

Janelle Waite

Professor Smith

ENG 122

22 April 2013

I'm too (Insert negative criticism of yourself here). The media says so.



Imagine you are a mom or dad, and one morning your three-year old daughter tells you that she needs to go on a diet. “My legs are too fat,” she says, “and I need to be like a princess.” Her legs are not fat. She has strong, muscular legs, but because her legs do not look like Barbie’s legs or Cinderella’s legs, she feels the need to be on a diet. Again, she is just three years old. Sadly, this story is real, and it happens all too often.

This little girl is not alone in her struggles with her body image. Stepping on a scale is often described as a terrifying ordeal. Many people have a love/hate relationship with the mirror. We want to see what we look like but, when we look into that mirror, we do not like what we see. In our culture, body dissatisfaction has become very prevalent due in



part to media images. The media as a whole tends to champion an ideal that cannot, and arguably should not, be achieved by the vast majority of the population. With the growing number of people who suffer from negative body image issues in our country, the media needs to take more responsibility for what it is doing to our culture, and make a change to promote positive and healthy lifestyles.



Having a healthy body image is integral to maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Sadly, a large number of people do not have a positive view of themselves. Body dissatisfaction was reviewed in a study conducted for the well-respected journal *Psychology and Health*. The author Professor Verplanken holds a Ph.D. in Psychology and was the Associate

Editor of the journal from 2007-2009. He explains, “Body dissatisfaction is formed by negative thoughts about one’s appearance, for instance thoughts about being dissatisfied with specific parts of the body, or the belief that other people dislike your body” (686). In our culture, this can affect not only women, but also men and even young children. Anyone at any age can struggle with body dissatisfaction, and the numbers for this are high in American culture.

The media has set the standard by inundating all forms of entertainment with unrealistic and/or unhealthy models thus largely contributing to turning people against themselves. Susie Orbach, a Psychotherapist and author of several critically acclaimed books, states in her article “Losing Bodies,” “Pascal Danguin, an artistic retoucher, routinely remakes pictures. In the March 2008 issue of U.S. *Vogue*, for example, he changed 144 images” (392). This retouching often takes the form of trimming off any excess fat on females, such as fat in the arms, thighs, and the waist. At the same time, retouching includes augmenting the size of muscles in men, presenting men with large, muscular arms and six-pack abdominal muscles. The process also allows for the removal of any blemishes on the skin, such as freckles, moles, or acne, and effectively creates the illusion of perfection. In many cases the final product does not accurately reflect the person depicted.

In addition to the technology used to change the people we see in media images, the media often starts with people who do not represent—or even come close—to the average man or woman in our culture. The models themselves are often underweight and would be classified as clinically malnourished by the World Health Organization’s standards. As stated in the article “Adolescents and Eating Disorders,” “The average

American woman weighs one hundred and forty pounds and is five foot four inches tall. In contrast, the typical model is five foot eleven inches tall and weighs one hundred and seventeen pounds, this is blatantly impossible to achieve in a healthy way for ninety five percent of the models currently in the industry” (Trujillo 127). Because these body



weights are impossible for most people to achieve, these models set a precedent that eating disorders are an acceptable way to achieve a desired body weight. Eating disorders

come most commonly in two forms: Anorexia Nervosa, a condition in which a person refrains from eating in order to achieve a desired weight, and Bulimia Nervosa which is characterized by binge eating, and then purging. These disorders are mental in nature and are most commonly seen in women. While the blame for the significant amount of people diagnosed with eating disorders cannot be laid solely at the feet of the media, according to research, the media does have a leading role in propagating the “perfect body” ideal and, therefore, must take some responsibility.

When reviewing the implications of media on body image, it is generally targeting women, but men are being targeted and affected as well. One analysis found that ninety-four percent of women’s magazines displayed a thin female model or celebrity on the cover (Slater et. al). It is not just body shape or weight that is being idolized; it is everything from long necks to thin waists to white teeth. And, thanks to retouching, these images are setting an impossible standard for women. However, new research proves that men are affected by the media in much the same way that women are. An article published in the *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* details a study conducted by a group of Psychologists at well-respected universities. The study focuses



on determining the effects of media images on men’s body image. The results suggest,

“after exposure to muscular media stimuli, male participants had more negative body images” (Bartlett, Vowells, and Saucier 282). The results also showed that “body dissatisfaction and body esteem were both negatively affected, and psychological outcomes (e.g., depression, drug/ steroid use) were likely to be increased, after exposure to muscular stimuli” (282). Muscle mass is “in” right now. Models have changed to reflect this new development, and men are sensitive to the influence of the media’s message to be strong and muscular.

