

Magazines' Influence on Women

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## Introduction

Mass media is a powerful source that continues to influence societal norms. In particular, magazines have become a media outlet that has created an image for American women. These images and expectations have negatively persuaded girls and women to feel as though there is a status quo to be met through appearance.

Magazines have reinvented the wheel for beauty. As a result, health is compensated for beauty. Therefore, women's perceptions of beauty have been shaped through the media of magazines, having a negative effect through unnecessary dieting, low self-esteem, and unattainable role models. In return, these effects are a daily struggle for women as they feel there are so many expectations to be upheld. Unfortunately, inner beauty and personal satisfaction is no longer rewarded in a society saturated with skinny celebrities setting the status quo.

## Research

To begin, magazines influence of beauty on girls and women has lead to a decrease in self-esteem (Morrison, 2004). The way women see themselves is based on the images of others. Morrison writes, "...while the average American woman under 30 has become progressively heavier, media images of women have become progressively thinner. For example, a longitudinal examination of models appearing in the magazines Ladies Home Journal and Vogue revealed that their bust-to-waist ratios had decreased steadily since 1949 (Morrison, 2004)."

When women experience exposure to such images and standards, they are likely to view themselves more negatively. What they see in the mirror and what they see in magazines, does not match up. Therefore their first inclination is to doubt their beauty and have low self-esteem.

Vogue ran an article where a writer used her own personal experience of weight loss.

This 5' 6 ½" woman who weighed 136.5 pounds, dropped 14.5 pounds in order to look presentable for the season's style ("Women Need Self-Esteem, Not Diet Advice", 1996). For women who are already self-conscious of their weight and appearance due to societal pressure, this article does nothing but add to their lack of self-esteem. As a result of these types of articles, women struggle daily with feeling confident. They feel that their bodies must match those of high status to be sexy and attract men. Not only are these images disturbing, but the majority of them are not even original.

Ralph E. Hanson writes, "...when it comes to magazine cover shoots, editors should do whatever it takes to make the cover model look her best - even if that means changing her body digitally (Hanson, 172)." This quote is in reference to a controversy involving Kelly Clarkson. Many fans are aware of her fluctuating weight issues. While competing in American Idol, she was arguably overweight. After winning American Idol she began to transform her image to the mold of Hollywood. She lost weight. After some time, however, she gained it back. By her photo being digitally edited because she is "overweight" that just proves magazines' standards for how women should look – skinny.

In September 2009, she was featured on the cover of a *Self* magazine. The previous quote was in response to her featured picture. Despite Clarkson's happiness with weight, her opinion does not go a long way because of the crafted photos used (Hanson, 2011, p.172). It is no wonder women's self-esteem is affected, when images are molded to the quintessential creation of an editor.

Hanson's textbook brings up the issue of the importance on magazine covers. Is the sale of a magazine more important than its effect on someone? Editorial Director, Janet Chan, for Time, Inc. stated, "You'll follow a lot of rules and you could say that's the science, but I think a

lot of it is gut. For me, thinking of designing a cover is looking for the image that says, 'You want to take this puppy home (Hanson, 2011, p.175).' After reading this quote, one must contemplate the ethics of such a mindset because negative effects could be ignored in order to make sales. The audience that is negatively being affected is the same audience that magazine companies rely on to make money.

Additionally, magazines' define beauty as super thin, large chested, and clear complected women (Gorrell, 2001). . Unfortunately, this is only attainable if your name is Barbie and you are made out of plastic. As a result of magazines pushing this perception of beauty on women, which gives them low self-esteem and in return has led to dieting which can be very harmful. Carin Gorrell addresses the issue about the connection between magazines and girls whose eating and diet habits are influenced by the material magazines present. Research was conducted by Stephen Thomas, Ph.D., from Brigham Young University on 500 female high school students. Of those 500, he found that 87% of the girls were affected. Eleven percent had used laxatives, 15% took diet pills, 9% reverted to vomiting, and 52% reduced their calorie intake under 1,200 calories each day (Gorrell, 2001).

