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Writing Process

For this assignment, my English 200H class was asked to research and form an argument surrounding a pertinent issue regarding gender in the United States. The topic I chose to explore was the relationship between women's body image and the growing thin ideal portrayed in the media. Throughout the research process, I compiled an annotated bibliography, conducted original research in the form of a survey, and composed three drafts, two of which were peer edited and one of which received feedback from my professor. I hope my paper brings awareness for the necessity of action regarding this issue in our country today.

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Does This Picture Make Me Look Fat? *

“That gorgeous model has a perfect body. We must hire her to work for us.” “People will surely buy that Carl’s Jr. burger because she is so hot.” “Maybe we should take in her waist just one more inch.” These are just some of the many conversations happening in the media today. Whether it is on television, in magazines, or on billboards, so-called “sexy” women are used as a means to sell products every day in America. However, more often than not, these women are thin to the point where it is unhealthy for them as well as for those viewers who strive to look just like these airbrushed women. Unfortunately, this unrealistic goal often contributes to a decrease in self-esteem and an increase in eating disorders among females of all ages.

No matter the means, females in America are constantly bombarded with images of touched up models, actresses, and celebrities. In watching just one hour long show on television, Americans are exposed to a steady stream of women who appear to be what society claims as perfect. Sadly, this societal view does not simply come to mind and pass right through. Rather, it often remains in the minds of viewers, who begin to cultivate feelings of insufficiency about their bodies.

While many believe the high numbers of women with eating disorders and low body image in America is the result of the American culture, the media plays a major role in developing this culture. In fact, the effect of television, one type of media, is especially evident

when looking at Fiji. In the past, Ellen Goodman, American journalist and Pulitzer Prize winner, describes the people of Fiji as having a rich culture surrounding the importance of food.

Contrary to most Western cultures, the bigger someone was in Fiji prior to the introduction of television, the more beautiful or important that woman was in society because it meant she had the money to keep herself well-nourished. In fact, women even complimented one another when they gained weight. However, this all changed when television came to Fiji in 1995. In just 38 months, Goodman claims “the number of teens at risk for eating disorders more than doubled to 29 percent. The number of high school girls who vomited for weight control went up five times... (and) 74 percent of the Fiji teens in the study said they felt ‘too big or too fat’ at least some of the time” (79). If the Fijian teens, who grew up prior to exposure to television in a culture that praised being heavier weight, developed these behaviors and attitudes in just 3 years, one can only imagine how much more at risk American teens are, as these adolescents have experienced the joys and pains of television since the 1940s.

Sadly, the statistics show there are even more American women than Fijian women who feel their bodies are inadequate. As these feelings fester and increase, the actions women take to reduce their weight also tend to grow in number. For instance, in 2002, 57% of adolescent females in the United States took part in at least one unhealthy weight management behavior (Mayer-Brown et al. 59). Such behaviors range from induced vomiting to excessive exercise, and all are risky for the partaker and often lead to other health problems both physical and mental. Particularly, eating disorders, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and suicide attempts are all common among women and adolescents who partake in unhealthy weight management (Mayer-Brown et al. 59). From this list, anxiety and depression are serious mental health problems that unfortunately have a stigma in society today, so many who experience them do not

seek help. In turn, this can lead to a growth of these trapped feelings which may cause debilitation in other areas of life due to complete loss of self-worth. Even more harmful, females who buy into this ideal image portrayed in the media tend to believe they must fit the mold and thus develop eating disorders in which thoughts of food intake and how to lose weight constantly penetrate their minds. When this becomes the case, many suffer heart or kidney failure and “90 percent of sufferers (of anorexia) end up with bone loss” (Rhode 39). Moreover, some starve themselves to the point of physical discomfort and even may starve themselves to death. In fact, two models in South America alone have died from eating disorders in recent years (Rhode 151). These two models are not alone, either. Many other models and women in the media often practice similar behaviors, which result in real health problems.

