

Line by Line: A Journal of Beginning Student Writing

Volume 1
Issue 2 *Spring 2015*

Article 7

March 2015

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Madeline W. Collins
University of Dayton

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Recommended Citation

Collins, Madeline W. (2015) "Slenderize Me: Youth's Infatuation With Images in the Media," *Line by Line: A Journal of Beginning Student Writing*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/lxl/vol1/iss2/7>

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Slenderize Me: Youth's Infatuation With Images in the Media

Writing Process

I began to compose this research paper based on an assignment in my English 200H Writing Seminar. The assignment was to use original and unoriginal research to argue and prove an opinion about a gender-related issue. I began the process by researching online articles about the effects of the images in the media on young adults. Being a young woman in the era of technology made me very interested in how the increased media exposure of today negatively affects the confidence levels and body images of myself and other girls my age. After gathering baseline information from online academic articles, I decided to conduct my own research by way of surveys. I surveyed fifty of my peers in order to gather my own information about how they think the media has impacted their views of beauty within themselves and others. The data collected supported my initial hypothesis that these images do in fact have negative effects on body image, especially in young girls. In the paper, I included key findings from both the primary and the secondary research as well as my own conclusions. I wrote three drafts of this essay and received feedback from my peers as well as my professor.

Course

ENG200H

Semester

Fall

Instructor

Laura Vorachek

Year

2014

Madeline Collins

Dr. Laura Vorachek

ENG 200H

Fall 2014

Slenderize Me: Youth's Infatuation With Images in the Media

Amazing hair, toned body, fierce fashion, and perfect skin. Sound familiar? These descriptors are used every day around the world to grab the attention of young adults and to promote a culture based on improving overall appearances. Magazines, television shows, and commercials all promote very similar depictions of beauty. Look at any magazine that targets young adults, boys or girls, and you will find countless articles and advertisements about ways to enhance your appearance or lose that extra few pounds. You will also find models who seem to unrealistically portray the epitome of the descriptors above: young, thin girls with flawless skin and voluptuous hair. In most cases, it probably seems unrealistic because it is. Increased technology in Photoshop makes it almost impossible to tell the difference between what is real and what is not when it comes to the seemingly perfect appearance of models and celebrities. By always portraying these images of “perfect” beauty, the media is greatly affecting the public’s perception of realistic and genuine beauty. Add this to adolescents’ increased access to mass media, and the outcome is obvious. Young adults, especially women, become very susceptible to the media’s influence and the types of beauty it promotes. This vulnerability leads to the creation of a culture with a very narrow definition of beauty, emphasis on physical attractiveness, decreased confidence levels, and negative body images.

The majority of the media has a tendency to show and promote ultra thinness for girls and muscular physiques for boys as the “ideal” body type. Not only are these body types portrayed as

better than others, they are automatically assumed to represent everyone's goal. One example of media that continuously delivers these messages to young adults is advertisements. Sometimes the messages are not explicit, but rather implied in the wording or pictures used. In their article on "An Intervention For the Negative Influence of Media on Body Esteem," Cheryl Haas et al use a specific example of an advertisement for a cigarette lighter in a magazine to directly prove this point. She explains the advertisement as, "a picture of a thin woman with the headline reading, 'Express your lighter side'" (Haas 406). Haas goes on to discuss the implications in this portrayal of the woman. She mentions, "the underlying message is that women should be thin and using this product may help to achieve that goal" (406). Advertisements like this one that promote thinness show young women that this is what society strives for and, in turn, what they should strive for as well. The repercussions of these goal-directed expressions is the thought that in order to be accepted by society, women must try to emulate the thin ideal.

The problem with this attempt is that many times it is not possible to achieve the media's idea of beauty, and, therefore, adolescents see their appearances in a negative light. The authors of the article, "Exploring Adolescent Views of Body Image: The Influence of Media," conducted a study to examine the effects of this type of media coverage on adolescents. The study found that the young adults tested were, indeed, negatively impacted by exposure to these types of stereotypical portrayals of the ideal "thin women and lean muscular males" (Spurr, Berry, & Walker 14). The authors then discuss the idea that these body types are more often than not unattainable for most members of society, especially adolescents (14). Perhaps they are unattainable because the pictures are touched up or simply because these body types are so rare. Whatever the case, these young adults are being negatively impacted by feeling compelled to imitate images of beauty that are simply not possible.

