Body Image and How the Mass Media Affects Us

Connie Wheeler
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Connie Wheeler
Abstract

The ideal body image is shoved in our face all over the place through advertisements and the media. Normal concerns about the way we look have turned into obsessions through the rise of the mass media. “It has been estimated that young women now see more images of outstandingly beautiful women in one day than their mothers saw throughout their entire adolescence” (Rogan 1999). I hypothesize that the media overall has negative affects on body image of women and men, particularly women. “Up to 90% of the female population diet at some point in their lives, but only 16% of the female population is obese” (Ogden, 1992). Furthermore, one in every ten women has an eating disorder. So, who profits from the mass media and how men and women’s body image is portrayed? “The average American sees 3000 advertisements per day and spends 3 years of their life watching TV commercials” (Kilbourne, 2000). Not only does the mass media create the need to be thin and to look a certain way but also then industries, such as the dieting and fashion industry, profit by responding to the “need.” It is a vicious cycle and by making women, and men, feel inadequate they then promote the idea that dieting will make you thinner and more content with your life (Ogden, 1992). In my thesis I have gathered research from various sources not only so I can understand a little more clearly why it is I believe that the media affects us but also so other people who read this can too.
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Hypothesis

The ideal body image is shoved in our face all over the place through advertisements and the media. Normal concerns about the way we look have turned into obsessions through the rise of the mass media. “It has been estimated that young women now see more images of outstandingly beautiful women in one day than their mothers saw throughout their entire adolescents (Rogan 1999).” I hypothesize that the media overall has negative affects on body image of women and men, specifically women. The obsession with thinness and achieving this super model look, which only 5% of the female population has (Kilbourne, 2000), can cause women and men to resort to detrimental behaviors such as bulimia and anorexia, obsessive dieting/exercise and hyper-consumption. There are also harmful affects to one’s self-esteem or mental health that can lead to depression, feelings of despair and worthlessness, anomie and the list goes on. So why is it that one in every ten women has an eating disorder? Who profits from the mass media and how men and women’s body image is portrayed? “The average American sees 3000 advertisements per day and spends 3 years of their life watching TV commercials (Kilbourne, 2000).” The messages given to us do not just go in one ear and out the other; advertisements have a plan, one of which is to make us think they have no affect on us. The primary purpose of a business is to increase profits and to make loads of money. In doing so the advertisement company could not care one way or another how they succeed in selling a product. As the audience we learn through the mass media who we are and if not who we are, who we should be. We are brainwashed to think that products can cure our problems, and “ads encourage us to objectify each other and to believe that our most significant relationships are with products (Kilbourne, 1999).”
therefore we buy these things we don’t need. If the mass media was not trying to get us
to buy into their billions of billions of dollars spent on creating the perfect advertisements
then why do advertisement companies hire, “scientists who study the influences of colors,
sounds, and smells on our likelihood of buying (Rushkoff, 1999)?” “Up to 90% of the
female population diets at some point in their lives, but only 16% of the female
population are obese (Ogden, 1992),” therefore should diet. Obviously one business that
is doing well in selling their products is the dieting industry. Not only does the mass
media create the need to be thin and to look a certain way but also then industries, such as
the dieting and fashion industry, profit by responding to the ‘need.’ It is a vicious cycle
that won’t stop at making women feel inadequate but will then promote the idea that
dieting will make you thinner and more content with your life (Ogden, 1992).

Methodology

The problems that the mass media has created touch everyone, regardless of race,
gender, or age. The topic of mass media and body image is becoming a topic of
increasing interest. It is very interesting to me because I have seen people beat
themselves up over and over again from not liking the way they look and contributing the
way they look to reasons why they are single and not ‘happy.’ I think that by writing a
paper on this topic I can better understand what influences us, specifically the media, and
why we let ourselves believe that we are not beautiful enough unless we look like the
body images displayed in the media. I have had a lot of luck gathering data from recent
work done on body image and the media. This paper will look at the topic of body image
and the affects it has on men and women, women in particular through the literature I
found in books, journals and movies in Murray Library, Messiah College. Also I have
used online sources and several magazine advertisements. Furthermore I have conducted seven interviews, four with women and three with men from Messiah College. It was easiest for me to pull from people I know, from different levels of schooling, females and males alike. Therefore, the sample is not random because I felt that people see, in this day and age, a good amount of media be it TV, movies, magazines, billboards, models, etc. I want to see a link between how ‘normal’ people feel about themselves and learn also how the media contributes to that. The interview will consist of 13 questions that will ask the respondents about their body image (Appendix A), how they feel about dieting, exercise, how they perceive others and questions about the media. I have also collected various magazine clippings that have really made me sick and motivated me to write this paper. I think too many times we take what we see at face value and we don’t critique how the images constantly portray women, and men as objects that sell products with their bodies. I could take so many of the images, cover up the ad on the page, and never guess what the advertisement was trying to sell. The magazine clippings I wanted to incorporate into my paper, but in the end I could not figure out how I wanted to. I suppose saying that we need to become more critical of what we see, and not buy into what the ad is ‘selling,’ be it an ‘ideal body,’ or some product that we ‘need,’ is what the magazine clippings taught me. I challenge you when you read this paper to allow yourself to open up to the idea that the media has influenced you and if you are influenced more than you want to be then become critical of what you see and don’t accept it. On the following pages hopefully you will be able to use what you read to benefit and strengthen your understanding of the mass media, it’s tricks to influence, and how you see yourself. I have incorporated literature findings, theories, observations I
have made in my own life and interviews from my peers to guide you through the process of understanding the media and its influences.

Preliminary Findings

In the next few sections of my paper I have broken up in categories what I believe to be the different elements of body image and influences of the media, beginning with three separate studies I came across in my research.

“The Effect of Experimental Presentation of Thin Media Images on Body Satisfaction”

The department of psychology at Kenyon College, March 2001, conducted this research. The thin body ideal is in the media everywhere and researchers want to know how these pressures of society, to be unnaturally thin, affects us. This study specifically looked at females because of the fact they have higher rates of body dissatisfaction and eating disorders than men. Body dissatisfaction was measured after reviewing images from different stimuli: slides, advertisements and commercial clips of thin models, average models, attractive non-models, overweight models or different objects. Furthermore, different numbers of exposure (stimuli) were given to the women, which they call the effect size. The results of the experiment proved the hypothesis true. The women who viewed images of the thin ideal felt more negatively about their body image than the women who were exposed to other stimuli. There was a positive or a consistent body image perception when looking at results from women who had seen the controls, which were anything other than the thin beautiful model. Effect size or the difference of exposure in stimuli, however, didn’t make a difference. Additionally, an interesting fact I read was that some women were given a seven-minute psycho-educational presentation
of media analysis. The women who were educated on the issue, if you will ‘de-
mystified,’ were less likely to compare their bodies and feel negative than the students
who weren’t educated about the ‘ideal.’

“Diet Vs. Shape Content of Popular Male and Female Magazines: A Dose Response
Relationship to the Incidence of Eating Disorders?”

This study, by Arnold E. Anderson was from the International Journal of Eating
Disorders (1990); it looked at magazines, which people defined as either dealing with
“diet” or “shape.” It also looked at both males and females instead of the last study that
dealt with just females. They hypothesized that women tend to have more eating
disorders because magazines targeted towards women promote more ideals of thinness.
The women’s magazine showed 10.5 times as many ads/articles promoting weight loss!

To say the least there was a connection between eating disorders and the amount of
societal pressure for thinness in women. To quote directly from the journal, “this 10-fold
difference in diet-promoting content (women’s magazines) is almost identical to the
difference in the prevalence of females vs. males with eating disorders.”

