

Women within
society: the effects of
media, socializing
institutions and
beauty i...



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The feminist movement has been a social fight for gender equality for over 15 decades (Evans, 1979, p. 156). Many strides have been taken and victories have been made. However, why is it that after almost 200 years, the media and beauty industries are continuing to over-sexualize and show blatant sexism towards women; and why are they still able to get away with it? During a TED talk, model Cameron Russell discusses the model industry. Russell voices that image is powerful, “ how we look, though it is superficial and immutable, has a huge impact on our lives” (Russell, 2018). Russell also states that for the past few centuries we have “ defined beauty as tall, slender figures, femininity and white skin” (Russell, 2018). So, it stands to reason that only 4% of women in North America identify as beautiful (Dove, 2018). Fashion Designer Carrie Hammer believes that this is the case because the media, fashion and beauty industries portray and exploit unrealistic standards of beauty (Hammer, 2016). In this paper, I will discuss how macro structures, such as advertising, have impacted my personal self-identity as a young woman. I will then specifically discuss: how and why the media, beauty and advertising industries exploit females, how socializing agents control gender roles in society and the feminist theory. I will then discuss the impact these factors have on women and society as a whole.

Growing up, I was always told that I was pretty enough to be a model. I was skinny, I was white, and I was pretty; I fit the mould. However, although I had people boosting my self-confidence in my appearance, there were also people who thought I wasn't enough. To them, my teeth were crooked “ get braces” they would say, and then it became “ once you get those braces off, contact me”. After that, other excuses were made; I wasn't tall enough, I was

too skinny, not skinny enough, I had bad posture, my nose was crooked, my eyes were too close together or too small; the list goes on and on. As a pre-teen, this confused me because all my life I was told how beautiful was, by family and complete strangers, and then I was being told that I wasn't beautiful enough. This contradiction effected my self-esteem and self-confidence dramatically, and my teenage years were dark and filled with body image issues. It wasn't until I took a sociology course in high school when I learned about the effects of different socializing institutions (such as mass media, peer groups etc) on women in particular. I was taught that these socializing agents were supposed to help individuals form various roles in different groups and in society, however they actually were contradicting and in fact disorienting for young people (Brym, & Lie, J. 2018, p. 51). I connected to these findings, because I felt as though my body image issues and low self-esteem was a negative impact of the media, advertising and portrayal of women in society. It was also through my current sociology class, that it dawned on me: as a white, pretty and thin girl, I am supposed to be the " ideal beauty", however even in the eyes of some people, I am not good enough. This lead me to think about how other people felt, specifically those of minority groups; those who were not even looked at by society as beautiful because of their skin colour, or weight. My eyes were opened to the sick, twisted and contradicting world that has created ridiculously unrealistic beauty standards, that negatively impact women each day. Of course, I was aware of these issues growing up, some advertisements of women shown on T. V. or in magazines made me cringe, but now I have become fully aware of the negative impact these macro-structures have on myself, and all women within our society.

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Beauty industries have built their trillion-dollar success through what Carrie Hammer calls “ The Beauty Gap”. This is the term she uses to describe the “ space in between the unrealistic standards of beauty that we are being provided and where our true beauty actually lies. What’s in between is unrealistic images; images that actually don’t exist in real life” (Hammer, 2016). Industries have even gone as far as advertising women’s bodies 20% below normal weight for the average woman (Xiaowei, 2013, p. 195). Once these unrealistic images and standards are set, women who do not meet those standards are roped into buying products sold by the beauty industry, with empty promises of making them beautiful. According to, Huang Xiaowei, a writer for the journal of Canadian Social Science “ Approximating beauty can be essential to a woman’s chances for power, respect and attention (Xiaowei, 2013, p. 196). When comparing men and women Xiaowei writes “ To have power, one needs to possess something that someone else wants, or needs. For a man, it can be wealth or influence or knowledge; for a woman, it has always been beauty, or someone else’s accumulated wealth or strength (Xiaowei, 2013, p. 196). This fact, in relation to the rise in cosmetic surgery for women, has proven that women are spending time, money and putting themselves through pain, in order to try and gain status in our society through their appearance. In 2015, the amount of people who underwent cosmetic surgery in North America jumped over five times more than in 1992 to 1. 7 million people (Brym, & Lie, J. 2018, p. 63). Likewise, 14 million people underwent “ minimally invasive” procedures (such as Botox) in 2015, which is 200 times more than in 1992 (Brym, & Lie, J. 2018, p. 63). It is evident that many women in North America are undergoing surgeries and procedures to enhance their appearances, as Xiaowei stated in his article “ <https://assignbuster.com/women-within-society-the-effects-of-media-socializing-institutions-and-beauty-industries/>

recognizing this (beauty in relation to power and success for women), women have quite sensibly directed great energy toward evaluating and improving their appearance in" (Xiaowei, 2013, p. 196) in order to try and gain power and success within our society. This further proves that the beauty industry thrives on women's low self-esteem and self-confidence, in order to make a profit.

