore whether any effect is life-long and immediate or if age of viewer is a mediator in the relationship.

Implications

The results of this research potentially have far-reaching implications. If the Disney princess films truly are a benign childhood rite of passage, then these results will support that the images contained therein, although impossible for real females to achieve, have dissimilar effects than when presented via other media. However, if exposure to the ideals presented in the princess images has a similar effect as exposure to abovementioned media, steps must be taken to protect young viewers. Specifically, one must take into account the very young age at which most young girls are exposed to these images. Children often have difficulty distinguishing reality from advertising and television (APA, 2004). When they are exposed to one constant, impossible standard of desirability (with “princess” being an obvious desired status or role), and believe that this standard represents reality, it is logical to expect that they will feel negatively about themselves when they do not physically resemble the standard. It may also be logical to expect that when young viewers realize they do not meet this standard, which has been equated with “princess” status, it may lead them to surmise that they are not “princess material” and thus decrease their sense of worth and esteem. Further, one must consider that, with Disney’s most recent marketing campaign, the princess images can be found on an amazing range of items and clothing, in fast food kid’s meals and snack items. The sheer number of daily exposures a typical young girl might have to these images is staggering. Considering the negative connections between other forms of media and self-esteem, life satisfaction, confidence and even eating disorders, it would be quite important to know if these images have similar effects so that exposure could be limited or, at the very least, open and honest discourse about the images could become commonplace.