In addition, he asked the students how often they read health and fitness and beauty and fashion magazines. The girls who frequently read the health and fitness magazines (once a month) were more likely to perform unhealthy weight control techniques. Here about 80% induced vomiting, 73% took diet pills, and 60% used laxatives. Thomsen's findings for girls who read the beauty and fashion magazines were extremely similar to those that read the health magazines. Thomsen suggests that the magazines may not always induce the issue however he adds, "It seems that young women who already have eating disordered attitudes and thoughts are turning to the publications for support (Gorrell, 2001)."

Sadly, women take these extremes in hopes of “beauty”, but in turn do more damage than good. A news article from the *Orange County Register* interviewed several girls from a high school about body image and beauty. A question was asked about what age they had started to become self-conscious about their body? One interviewee, Chardonee, answered:

I started in seventh grade. I remember I was looking at YM magazine and I looked at all the girls in there, and they were perfect and they were beautiful. So I started comparing myself to them. And that's when I started getting interested in boys. I wanted them to think of me as beautiful. I started getting conscious about my weight (“Mirror Images”, 2002).

These reports give proof that the service magazines provide is more than just entertainment, but guilt that serves as a catalyst and “go to” for negative health monitoring. Girls are seeking advice from magazines because they feel what they have to offer is “truth”. As a result, *YM* magazine, which is up there with *Seventeen*, *Cosmo* and *Teen*, made a decision to stop running articles about dieting in hopes of preventing such conduct (“Mirror Images”, 2002). It would be interesting to see how women’s self-esteem levels would change if they were being influenced by similar, everyday women. *YM* is definitely taking a risk, but they are doing it in hopes of bettering its audience.

Moreover, role models featured in magazines play an intricate part of how women define beauty. What women do not realize is that the celebrities displayed in magazines such as *People*, *Elle*, and *Vogue* have make-up artists, personal stylist, nutritionists, and in many cases, cosmetic surgery. Take for example, Brittany Spears. She had a so called “hot body” but after having kids, like any normal women, her fit figure disappeared. Because of the disapproval from magazines and the American public, she got her figure back. What kind of story does that

encourage women with? The likelihood of her body after children is nearly impossible. Her transformation shows women that their bodies should not change because of childbirth, and then when “real” women experience this, they struggle feeling as though their self-worth has lessened because they no longer have the body of their youth. So Britney’s flat stomach and hipster pant style has been a huge factor in women having lipo-surgery (Jeffereys, 2008). In the article, *Western Beauty Customs Should Be Defined as Harmful Cultural Practices*, author Sheila Jeffereys explains how this intensive nine hour surgery costs a woman thousands of dollars. She interviews a patient who discloses, "I'd just like to feel proud of my figure, but right now I'm so ashamed of my belly—it just hangs there. Britney Spears has an amazing stomach, and I'd give anything to look like that. She wears all those low pants and I just wish I could have a stomach as flat as hers (Jeffereys, 2008).” Not only do these role models catch women’s eyes, but men’s as well. Because of this, women feel a need to look a certain way for their husband, boyfriend, or any man they want to impress. As a result, cosmetic surgery becomes an unhealthy option for women to construct themselves in any desirable way. Jeffereys quotes, “The cosmetic surgery carried out on women in the mainstream entertainment industry is directed towards making them conform to men's sexual fantasies in order to earn their subsistence (Jeffereys, 2008).” No wonder your average American women see unhealthy measures as normal and necessary, because they see it in all the movie stars and celebrities. Ironically in an issue of People Weekly, numerous celebrities give their answers to what makes them feel pretty and yet their answers avoid the physical. Stars such as Angelina Jolie, Halle Berry, and Jennifer Aniston all gives answers about how they feel beautiful when they are surrounded by people who love and care about them. As much as one would love to believe their comments, why would they say one thing and yet continue to set unreachable standards for women (“What Makes You Feel Pretty?”,

2010)? Referring back to the *Western Beauty* article, Jeffereys stated, "The surgeon in Coritore's operation says that 'all my girls' in the compulsory 'before' photograph of their almost naked bodies look 'shy, timid and insecure', but, 'the change I see in my patients in just a few days is so amazing' (Jeffereys, 2008)." Would this be the case if women were not bombarded with images of unattainable role models? Maybe yes, maybe no. The point being that media has made it harder to resist the temptations of beauty defined by the world and those in high influential positions. If these unattainable images continue to bombard women, health is going to continually decline.