“Magazine Exposure: Internalization, Self-Objectification, Eating Attitudes, and
Body Satisfaction in Male and Female University Students.”

This was a study in the Canadian Journal of Behavioral Sciences (2001), which looked at
both men and women and how they both have pressures from the media to be thin (for
women) and physically fit (for men). The way in which men and women internalize
these pressures, however, differ. Women are more prone to ‘self-objectification,’
meaning our culture socializes women to internalize an observer’s objective perspective
of their own body. Women tend to feel worthless and powerless if their outward
appearance isn’t up to par. This increases body dissatisfaction, and may lead to eating disorders. On the other hand, when looking at proportions of how many magazines there are targeting women to be thin compared to the number targeted towards men being fit, we see in the results, that men also struggle with self-objectification and similar problems just not as extremely as women do. This ideal is unreachable and is affecting our society. In the next few pages I have backed this hypothesis up even further with literature and videos.

The Unreachable Ideal:

The media presents the male and female bodies quite differently. In our Western society we promote slenderness for men and women; women expecting to be slim and shapely, while men should be slender and muscular. Furthermore, women are seen in the media as underweight and men are more of a standard weight. The fact is, super models have a body type that only 5% of women have but the media makes us feel guilty when we have a different body type. In other words, 95% of women today do not have a supermodel body; most women are pear shaped (Kilbourne, 2000). So why does all of this matter, I mean who cares, right? Wrong, we as a society are affected by this!

We are obsessed with the ideal female beauty and we spend absurd amounts of time and money to achieve this ideal, but we are only let down time and time again because failure is inevitable. We cannot be who we see in magazines and advertisements because these women and men are airbrushed and flawless through the use of computers (Kilbourne, 2002). Additionally, models have no lines, wrinkles, blemishes or pores! Nonetheless, this belief that women are not beautiful unless she is thin or wealthy is a core belief in American Culture, and therefore we are not trying hard enough if we are
not those things (Kilbourne, 2000). We are also told time and time again that thinness can give us success, control, love and a psychologically stable mind (Ogden, 1992). Even Social Psychologists have emphasized the importance of cultural factors in determining what is attractive, demonstrating that the slender ideal is relatively recent and has become thinner over the last few years with the emergence of the (male and female) ‘waif’ model in the 90s (Grogan, 1999). There have also been studies done showing that media does affect us. After viewing these idealized images women and men were documented feeling less good about their bodies. The studies also showed that media figures (fashion models, actors, sportspersons) provide role models for a significant proportion of men and women under forty.

So what are the affects? Well, because failure is inevitable (unless through cosmetic surgery, developing an eating disorder, excessive exercise, or even a combination of the three), we constantly feel ashamed that we can’t measure up. We hope that through losing some weight, buying a different product or wearing a certain clothing brand we will feel better about ourselves. Body dissatisfaction is also evident in adolescents, and kids as young as eight years old! Boys and girls express similar concerns to those voiced by adults in relation to their fear of fat and describe similar body shape ideals to those described by adults, slender for girls and slender but muscular for boys (Ogden, 1999). So, how are women specifically affected?

Women

Two things that stick out in my mind when it comes to women in the media is that they are to be slim, but full-breasted, and women are objects to sell products. First of all, and very important to mention, is that women have always been encouraged to change
their shape and weight to conform to current trends. “Their bodies are like gardens-arenas for constant improvement and resculpting (Grogan, 1999).” As trends change in clothing lines, so do the types of bodies that they are made for. For example, a corset to promote a thin waist, binding women’s feet in Chinese cultures, creating clothes for more voluptuous women (like Marilynn Monroe) or the ‘waif’ look of Kate Moss, who had a very boyish figure. Trends come and go but why do women have to undergo pain to attempt to conform to the current ideal? Feminist Sociologists today in our westernized culture attempt to understand women’s dissatisfaction. They suggest that social pressure on women to strive for the slender, toned body shape that is associated with youth, control and success encourages the objectification of the body and the disproportionate allocation of energies to body maintenance (Grogan, 1999). For example: eating disorders, excessive exercise, fad diets, cosmetic surgery, etc.

Silhouette studies have also found links between body satisfaction and self-esteem. First of all, a silhouette study is when women or men are presented with several different ‘silhouettes,’ of the body and then have to choose which represents them the best. Most women are dissatisfied with their stomachs, hips and thighs, and when asked to pick out a figure from the silhouettes that matched their body size women always chose a heavier figure. Furthermore, after choosing figures that are actually bigger than what they really were, the majority picked a thinner body type for what they feel men would like and then an even thinner ideal for what they would want to be! On a more positive note, body dissatisfaction with age did not appear to get worse, but the ideals they chose for themselves did become heavier (more in line with actual body size). In saying all of this I am hoping to show that images in the media do have affects on how
we see ourselves and how we feel we need to be because in our society we have linked this ideal beauty to success practically in every area of our lives.

Lastly, women’s bodies are displayed to sell anything from watches to perfume. In a lot of advertisements I have seen fragmentation of women’s bodies. In other words we will just see a woman’s buttocks, breasts, legs or stomach. By dismembering women they are dehumanized. It’s the dismembering, turning women into fetish’s and objects for men to look at that sometimes makes women seem like they enjoy to be displayed. In our society we are so used to it. In a way I think society feels they can control women and they even might become victims of extreme violence including sexual and domestic abuse. When magazines and the mass media turn women into objects it is telling society that we accept violent behavior towards women. “Advertising Age Editorial, 1991 says, ‘clearly it’s time to wipe out sexism in beer ads; for the brewers and their agencies to wake up and join the rest of America in realizing that sexism, sexual harassment, and the cultural portrayal of women in advertising are inextricably linked,’ we are selling more than products but a way to treat women (Kilbourne, 2000).”

Men

Not only are women being objectified and told how to look and act through the mass media but men are affected as well. This should not be a way of equalizing what is happening to women, but a wake up call that if we don’t put an end to the way men and women are portrayed in the media things will only continue to get worse. In a movie I watched called, Tough Guise, by Jason Katz, he focused on the inextricable link between males, masculinity and violence. I thought that this was important enough to put in my paper because the media is connecting this image of toughness to men in order for them
to be real ‘men.’ First and foremost men are pressured to put on a front. They have to wear a mask because in order to be a ‘real man,’ they have to be physical, strong, rugged, powerful, athletic, and tough and the list goes on (Katz, 1999). If men are not these things they are called names such as pussy, fag, bitch, girly, wimp, queer, sissy, mommas boy, girly boy, etc. Why do we as a society create this pressure to conform to such narrow boxes when we are also encouraged to be individuals and think for ourselves? In the media, power that is linked to masculinity is also inextricably linked to violence, like I said earlier. Jason Katz says that this might be one reason why tough guys are violent towards women and other men. In normalizing this behavior we accept it. Some interesting statistics Katz gave in his movie are that:

- Men cause 95% of serious domestic violence.
- Men commit 85% of murder.
- Men commit 90% of assault.
- Men commit 95% of serious domestic violence.
- Men commit 95% of dating violence.
- Men commit 85-95% of child abuse.
- 99.8% in prison for rape are men and 1 in 4 men will abuse their partner (Katz, 1999).

Men are also starting to feel pressure to look a certain way as well. A lot of men feel pressure to be tall, thin and fit. The ideal for men is to be thin and ‘moderately (not too big, not too small) muscular.’ The differences between men and women in the media are that men are getting bigger and women are getting smaller. Men are not pressured into the thin ideal that women are; however, they cannot be too skinny or too big.
Furthermore, the main areas I read about that produce dissatisfaction the most in men are the mid torso (stomach, mid-back), biceps shoulders, chest and the general muscle tone (Grogan, 1999). In a study done of British and American men, muscle tone and muscle mass were important. All of these attributes again are contributed to being in control, healthy, confident and therefore having success in other areas of life.

