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Warning: Models in Magazines Are Larger Than They Appear

Writing Process

My process began by brainstorming ideas for the essay, and how to conduct my own original research so that it would be an asset to my essay. Once I decided on the topic of adding warning labels to women's fashion magazines, I concluded that a survey of my female peers at the University of Dayton would provide me with the best information to support my ideas. I was able to incorporate my original research into my essay and improve my essay by writing three drafts and receiving feedback from my classmates and teacher.

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Warning: Models in Magazines Are Larger Than They Appear*

Simple warning labels would be a game-changer for female fashion magazine readers everywhere. Today, the media constantly tells women what they should look like and how much they should weigh by bombarding the public with images of the “thin ideal.” These images include female models that are greatly modified with airbrushing and photo-shopping techniques in order to display an unattainable picture of the ideal woman. When female readers view these overly edited images it has negative effects on their emotional, psychological, and sometimes their physical health. With the addition of warning labels and disclaimers to women’s fashion magazines, the negative effects that they have would be greatly diminished. These warning labels on magazines would alert readers to the fact that the images in their pages are unrealistic, and it would be harmful to readers to attempt to resemble the edited and photo-shopped examples of the thin ideal.

When females read fashion magazines and view the models in them, they are exposed to the unattainable thin ideal that society has created by manipulating photos of women. Researchers Marika Tiggemann, Janet Polivy, and Duane Hargreaves of Flinders University conducted a study in which 144 women were shown fifteen advertisements of dangerously skinny models from popular women’s fashion magazines (73). The participants were then asked to self-report on how the advertisements made them feel about their own body image (73). The results of the study showed that after viewing these

ideal images of thin models, participants reported negative moods, lower self-esteem, and higher body dissatisfaction (73). When women view advertisements like this, it is natural for female readers to compare themselves to the models. When readers realize that their body does not look like the edited and retouched ones in magazines, they become extremely discouraged. Nathaniel Branden, an American psychotherapist and author, explains that low self-esteem can become extremely severe and eventually lead to anxiety and depression (167). He goes on to say that when people have low self-esteem and have doubts about their self-efficacy and self-worth, they let their negative emotions consume their lives (167). Tiggemann, Polivy, and Hargreaves' research demonstrates that when women view thin ideals of other women, they experience a lowering of their self-esteem, which, as Branden states, can lead to much greater emotional and psychological issues.

In a survey I conducted with fifty college females at the University of Dayton, the participants were asked, "On a scale of 1-5, after viewing a women's fashion magazine, how do you feel about the way your own body looks?" On the scale, "1" meant "very poor," "2" meant "poor," "3" meant "neutral," "4" meant "good," and "5" meant "very good." Participants were also asked, "On a scale of 1-5, after viewing a women's fashion magazine, what is your overall mood?" For both of these questions the average response was "2," which means "poor." From this part of my original research, I concluded that after viewing fashion magazines, a majority of the participants had high body dissatisfaction and poor moods. Young adult females are especially vulnerable when it comes to comparing themselves to the models that they see in women's fashion magazines, which can have dangerous psychological and emotional consequences when they find that they cannot resemble these unrealistic images. These results from my

original research were interesting because the participants did not view a women's fashion magazine directly before they took the survey, whereas the participants in Tiggemann, Polivy, and Hargreaves' research did view a women's fashion magazine directly before self-reporting their mood and body dissatisfaction. This suggests that the negative effects and feelings linger after viewing the thin ideal in fashion magazines.

Not only can fashion magazines that push the thin ideal on women cause psychological and emotional harm, but they can also lead to physical harm when women attempt to resemble the ultra-thin models. Slender models in magazines are more than just pictures; they represent what society believes the ideal woman should look like, which distorts women's body images of themselves. When women have low self-esteem it leads to many other issues, for example, eating disorders. Sherry Turner and Heather Hamilton, researchers on the effects that fashion magazines have on women, reported that "Women whose body fat falls below 22% are much more susceptible to infertility, amenorrhea, ovarian, and endometrial cancer, and osteoporosis. These findings suggest that the slim beauty ideal presented in the media may be unhealthy for women" (Turner and Hamilton para. 2) According to Julie Shaw, an expert on eating psychopathology, eating disorders are an epidemic among young girls because they attempt to resemble the unrealistic images they see in the media (21). In a study that Shaw conducted on this topic, it was found that young girls who read fashion magazines regularly exhibited more bulimic tendencies than girls who did not regularly view fashion magazines (21). This evidence shows that there is a direct link between viewing fashion magazines and the development of eating disorders in young females. When girls view images of models that are dangerously skinny, it distorts girls' perceptions of their own body. For example,

a girl who has been over-exposed to the thin ideal in fashion magazines can look in the mirror and view her body completely differently than what it actually looks like.

