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Social Ideals of Beauty as Seen Through the Lens of the Media

On a daily basis American women encounter images of “ideal beauty” on television, in print, and in the advertisements plastered around the urban and suburban landscapes. These images, proliferated by mass media, have been condemned by critics for imposing an unrealistic ideal on women. Although it may be easy to blame one source for all our frustration with the seemingly unattainable standards, the beauty ideals that appear in publications were not arbitrarily chosen by fashion and beauty industry magnates. They evolved based on the aspirations and expectations of society in the realm of beauty and are reflective of the ideals of western societies. The role of the media is to sell ideas, concepts, and products to the public; it is therefore restricted by the taste of the audience they attempt to please and persuade. Print media utilizes imagery that the public finds attractive in order to make its own message appealing. Although women often accuse the media of imposing an unrealistic ideal on them via visual imagery, these ideals actually reflect social aspirations and values.

Throughout western history there have been many different forms of ideal beauty; according to Basil G. Englis, to envision this vast transformation of beauty “one need only contrast the plumpness of the nudes painted by Titian, Raphael, and Rubens to the stick figure exemplified by the eponymous Twiggy” (52). The constantly changing standards of beauty have been evolving since before the media as we now know it was established, which suggests that our ideals are culturally based and result from social experiences. Research into the images portrayed in the media has found that the ideals exemplified “may reflect something about the

current historical epoch and its values” (Englis 70). Today we value women who are tan, slender and curvaceous, while during the Victorian era men preferred their women meek, skinny and pale, because our values have changed. We have come to value strength and sexuality in women rather than submissiveness. Decisions made by fashion editors, designers, photographers, and the other creative types that generate the images of beauty shown in the press reflect “their beliefs about which types of beauty will appeal to the intended audience” (Englis 51). It is therefore impossible to separate the images of beauty that the press portrays from the audience for which it is created. The decisions are made based on what would please the community and what society has come to find beautiful and attractive for social and cultural reasons.

The role of the media in society today is to communicate to the public a message. Because of the pervasiveness of media today, competing messages try to outdo each other with attractiveness. As John Berger observed, “Publicity is the culture of consumer society. It propagates through images that society’s belief in itself” (Berger 139). The media utilizes the symbols recognized by society to relate their message, and therefore must choose beautiful images that the public would find attractive. It would be difficult for the media to compete if it were to use average women as models instead of attractive women. If a magazine put overweight, unattractive people on the cover, consumers would be less inclined to purchase it even if it promised to explain how to lose weight, dress better, and look sexier. The magazine would not stand out among other magazines on the newsstand and the promises of appearance enhancement on the cover would not be credible. The lower the sales and circulation of a magazine, the less advertisers will be interested in purchasing space, which would lead a magazine to failure and bankruptcy. They need to be attractive in order to compete, gain attention, and thrive on the market:

Although new magazines such as *Girl* and *Jump*, which won a Healthy Weight Journal Award for depicting girls of all sizes, may be making headway in reflecting girls bodies more realistically, their circulation numbers are dwarfed by monoliths *Seventeen*, *YM* and *Teen*, which still use mostly traditional models, rarely larger than a size 6. (Moore 1)

Although some magazines have tried to present a more egalitarian ideal of beauty, they have failed to achieve as much popularity as those who still choose to portray only the most attractive images. Despite complaints about unattainable standards, women will still support them even when given an option not to.

Many women criticize the media for glorifying certain unrealistic standards of beauty; however, due to the proliferation and popularity of fashion and beauty magazines, “seeing attractive models may become such a familiar experience that exposure no longer produces a reaction strong enough to influence self-perception or one's general sense of hope” (Thomsen 1006). Therefore exposure to these models is a lot less psychologically harmful than most would believe because women have become used to and desensitized to the imagery. It has been noted that although “virtually all women and girls are exposed to a substantial dose of idealized thin beauty images, not all develop extreme preoccupation with weight, and only a minority develop clinically diagnosable eating disorders” (Tiggerman 25). It is impossible for American women to avoid images of women in the media; if body dissatisfaction and eating disorders were caused by the media, more women would be afflicted.

Despite desensitization to the abundance of thin women portrayed in the media, eating disorders are still a body issue that plagues American women. Women still inaccurately maintain traditional gender-role ideals that link male attraction to female thinness, and although trying to maintain a healthy weight to appear more attractive is not necessarily harmful, it has become

competitive and is leading girls to unthinkable extremes. Unsatisfied with their bodies, they strive to attain the unattainable beauty that is airbrushed on the pages of the magazines they read, which can eventually lead to eating disorders; however, “one must keep in mind that ninety-eight percent of women do not develop diagnosable levels of eating disorders although all are exposed to the media” (Etcoff 203). The role the media plays in creating a negative self-image for girls is “generally believed to be mediated by additional factors, including personality and temperament, emotional distress, endorsement of traditional gender roles, negative self-evaluation of achievement, teasing about appearance, low self-esteem, and body mass” (Thomsen 990). The representation of thin women in the media doesn’t cause these problems, but it does add to the tensions when these additional factors spurred by pressures among society are present.