An additional difference is how men perceive what they see. A man’s weight has little effect on their body image, which does not affect his self-image as much as it does a woman. One man said in a book I read called “Fat Chance,” by Jane Ogden that “although I would like to be lighter I don’t get depressed about it, I’m more concerned about being fit since there are so many other qualities related to my attractiveness. If I lost weight I wouldn’t feel any more attractive, I would simply feel lighter (1992).” Another male interviewee even admitted, “men’s attractiveness is to do with character and personality, women’s attractiveness is far more to do with physical appearance (Ogden, 1992).” As you can see body image still is being pushed more on women than men, however changing ever so slightly. In other words, women internalize how they perceive themselves more so than men to the point of affecting their body image.

More and more research is being conducted now with men and the affects of media because men are present more in the media. Men’s appearance is taking a stronger role and work on men’s body satisfaction has suggested that a significant proportion of men are dissatisfied with some aspect of their body shape and weight. Grogan also says in her book that, “there is some evidence that men become less satisfied as they become older, although the gender differential is maintained throughout the lifespan (Grogan, 1999).” So where do men and women go from here and what are the trends? The one’s
who have time and are seriously affected by what they see may turn to eating disorders, fad diets, cosmetic surgery, exercise, body building, and the list goes on.

Solving the “Problem”

One answer presented to the public is dieting. There are cues targeting women especially in the media to diet. The messages sent through the media are also full of contradictions. For example, I would like to share some lines from Jean Kilbourne’s movie, *Slim Hopes*:

- “Lose weight and how to make a ten minute cake.”
- “Lost myself completely (shown while a woman is eating ice cream, demonstrating she was not in control).”
- “Being Naughty (another woman eating desert).”
- “He eats a brownie… you eat a rice cake, he eats a juicy burger…you eat a low fat entrée, he eats pizza…you eat pizza, finally life is fair.”

All of these ads suggest that a woman needs to eat less, or if she is eating something it is related to sin or being out of control. Good girls are the girls who don’t eat and a good girl is a thin girl. A woman who is in control is thin therefore good (Kilbourne, 2002). These messages are perpetuated and are encouraged by ads for dieting. Up to 90% of the female population diet at some point in their lives; very few lose weight and even fewer maintain any weight loss, why is this? To let a few of you in on a little dieting fact, for a large majority of women it does not work and later on I’ll tell you why. Dieting and overeating becomes a vicious cycle; we binge then we starve ourselves (Ogden, 1992). Theorists and psychologists are trying to understand the basis for our cultural obsession with dieting.
"Psychologists working within a biological framework have stressed the healthiness of the slender ideal; however, there is evidence that being slightly overweight may have health benefits for women and that being very thin may impact negatively on health (Grogan, 1999)." The health problems and the unlikelihood that diets will lead to a long-term weight loss have failed to be mentioned by the dieting industry. There are also anti-dieting lobbyist who are trying to promote the dangers of dieting and hopefully in doing this reduce the power of the diet industry. It is not going to be easy to fight against the media who has so far successfully convinced millions of American’s, women significantly, that they are overweight, never good enough, and always needing to drop a few pounds. "In a recent study done, regardless of actual weight all women studied when asked overestimated their actual body size by up to 10% (Ogden, 1992)." Additionally, 11.3% or 1 in 10 women have a serious eating disorder, 80% of girls 10 years and older are on diets. And, what the public is not being told is how dieting can cause irreversible damage such as osteoporosis and that for models to look like they do they develop eating disorders and take different dieting pills (Kilbourne, 2002). Body concern is not just restricted to woman with eating disorders either but also a significant proportion of women with no history of such a problem.

A second trend is to replace dieting with exercise, as the socially acceptable means to the slender ideal. In my research it shows time and again that men tend to use exercise (rather than diet) to try and change their bodies. In a questionnaire study done mentioned by Sarah Grogan in her book Body Image, 65% of British men and 41% of American men college age reported they exercise specifically to improve body shape and size (Grogan, 1999). Men are also more prone to compare their bodies to other men at
the gym, which is a way they are encouraged to train harder. Some even chose to increase their muscles to achieve a certain look they have seen through the use of steroids, speeding up the process. On the other hand, most men reported not exercising and not dieting to be like actors because again men are not targeted as severely to change their outward appearance as much as women. Men who body build were an exception however, “reporting that unfavorable comparisons with media images of highly muscled men often resulted in increases in weight training as they try to become more like their role models (Grogan, 1999).” Men and women varying in how they deal with diet and exercise does not surprise me because of the fact that the idealization of female beauty is so much more dominant in the mass media. Dieting plans and going to the gym are two of the many ways we succumb to in attempt change our outside appearance to match that of the ideal. I would like to take this one step further and talk more about the myths and stigmas attached to being overweight.

Myths of being ‘overweight’

In the media when an ‘overweight’ person is shown (if they are even shown) they are portrayed in a certain light. Someone who is generally depicted as overweight is unattractive, unsuccessful, unhealthy, lazy, and of course not in a successful relationship. There are also other stereotypes attached such as you might see an overweight person as bubbly and/or jolly. With this portrayal it’s hard not to want to be thin and beautiful because who wants to be seen as those stereotypes that I have just listed. We need to start changing this language we attach to someone who is not the ‘ideal’ body type. Constantly in the media overweight people are picked on, looked at with disgust and given a horrible image. Again we compare thin people to overweight people by saying
that thin people are successful, attractive, sexy and have self-control opposed to overweight people who are ‘failed dieters’ who are weak-willed (they give in too easily to high calorie foods) (Ogden, 1992). Even if someone who is overweight goes to work out, according to Shelley Bovey, who studied overweight people going to exercise, “exercise is made difficult for people who are overweight by other people’s reaction to them (Grogan, 1999).” It is basically a lose, lose situation, if you don’t exercise you’re unattractive, if you do exercise you are looked at funny, making no one want to exercise and therefore failing.

The myths that overweight people eat too much is proven to be false. There is ample evidence from psychology and sociology sources that overweight people do not eat more than thin people. For instance, in 18 out of 19 studies done on the amount (how much) that people ate, overweight people ate less than, or the same amount, as people who were of ‘normal’ weight or thin for their size (Grogan, 1999). Another thing that we are not told is that exercise is not a very affective way to lose weight or should I say that it is hard for people at their ‘normal’ and healthy body weight to lose the 10 to 20 pounds to achieve the ‘ideal.’ Contrary to belief, not only are few calories burned with vigorous exercise (when there is no change to diet), but the lack of exercise by overweight and thin people show that only a very small percentage actually become obese. In other words, to contribute being overweight to the lack of exercise is not necessarily true. Some research argues obesity is genetic and other research done in a study by Andrew Prentice shows that only about 25% of obesity is caused by genetics. Prentice argues that a person will become obese on a high fat diet and a sedentary lifestyle (Grogan, 1999). The set point theory suggests that each individual has a natural, healthy set point (or range) for body
weight, the metabolism changes to maintain the range of weights, no matter how much you eat. In other words, if you were to partake in a fad diet where you ate only fruits and your body is not getting the other nutrients it needs it will go into starvation mode and store everything in your body as fat to maintain your ‘set point.’ Another example is self-starvation, which will eventually lower your body’s metabolic rate, storing fat, leading to an increase of weight gain when you start eating again. In the long run the ups and downs your body takes is unhealthy. Lastly, those who diet are not necessarily overweight but they perceive themselves as fat, the ideal shape is so far below average shape that most women are left feeling fat and desire to be thinner and in actuality only 16% of the female population are obese (Ogden, 1992). So, if dieting and exercise are pointless then why are we put in a position to believe that we need to diet; who is benefiting from it?

