

Adolescent Body Dissatisfaction and the Media

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE CAPSTONE

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In this paper, an examination of the correlation between the use of sexual images in advertising and feelings of discontent with body image in adolescent girls will take place. It is this author's opinion that the over-use of sexual images in advertising negatively effects how young girls perceive their bodies. This author's research question examined whether the increased use of sex as an advertising tool is associated with the way that an adolescent girl perceives her own body. A literature search was also completed in which it was found that there is significant evidence to support this author's claim. A broad internet search was done to obtain the most common keywords, and then a more in-depth search was done to find appropriate articles.

“Have you seen the fool that corrupted his own live body?
 or the fool that corrupted her own live body?
 For they do not conceal themselves, and cannot conceal
 themselves.

-Walt Whitman, 1855

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, an examination of the correlation between the use of sexual images in advertising and feelings of discontent with body image in adolescent girls will take place. It is this author's opinion that the over-use of sexual images in advertising negatively effects how young girls perceive their bodies. Seeing extremely young, unhealthy, thin girls and women in commercials, television shows and print media creates an unhealthy and unnatural standard that young girls today desperately try to emulate. The result is a culture of young girls trying to change their naturally beautiful, healthy, curvaceous bodies into unhealthy thin ones, which has a multitude of side effects. In short, they are trying to conform to the standard that the media has set for them; unfortunately, this standard is often times unrealistic.

This author's research question examined whether the increased use of sex as an advertising tool is associated with the way that an adolescent girl perceives her own body. According to the research, the answer to this question is yes. The increased use of sex and nudity in the media has, and most likely will continue to, be associated with adolescent girls' body images.

Present day women who look at the major mass media are exposed to a standard of bodily attractiveness that is slimmer than that presented for men and that is less curvaceous than that presented for women since the 1930s. This standard may not be promoted only in the media, it may not even originate in the media, but given the popularity of television, movies, and magazines... the

media are likely to be among the most influential promoters of such thin standards.

(Myers, 1992)

A literature search was also completed in which it was found that there is significant evidence to support this author's claim. A broad internet search was done to obtain the most common keywords, and then a more in-depth search was done to find appropriate articles. The most common keywords used were: body image, adolescent, girls, body dissatisfaction, and eating disorders. The most common journals used were: *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, *Journal of Communication*, *Pediatrics* and *Sex Roles*. The literature reviewed supported this author's claim that body dissatisfaction in adolescent girls increased when exposed to media images of a sexual nature.

IMAGES IN THE MEDIA

Evidence of a correlation between the media and poor body image in adolescents can be seen "in a study by Nichter and Nichter (1991) [where] adolescent girls endorsed their ideal as the models found in fashion magazines aimed at teenage girls. This ideal teenage girl was described as being 5'7", 100 pounds, and size 5 with long blonde hair and blue eyes. Reaching such an extreme ideal is quite unrealistic for most women and also dangerous, given that the body mass index of someone with such proportions is less than 16, clearly in the anorexic and amenorrheic range" (Thompson and Heinberg, 1999).

A study conducted by Andersen and DiDomenico (1992) found that the "magazines read most frequently by young females contain many more diet articles and

advertisements compared to those read primarily by males in the same age range". It is possible that the constant viewing of these images may contribute to feelings of discontentment with body image. "Instead of simply reflecting the weight and shape ideals of our society, popular media may be, to some extent, imposing gender-related norms" which are being found to create and support body image problems (Andersen and DiDomenico, 1992). One would hope that the creation of magazines designed specifically for adolescent girls would help to decrease the prevalence of poor body image and body dissatisfaction in adolescence, but that has not been the apparent case. Young girls are still dissatisfied with their bodies, despite attempts to create media outlets specifically designed for their age group. This is not surprising, however, due to the fact that these magazines still contain images of airbrushed models and articles about how to change oneself into someone the reader most likely perceives as better.

For years, the advertising industry has been using sex and women to try and increase profits and sales. Dating back to early American society, women were used as a form of temptation, much like they are now. Women entice, they elicit curiosity, they empower. A man who thinks that purchasing a specific product because a woman would, could, or should find him more attractive, available, or acceptable falls into the age-old category of one who is sexually influenced.

This type of advertising is still present, and prevalent, in today's society, it is simply being seen in a different form. The use of women in advertising to try and change the perceptions of young girls is a common occurrence at the present time. The

problem with these influences is that they are perpetuating unhealthy and unrealistic images and standards.

