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The Effectiveness of Warning Labels and Subvertising on Reducing the Harmful Effects of Media Exposure

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Women are routinely exposed to highly sexualized images of women whose bodies have been airbrushed into literally impossible standards of beauty, which can contribute to body dissatisfaction. Women who are more dissatisfied with their bodies report greater depression, social anxiety, and disordered eating patterns. This study explores the use of warning labels and subvertising to ameliorate negative body image that women experience when they view media images of these impossibly beautiful women.

Warning Labels: Several countries have considered or adopted public policies to combat the negative effects of objectified media. The Australian National Advisory Group on Body Image recommended that viewers be made aware if digital enhancement was used to alter the image via explicit warning labels on the images (Tiggeman, Slater, & Smyth, 2013).

Subvertising: Subvertising is a form of “culture jamming,” where activists attempt to challenge dominant social discourses, particularly those promoting consumerism. Typically, it involves the altering or superimposing of counter-attitudes onto the original message being and satirizes commercial messages through visual manipulations (Chung & Kriby, 2009; Carducci, 2006). The effectiveness of this strategy when applied to body image threats, however, is completely untested.

Hypotheses

We hypothesized that participants who viewed the warning label or subvertised images would report less body dissatisfaction than those who view the control images. People who compared themselves more to the images would report more dissatisfaction and be more affected by the images.

Methods

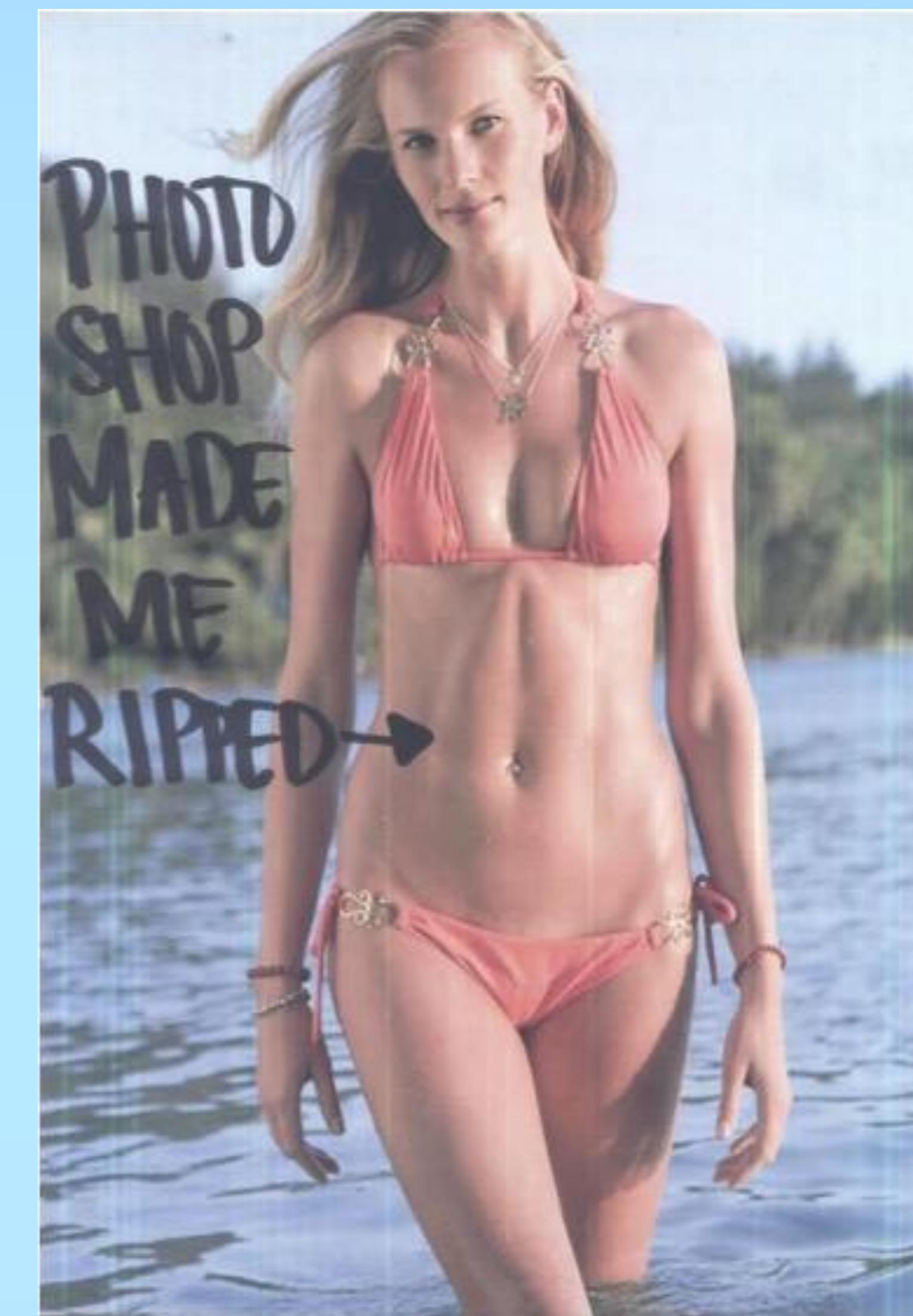
Women (N = 820) were recruited via Mechanical Turk and viewed 10 images with photoshop warning labels placed in the corner, images with subvertisements, or control images with no alterations. Participants completed the Body Image States Scale (Cash et al., 2002) and PASTAS measure (Reed et al., 1991). They indicated how much they compared themselves to the images (Comparison Level; 3 items) and reported explicitly if the images had a positive, negative, or neutral effect on how they felt about their bodies.