Furthermore, these models are a key contributor to the media’s beauty perfection women believe must be attained, despite the fact that many models only are able to look as they do because they practice starving themselves. Unfortunately, according to Deborah Rhode, “in 1894, the United States’ average female model was 5 feet 4 inches tall and weighed 140 pounds. A century later, these proportions reflected the average American woman, but the average model was 5 feet 10 inches tall and 110 pounds, and she has been growing thinner ever since” (59). There is truly something to be said about this image in which women are gradually growing thinner and thinner in magazines and on the runway. Eventually there will come a time when those modeling will no longer be able to physically survive if the media expects them to keep wasting away. As for now, the average woman is already unable to live a healthy life if she attempts to look like the myriad of pictures she sees around her. But, it seems impossible to completely ignore such images, and despite the fact many women are beautiful, they see these shrinking waists on the runway as a sign of what society requires of them for success. When

they develop this mental attitude and a negative body image, women do almost anything to fit into this mold, whether that be diet pills or starvation, both common components of the eating disorder anorexia nervosa.

Even psychological studies have proven the correlation between viewing slim figures in media and women's low self-esteem and likelihood of developing eating disorders. For instance, in a study by Turner, Hamilton, Jacobs, and Dwyer, undergraduate women were split into two groups, the control and experimental group. Those in the control group read news magazines, while those in the experimental group read fashion magazines. After reading these magazines the women reported their levels of body satisfaction. The study found those who had read the fashion magazines tended to express higher insecurities with their own bodies and had a stronger desire to be as thin as those in the media (Kashubeck-West and Sanders 191). These results, therefore, show a relationship between images in the media and low self-esteem among women. With the growing availability of media such as the internet, more and more women will likely begin to develop low self-esteem and begin practicing unhealthy weight management techniques.

Specifically, evidence already points to a link between the growing use of social media and low body image. Although social media sites have not been around for long, there already appears to be a connection between these sites and girls' self-image. In their study examining the relationship between the modern outbreak of selfie alteration and posting, Sian McLean and her colleagues from La Trobe University found supporting evidence for this claim. In the experiment, seventh grade girls filled out a questionnaire pertaining to social media usage and body image. Results found that girls who shared more images of themselves on social media tended to report greater feelings of insufficiency about their bodies and weight (McLean 1132). While it is not a guarantee the sharing of more images causes more concern about weight, this is

definitely evidence which shows the two often coincide. Therefore, while it may not be possible to conclude all girls who share a greater number of selfies have discomfort with their bodies, this does seem to be a good indicator that may help identify those who are in need of help to overcome these feelings of insufficiency. Moreover, of those who shared images of themselves, the girls who altered their photos in some way were more concerned about diets and eating behaviors (McLean 1132). This brings to light another important topic of discussion: photo shopping. With modern technology and all its advantages also comes many negative side effects. Because of the capabilities of computers, any and all individuals, including young junior high girls, are able to alter images so that they appear to be the original and true photo. Consequently, girls may view altered images of peers and may feel they need to photo shop their pictures as well. This then often leads to a downward spiral in which girls continue to take selfies and alter them. After a while, the girls may become obsessed with the “perfected” image they have created of themselves and may no longer feel confident in what their true reflection shows.

Additionally, those who are exposed to photo shopped or pencil thin actresses from an early age also tend to develop these feelings of insecurity. The overwhelming exposure of underweight actresses to children can be found on both Disney Channel and Nickelodeon. When examining shows from these two channels in 2007, Temple Northup and Carol Liebler from the 2009 International Communication Association Conference found 87% of the female characters ages 10-17 were considered “below average” weight and only 3% were “heavy” (Northup and Lieber 15). This fact that the younger characters on adolescent shows tend to be a majority underweight is significant as those watching the shows tend to compare themselves to the females of their same age. Therefore, if a child begins watching Disney Channel or Nickelodeon

when she is ten years old, she enters her adolescent years, a time when self-esteem is already at risk of plummeting, with a preconceived notion that thin means beautiful. Unfortunately, this means girls enter puberty with an already bias view of what they should look like in order to achieve success and beauty.

Expanding on this idea that girls will compare themselves to these actresses is important as one looks to the comments made about characters in these shows. When analyzing this factor, Northup and Lieber discovered “the thinner a character was, the more likely she was to have positive comments made about her” (Northup and Lieber 17). And not only was she more likely to receive positive comments, but viewers tended to rate these characters as more attractive, as well. While this may be due to the fact the characters were typically the stars of the show and viewers held them in higher regard because of this, there is also a strong chance the girls already had fallen into the trap of believing skinny equals beautiful (Northup and Lieber 18-19). If that is the case, it seems far too young to have 10-year-old girls already thinking about body size as a factor involving beauty. More often than not, these girls are not as slim as the actresses and, consequently, it seems quite probable this could lead to depressed states in regard to their own bodies, which may eventually develop into eating disorders.