EXPOSURE TO THE MEDIA AND ASSOCIATION WITH BODY IMAGE AND SATISFACTION

According to sociocultural theorists, “current societal standards for beauty inordinately emphasize the desirability of thinness. ... The current epidemic of body dissatisfaction and emergence of eating disorders is a function of the sociocultural ideal of thinness. And one major way that this is transmitted is through the media”

(Tiggemann and Pickering, 1996).

Formal content analyses of both women’s magazines and television reveal a preponderance of young, tall, and extremely thin women.... These epitomes of beauty underscore the desirability of thinness, and thinness at such a level as to be increasingly unrealistic for most women to achieve by healthy means.... Thus, it is not surprising that the most prominent account of the current high level of body image disturbance and disordered eating observed among women is provided by sociocultural theory, which accords such media-conveyed thin ideal messages prominence. This account holds that the socioculturally transmitted thin ideal becomes accepted and internalized by many women and girls, resulting in the pursuit of thinness, sometimes by extreme and unhealthy means

(Tiggemann, 2006)

Before an attempt is made to examine and identify the suggested correlation between the media and body image dissatisfaction we must first define the concept of body image. Loosely defined, it is the way in which we perceive our bodies. According to the womenshealth.gov website:

With a positive body image, a woman has a real perception of her size and shape and feels comfortable and proud about her body. With a negative body image, a woman has a distorted perception of her shape and size, compares her body to others, and feels shame, awkwardness, and anxiety about her body. A woman's dissatisfaction with her body affects how she thinks and feels about herself. A

poor body image can lead to emotional distress, low self-esteem, dieting, anxiety, depression, and eating disorders.

(www.4women.gov/bodyimage, 2007)

Although suggestive of women, the same philosophy and definition can be used for adolescent girls as well.

Studies dating back to the 1970s help to support the claim that women and young girls alike are influenced by the media (Linder, 2004). A study done by Lavine, Sweeney and Wagner (1999)

examined whether exposure to TV ads that portray women as sex objects causes increased body dissatisfaction among women and men. Participants were exposed to 15 sexist and 5 nonsexist ads, 20 nonsexist ads, or a no ad control condition. Results revealed that women exposed to sexist ads judged their current body size as larger and revealed a larger discrepancy between their actual and ideal body sized (preferring a thinner body) than women exposed to the nonsexist or no ad condition.

In this study, sexist was meant to refer to “TV ads that activate the female sex object gender subtype”.

Additionally, Tiggemann (2006) has cited that “women and girls’ own reports clearly indicate that they hold the media at least partly responsible for their negative feelings toward their bodies (e.g., Milkie, 1999; Tiggemann, Gardiner & Slater, 2000; Wertheim, Paxton, Achultz & Muir, 2002)”. In another study, Harrison (2000) distributed a questionnaire to adolescent participants and found a correlation between exposure to specific body-imaged characters and the eating disorders that they were also dealing with. Similarly, Tiggemann and Pickering administered a survey to 94 female high-school juniors “who reported how much and what television they had watched in the previous week. Body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness were also addressed.” Despite the fact

that “the adolescent women in this study were bordering on underweight[, ...]they perceived themselves as somewhat overweight, were dissatisfied with their weight, and had high Drive for Thinness scores” (1996). This study also shed light on an important aspect of this type of research. It was determined that what the girls watched was more important than the simple fact that they simply watched TV. “Total television-viewing time was not related to body dissatisfaction nor drive for thinness. However, certain specific types of programs were. In particular, time reported watching soaps or serials and movies, programs likely to show women in stereotyped roles, was positively correlated with body dissatisfaction” (Tiggemann and Pickering, 1996). It is possible that seeing women in stereotyped roles caused the girls to feel that they have to look a certain way depending on the roles they fill in society. According to Lavine, Sweeney and Wagner (1999) “it is reasonable to expect that portrayals of beauty in TV ads play a casual role in shaping women’s perceptions of and satisfaction with their bodies. In particular, because TV ads that depict women as sex objects portray and reinforce contemporary standards of thinness, exposure to such stereotypic stimuli may heighten women’s concern and dissatisfaction with the bodies.”