**Business and Industry**

The fact is this, if the dieting industry aimed at the 16% who are actually obese and in need of dieting the industry would have a very small membership and would not make much profit. This is why the mass media has created a need. Magazines not only publish success stories and tell of women who have dieted and how happy they are now, but then out of creating the ‘need’ to be thin they encourage and perpetuate the ‘need’ by selling their products (Ogden, 1992). Plastic surgeons are making billions with cosmetic surgery, breast augmentations, botox, you name it, and they create some sort of paranoia and then the solution to having an ideal body image. In addition, maybe a woman doesn’t want to go as far as changing herself through surgery but maybe through her
makeup, hairstyle or clothing brand (fashion industry). What we think we need has been created for a business to profit from our insecurities.

In 1979 $20 billion dollars was spent on advertising and now today $180 billion. Advertising, as one advert company says is, “in your face all over the place.” So, what do advertisements do? They tell women that the most important thing about us is the way we look (Kilbourne, 2000). In Douglass Rushkoff’s book *Coercion*, he argues that advertisements are a type of coercion and if they work according to plan, we don’t even realize we are being compelled. I’m sure if you ask a friend if they think an ad can coerce them into buying something they most likely will say it has little or no affect on them or their decisions. This is a danger because it shows us that years of research directed on methods of influencing human behavior and studying the likelihood of someone to buy something has paid off (Rushkoff, 1999). Jean Kilbourne also agrees with Rushkoff. In her book *Can’t Buy My Love*; she says that one huge reason why advertising works best is because we don’t think it works. Advertisements obviously don’t make the choice for us to buy what is being sold, but they definitely create the environment in which hyper-consumption is reinforced. “Advertising corrupts relationships and then offers us products, both as solace and as substitutes for the intimate human connection we all long for and need. People turn into objects. Women’s bodies, and men’s, are dismembered, packaged and used to sell everything from chains saws to chewing gum (Kilbourne, 1999).”

Advertisers are trying to develop new sorts of programming tricks that will work in the new postmodern mediascope environment. One way of doing this is branding products. This actually started as early as the 1800s. In the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, when
Americans turned to movies and television, advertisers turned from describing their products to creating images for them (Rushkoff, 1999) and throwing a beautiful man or woman in the advertisement never hurt sales. This day and age brand names on clothing is very important and also give us status. In my opinion we are only striving to become like others, but Rushkoff described it as a way to ‘differentiate’ or show a higher status by having better bodies, clothes, hairstyle or makeup. So how are we suppose to stop the direction of self-dissatisfaction we are moving in? We are unable to achieve this aesthetically beautiful outward appearance that apparently is inextricably linked to our successfullness as a human being. I have found answers I discovered helpful, and hope are for you too, but first I would like to look at the way in which different theorists/theories can be applied to body image and the affects of the media.

**Applied Theories:**

This section of my paper will be looking at different theories that I have found extremely helpful in defining sociologically why and how media affects body image.

**Leon Festinger’s social comparison theory** states that we as individuals want to know how we are doing as a whole, compared others. We do this through environmental factors such as taking a test or running a race, or we compare ourselves to others like us and if there is no one like us around to compare ourselves to we turn to people different than ourselves. I feel strongly that this theory applies to the affect the mass media has on body image. Not only do women and men, women especially, view thousands of ads each year but they internalize them. In other words, what we see through advertisements on television and in the movies is what we feel we need to be. For example, women feel they need to be extremely thin; therefore, they use dieting or might even have an eating
disorder while men have to be muscular and masculine meaning they need to be aggressive, assertive, which in some cases turns into violence. If women are not thin they feel they have failed according to what society is telling a woman, being thin precedes control, love, happiness, success and the list goes on. We compare ourselves to how the mass media portrays our body image and if we don’t match up we feel inadequate and try to change the way we look, dress and act to mirror what we see.

**Charles Horton Cooley** had a pretty similar idea to Festinger. Cooley’s *Looking Glass Self Theory* states that we use others as mirrors to assess who we are and how we’re doing. This theory is more of a face-to-face comparison in my opinion because it is described that we compare by looking into someone’s eyes, observing their body language and listening to their words. The mass media isn’t the only institution that perpetuates this ideal body image we desire to have. Our families and peers do enough ‘constructive criticism’ to leave us feeling worthless and not good enough by perpetuating what they see as ‘normal’ in the media. Later on in the paper I will mention that once young girls reach adolescents there is a likelihood of a decrease in self-esteem and higher tendencies of depression. I think this is because at this age girls start to become a little bit more cynical and materialistic, looking up to super models and Hollywood’s actresses as their role models. As adolescent cliques start to form in school, a young girl may not be in the popular crowd because of the way she dresses or maybe she is a little bit chubbier. The girl will look at herself in the mirror negatively until she sees what the other popular girls look like, therefore, mirroring the other girls.

**George Herbert Mead** is great in telling us how we compare ourselves to others, like Cooley and Festinger. The *generalized other* was a big theory that can be tied into
my hypothesis on why the media can influence us so much to want to change ourselves. The generalized other is the attitude of the entire community or the entire ‘team, clique, group,’ that you play a role in day to day. Everyone wants to know how they compare to others; at least I do because we are socialized to value other people’s opinions of ourselves from the point of view of the community. In further words, if we did not have the media to compare ourselves to or know what the ‘ideal body’ was then there would be a wider range of acceptability. In school the chubby little girl might not be picked on as much. Additionally, women would have less pressure to look thin and physically attractive because it would not matter, the same is true for men. The pressures of the media would diminish our insecurities. However, I’m not saying we would not compare ourselves to our peers or people physically around us, but I think the ‘me’ or the conformist aspect of self would feel more comfortable in our own skin if it were not for the media.

A stigma is created by not being comfortable in our own skin because we believe we do not compare and others look down on us. In Ritzer it explains that Erving Goffman, another theorist, feels “when individuals interact, they want to present a certain sense of self that will be accepted by others (Ritzer, 2003).” A good example of this is our level of ‘attractiveness,’ which is based a lot of the time in our society as the outward appearance of a person. I think that a lot of what makes people attractive is their personality, without that the person becomes unattractive. On the other hand, because society ties attractiveness with being thin and having a certain amount of wealth a lot of people in our culture won’t give someone who is ‘unattractive’ or not the standard of beauty, the ‘ideal,’ the time of day. There is a stigma attached. A stigma is “a gap
between virtual and actual social identity; virtual social identity meaning what a person ought to be (what the media says is the ‘ideal body image’), and actual social identity meaning what a person actually is, which would be someone who is overweight or not muscular enough (Ritzer, 2003).” In our culture where we are socialized into being or wanting to look a certain way we become paranoid that we will become a stigma, maybe an extra few pounds more than the ‘ideal.’ Often this occurs when we feed into all the ‘solutions’ that industries/businesses have so conveniently come up with to solve our paranoia in becoming a stigma.

Stigmas are learned, which I feel relates to Alfred Shultz’s concept of **typifications**. Typifications, good or bad, are the generalizations we make when we see a ‘thin’ person opposed to an ‘overweight’ person. First of all, typifications are categories limited in number that we use to try to pigeonhole people, we try to assume what they are like from their outside appearance. The westernized society we live in has stigmatized being overweight as someone who is lazy, unattractive, unsuccessful, unhealthy, or someone who is bubbly and/or jolly. On the other hand, someone ‘thin’ is beautiful, successful, attractive, motivated, active, healthy, etc. Obviously being thin is meaningful in our social world because it is what we see most of the time as the ideal body image in the media. There are other contributions to the pressures of being thin like our families and peers, but the media also culturally and socially influences them.