Regardless of experiments and surveys such as the one conducted by Northup and Lieber, it does seem to be difficult to find one specific factor that contributes to poor body image in today’s young women. For instance, I received responses from fifty-two college women from the University of Dayton when I passed out a survey to individuals from all four grades. Responses varied from individuals who were confident in their bodies to those who wished they could change many features regarding their appearance. Almost all individuals surveyed said they enjoyed watching Disney princess movies as children and watched Disney Channel as a

child so it is possible these sources of media do not have a direct impact on body image. However, when respondents were asked to rate on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) if they agreed with the statement “When I look in the mirror, I often wish I could look more like a celebrity or model” twenty-four participants rated this question as a 4 or 5. This amounts to 46% of participants who often compared themselves to famous individuals in the media. Furthermore, thirteen participants were neutral (rated it as a 3) in regards to this statement, which accounts for another 25% of the participants. Some of these individuals in this category may have selected neutral because of the word “often” and in fact may occasionally compare themselves to famous individuals. If this is the case, that would mean 71% of participants at some point compare their bodies to the unrealistic ones to which the media exposes them. Even without the 25%, however, 46% is still much too high a number of individuals who feel inadequate about their bodies. Moreover, only four participants total, a sadly small number, strongly disagreed with this statement. From this data, one can conclude there are still many girls and women who are impacted by the image of women portrayed in the media, including celebrities and models. Therefore, we as a society and scientists should search further in depth to find a way to prevent females from feeling this way.

Although many think only those with the biology for low self-esteem or perfectionism will be affected by these media messages, that is simply not the truth. My survey also supports this as all but three of the girls taking part either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “sometimes I compare my body to others’.” Among this group, thirty-three individuals did describe themselves as perfectionists, yet nineteen were neutral or disagreed that they were perfectionists. Furthermore, it should be noted the majority of individuals surveyed were honors students so there is a likelihood these individuals would have a tendency to consider themselves

perfectionists more than non-honors students. So, while a person's genetic make-up may increase the likelihood to participate in behaviors such as skipping meals and purging in order to maintain a smaller size, there is definitely environmental influence from the media as well. Specifically, Sarah Mayer-Brown and her fellow colleagues from the Departments of Clinical and Health Psychology and Pediatric Medicine at the University of Florida concluded from their research "even girls with average levels of global self-worth may be at risk for internalizing messages from the media about their body and using unhealthy ways to manage their weight" (64). Therefore, while most current treatments are being offered to those who have significantly low self-esteem, research suggests others may be in need of assistance in breaking the mental obsession with reducing their weight.

It is not easy, then, to distinguish who is in need of treatment if some who appear to have high self-esteem are also at risk. Moreover, there are a variety of ways in which those suffering from low self-esteem, depression, and eating disorders are treated. Each individual is unique, so the best treatment plan varies among individuals. Finding the right treatment is necessary and will help improve the lives of many. However, it would be even better if women and adolescents did not require treatment in the first place. That is why it is important to find the underlying causes of these mental issues. Some cities, such as London and Madrid are taking the first step in abolishing these roots. In response, the cities have begun forming laws preventing underweight women from modeling and requiring doctor's notes approving the health of models (Rhode 151). This proves there is still hope in this battle involving the media and women. It may be impossible to rid the world of old, unrealistic advertisements; however, laws could be put in place that prevent the printing of photo shopped images in magazines or that require mannequins and models to be practical sizes.

Current views hold that skinny women are prettier and thus clothes sell better when modeled on these women. This belief can change, just as the belief that smoking was attractive changed when the adverse effects became known (Treasure et al. 126). For the time being, societal pressures to be thin are growing stronger in the United States. Even if the government does not decide to intervene on this issue, friends and peers can encourage one another to believe in their own beauty and worth. Furthermore, discussing current problems with the media and the portrayal of women may be enough to catalyze a transformation in the attitudes of society. If enough people change their thinking, this may soon influence the media to revise its policies and practices. People may be subject to the media's messages, but that does not mean they must sit back and allow it to determine their every action and belief. Although the media is a powerful institution, it is not a dictator. It only sells what the people buy, so the people should stand up and refuse to buy products which promote the unhealthy image of women.

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