Results

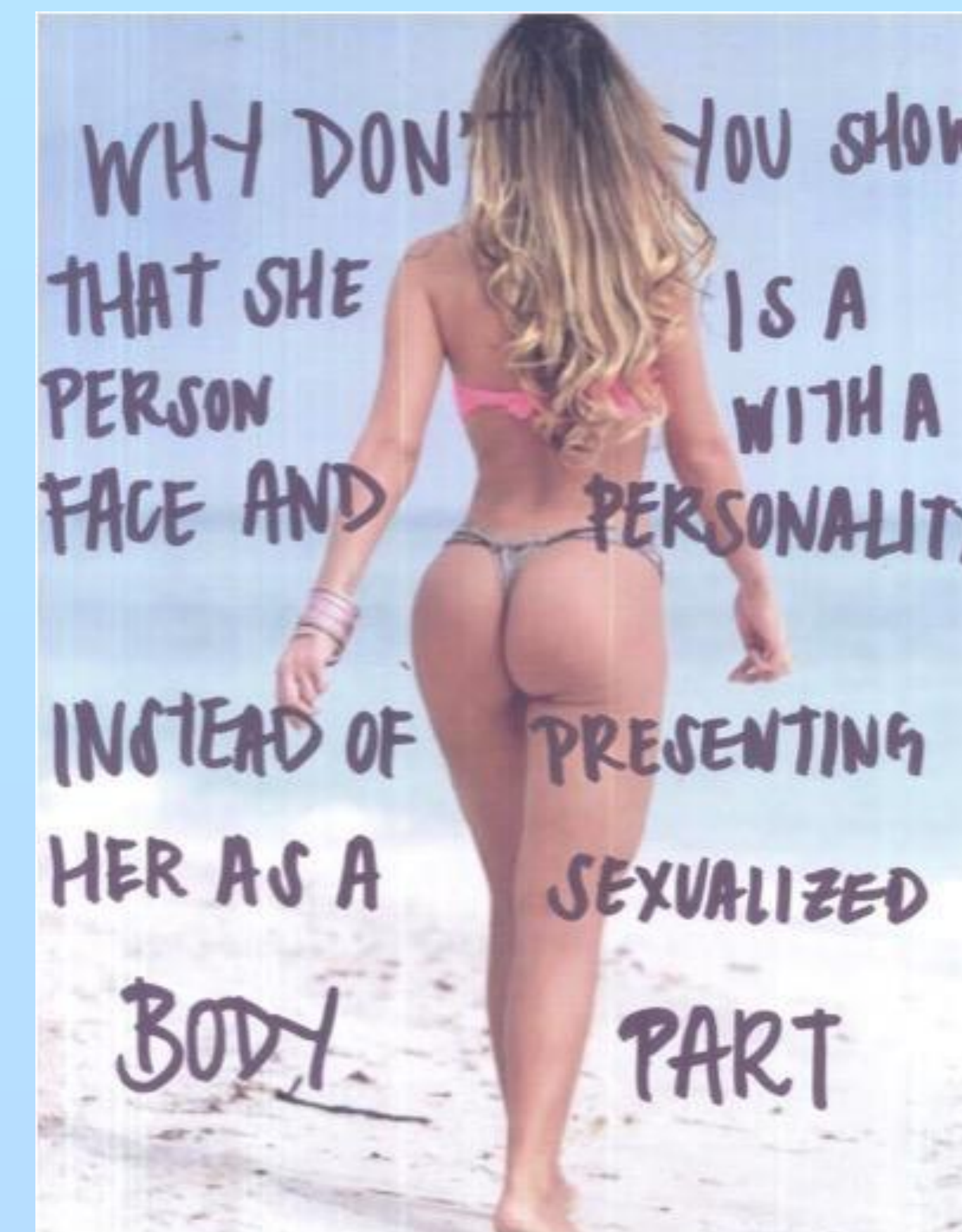
Figure 1. Viewing media images led nearly half of women to report feeling worse about some aspect of their bodies. There was no effect of image type. **Figure 2.** There was a significant main effect of Comparison Level on the Body Image States Satisfaction Scale, but no effect of image type. **Figure 3.** Results were consistent on the Physical Appearance State and Trait Anxiety Scale with a main effect of Comparison level but no interaction.