Furthermore, research has shown that eating disorders will never change a girl’s body into that of a supermodel. Although models seem ultra-slim, they have the same ratio of curviness that is considered the best for fertility. M.J. Tovee suggests that the reason models appear thinner, when they are just as curvaceous as other women, is because of their height: “A shorter hour-glass figure will appear more curvaceous. The take-home message from this study is that supermodels are both tall and curvaceous, and that dieting will not make you look like a *Vogue* cover girl” (Tovee 1475); therefore denying nourishment will not transform a girl into the images she sees in the media. Models are born with the genes to be tall, slender and curvaceous and “like height, weight is determined by many factors and the genes set limits to how much we can vary the shape of our bodies” (Etcoff 201). No matter how hard a girl may try, if she isn’t blessed with the genes of a model, she probably will never look like one.

Other social reasons have been suggested as viable causal factors for eating disorders that are not created by the media. Research has discovered a strong inverse correlation between the weight of women in developed countries and her social and economic status: “Obesity was six

times more prevalent among women of lower SES than among those of upper SES.” Furthermore the same study found a direct correlation between thinness and socio-economic status: “the prevalence of thinness among women was the mirror image of that of obesity, varying directly with SES: the higher the SES, the greater the prevalence of thinness” (Sobal 261). This strong relationship suggests that women’s desire for thinness has more to do with social considerations than with emulating media images for aesthetic purposes:

The status motive can sometimes lead to impulses that counteract the feeding motive and override our aesthetics. We know that skeletal or obese bodies don’t look as good as average-weight bodies, but we value them as emblems of status and desire them the same way we do any other accoutrements of wealth. (Etcoff 200)

Thinness connotes status, power and respect because it symbolizes that one has the funds and leisure time to invest in personal maintenance, exercise, and dieting. Psychologist Nancy Etcoff further suggests that “Another way of looking at the phenomenon is to consider that women, not men, are driving the thin ideal, and it may help to explain the idealization of thinness among the highest social classes” (Etcoff 203-4). Women themselves are idealizing thinness and using it as a means to compete for status, so it would be unfair for them to blame the media for imposing a standard to which they willingly adhere. Journalist Andrea Georgsson also noticed: “The fashion magazine aesthetic of grossly thin women is a strange one. Men often say they find gaunt women neither sexy nor attractive. Yet women, and even young girls, clamor to emulate the look” (Georgsson 20), which further distances men’s role in creating the thin ideal and further suggests that it is women who are competitively trying to achieve the ideal and therefore reinforcing thinness as a standard of beauty.

Although men may have little to do with the imposition of the thin ideal, another social source of dissatisfaction based on this ideal stems from a common female misconception that men desire thin women. According to research, one of the effects of beauty and fashion magazines is that they increase the “internalization of traditional gender-role beliefs, specifically the perception that beauty, which is necessary to please a man, is based on thinness” (Thomsen 1992); therefore, this idea is already firmly rooted in our society, magazines just make consumers more aware of it. Since this is an ideal many women already adhere to, it is one that the media utilizes for attractive purposes. Models are the extreme version of this concept, yet they are not the paradigm for the type of thinness men find attractive, as many women inaccurately infer. In fact, Cross-cultural research has found consistencies in the body types that men find attractive, and most men found the average body type to be the most attractive: “None rated the extremely fat or thin attractive, and all picked the same cluster of mid-weight figures for both male and female drawings” (Etcoff 199). The cultures studied varied greatly in location and development and all are subjected to different media, sometimes none at all. Since the media varies greatly from culture to culture, it could not have contributed to this consistency in ideals. Men are universally more attracted to women of an average body type because it indicates health and fertility. The only reason men may value thinness in women is because of the implications of social status that women have come to associate with being thin.

One of the main reasons the media is accused of unrealistically portraying the ideal body is because of the female models used in print, although their attraction comes from their association with status and aesthetic considerations on behalf of the media. While it is true that most models have an unhealthy, low body mass index, there are practical reasons why photographers and designers use thin girls. In photographs most models appear healthy and slender, but in reality look nearly emaciated. Most people are aware of the fact that “the camera

adds ten pounds,” and for this reason ultra-thin women tend to photograph better than the average woman. It is also common knowledge that the images of models that we see in photographs are airbrushed and that models wear expertly applied makeup; therefore, the final images seen in print are obviously unrealistic and unattainable; hence the desensitization to these images that many women exhibit.