EXPOSURE TO THE MEDIA AND ASSOCIATION WITH EATING DISORDERS

In a study done by Field, Cheung, Wolf, Herzog, Gortmaker, and Colditz (1999), it was determined that despite healthy body weight, young girls were still experiencing feelings of body dissatisfaction as well as were imposing upon themselves a need to lose weight. Of all the study participants, “sixty-nine percent of the girls reported that

magazine pictures influence their idea of the perfect body shape, and 47% reported wanting to lose weight because of magazine pictures". This study also cited a "positive linear association between the frequency of reading women's magazines and the prevalence of having dieted to lose weight because of a magazine article, initiating an exercise program because of a magazine article, wanting to lose weight because of pictures in magazines, and feeling that pictures in magazines influence their idea of the perfect body shape" (Field, Cheung, Wolf, Herzog, Gortmaker, and Colditz, 1999).

The problem lies in the natural inability for young women to obtain these standards. Take for example the deaths of two young models five years ago. In August 2006, fashion model Luisel Ramos passed away. Ramos, an extremely underweight 22 year-old, died of heart failure (see Klonick, 2006) after a show in South America. Shortly after, in November 2006, another model died from "complications of anorexia" (Taber, 2006). Models are dying trying to obtain the ultrathin bodies that we hold to be images of beauty, which they very well may be – but at what cost?

Years ago, advertising tried to entice young girls into wearing makeup and styling their hair a specific way. And they changed; not because they necessarily felt that the way they looked was wrong, or bad, but because they wanted to look like the women in the ads. Over the years, the physicality of models and actresses has changed, leading young girls to think that they too need to change. Unfortunately, the fact that many of the images we see in the media are *not* natural, or healthy, seems to slip past many of these young girls. According to Field, Camargo, Taylor, Berkey, Roberts, and Colditz:

The most likely mechanisms through which frequency of exposure to the mass media increases the likelihood that a girl becomes concerned with her weight or

develops eating disorder symptoms are via encouraging girls to compare their bodies with those depicted in the media and inspiring them to try to look like the unrealistic and unhealthy models and actresses in the media.

(2001)

As this paper has shown, numerous studies have been done that show a correlation between the use of ultra-thin female images in advertisements, eating disorders and body dissatisfaction in young girls. It is these ultra-thin images that do our youth an injustice. Aside from the alterations done to the images to make them look as they do, allowing adolescents' exposure to these images automatically puts them at a disadvantage as "adolescence is a period in life when changing bodies and increasing awareness of social standards make body image especially salient" (Harrison, 2000).

There is also evidence of harmful, "disordered eating among" Hollywood types (Turner, Hamilton, Jacobs, Angood and Dwyer, 1997). "Content analyses have shown that over the past 50 years, since the birth of television, female media personalities have grown steadily thinner, so that currently more than half meet criteria for anorexia nervosa (Harrison, 2000). These images convey misleading information as to the natural size and shape of women today. Simply put, "the mass media...encourage girls to form unrealistically thin body ideals, which are unattainable for most females" (Field, Camargo, Taylor, Berkey, Roberts, and Colditz, 2001).

Television is arguably the most prominent and influential form of the mass media, especially for adolescents. Not only do young people watch the most television, but Johnson & Schlundt (1985) have suggested that the societal pressures of thinness are particularly influential during adolescence and young adulthood as this is a time of gender identity development and sex role exploration. Both anorexia and bulimia nervosa typically have their onset during late adolescence and are highly prevalent in this age group.

(Tiggemann and Pickering, 1996)

NON-MEDIA INFLUENCES

There are other influences in the creation of eating disorders and body dissatisfaction in addition to the mass media. Family, friends, and society all impact the thoughts and decisions of young girls. Combined with peer pressure and desires to fit in, it is not surprising that young girls are feeling consistent pressure to drop weight and change the shape of their body. Traditionally, it has been thought that any important change would, could, or should start at home. That could be difficult if home is also a breeding ground for a parent's body dissatisfaction. Field, Camargo, Taylor, Berkey, Roberts, and Colditz in a study done in 2001, "suggest that weight-related issues of parents are transmitted to their children". How can we expect adolescents to ignore media images if we can't do the same ourselves? Much like the anti-drug and anti-smoking campaigns, healthy living and positive body images must first be seen and practiced within the home before they are to be successfully noticed outside of it. As the old adage goes: children learn what they live. If a child, or adolescent, is living with adults who are consistently scrutinizing themselves and drawing comparisons between their perceived downfalls and a prominent media image's perceived attributes, then it should not be surprising when this young person grows up to do the same thing. This is why it is so important for adolescents and adults alike to create and maintain healthy body images.