In the survey I conducted on this topic, participants were asked if they thought the models that appear in women's fashion magazines appear too thin and whether or not participants ever desired to look more like the models shown in women's fashion magazines. Every participant out of the fifty asked responded "yes" to both of these questions, meaning that every participant in the survey believed that the models in fashion magazines appear too thin, yet at one time or another they desired to look more like these dangerously skinny looking models. This is what can often lead to eating disorders, especially in impressionable, young adult female readers like the ones in my study. The media tells these girls what the ideal woman is supposed to look like, and when young readers believe that they fall short of society's expectations of them, they sometimes take drastic measures, like not eating, to attempt to resemble the thin ideal.

Some people may claim that the media and women's fashion magazines are not to blame for the development of eating disorders in young females today. For example, Carrie Arnold wrote an article entitled "Don't Blame Thin Models" about how she, a woman who struggles with anorexia, does not blame fashion magazines for her eating disorder. However, throughout her entire article she never acknowledges the fact that the models in fashion magazines are not actually as skinny in real life as they appear in magazines. This leads me to wonder whether Arnold is aware that fashion magazines edit and photo-shop their models to appear stick-thin. In my original research, I found that almost half of the participants were not previously aware that models in women's fashion magazines are often photo-shopped to make them appear more thin and/or attractive. This

is very alarming because it means that readers know that models look skinny in magazines, but many are not aware that the models do not actually look that thin in real life, and they are edited to appear differently in magazines.

Adding warning labels to fashion magazines would combat all of the issues previously addressed in this paper. *Off Our Chests* is an online women's magazine and clothing brand that has recently been campaigning to secure legislation that would make disclaimers on airbrushed and photo-shopped advertisements in the media mandatory by law. One of the co-founders, Seth Matlins, described the current issue saying, "We've got a societal problem, the consequences of which are having serious effects on individual happiness and well-being, economic productivity, and an astounding number of eating disorder deaths each year" (PR Newswire para. 5).

The simple fix to these problems would be warning labels, which would ensure that all readers are privy to the fact that the images they see in the pages of the magazines are unrealistic. *Off Our Chests* co-founder Eva Matlins stated, "The labels we want to see on ads and editorials are not a judgment of their content but a clarification of fact, intended only to help stem the epidemic crisis of confidence and esteem among girls and women" (PR Newswire para. 3). Matlins is suggesting that these labels would not intend to stop people from buying and viewing women's fashion magazines. They would provide a way to inform readers about what they are actually looking at on the pages of fashion magazines, which are edited and photo-shopped images of the thin ideal. The addition of these labels would aim to combat the problems of poor mood and body dissatisfaction that affect readers.

Evidence suggests that warning labels would make a difference in this issue. Amy Slater did an investigation on whether the addition of warning labels to fashion magazines has an effect on female readers' self-esteem. In this experiment, "102 undergraduate women aged 18 to 35 years were randomly allocated to view magazine fashion spreads with either no warning labels, generic warning labels that stated that the image had been digitally altered, or specific warning labels that stated the way in which the image had been digitally altered" (Slater 105). The results of the study demonstrated that women had less body dissatisfaction when viewing magazines with warning labels as opposed to the magazines without warning labels (Slater 117). From this study, it can be concluded that adding simple warning labels to fashion magazine covers is an effective way to communicate to female readers that they are not expected to resemble the models in these photo-shopped images.

In my original research, participants were asked to answer the question, "Yes or no, would you feel more comfortable about your own body if warning labels about unrealistic images were placed on the covers of women's fashion magazines?" The results of this question were that more than two-thirds of the participants answered "yes." By adding warning labels to fashion magazines that contain edited images, readers would feel much more comfortable about their own bodies in comparison to the models. Female readers would also better understand that the images are unrealistic, and, therefore, women should not attempt to resemble the photos representing the thin ideal that appear within the pages of fashion magazines.

I was interested by the responses I got to this question because I assumed that more participants would respond "yes." However, after thinking about the one-third of

participants who responded “no” to this question, it is possible that they responded this way because they do not believe warning labels are enough of a change. We live in a society that constantly puts women down when they do not look a certain way. Therefore, I believe that this one-third of participants have been so discouraged by the thin ideal in the media that they would never feel more comfortable about their own bodies unless a more drastic change was made. For example, these changes could include prohibiting the use of editing and photo shopping all together, or using what are considered today to be “plus-sized” models. Banning photo-shopping or requiring magazines to use larger models may diminish the artistic integrity of the designer, which is why I advocate the implementation of warning labels. In comparison to these more drastic changes, adding warning labels to fashion magazines would be a simple fix to this complex problem and allow designers to represent their brands however they choose.

The psychological, emotional, and physical harm that women’s fashion magazines can have on readers is evident from the multiple issues outlined in this paper. However, adding disclaimers to fashion magazines could diminish all of these issues. If women were aware that the pictures in magazines are manipulated to be unrealistic and unattainable images of the thin ideal, then they would be less likely to feel poorly about their own bodies and attempt to resemble the images that are presented to them in fashion magazines. Warning labels would significantly cut down on the struggles women face when they are constantly told by the images in fashion magazines that they should look a certain way and see a certain number when they step on the scale.

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