

# Beauty in the media media essay



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Images of female bodies are everywhere. Women-and their body parts-sell everything from food to cars. Sex has become the selling point of a product, rather than the value of the product or service itself. Everywhere a person turns women's bodies are being graphically used to sell products. Popular film and television actresses are younger, taller and thinner all the time. Quite often they have to starve themselves, and will faint from hunger simply to maintain the body image that seems to be required for a standard of beauty that was set by media. These are the women that young girls are taught to idolize and emulate. Magazines published specifically for women are bursting with articles advising that if a woman can lose those twenty pounds and buy the right makeup and clothing, they'll have everything-a perfect marriage, great sex, loving children, and of course a rewarding career; all it takes is fitting into a mold. Beauty is no longer in the eye of the beholder, it is a set standard that can only be achieved by living up to impossible standards. Women attempt to change their attitudes and appearances to conform to a standard that through years of seeing images in magazines and on television have become normalized to the point where, often unconsciously, they are accepted ideas, values, and standards; for women far more than for men looks are crucial and more defining and it is hard to achieve and maintain the image that media has defined as beautiful. These values of attractiveness are being imposed on women, most of whom are larger and more mature than the actress and models shown, because women allow it to be so. Women allow themselves to try to fit a mold, to live up to that impossible standard. They allow themselves to believe that to be beautiful they have to act raunchy, dress slutty, and be thin, tall, and wear

makeup; anything else is not attractive. Men on the other hand do not believe this to be true; as David, a young man in Ariel Levy's book *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, points out "What girls don't understand is guys always want girls. If every girl dressed casually, you'd still like girls"(Levy Page 151). Women exhaust themselves living up to a standard they feel must be met in order to be liked, to be loved, or even to be wanted when the simple truth is they would be anyway. If this is the truth, why is it women do exhaust themselves?

Some psychologists say the reasons are rooted in economics. Industries that present ideals that are difficult to achieve and maintain, are assured of growth and profits. Meaning, it is not a coincidence that youth and a slim figure are promoted in ads and media. By viewing these images repeatedly there begins to be hegemony, and therefore mentally women believe they actually do need the products that will help them achieve their goals of living up to the ever raising standard. This makes the stakes huge. By showing images of young, thin women made up with beauty products it makes the average women insecure about their own body, and how the male counterpart views the body of an average woman. Women that are insecure concerning their bodies are far more likely to purchase beauty products, new clothes, and diet aids. Research also indicates that constant exposure to images of young, thin, and often air-brushed female bodies is associated to loss of self-esteem, depression, and can lead to the development of unhealthy eating habits in young girls and women. The American research group *Anorexia Nervosa & Related Eating Disorders, Inc.* reports that one out of every four college-aged women uses detrimental methods to control

weight; including skipping meals, fasting, self-induced vomiting, excessive exercise, and laxative abuse. The demands to be thin are also influencing young girls: statistics show that these extreme weight control measures are even being used by girls as young as five and six. Many studies, such as one conducted by Marika Tiggemann and Levina Clark in 2006 titled “Appearance Culture in Nine- to 12-Year-Old Girls: Media and Peer Influences on Body Dissatisfaction,” indicate that almost half of all preadolescent girls desire to be thinner, and as a result have engaged in some form of unhealthy weight loss. Overall; research suggests that 90% of women are dissatisfied with their body image in some way. Media activist Jean Kilbourne comes to the conclusion that, “Women are sold to the diet industry by the magazines we read and the television programs we watch, almost all of which make us feel anxious about our weight”. Americans live in a media culture and when that media shows women who they ought to be and it is fed to women in a constant loop of ads, television, and billboards it is increasingly hard to escape.

Conceivably the most disturbing factor is the fact that these media images of female attractiveness are unattainable to all but an extremely small percentage of women. When we look at popular icons of beauty it is clear just how unrealistic the standard is. For example, researchers generated a computer reproduction of a woman with the proportions of a Barbie-doll discovered that her back would be too frail to bear the weight of her upper body, additionally her body would be much too narrow to have any more than half a liver and a few centimeters of bowel. A real woman with those proportions would experience chronic diarrhea and ultimately die from

malnutrition. Yet the number of real life women and young girls who seek a similarly underweight body has become an epidemic, and unfortunately they can suffer equally devastating consequences to their health.

Sadly, even women's magazines have ten and one-half times more advertisements and articles promoting weight loss, and showing super thin and gorgeous women than men's magazines do. Furthermore, over three-quarters of the covers of women's magazines incorporate at least one message about how to change a woman's appearance to please a man-by diet, cosmetic surgery, beauty products, or exercise. These magazines which ideally would promote better self image, and encourage all body types actually help promote the insecurities that lead to women continuing a self destructive cycle. This image of beauty is seen everywhere. Television and movies also reinforce the significance of a skinny body as the measure of a woman's worth. Most of the female characters in TV comedies are underweight, the characters that are above average in size, or even what the average woman would be, tend to be given negative comments from male characters as well as other female characters about their bodies; and often these negative comments are followed by audience laughter. Although women have come a long way and now have a greater knowledge of the body image that media force feeds the effect of the media still has a strong hold on mentality and the lengths women go to achieve the unattainable.

Everywhere women look there are images of slim women wearing hardly anything at all with their hair and makeup completely done. One only has to go outside and look at the billboards, turn on a television, or open a newspaper or magazine to experience these types of images. In a recent

Macy's ad the cover shows the image of Santa Clause; the typical older gentleman dressed from head to toe, while a young, fiery redheaded Mrs. Clause (or perhaps Mistress Clause?) leans in to kiss dear old saint nick; who has a finger up to his lips to whisper silence. Ads like these promote that older men 'should' be with younger women, that secret affairs are sexy, and that young pretty girls are objects of clandestine desires. Other ads do not even try to disguise the sexuality and blatantly flaunt it to the audience. In a recent Volvo ad the manufacture displays the interior of a car, highlighting the parking brake in full upright position; the caption reading "We Are Just As Excited As You Are" leading a woman viewer to think that she should be excited, and thankfully it is nothing to be ashamed of because the masculine image is also excited. Many advertisements go even further, an Italian coffee ad shows a couple nude, and heavily sexualized in a sea of coffee beans. Ariel Levy says "women are not just accepting this supersexualised culture – they are fuelling it" (Levy), which seems to be the case when a simple look around produces women and young girls wearing next to nothing and women in ads wearing absolutely nothing at all by their own choice.

This barrage of main stream media about tin bodies, dieting and a beauty standard tells "ordinary" women that they are forever in need of modification-and that the female body is merely an object to be perfected. Jean Kilbourne argues that the overwhelming presence of media images of painfully thin women means that real women's bodies have become invisible in the mass media. The real tragedy, Kilbourne concludes, is that many women internalize these stereotypes, and judge themselves by the beauty industry's standards. Women learn to compare themselves to other women,

and to compete with them for male attention. This focus on beauty and desirability “ effectively destroys any awareness and action that might help to change that climate”. Sex and beauty are tools to sell more products; the poor body image and low self esteem only help to further sell items to enhance appearances; and slowly this has become an acceptable practice. The way we talk and think about appearances could use a radical makeover.