The media connects all parts of the world and in the United States helps to normalize judgments. **Michael Foucault**’s concept of **normalizing judgments** explains how the mass media holds extreme amounts of power over our society and it reaches all corners of the world; we cannot escape it. The mass media doesn’t just include television
and movies but also billboards, magazines, literature, labels, and the list goes on. To say we are not affected by the messages and symbols from the media would be a lie. This is why the mass media, if in the wrong hands, can do some serious damage and in my opinion already has. Normalizing judgments is one way we can use the media negatively. Not only does media portray men and women’s bodies in a certain way but it shows distinct ways men and women should act and the relationships between men and women. “Those in power can decide what is normal and what is abnormal on a variety of dimensions. Those who violate the norms, who are judged abnormal, can then be punished by officials or agents” (Ritzer, 2003). This theory explains the way in which those in power can use the media to normalize behaviors. For example, it is very normal to see men in aggressive roles, using weaponry, being in authoritative or dominant positions, that it comes to the point where we think as a society this is the way things are supposed to be. It is hard in these cases to think outside the box; that things could be different since we are the ones who have constructed these roles.

We have a choice to either buy into what we see or to think outside the box, but so many people end up buying into products being sold. Women are targeted more over men and to me seem to go to the ends of the earth to achieve the ‘ideal’ that is implied everywhere. There are new procedures coming out everywhere to make women ‘beautiful’ and because there has been this need created, industries have started to lose control, which Anthony Giddens has described in his theory of the Juggernaut. Giddens says that human creations may seem worthwhile but can turn out to be disastrous, such as cosmetic surgery, dieting plans, gastroeas bypass surgery, breast augmentation, liposuction, botox and fad diets like Fen Phen. For example, Fen Phen, “a
weight control drug that was very popular for a while was taken off the market when it was learned that many who took it developed heart valve problems (Ritzer, 2003).” What seems so worthwhile to women and some men are presented to the public to sound logical and reasonable, but they are not! A lot of self-conscious women and men are buying into the cosmetic, dieting, and fashion industry, feeding into this machine, which is growing and getting out of control. I can argue using Giddens theory that fad diets might show great results, however only, temporarily and in the long run may cause great dangers. Another example is steroids and how men specifically are prone to use this drug. They see the result of huge muscles, but the affects in the long run on the body are unhealthy. All these things mentioned to become ‘beautiful’ are presented to the public positively, but we need to uncover the lies that industries give to us in order to prevent some of the unhealthy tolls our bodies take.

Results seen are only temporary, as mentioned above. I think the key word here is ‘seen’ because isn’t this why we consume? We want other people to look at us and ‘see’ what we have achieved. In doing a lot of my research with theorists and how they apply to my topic I feel Jean Baudrillard has hit the nail right on the head. Baudrillard looks at consumption as a language. In other words, a lot of people buy into the products presented to them through the media, such as dieting, cosmetics, popular clothing brands because it serves to define who we are. For example, why would one person buy Tommy Hilfiger as opposed to the much cheaper Wal-Mart clothes, or get a certain hairstyle or plastic surgery? Part of it may be to make ourselves happy, but we are made to think that a product with create happiness so business can get money. Actors and actresses are defined a lot by how they look, what clothes to wear, how many houses
they own, what kind of car they drive, who they are dating, and how beautiful that person is. The media is the main presenter of how our culture learns to behave. We learn through what we see, we consume in order to be ‘different’ when really in my opinion everyone is consuming or wanting to consume the same things so in reality they are becoming similar. Baudrillard tells us “we end up needing what the code tells us we need. A code is a system of rules that allow us to understand signs and, more importantly, how they relate to one another (Ritzer 2003).” Some people like the actors I talked about above can afford to be ‘beautiful’ which in the stratification system act to keep people in their place within the system. If actors and models did not have all the things they do and look the way they look then society would not be fed to think that they too have to strive to achieve that certain look or lifestyle, thus all of the industries I’ve talked about would go out of business. Furthermore, the code implies that consuming a certain way communicates to others what we are ‘saying,’ because everyone knows the code and understands the meaning of signs. Baudrillard talks about ‘needs’ and how our individual need exists, again because the code needs them to exist. “Specific capitalistic organizations must try to convince people to be active and regular consumers of their productions (Ritzer, 2003),” which advertisements then lure us into buying things, much of which people cannot afford and may go into debt to acquire.

Simulations and hyperrealism are two other concepts of Baudrillard. In trying to achieve this ‘ideal body’ that is so nicely displayed everywhere the public is hidden from behind the scenes. In other words, through computer buffing, applications of makeup, hairstylists, cosmetic surgery, people in movies, magazines and TV are fakes! They are hyper-real, simulated and more real than real, more beautiful than beautiful, as a
result we cannot achieve what we see. All the products we buy into are not going to change that. Our society needs to push for this realization and accept more ‘normal’ and achievable body images.

Like Baudrillard, Thorstein Veblen in his theories of business and industry attempts to reveal that consumption is there to benefit and feed into the dominant interests. The dominant interests are, “acquisition, money and profitability, rather than production (Ritzer, 2003).” Our ‘needs’ too, are mostly the consumption of a variety of goods, not for subsistence but for higher status for those who consume them. This conspicuous consumption theory of Veblen creates distinctions between people. Again, why do we buy expensive clothing, or have cosmetic surgery, or diet? We are defining ourselves because we have learned this is what is found attractive as expensive as it gets.

Meanwhile, everyone cannot achieve what the mass media says we ‘need.’ In other words, by applying Emile Durkheim’s theory of anomie, I find that through the mass media what it is we need to look like and how we have to act is engrained in our society so much that people who can’t obtain what is being asked of them become disconnected. Some people cannot physically look like a supermodel, some men can’t gain the authority and respect supposedly inextricably linked to being masculine and some people cannot afford the appropriate clothing; so what happens when society tries to put us into a box that we don’t fit into? Anomie is this sense of chaos and normlessness that many people feel when they can’t be who society wants them to be or act the way they are ‘supposed to act.’ As a result many people go into deep depressions, develop eating disorders, lash out angrily/violently or maybe even commit suicide. I
know these are extreme cases but they do happen and I think we have to be sensitive as well to other people and what they are feeling and how the media affects them.

Lastly, Karl Marx’s theory of alienation describes another way in which someone might feel because of not being able to achieve the ‘ideal body.’ Marx says that being so involved as consumers we separate ourselves from relationships and our surroundings that can alienate us. Additionally, alienation as defined by Ritzer is “the breakdown of, the separation from, the natural interconnection between people and their productive activities, the products they produce, the fellow workers with whom they produce those things, and with what they are potentially capable of becoming (Ritzer, 2003).” If I apply what Marx says about alienation to the mass media we find that as consumers we become so wrapped up in ‘needing’ products that we lose connection with the reason why we need things such as a Benz instead of a Ford. In other words women think they need to be thin to be happy, they need to wear makeup to be beautiful, and they need designer clothes to feel superior to others. This leads into false consciousness that tells us that we are getting what we need from the products being sold to us, but in actuality through advertisements the need is created and then fulfilled by producers. Unless we as a society start to become media literate we cannot achieve a class-consciousness that can reveal to us what we actually need and not something that our capitalistic society created just to be sold for profit.

Where do we go from here?