Discussion

These results suggest that these approaches are not effective in reducing body dissatisfaction. This information is especially useful to government agencies who have proposed using Photoshop warning labels and subvertising to decrease the harmful effects of media on negative body image.



Example images from conditions. Left is Photoshop Warning Label condition. Right is Subvertising condition.



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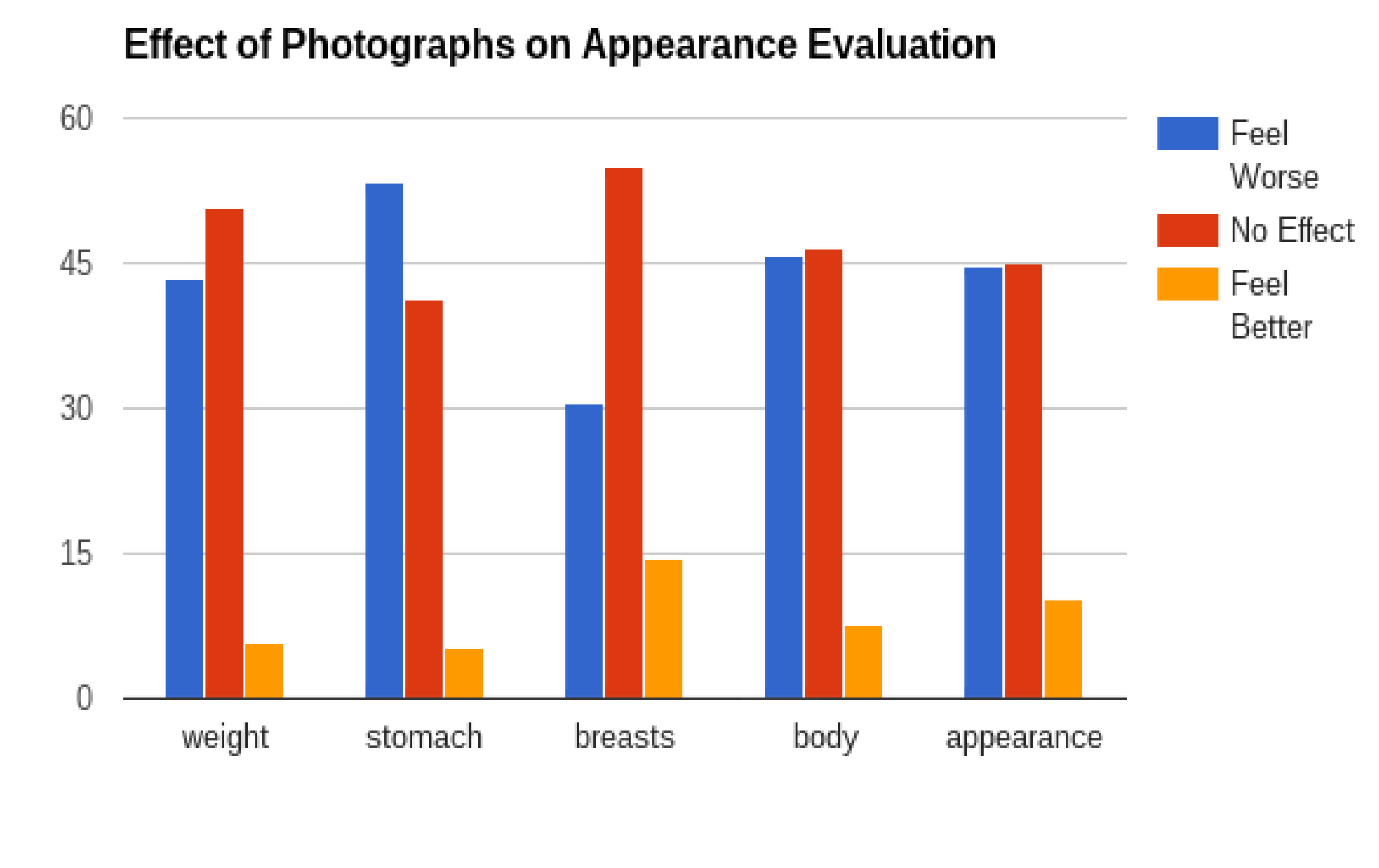