### Criticism

Although there is much research to support the negative effects of magazines on girls and women, there are some critics that believe this is not necessarily the case. The main point is that critics feel women have a choice. For example, some feel that the use of thin models and stars is motivating and positive in a country that struggles with obesity. Garance Franke-Ruta, a senior editor at the *American Prospect*, feels that models and celebrities keep their slim figures through diet, exercise, and discipline and that any woman can choose to do the same. She claims that a woman can choose whether beauty is worth the work. Although a good argument, it does not eliminate the hard data previously stated of the affects this mindset has on women (Franke-Ruta, 2010). Here, Franke-Ruta is stating an idea, however, what people such as herself want others to realize and what is being portrayed seem to be very different. A quote that seems to disprove this thought is by Christie Greenleaf an assistant professor of kinesiology, health promotion, and recreation at the University of North Texas. She states:

Girls and women, in our society, are socialized to value physical appearance and an ultra-thin beauty that rarely occurs naturally and to pursue that ultra-thin physique at any cost.

Research demonstrates that poor body image and disordered eating attitudes are associated with internalizing the mediated (i.e., commodified, airbrushed) bodies that dominate the fashion industry (Schwarz, 2010).

Although, it is understandable that ultimately women's actions are based on their choices, it is unfair to discount the fact that media saturated world will have affects on those decisions. Since women are emotional beings, like Christie said, women internalize these messages which in turn effect their daily decision of how to obtain beauty.

#### Evaluation of Sources

The sources used to back up the thesis that magazines evidentially having a negative effect through unnecessary dieting, low self-esteem, and unattainable role models is overwhelming. There is a lot of research to support this idea. The articles were countless, which is a statement in itself. If so much research has been done on it, then it must be a pushing issue. Many of the sources used were from an online database, which automatically is an indicator that the information is highly reliable. The articles found were very well written and easy to understand. The statistics are helpful in that there are hard facts to help support the thesis, especially since this idea could be so interpretive. Additionally, the majority of the sources used were published within the last ten years. As a result the ideas and support are reasonable fresh and accurate. Many of the sources were also authoritative in that the ideas presented and those who had published them were well known in fashion and or education. The resources were not biased. They were well balanced and yet successfully supported their side of the argument well.

#### Conclusion

In conclusion there are many resources to support the viewpoint that we live in a media



saturated world. The effects media and the messages it sends through magazines on girls and women are negative in that there is unnecessary dieting, low self-esteem, and unattainable role models. Although some believe these actions are a choice, there is no excuse for the negative influence of magazines directed at women. Women are constantly bombarded with the ideal image and idea of beauty. Many feel that the only way to be happy and catch men's eyes are to be like those of celebrity status. Unfortunately, women are deceived by the lies presented. Yes, these celebrities are skinny but it is their job and their photos get a lot of help from the magazine's editing department. With technology, magazine covers are adjusted to appear perfect, as seen in the controversy with Kelly Clarkson.

Sadly, women see these images and feel as though that fake appearance is beauty. If women could only realize that being healthy is a great goal, and that beauty begins with being happy on the inside. Media preaches outer beauty, but in a world of flaws, beauty defined by the world is nearly unattainable. In addition, health is being compensated to reach the ideal look by detrimental eating habits and procedures such as lipo-suction. Not only is surgery unhealthy, but it is expensive, causing women to put out more money than they can afford to "look good".

In order to counteract the negative influences and repercussions, magazines should focus on inner beauty as well as represent the American public better with having "average" women represented such as *YM* magazine has attempted by featuring women that the public can relate to. Therefore, when all is said and done, magazines tend to care more about revenue than negative influences on their audience. It is up to women to define their own beauty and find satisfaction in that.

A Christian author, Tertullian, writes: "Against Him those women sin who torment their skin with potions, stain their cheeks with rouge and extend the line of their eyes with black

coloring. Doubtless they are dissatisfied with God's plastic skill. In their own persons they convict and censure the Artificer of all things ("The Garden Quote", 2010)." What a well said statement. Magazines have made beauty an idolized standard, preventing women from seeing the good and instead, focusing on the bad.

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