Looking at theories we can easily explain from a sociological standpoint how to understand body image, the media and everything else it entails. However, what are we suppose to do right now to dismantle the control of the mass media? First of all, we need
to become critical viewers. In this I mean that we rarely look at an advertisement of a beautiful woman or man and say, “oh with a computer her complexion was cleaned up, chin trimmed, eye lines softened and neck lines removed (Kilbourne, 2000).” On the other hand, if people were educated in learning the art of manipulation used by the media we can demystify the techniques that advertisers use to fool us, creating a problem for future advertising (Rushkoff, 1999). Mandating media literacy as a part of public school curriculum may also be a way to help the younger generations understand the unrealistic ideal presented to them through the media. It is interesting to note that in 1999 at least, when Rushkoff wrote his book *Coercion*, the United States was actually the only developed nation in the world that did not have media literacy. This, in my opinion, can contribute to our cultural acceptance in objectifying the body, encouragement of dieting, and buying products that are made to ‘solve’ these problems. Overall, advertising affects us whether we like to admit it or not. Advertising shows us what we lack and need as well as our correct gender roles and gender relationships. The public needs to understand that these things are not innate or biological but culturally produced and reproduced (Heinecken, 2002).

Dieting and exercise are important; I believe to maintain a good health. I think, however, there has been an obsession placed on us to over-diet and over-exercise. When we start to become wrapped up in our appearance we diet and exercise for the wrong reasons, which is to meet the expectations society has placed on us in order to be ‘ideal.’ A lot of dieting and exercise is about personal control beliefs and self-esteem, which are very closely linked to body satisfaction. Some short-term solutions to improve body satisfaction, research suggests is assertiveness training. In other words to raise self-
esteem and perceptions of control there are discussions of strategies for improving body image, which may increase body satisfaction (Grogan, 1999). Fad diets, diet pills, self-starvation, eating disorders, only take an unhealthy toll on your body, and never give you long term results that are sometimes advertised (when it comes to different diet plans especially). It is very important again to be healthy, but when asked, the majority of men and women said they diet and exercise for aesthetic purposes only, to look 'thin' or 'not too thin/not too muscular,' for men.

In the long term, Sarah Grogan says cultural changes in the objectification of the female body and the male body and the discouragement of dieting, would be likely to impact positively on the experiences of all women and men prone to eating disorders and chronic dieting in particular. Women have had to change their bodies year after year to fit the mold of what is 'fashionable,' and, 'ideal.' Why can't there ever be a time when all women's and men's bodies are accepted the way they are? Women are aware too that models are too thin and people in the media are unnaturally thin, however, they mention still that they would 'kill' for a body like that. We are made to always want more and feel we are never good enough the way we are. It is a start though that women are critical of the narrow range of body shapes presented in the media (being unrealistic and unhealthy). Women need to get angry at the ways in which they perceive the media (in particular the fashion industry), which manipulates how they feel by setting up unrealistic ideals. So what should we do as a society to change the images?

Sandra Bartkly, who promotes the development of the new aesthetic of the female body, feel women should fight to broaden the limits of acceptable body shape and size
(Grogan, 1999). A few other things we can do ourselves and remember, suggested by the National Eating Disorder Association are as follow:

1. Find a method of exercise that you enjoy and do it regularly. Don’t exercise to lose weight or to fight your body. Do it to make your body healthy and strong and because it makes you feel good.

2. Eat what you want, when you are truly hungry. Stop when you’re full. And eat exactly what appeals to you. Do this instead of any diet, and you’re likely to maintain a healthy weight and avoid eating disorders.

3. Remember that all media images and messages are constructions. They are NOT reflections of reality. Advertisements and other media messages have been carefully crafted with intent to send a very specific message.

4. Remember advertisements are created to do one thing: convince you to buy or support a specific product or service.

5. Choose a filter that protects your self-esteem and body image. Choose whether you want to think or believe that message.

6. Make a list of companies who consistently send negative messages and make a conscious effort to avoid buying their products. Tear out the pages of your magazine that contain advertisements or articles that glorify thinness or degrade people of larger size.

7. Celebrate and appreciate your natural shape and body and understand that a person’s physical appearance says very little about their character and value as a person.
8. Be proud and accepting of your unique body and refuse to spend an unreasonable amount of time worrying about food, weight and calories.

9. Remember that we may all have our days when we feel awkward or uncomfortable in our bodies, but the key to developing positive body image is to recognize and respect our natural shape and learn to overpower those negative thoughts and feelings with positive, affirming and accepting ones.

10. Lastly, it is important to remember that every body is different. We all have different genetics. Even if everyone started eating the same things and did the same amount of exercise for a whole year, we would not all look the same at the end of the year. This is because each person’s genetics influence his or her bone structure, body size, shape, and weight differently.

Findings and Conclusions

In this section I wanted to try to understand where I fit into my research and what I have observed from friends, family and co-workers when it comes to influences that the media has had on their body images. Also, this is where I have given my results and findings from the seven interviews I conducted. (Interview questions found in Appendix A)

My Experiences

I want this section to be about more of my personal experience dealing with the issues of my paper. It will also be a little peek at some observations I have made as a sister, student and a co-worker. In closing this section I would like to share a general
overview of results I obtained through asking interview questions pertaining to body image and the media.

Another day, I wake up, shower, and start the process of what it is, I feel, to be a woman. First, apply the makeup; creams, foundation, powder, mascara, eyeliner, eye shadow. Second, fix the hair. I think about how to wear it, up, down, maybe just pull half of it back; blow dry, curling iron, hair pomade and maybe some hairspray. Third, choose the outfit. I definitely can’t wear something within the same week, maybe jeans because they are not as easy to point out that I have worn them several times in one week. I’m not sure how this stigma was attached that wearing the same thing within the same week, but I think it has to do with showing people your massive and stylish wardrobe. The outfit is picked and I head out to class. As a girl I think it is only normal to stare down other girls and what they are wearing, how they look and see how I measure up in comparison. *Oh that hat was really cute; maybe I should cut my hair like that or let it grow out. That shirt and those capris man I need to go shopping!* These are the inner thoughts, of maybe just me, but I think of other females. What makes us obsess and always want to be ‘better,’ better meaning looking good. I head home after class, think about what to eat, and I really think about it, I’m annoyed. I really don’t want to care about the food I put in my mouth, I figure it really doesn’t matter, but that’s not what I hear. I need to be thin to be attractive, successful, beautiful, etc. I had my lunch and then decided to go on my daily run. I headed back to campus and up to the indoor track where you find treadmills, ellipticals, bicycles, and 95% of the gym consisting of females. I recognize that most all of the girls are sweating, working hard, and probably thinking about being skinnier, again they will most likely be happier if they lose those ten pounds.
So, why is it that I continue to buy into the things I know are scams, scams that fashion, cosmetic, and dieting industries profit from? Because I have bought into it, I am part of this culture and like a drug it is really hard to cut myself off from all of it.

I am a woman who is 5'5 and 120 pounds. I constantly carry with me some type of body image, how I look, how others see me and whether or not I am ideally beautiful. It is actually a constant battle that I fight every day. I am not just sharing these things about my life because it supports my thesis but I truthfully struggle with body image. With the media and the advertisements teaching us daily what is beautiful it is not easy to let go of any self-consciousness I might have. Television, magazines, billboards, movies are all constant reminders of how I do not measure up. I have never actually struggled with a severe eating disorder such as bulimia or anorexia nervosa, however, I believe like many woman who are not diagnosed we still have an eating disorder all our own. Not only am I aware of what I put in my mouth when eating something, but I also feel guilty about eating high calorie foods. I try and exercise six out of seven days of the week and if I fail at not fitting the track one of those six days I convince myself that I see my stomach not tone enough or even flabby. I know that these insecurities are not something biological or natural, but it is learned and then encouraged by the media. If I don’t have this ideal body then I feel unattractive, lazy, unsuccessful, not in control and insecure. I buy into foods that are low calorie, make up that will cover up blemishes and clothing that is popular and ‘stylish’ because it is what is being advertised. I get my haircut and styled, sometimes dyed because I don’t want to look ‘boring’ or ‘unkempt.’ I feel trapped literally in my own body sometimes. I want to feel secure and not care about a few pounds that I’ve gained in the ‘wrong’ places, or not obsess over eating a little bit
more than usual or missing a day of exercise. I know there are other women out there who feel this same way, women that are beautiful, attractive and successful and not just because of their looks. Bodies are a beautiful thing that should be celebrated big or small. Why should we mold ourselves into a box that society has created in order to feel good about the way we look when we are also taught to be unique and original individuals? Through my own observations at home, school and work I see women and men struggling with their bodies.