As our society is currently experiencing an obesity epidemic, it is not surprising that there are many homes in which at least one parent is trying to lose weight. The difference that this author sees between an obese parent trying to lose weight to regain

health and an average weight adolescent trying to lose weight to mirror the images she sees on TV is that the parent is trying to become healthier, while the adolescent is potentially putting her health at risk. Overcoming obesity has the potential of becoming a lesson in striving for good health rather than an example of how to lose weight.

Adults struggle with body image just as adolescents do. We ask ourselves, and each other, if things “look good” when we try them on. We step on scales and cringe when a number shows that we weren’t expecting to see. But as adults, we usually have the ability to work past it and know that health and wellness is more important than a number on a scale or an image that Hollywood says is important to maintain. Adult body images are fairly healthy and consistent because age and wisdom have helped to educate against the idea that fad and fashion out-weigh long-term health and wellness.

SOLUTIONS

The concept behind a positive body image is nothing more than a satisfaction of having health and wellness. This is a concept that should be taught to today’s youth, much like we teach safe sex and defensive driving lessons. Positive body image has remarkably very little to do with weight; it is more an acknowledgement of one’s limitations and abilities, and an acceptance that bodily perfection is not necessary to obtain happiness. Since eating disorders and body dissatisfaction are so common among adolescent young girls in our society, we must be doing something wrong in how we are teaching these girls about health, wellness, and body image.

It is natural for young girls to feel funny and awkward about the changes that their bodies undergo during puberty. What should not be natural is the ease at which they turn to poor eating habits and unhealthy lifestyles in order to maintain low body weights in an effort to look like media images. A-list celebrities such as Nicole Ricci and Mary Kate and Ashley Olson are plagued with health problems due to their respective eating and low body weight disorders. Adolescents see all too much the attention that these young women continue to get, and associate that with status, prestige, and a good lifestyle. This is quickly becoming the thought processes of young girls all over the country: 'If I act/look/am like these celebrities, then I too will have a good, happy life.' According to Myers (1992), it takes less than half an hour of television watching for a young girl to alter her body shape perception. In the television watching world, this is virtually no time at all.

It is therefore imperative that educators, parents, and scholars convey the importance of internal thoughts and feelings: looking good is about feeling good, and that comes from within. The images that are shown in the movies, on television, in magazines all portray happy people as thin and unhappy people as overweight. In reality, however, happiness has nothing to do with the numbers on a scale. It is about the importance placed upon those numbers. The less meaning the numbers are given, the better one's body image will be, and the easier it will be to maintain it. Simply put, happiness goes hand in hand with health and wellness, not weight.

On the contrary, the media has done a wonderful job of promoting the idea that the thinner an individual, the happier they will be; they will date the more attractive

people, they will make more money and have better careers, and they will live the more glamorous lives. But in reality, this isn't the case. Not only do those things not create happiness, but they are not mutually exclusive with thinness either; plenty of non-thin people have attractive spouses, make a lot of money, have great careers and live glamorous live. Health and happiness come from within; it's all about feeling good. This is the message that should be passed on to young girls. "Developing and nurturing a positive body image and a healthy mental attitude is crucial to a woman's happiness and wellness!" (www.4women.gov, 2007)

Legislation designed to protect the young women entering into the modeling and acting fields is also necessary to ensure that certain standards of health are met in a field where health can clearly hold increasingly less importance. The deaths of the young models discussed previously have spurred a recent move to ban excessively thin models in Madrid, Spain, as well as in other fashion cities worldwide. Although there is still a great deal of opposition to this legislation, many are finding that the benefits will outweigh the negatives in the long run.

This controversial legislation will require that each model meet minimum body mass index (BMI) guidelines, creating the fashion industry's first proactive role in model health thus far. It is a stand such as this that this author believes is necessary to elicit change in both the fashion industry and in the health of those who look at fashion and Hollywood types as conveyors of healthy lifestyles (i.e. adolescent girls). This trend to put a stop to underweight models is carrying through to other facets of the modeling community as well. According to the Canadian Association for the Advancement of

Women and Sport and Physical Activity in an article dating back to 2000, “anorexic models will be banished from the pages of women’s magazines under a voluntary code agreed by editors” (Womersley). This helps to show that, although the unfortunate deaths of the two underweight models has reignited the fire under this volatile topic, there has been talk in the past to try and move these same mountains.