The pressure the media exudes not only affects men and women, but children as well. In some situations the impact is indirect. A young girl watches her mother sigh



when she looks in the mirror. Or perhaps the mother makes derogatory comments about her own body or weight. This type of example could cause the young lady to begin

critically assessing her own body, and to adopt the media’s ideal of beauty. Hayes and Dunn, two distinguished professors of psychology, recently conducted a study to determine how the media ideal is affecting the younger female population their findings were published in an article entitled “Am I Too Fat to Be a Princess? Examining the Effects of Popular Children’s Media on Young Girls’ Body Image.” They established that “Approximately one half of the girls who participated in the study (ages 3-9) reported worrying about being fat sometimes or always.” They also noted, “Recent literature suggests that girls as young as six years old experience body dissatisfaction, and can name at least two things they would change about their bodies if they could.” (Hayes and Dunn 413) This would mean that the media’s message is being internalized by little girls as young as six. Another study, led by Dr. Maria Eisenberg, who is the Chair for Division of Adolescent Health and Medicine of the University of Minnesota, examined the impact

of the media on body perceptions of males between the ages of twelve and seventeen. The results concluded that the increase in the media's portrayal of muscular men has caused a rise in the amount of muscle-enhancing behaviors, including steroid abuse (Eisenberg, Wall, and Neumark-Sztainer 1019). The pressure from the media for boys to be "built" a certain way has steadily increased over the years as evidenced by a study that reviewed a male version of "Barbie Syndrome." This study found that, if the original G.I. Joe, manufactured in the 1960s, is scaled up to human dimensions, the biceps would have a circumference of 11.5 inches, a relatively ordinary size. However, today's "G.I. Joe Extreme" would have a biceps of 26 inches, which the researchers say is larger than that of any known bodybuilder (Wheeler 21). The potential effect of these toys and similar images on the children is quite significant, and with the rise in number of young men who are abusing steroids and reporting dissatisfaction with their bodies, the connection seems logical.

Fortunately, as these problems are on the rise, people are beginning to take note and speak out against the media's unattainable ideal of beauty. One such advocate is fourteen-year old Julia Bluhm. She met with *Seventeen's* editor-in-chief Ann Shoket on May 2, 2012 to discuss the "physically impossible "perfection," screaming out on every glossy page. Julia was able to garner an impressive 30,000 signatures on a petition against digitally enhanced images. While the meeting was widely publicized, *Seventeen* has yet to make a change in how they produce and "artistically enhance" their images (Rhiannon 32). But, others are standing up as well. In their article "Waif Goodbye! Average-Size Female Models Promote Positive Body Image and Appeal to Consumers," Phillipa Diedrichs and Christina Lee, both doctors employed by the Centre for

Appearance Research at the University of West England, recognize the power that consumers have given to mass media. Their research has led them to the conclusion that consumers need to take the power back by demanding what they want (namely more accurate representation of male and female figures). They also champion the idea that it may take more than individuals, and that is where leaders need to get involved. They hail the countries that have called for regulation and changes to media imagery: “These recommendations present an important shift, from the assumption that is the responsibility of every individual consumer of the media to learn how to resist unhealthy images, to the view that the media, fashion, and advertising industries have a responsibility to promote positive body image” (Deidrichs and Lee 1276). Although efforts to regulate the media in this way have failed in the past in the United States, as more people become aware of the seriousness of this issue, it is time they demand legislation to force the fashion and advertising industries to make a change.

In response to the overwhelming amount of research confirming the correlation of negative self-esteem and body dissatisfaction to exposure to media, it is clear our media should step up and do more to change the norm. The media is responsible for propagating the lie that an impossible beauty is a standard every person can and must achieve. The media in the United States should take the lead and promote a new ideal. Doing so could literally save lives.

## Works Cited

- Barlett, Christopher P., Vowels, Christopher L., and Donald A. Saucier. "Meta-Analyses of the Effects of Media Images on Men's Body-Image Concerns." *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 27.3 (2008): Academic Search Complete. Web. 31 March 2013.
- Diedrichs, Phillippa C. and Christine Lee. "Waif Goodbye! Average-Size Female Models Promote Positive Body Image and Appeal to Consumers." *Psychology and Health* 26.10 (2011): Academic Search Complete. Web. 29 March 2013.
- Eisenberg, Maria, Wall, Melanie, and Dianne Neumark-Sztainer. "Muscle-enhancing Behaviors Among Adolescent Girls and Boys." *Pediatrics* 130.6 (2012): Academic Search Complete. Web. 29 March 2013.
- Hayes, Sharon and Stacey Tantleff-Dunn. "Am I Too Fat to Be a Princess? Examining the Effects of Popular Children's Media on the Young Girls' Body Image." *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* 28.4 (2010): Academic Search Complete. Web. 5 April 2013.
- Orbach, Susie. "Losing Bodies." *Social Research* 78.2 (2011): Academic Search Complete. Web. 29 March 2013.
- Verplanken, Bas and Yonne Tangelder. "No Body Is Perfect: The Significance of Habitual Negative Thinking about Appearance for Body Dissatisfaction, Eating Disorder Propensity, Self-esteem and Snacking." *Psychology & Health* 26.6 (2011): Academic Search Complete. Web. 31 March 2013.
- Wheeler, David "Could Boys Get 'Barbie Syndrome'?" *Chronicle of Higher Education* 45.40 (1999): Academic Search Complete. Web. 30 March 2013.

Trujillo, Alyssa E. "Adolescents and Eating Disorders." *Insights to a Changing World*

*Journal* 3.4 (2012): Academic Search Complete. Web. 30 March 2013.