The same implications of the ideal beauty and body type are present in other media outlets, such as the marketing and portrayal of the iconic Barbie Doll. With her long, blonde hair, perfectly tanned and hairless skin, tiny waist, and even tinier limbs, Barbie represents society's view of "perfection" (Whitney 3). Jennifer Dawn Whitney, a researcher at Cardiff University, says that the way the Barbie image is depicted and marketed in society gives the impression that her look is both desirable and attainable (3). Barbie's face, hair, and body are unrealistically exaggerated and, therefore, are not attainable and should not be desirable. These types of exaggerations are in themselves degrading towards women because of their suggestions for how women should look and act. Furthermore, Whitney gives a brief history of the word "doll" in order to explain the significance of its implications for Barbie. She explains that throughout history the word "doll" has invariably been connected to "pretty women" who are unintelligent and silly (6). Although this definition is not directly linked to the contemporary Barbie, it must have been ingrained in her emergence as a "Barbie Doll" adding to her emphasis on physical attractiveness. As young girls purchase and play with Barbie, they are increasingly exposed to her unattainable "plastic perfection." Exposure to such unrealistic images gives young adults a false idea of what true attainable and desirable beauty is in the real world.

All of this exposure to idealized beauty and the thought that it should be attainable for any person leads women to compare themselves to these images and to feel less confident because they do not resemble the models. As a result of the images in the media that over-emphasize ideal beauty, women begin to measure their self-worth based on their physical appearances (Spurr, Berry, & Walker 18). Such a strong focus on physical beauty excludes the importance of other traits such as intelligence, kindness, and overall health. These characteristics, although important for a well-rounded person, get pushed to the side in favor of physical

attractiveness. Sometimes they can get pushed so far that women begin to think physical beauty is their only track to success. A study conducted by Renee Engeln-Maddox of Northwestern University aimed to determine how women thought their lives would change if they looked like the media's ideal beauty. After 109 undergraduate women were interviewed, the results showed that the majority of the women would expect to experience large, positive changes in their lives (Engeln-Maddox 6). Engeln-Maddox says that these "participants frequently listed beliefs that they would be more socially competent, successful, and well-adjusted if they looked like a media ideal" (6). This example takes the previously stated phenomenon to the extreme. The women in this study, and probably many more throughout the world, actually believe that their lack of "perfect" beauty holds them back in life. Saying that an improvement in physical appearance leads to more success essentially gives the impression that physical appearance is the most important characteristic of a person. This could then lead to an increase in self-consciousness if the person does not resemble the images in the media.

Some might say that everyone knows the images in the media are fake and/or unrealistic and that this knowledge helps young adults fight against their tendency to compare themselves to its portrayal of beauty. In many cases, however, young adults' understanding of this fact does not improve their opinion of the models or themselves. The authors of "Exploring Adolescent Views of Body Image: The Influence of Media" explain in their study, that "the adolescents reflected the view that the images presented by the media were idealized and not real, but for several participants these images still had obvious effects on the adolescents' beliefs about their outward physical appearance" (Spurr, Berry, & Walker 26). Even though these young adults were fully aware of the unrealistic nature of the media's definition of beauty, they still felt inferior in comparison. Simply saying that knowledge of the media's misrepresentations helps deter

adolescents from feeling the need to compare themselves does not consider the ultimate power of the media's influence. Haas' study found that when women were exposed to images of averaged-sized models, they were less likely to report feeling self-conscious (406). Essentially, women are so influenced by the media that exposure to different body types leads them to feel different ways about their own bodies. These results show the inevitable influence of the images in the media, but they also provide evidence that the media could reverse its side effects by displaying images of averaged-sized models instead of the ultra thin examples common today.

In an effort to acquire information on the current opinions and attitudes of young adults regarding the media's influence on our perceptions of beauty, I conducted a survey that included 50 boys and girls between the ages of 18 and 21 living in my residence hall at the University of Dayton. Participants were asked a variety of questions regarding their personal opinions of beauty, how they think the media has influenced this opinion, and their overall opinions of their own beauty. When I first began to explain my research to my peers, I got many remarks of encouragement. It became obvious to me that young adults consider this an important and contemporary issue that directly impacts their lives on a daily basis. The results of my survey definitely proved my initial thought process and showed me that the media does indeed greatly affect the lives of my peers. When asked if they believe the media has a direct impact on their personal perception of beauty, 70% said "yes." Of the girls surveyed, 83% fell into this category; however, only 43% of boys said the same. The media has a much larger impact on the way girls see beauty in themselves than the way boys do; however, overall, it proved to have an influence on the majority of the participants.

The participants in the survey were asked to provide an example of someone in the media that they believe represents the perfect image of beauty. Interestingly enough, a majority of the

girls chose women who all seemed to fit a certain mold. Of the 29 girls in the study, 23 of them chose females that were slender, Caucasian, clear-skinned, and had very defined bone structure in the face. Some of the recurring celebrities that match all of these criteria included Blake Lively, Jennifer Lawrence, Julianne Hough, and Emma Watson. The tendency to conform to society's standard of beauty became ever more evident when these girls were asked to explain why they chose the person they did. One female, age 18, when describing Julianne Hough said, "She has a pretty face and perfect body." The idea of a "perfect" body is used many times as girls attempt to describe why these celebrities represent beauty. Another 18 year-old female described her reason for choosing Blake Lively as "She's beautiful and skinny!" The media ideals mentioned above have clearly led these young girls to appreciate certain characteristics of women that deem them beautiful. As the media continuously emphasizes thinness as the ultimate source of beauty, young women take these ideas as truths and develop their own opinions based on them.