First I would like to talk about my family. I have four brothers and three sisters, who are all wonderful, beautiful and successful people. Our family has always been pretty active, in shape, and never at a weight that could be a threat to our health. Looking at these few facts about my family you would think overall we would have a pretty good outlook on our bodies, but there are problems. All of my sisters, including myself, fight with our body image. My oldest sister and youngest sister have larger builds than me and my other sister; they are healthy and active but still put themselves down and compare their bodies to myself and my other sister because they are not our size. The frustrations I have increase because I know where some of the problems have risen and to tell them they are beautiful no matter what is never enough because they are not the size of an actress or model (who for their profession is to be beautiful). It’s also eye opening to hear stories from my grandmother. During her school years she actually got picked on for being too skinny, instead of now a days we see little kids get picked on because they are chubbier. This just goes to show that the ideal body image is a social construct, a fad that changes over time. Furthermore, I’ve come to the conclusion that even though my grandmother did get teased a little it was never enough to bring her self esteem down.
She shared with me that body image for her was not even a problem and she never worried about the way she looked or compared herself to others. It’s just phenomenal to see the huge leap of the affect of body image from her generation to ours now. I really believe the fact that the media not being such a central part of life and that there was not a television set in everyone’s homes that people were not influenced as much or made to feel physically inadequate as women do today. Lastly, my brothers are distressed about their body image too. The ‘V-shaped’ muscular body image that is now being pushed on men is playing a role in my two younger brothers view of how they should look. My brothers run and exercise for track practices and then go home and lift weights. My youngest brother makes sure he eats extremely healthy foods, is on a very strict diet and he is in no risk whatsoever of becoming overweight; and same goes for my other brother. I’m not saying they are a representation of all males but it is a personal glimpse for me that women are not the only one’s affected by the media and body image but so are men.

The observations I have made at school deal with my roommates, friends and people I see around. My roommates are successful, talented and going somewhere with their lives, but they are single. A few of my friends tend to fall back on the way they look to attribute to why they are not dating anyone. We see constantly on TV the romantic shows and movies that show a beautiful woman getting the attention of the most handsome men. We never see a ‘normal’ looking woman who might not be 5’8, 120 lbs, with long flowing hair, but maybe if we did more women would feel better about themselves and not attribute being single to the way they look. “So I was working out today and I’ve realized that if a guy is running next to me it makes me work harder,” a friend of mine commented the other day. Roommates and friends both always want to
be thinner, "if only I can lose 10 lbs, have a flatter stomach." It makes me infuriated that advertisers have accomplished their goal, to make women feel insecure enough to buy into their products. At work I run into the same comments from my boss. She eats hardly anything, counts any calories she eats, if she eats, and obsesses over any weight gain/loss and also exercising. My boss is so controlled by what she eats that it’s sometimes all she talks about and that’s what happens when you try to stay on a strict diet that is not healthy, it controls your thoughts; which in my opinion makes it harder and you end up binging. These observations are honest and are things I have picked up on these last few months. The next and last section of my paper is the results from my interviews. I was able to talk one on one with seven college peers about how they feel about body image and the media; here are my results.

**Interview Results and Conclusions**

It was pretty difficult to narrow down the number of questions I wanted to ask my peers on my thesis topic. Some of the questions I will be combining the answers to just because the answers given for one questions were pretty similar to another. You will find the questions I asked during the interview in Appendix A and I will also reference to them below.

The women I spoke with were very passionate about the answers given. I cannot speak for them; however, the answers seemed truthful and honest with a little edge of anger at times. Three out of the four women interviewed said, when asked about their overall body image and what they would change if they could, was to lose weight. The ideal shape, which correlated with what I researched, was to be thin, to ‘slenderize’ their waist, hips, but to have breasts and to be able to feel good in a bathing suit.
One interviewee answered, “I could be prettier if I was thinner, I never wanted to be taller or have a different hair color, but to be thin which is ideal, would be nice (Personal Interview, 2).”

A few of the women made comments about how unrealistic it is to try and achieve this ‘ideal’ beauty but to lose weight still overall was important. “If I were bigger I know I would compare myself more,” this was a response I got from my first interviewee. She also said, “it’s hard because someone could be happy with their image, but still doesn’t get the attention from guys that the ‘beautiful’ girls get,” she says her roommate is not ‘ideal’ and even though she tries real hard to change her appearance she does not see the results. She realizes she’ll never be thin, therefore, never the girl guys will want. This message is sent to us so many times through the media; because don’t we always see the beautiful girls win the guy?

Some of the comments I got in reference to exercise, dieting and working out listed below demonstrate that working out is important for aesthetic purposes (to look ideal on the outside).

“I feel very confident when working out because working out makes me feel healthy, however, the driving force is to be thinner (Personal Interview, 2).”

“When I diet it definitely feels good to eat good things and it encourages weight loss (Personal Interview, 3).”

“I don’t usually exercise unless my clothes start fitting weird and when I realize I’m gaining the weight I work out (Personal Interview, 6).”
When I asked the women if they would be upset if they gained some weight most all of them responded calmly saying that if they start to see themselves getting bigger they hit the gym.

One interviewee stated, "Initially when I first see I gained weight I get upset but I just kind of tell myself I need to work on that and go to the gym (Personal Interview, 3)." Furthermore, the number on the scale never mattered much to any of the women; it was more of how they looked in their clothes.

I asked about eating high calorie foods and if there was any guilt that followed, one interviewee answered, "I’m conscious about what I eat, but not to the point where I’ll go to a restaurant and order nothing (Personal Interview, 2)."

Another answered, "it depends, sometimes I’ll feel guilty when I give in during a diet, and then I feel afraid that I’ll fail again and ruin it completely, but sometimes I purposely give myself ‘breaks’ so I can eat desert (Personal Interview, 3)."

The other two women I talked with did not care as much about watching their calorie intake and just brushed it off with a laugh, "a little bit, but not enough to stop me (Personal Interview, 6)."

The fifth question I asked was about if they think or talk about their bodies negatively. Their answers were interesting because they showed how much their opinions of how they see themselves were results of how their families perceived them. One interviewee felt extremely negative about her body image and contributed it to the fact that when she goes home her mom always has something to say about her weight. Growing up she always heard people tell her sister, who was thin, that she was beautiful. Another interviewee had a higher self-image because at home her parents would always
compliment her positively about how she looked so now she generally feels good about herself. On the other hand, her parents compliment her when she looks as though she lost weight or has a nice outfit on, still perpetuating the link between what the media socializes us into valuing as beautiful. Some of the other interviewees commented how they ‘jokingly’ picked on certain ‘flaws’ they had, either jokes about thighs, stomach or buttocks. Moreover, lifting weights was not really of any importance to the women, however, a little bit of ‘tone’ was good if they were motivated enough to lift but, looking like an idiot on the equipment was a concern for some.