Figure 1. Women’s Reports of Whether Media Images Made them Feel Worse

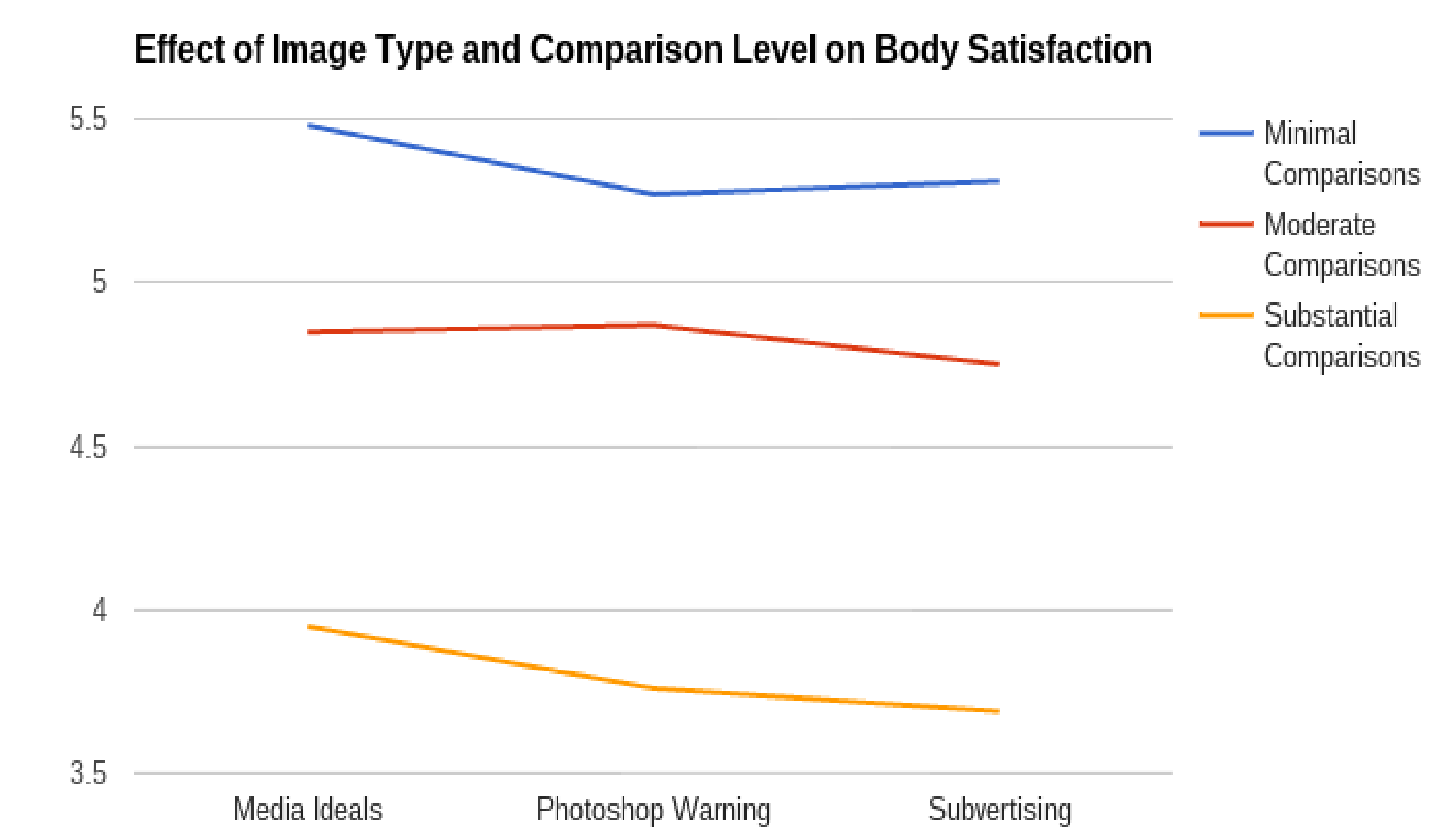


Figure 2. Effect of Image Type and Level of Comparison on Body Image States Scale. Note. Higher scores indicate better body image.