When boys were given the same question, they followed similar patterns. Male participants tended to chose male celebrities that have extremely muscular physiques paired with defined bone structure in the face. Some of the common answers included Zac Efron, Matt Bomer, and Brad Pitt. When describing these men, the male participants often used words such as "fit body," "good hair," and "attractive." A few boys also chose to discuss the extent to which media does and does not influence their views of women as opposed to themselves. When asked if he thought the media influenced his perception of beauty, one 19-year-old male responded, "The opinions on male beauty affect my opinion, but my opinion of women's beauty is mine and isn't affected at all by the media." When asked the same question, another 19-year-old male responded differently: "Yes! The media has absolutely warped my view of women. What's

worse, it has warped how women see themselves.” These two statements provide very different outlooks on the way in which the media affects our opinions. The first response displays that for some boys, the media mostly affects their opinions of their own beauty, while the second response shows that for other boys, the media has a greater influence on the way they see women. It does, however, show that the media has the potential to influence boys’ opinions of other boys and possibly also other girls.

Another trend that I found within this survey is that actual health of an individual does not seem to play a role in the development of that girl’s body image. Of the 29 girls surveyed, 22 of them said that they do believe themselves to be healthy individuals. That is 76% of girls that do not think they need to lose weight for health reasons. Within this group, however, many responded saying that even though they felt healthy, they were still not happy with their bodies. When asked if they believe the media affects their opinions of beauty, three females responded in this way. One 18 year-old girl said, “Yes, I have felt that my body shape is not acceptable even though I am only a few pounds ‘overweight’ by my doctor’s standards.” Another girl remarked, “The media only portrays very thin or fit people as attractive and it makes me question if my curves are ok.” Yet another girl mentioned beauty in contrast to health by saying, “I still want to have a body like people on TV, even though I am healthy. When I think of beauty, I picture people I see on TV and the Internet.” All of these girls answered “yes” when asked if they believe themselves to be healthy individuals. Although they are healthy, these girls still find their bodies to be too overweight or not perfect enough because the media gives the impression that they should be ultra skinny if they want to be considered beautiful. This ultra skinny ideal has nothing to do with health.

Responses from my surveys also gave me a lot of evidence to support the claim that young adults do in fact often compare their body types with those in the media leading to a decreased sense of self-confidence and increased desire to resemble the images in the media. When asked the same question, “Do you think the media representations of beauty affect your opinion of beauty?” many participants responded by describing the ways in which the media makes them feel about themselves. Some of the responses included:

- “Yes. Seeing photos of models with perfect skin and slender bodies makes you believe that is what you should strive to look like. We idolize these types of beautiful celebrities because their lives appear to be perfect.” – Female, 18
- “Yes, I feel less pretty than I probably should because I’m really not all that skinny. I’ve got curves and big hips and thighs, and a lot of times I feel less pretty because of it. So much, these days, we see beauty as skinny and we shouldn’t.” –Female, 18
- “I compare myself to people on TV.” –Female, 18
- “Yes, I am not as skinny or pretty.” –Female, 19
- “[The media] gives me a false image in my mind to what is desirable and this makes me unsatisfied with my body forever.” –Male, 18

Many of these participants used words such as “slender,” “skinny,” “pretty,” and “perfect” to describe the images they see in the media. As a result of these images, these young adults feel “less pretty” and “unsatisfied” with their own body type. Responses such as these show young adults’ tendency to compare themselves to the media resulting in negative opinions about their own appearances. When adolescents begin to judge themselves based on the images in the media, their overall levels of confidence and feelings of self worth decrease. The beauty that is

portrayed in the media becomes the idea of “perfect” beauty, and when young adults are unable to attain this, they feel inadequate compared to others.

The images in the media overwhelmingly portray models and celebrities that illustrate ultra thinness along with many other “ideal” traits. The continuous exposure of these images leads young adults to believe that these models exemplify the perfect look; therefore, many adolescents try to imitate the beauty they see in the media. Unfortunately, the images in the media are more often than not unrealistic and unattainable by most everyday people. Because these young adults find themselves unable to attain their goals of beauty, they begin to feel less comfortable with their body types. The media has a large effect on society’s view of what is beautiful, and it also leads to lower self-esteem in all young adults, but especially women. Whether we like it or not, the media has great power over our thought processes. Because of this power, the media could definitely change the attitudes of adolescents by beginning to display diverse beauty and putting more emphasis on average-sized models.

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