When it came to comparing looks the women were very aware of the unrealistic ideal in the media. Additionally, they were more prone to compare theirselves to ‘normal’ people like friends and family. One interviewee stated, “Actresses I see as fake beauty because what you see is not realistic but products of computer retouching (Personal Interview, 3).” Interview three also said that people who are ‘actual real people’ like her mom who lost weight and looks really ‘cute’ give her confidence that she can look that way too.

All the women were in consensus that women in our society have more pressure to look a certain way than men; however, they were not too optimistic about the ‘ideal’ image changing anytime soon. “Yeah it would be really healthy to see more ‘normal’ looking people in the media, but on the other hand its not very practical because the general public is used to seeing gorgeous people and probably wouldn’t be accepting of normal (Personal Interview, 2).” Another woman states, “it’s hard because society wants to see good looking people in movies, but it would be good to accept more average looks (Personal Interview, 6).”
The women were not too hopeful about things changing which was definitely sad. They felt that because our culture has already deemed what is attractive that they cannot do anything about it because the media sets the tone. Some suggestions they did have though were to see more things like the Dove Campaign, with ‘real’ women, however, with that up against America’s Next Top Model and all the other airbrushed, thin models it’s extremely hard to wash the others away. Overall to wrap up, the women were conscious of their body image and felt indirectly the media affects views on how they see themselves because the opinions of friends and family were learned from what we see and eventually hit home. I noticed that they were very aware of the unnatural and unrealistic standard the media has placed for us; however, there is hope even though small that it would start to change in a direction that accepts beauty in all different body types.

The men that I interviewed had slightly different answers than the women to the questions given. Two of the three men mostly saw themselves ‘realistically,’ not bothering to compare themselves to models, actors, etc.

When asked about their body image one man stated, “I have a healthy body image, but if I were to change anything I would want to be a little more muscular and have clearer skin, and five to ten pounds heavier wouldn’t hurt (Personal Interview, 4).” Another commented, “I would like to be in a little more shape and possibly a little less soft (Personal Interview, 5),” pointing to his abs. The tallest and larger stature of the three men commented that he would like to lose weight feeling conscious about being so big.
When asked their reasons for exercise it was mainly to be healthy, have more energy or because it was something enjoyable like a sport. Never did any of the women I interviewed say they exercise because it was enjoyable, but the driving force was always to be thin.

Two of the men when asked about feeling conscious about eating high calorie foods laughed and stated, “a few pounds, I can afford (Personal Interview, 4),” and “ehh, I have gained a few, but if I want I can diet at least (Personal Interview, 5).” The largest of the three, however, felt guilty when he went to food for comfort, seeing a repeated pattern of failing and eating high calorie foods was hard for him because of trying to keep the weight off; “if I’m good the whole day though I can justify eating a treat (Personal Interview, 7).”

As for thinking negatively about themselves or receiving comments two of the men talked about negative feedback from friends regarding clothing or hair. One male interviewee mentioned his ‘fat’ stomach saying, “not like I’m fat, but you know (Personal Interview, 5).” Receiving criticism was tough for Interview 7 who said when he weighed a lot his parents would tell him he needed to lose a few pounds.

Muscle and being tone were of little more importance. The two first men said a little more muscle would be good, but they don’t feel any huge pressure to hit the gym consistently to change that. Interview 4 said about lifting weights, “sure, not heavily, some degree is nice, but not too much because I don’t want to look like ‘them’ (in regard to body builders).” Interview 7, again being of larger stature, is not so much worried about getting bigger by building muscle, instead he would like to be smaller.
In agreement with the women, men felt strongly that women were affected more by the pressures by the media to look thin. They recognized that women’s bodies were seen more in advertisements. One man stated, “It’s easier to be fat and male, women have to compensate a lot with their personality if they are fat (Personal Interview, 7).” Also being a film student he is aware that men who are overweight or not the ‘ideal’ have a lot more opportunities for roles in the media whereas, “women of a certain age are cut off from acting, if they are younger and heavier they most likely won’t have a role, but if they are older and good actresses they can get big parts (Personal Interview, 7).”

Subconsciously the male interviewees know the media does affect them most of the time by wanting to look good in clothes that they buy, but never enough to make them physically want or desire a model or actor’s body. One interviewee commented, “if I’m healthy and in shape I don’t care, I don’t need to be a ‘marathon’ man or anything (Personal Interview, 5).” As for what they think the media can do, again like women, they were not too optimistic about it changing. “It’s good if they do,” interview 4 commented, “it wouldn’t be good advertising though; it won’t be affective, because thin people look good in clothes and an overweight person won’t sell them.” Another interviewee felt it was annoying though when ‘real’ people were used because he felt the advertisers were being overly obvious like, “look aren’t we great we are using ‘normal’ people (Personal Interview, 5),” when in reference to a Dove Campaign, which women I interviewed thought was great.

The higher acceptance of men when it came to their body image was obvious to me when conducting the interviews. Even though some of the men wanted to have a
little more muscle, they were not losing sleep over it and recognized that women are
affected more. It was nice, however, to hear the other side of a man who is considered to
be ‘too big.’ He pointed out some valuable information that as a man you cannot be too
big or too small, but slim and some muscle, but again not too much muscle. The findings
from my interview were consistent with the research I did. It would be interesting if I
had more time to conduct more interviews to see how other people’s body image is
affected from a more random sample.

The moral of the story is we always want what we don’t have which is brilliant
for consumerism and our capitalistic society that will feed off these needs, sometimes
create them, and give us the products and solutions we feel will make us ‘happier.’ We
will never be happy though because like one of my interviewees said, “the media makes
us want things and desire what we don’t have and to be satisfied is completely
against what the media is trying to do (Personal Interview, 3).” This is why we need
to try as individuals to re-create what beauty is and that there is not one ideal body. It’s a
long road yet but a lot can be accomplished by allowing yourself to be more critical and
learn to decipher your needs from what the media tricks us into believing we ‘need.’
Appendix A:

Interview Questions

1. Would you say you have a good body image? Or do you think a few things need to change in your appearance to make you feel better?
2. Why do you exercise or diet? While working out do you ever feel self-conscious?
3. Would you be upset if you gained a few pounds?
4. Do you feel guilty after eating high calorie foods?
5. Do you talk and think negatively about your body? Does anyone around you comment about how you look?
6. Do you think bodybuilding or lifting weights in any degree is important?
7. Do you compare your looks to others? Friends, family, or models?
8. Would you date an overweight person? Would you find them attractive?
9. Who do you feel has more pressure in society to look a certain way, men or women?
10. Do you think the media influences you at all in how you feel about your appearance?
11. Do you feel there needs to be more variety of body types shown in the media?
12. What is your ideal body type and why?
13. What do you think can be done in the media to promote more ‘normal,’ body images?
Bibliography


Interview 1. Interview conducted by Connie Wheeler with a Messiah College Student. April 15, 2006. The Female Adventure Ed Major is 20 years old.

Interview 2. Interview conducted by Connie Wheeler with a Messiah College Student. April 20, 2006. The female Elementary Ed. Major is 21 years old.

Interview 3. Interview conducted by Connie Wheeler with a Messiah College Student. April 20, 2006. The Female Art Major is 22 years old.

Interview 4. Interview conducted by Connie Wheeler with a Messiah College Student. April 20, 2006. The male Communications Major is 20 years old.

Interview 5. Interview conducted by Connie Wheeler with a Messiah College Student. April 20, 2006. The male Communications Major is 21 years old.

Interview 6. Interview conducted by Connie Wheeler with a Messiah College Student. April 20, 2006. The female Elementary Ed. Major is 21 years old.

Interview 7. Interview conducted by Connie Wheeler with a University of Gloucestershire Student studying abroad at Messiah College. April 22, 2006. The male Film Major is 24 years old.