Although the fashion industry is blamed for starting the trend of thin models, it is necessary to understand the working relationship between the fashion industry and publications to understand why thin models are more convenient. For fashion shows, designers create samples -- examples of how the merchandise is supposed to be manufactured. It is easier for a designer to make a sample in a smaller size than in a larger one because there is less material, less sewing, less beading, less embroidery, etc. Once on the runway, models are supposed to act like walking hangers with pretty faces. Designers don't want their artwork distorted by inconsistent curves or bulges, so they prefer their models without them. For these aesthetic and practical reasons, the fashion industry likes to employ thin models.

Fashion magazines usually use the same samples from the shows for their photo shoots, so therefore must also employ thin models that will fit the small samples. The goal of most fashion magazines is to highlight merchandise that will be available to consumers at the time that the magazine is on the newsstand and because editors compile an issue months in advance, only samples are available because the clothes usually have not yet been manufactured. In the April issue of *Vogue*, there was an editorial entitled “Celestial Bodies” depicting fashions for different body types. Their representative of the “short” body type was a 5’6” model; hardly short considering the average American woman is 5’3” – 5’4” (Goodman 289). This model was most likely chosen because she still needed to fit the sample merchandise -- the loaned pieces cannot be altered in any way. They can be temporarily clipped from behind to appear more tight-fitting,

but they cannot be expanded or hemmed to accommodate shorter or larger body types; so, *Vogue's* "short" model still had to be able to fit into the clothing un-hemmed. Furthermore, it is to the magazines advantage to use thin models because, as previously mentioned, they photograph better because the camera has a tendency to add extra volume to a figure.

In another instance, Lucky Magazine's assistant market editor, Madeline Passarelli, was commended for her magazine's usage of real women in addition to models. She responded "It's nice, but it makes my job a lot more difficult." For these real women she has to locate items that will be available at the time the magazine reaches the newsstand and that would fit them without alteration. For real women of varying sizes and shapes, this is no easy task since designer samples are what is most readily available. It is for this practical reason that publications use more professional models than real women.

Part of the reason that images of slim, attractive bodies in the media are seen as completely unrealistic is because of the obesity epidemic in America. America is a land of plenty, especially when it comes to food, and the abundance of unhealthy chemicals in food regularly consumed do more harm than good. The average portion size at restaurants has also increased dramatically. Physical work is no longer a necessity because we don't have to hunt, gather, or cultivate our own food. Nor are we solely dependent on our own two feet for transportation, because of advancements in technology, Americans lead relatively sedentary lives. Etcoff explains from an evolutionary standpoint, "we are not lazy or hypocritical, gluttonous or evil, we are human. And we are up against millions of years of evolution that have selected for the ability to eat heartily, store fat, and take in as much fat, salt, and sugar as we can" (197). Americans have gotten used to being overweight and our idea of what is fat and what is thin is skewed by the fact that being slightly overweight, by medical standards, has become the norm. The lack of overall health in this nation has greatly enlarged the gap between the lithe

bodies of celebrities and models, and the corpulent body of the average American woman. If the nation was generally thinner and healthier, the woman portrayed in the media would still seem thin, but not nearly as unattainable nor outrageous.

Critics often blame the media for imposing these ideals, but even if there were no mass media, these ideals would still exist. Ever since the dawn of civilization women have been practicing beautification as a means to aspire to some aesthetic ideal. Cosmetics have been around since the time of Ancient Egypt, yet people still blame the media and not society for dissatisfaction associated with personal appearance. As one psychiatrist observes, “Women perceive the media as the main source of pressure to be thin and women exposed to heavy models reported less body image disturbance than women exposed to thin models” (Posavac 325). Because of society’s current association of thinness with status, these women exposed to heavy models probably reported less body image disturbance because they may have felt better about their own bodies and somewhat superior to the women they were viewing. According to experts, “In 1972, 23 percent of US women reported being unhappy with their overall appearance. Today, 48 percent say they are dissatisfied,”(Njaim 4), which Njaim claims is due to the images represented by the media becoming increasingly more unattainable. According to the North American Association for the Study of Obesity, in 1976, 47 percent of Americans were overweight, which grew to 64 percent by 2000. The increase in body dissatisfaction is more likely related to the increase in waistlines than the media images.

Refusal to see past the media’s representation of women into the social factors that are part of the reason these ideals were created is ineffective. It may be easy to designate one source as the culprit for creating an unrealistic ideal, but it is impossible to change the standards of beauty without addressing how they came to be. The root of the body image issue is not in the

media, but in society. If changes are to be made, we must look within ourselves instead of to an exterior source.

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