Media has become an important socializing institution within our society. Research suggests that media plays a remarkable and important role in determining people's attitudes and behaviours (Lopez-Garcia & Roca-Sales, 2017, p. 188). When boys and girls are exposed to different forms of media from a young age, they begin to learn the different behaviour norms between genders that are portrayed in mass media. For example, boys are most likely to interact with media such as video games that portray violent messages, when in comparison girls interact with media that portrays the opposite message of being ' a damsel in distress' who needs a man to save them. For example: in the video game ' Grand Theft Auto' one of the features allows the male player to rape and physically assault female prostitutes; when in comparison girls are exposed to movies such as snow white, which sends the message of being hopeless and needing to be saved by a man (Brym, & Lie, J. 2018, p. 165). Through these different exposures of gender roles in mass media, males are learning that they are the dominant sex who are often powerful professionals that must be tough, strong and emotionless (J. Harold, personal communication, October 29th , 2018). In comparison, females are being portrayed as sexual objects, subordinate non-professionals whose only goal in life is to stay at home with the children,

cook and clean for their husband (Collins, 2011, p. 290). The social Cognitive theory states that people learn behaviours and roles through the media, as they learn from real-world models (Linz, Popova & Rudy, 2010, p. 708). Therefore, when children are viewing mass media stereotypes about men and women's behaviour and roles within society, they are learning and applying this knowledge of gender stereotypes during their everyday lives until they become a worldwide norm.

Feminist thinking did not have an impact on sociology until the mid 60s. It wasn't until that early period of feminism in sociology, gender issues being ignored by well-known male theorist were introduced by feminists (Brym, & Lie, J. 2018, p. 16). There is diversity within the Feminist movement, however there are three main streams (Brym, & Lie, J. 2018, p. 179). The first stream of the feminist movement is ' liberal feminism'. This form of the feminist movement advocates the beliefs that " the main sources of women subordination are: learned gender roles and the denial of opportunities to woman (Brym, & Lie, J. 2018, p. 179). The advocacy for non-sexist methods of socialization and education, more sharing of domestic tasks between women and men, and extending to women all of the educational, employment, and political rights and privileges that man have" is a main goal for this Feminist stream (Brym, & Lie, J. 2018, p. 179). The second main stream of the feminist movement is the ' socialist feminist'. This group believe the main source of women's disadvantages in society is the relationship to the economy (Brym, & Lie, J. 2018, p. 179). This group believes that " the economic and sexual oppression of woman has its roots in capitalism" (Brym, & Lie, J. 2018, p. 179). The final stream of the feminist

movement is the ' radical feminists'. They believe that " the very idea of gender must be changed to bring an end to male domination, and that patriarchy is more deeply rooted than capitalism" (Brym, & Lie, J. 2018, p. 179). In relation to mass media, feminist sociologists analyze gender roles, as they claim that people are not born with the knowledge of how to express masculinity and femininity, it is learned behaviour through exposure to mass media (Brym, & Lie, J. 2018, p. 60). Feminist also believe that people are not passively learning gender roles but are actively trying to develop the skills in order to use them in their everyday lives (Brym, & Lie, J. 2018, p. 60). This is part of the reason why such roles and behaviours become the conventional norm within our societies and are hard to change, as most people are inclined to choose messages that are widespread (Brym, & Lie, J. 2018, p. 60).

In conclusion, gender roles, socialization, and behaviours are learned through many different forms of socializing agents, however one of the largest is mass media. It is through media such as television, social media, and magazines, that children and adults learn how to express ' masculinity' and ' femininity' (Brym, & Lie, J. 2018, p. 60). It is through media that males learn violent behaviour towards women, viewing them as sexual objects. It is through media that women learn to be submissive, to let men have all of the power and success in life. Unfortunately, the mass media is how such behaviours become norms, as they become widespread and conventional views. It is through socializing agents such as the beauty and advertising industries that a horrific cycle of ' the beauty gap' plays over and over. When unrealistic standards cause low self-esteem, people (mostly women) buy

products or undergo painful and expensive surgeries to enhance their appearance, however when those strategies don't work, they go back to hating their appearance; and the cycle continues. It is through macro-structures such as the ones outlined in my paper, that I learned how to behave in a gender specific way, and my role within society. However, through the one advantage of mass media, feminist voices are being heard more, and we are able to have our views spread more effectively throughout the world. We are able to voice and debate our concerns, and educate people on the effects that media, socializing institutions, beauty industries etc play in the inequality and horrendous treatment of women in today's society. Although the treatment and portrayal of women in mass media today is far from perfect and the traditional misrepresentation of females in the media is unchanging, it is a fact that in comparison to the early 1900s, there has been some minor improvement (Amos & Spears, 2014, p. 446). Even though this is a small victory, many strides need to be taken to ensure the equality and treatment of women in the media and advertising industries improves. I believe this will take the world one step closer to equality between the sexes, and I believe that society as a whole will be a happier and healthier place for men and women to strive.

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