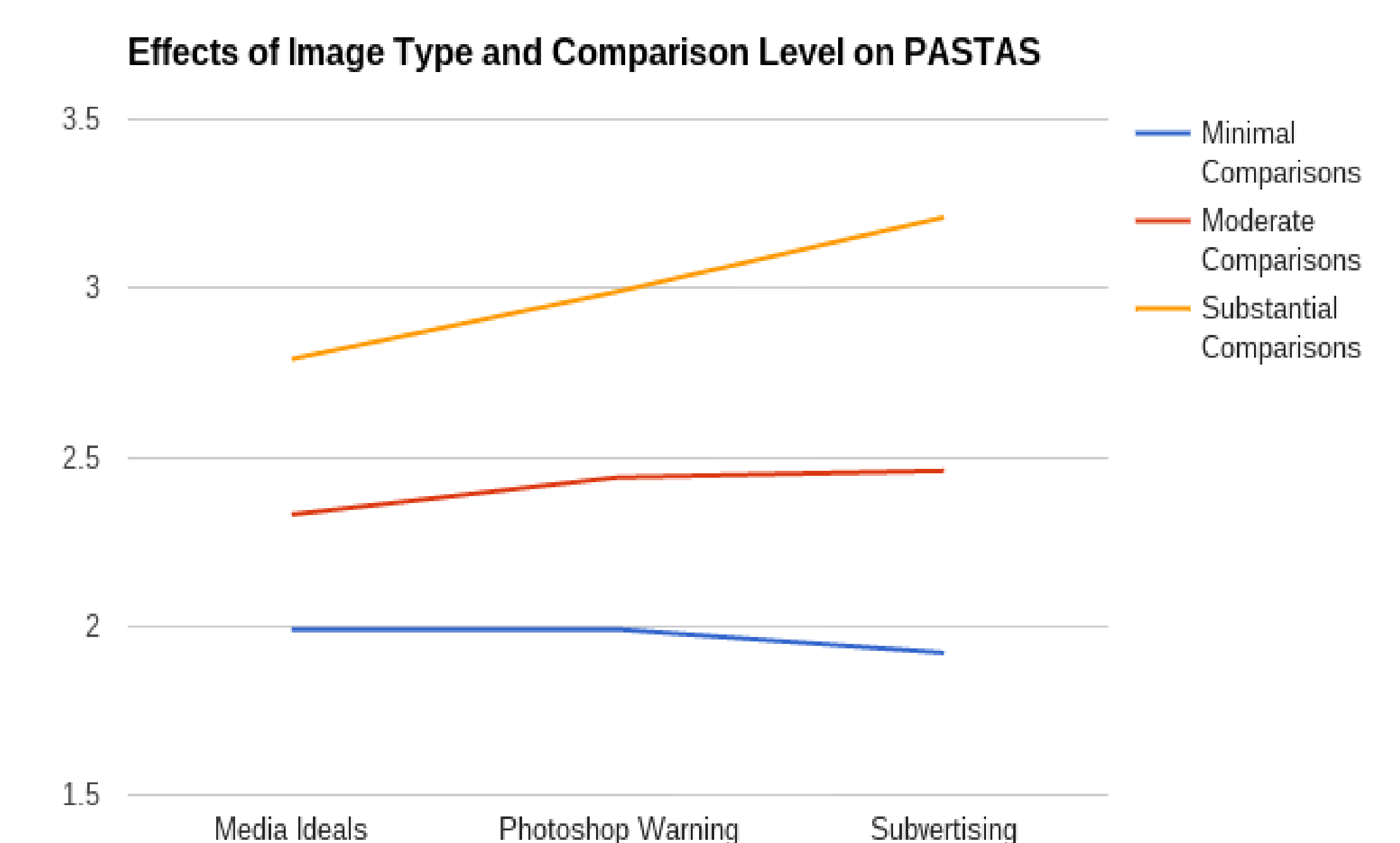


Figure 3. Effects of Image Type and Level of Comparison engaged in on Physical Appearance State and Trait Anxiety Scale. Note. Higher scores indicate poorer body image.