As much of this paper has stated, young girls set their gaze to images in the media for advice and knowledge on how to do their hair and makeup, how to dress, talk to the opposite sex, what diet to use, the best exercises to burn fat, etc. By putting a stop to the marketing of underweight body images, the fashion industry is making the first move in what has the potential to be an enormous shift in body image and thought. For example, if female models worldwide looked more realistic in size (for example a size 10 dress) and held a little more weight on their frames (150 pounds on a 5 foot 6 inch frame) then females in general would have better feelings about their bodies since this is more realistic to how women look.

Many individuals read fashion magazines because they want to obtain information on how to look better, but in reading those magazines, they end up feeling worse about themselves. The recent move to implement a minimum body weight or BMI onto catwalks across the world could be the first step in changing all this. If more realistic figures were seen on catwalks, then maybe those images would transfer to print and video media. Then when a more ‘average’ sized girl watched television or opens a magazine she may find it easier to identify with the images, therefore decreasing feelings of alienation (a common feeling among girls with low body image).

In order to create change, we must first engage the media in a proactive role. To do this, there needs to be a change in how media outlets are managed and utilized. Instead of streaming videos of ultra-thin models or supporting crash diets that promise results, mass media outlets should be spreading the word about health and wellness. Models and actresses should be held accountable and looked up to for their health. Much like professional athletes are required to undergo drug testing to ensure that illegal substances are not used, those in the media spotlight should also have to undergo some form of testing (i.e. BMI guidelines) to ensure that they are promoting healthy body images.

The media can also be proactive in changing its negative influence on adolescents through education and admission of the falsity of many media images. Many of us are aware that the images that we see on television, in the movies, and in magazines are not actual – they are air brushed and photo-shopped and altered. Adolescents, however, are not always aware of this. It is easy to open a magazine and see a beautiful, seemingly flawless young lady and think that that image is real. Although this author is not saying that the airbrushing and photo alterations should not occur for artistic needs, it should be well known to readers and viewers that the images are altered. In doing this, adolescent girls will hopefully see how unrealistic and uncommon those images are.

Since young girls look to emulate the images found in movies, and magazines, it is important that images promoting healthy looking bodies are used. If ultra-thin images are shown, then there will be attempts to become ultra-thin. If athletic and curvy

images are popularized and praised, then tradition would show that athletic and curvy would be the “in” way to look. It should be noted that this author is not saying that all thin models should find themselves unemployed, but simply that a balance must be found among body types in media outlets. As there are some very naturally thin adolescents, it would not be fair for them to not see images that mirror their own in the media, the opposite of what young curvaceous girls are currently experiencing.

Throughout adolescence, young girls are plagued with a variety of social situations that they will struggle to get through. From pimples to periods, boyfriends to break-ups, young girls are almost always in a constant state of anxiety and apprehension for much of their teenage years. “Accepting one’s physique is an essential feature of adolescent development” (Turner, Hamilton, Jacobs, Angood and Dwyer, 1997). During this time young girls tend to look to the media for social cues on how to act and feel.

So in an effort to decrease the importance in media images, this author suggests that society should be popularizing action instead of images. Throughout school, students are reminded not to ‘judge a book by its cover’ and not to make fun of kids who don’t look like them. Likewise, adolescents should be taught that health and happiness are more important than how one looks. A happy size ten is always better than an unhappy size zero. An increase in happiness has a tendency to manifest in increased self-esteem as well. Ways in which self-esteem can be improved and increased should be included throughout a student’s education. Studies have shown that “those who possess instrumental traits such as assertiveness and self-confidence seem to encounter less negative appearance-related feedback, and may be less inclined

to buy into media stereotypes” (Vartanian, 2001). Therefore young girls (and boys) should be consistently encouraged to get out and do things: playing sports or writing or playing music are all ways in which confidence can be boosted, therefore decreasing the likeliness of falling into the media-images pit. Assertiveness and self-confidence are not things that happen easily, so it is the duty of educators and parents to be diligent in their attempts. As a society, there should be an effort to minimize the importance of looks and increase the importance of internal health and wellness. Staying fit, eating healthy, and being happy should be the main priorities of our youth, not trying to look like someone who they have been told (through societal cues) is beautiful.

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