Dying to Be Beautiful:

The Effects of the Media on Women and Young Girls

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In this economy that revolves around consumerism, marketing products to the masses through popular media is a dependable method to assure sales. However, marketers are not only selling products through advertisements – they are selling ideas. One set of ideas, in particular, is the Anglo-centric standards of beauty that are dominating Western culture. According to experts in the field, the image of women in advertising today is worse than ever. The pressure on women to be thin, young, and beautiful is more intense than ever before. Ultimately, this has led to an increase in body image negativity, low self-esteem, and eating disorders in women and girls as young as eight years old. Understandably, men are just as susceptible to the effects of advertisements. However, research shows that women spend more time and money on beauty and are at an exponentially greater risk for anorexia and bulimia. The image of women in advertising today portrays an unrealistic and unattainable standard of beauty that is both physically and psychologically detrimental to the well-being of women and young girls.

It has been said that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder," but there is also a scientific validity that supports how humans and other species perceive and judge beauty. According to Feng (2002), an undergraduate of Human Biology at Stanford University, "Symmetry has been scientifically proven to be inherently attractive to the human eye." Feng's peer-reviewed science journal article, "Looking Good: The Psychology and Biology of Beauty," discusses multiple experiments that test the theory of symmetric beauty. For example, Johnston, a professor of psychology at New Mexico State University, created a survey in which viewers would rate a series of facial images on a beauty scale of one to nine. The photos with the highest ratings were all symmetric. Feng and Howard (2002), the senior science editor of *The Huffington Post*, both

report that humans are not the only species that seeks out beauty and symmetry. According to scientists, "Female swallows, for example, prefer males with longer and more symmetric tails, while female zebra finches mate with males with symmetrically colored leg bands." In Howard's (2013) *YouTube* video, "The Science of Female Attractiveness," some research suggests that during mating season, male and female flamingos will apply natural oil on themselves to attract the opposite sex by bringing out the pink of their feathers. Howard parallels this to the act of applying cosmetics to appear more appealing to the opposite sex. Moreover, Feng's (2002) research states that "[t]he rationale behind symmetry preference in both humans and animals is that symmetric individuals have a higher mate-value; scientists believe that this symmetry is equated with a strong immune system. Thus, beauty is indicative of more robust genes, improving the likelihood that an individual's offspring will survive." Although there is sound, scientific proof that justifies our perceptions of beauty, something in history caused modern society to change its definition of beauty.

Examples of great beauties are recorded throughout history, but so are the serious implications of the perceptions of beauty. In ancient Greece, Helen of Troy, a very beautiful Spartan queen who was celebrated in her time for her physical perfection, is said to have caused the Trojan War. In medieval times, Guinevere, the beautiful wife of King Arthur, is said have caused the downfall of Camelot because of an adulterous affair she had with Arthur's chief knight, Sir Lancelot. In more recent history, skin color plays a major role in society's concept of beauty. Colorism, which is defined as the discrimination against individuals with a dark skin tone, in the African American community originated during the 1800s when slavery was prominent. In the article, "Dark Skin Vs: Light Skin: The Battle of Colorism in the Black Community," Campbell (2016), a journalist for *Odyssey,* explains that the animosity that existed

and still exists between dark-skinned and light-skinned individuals started because slaves with lighter skin were shown preferential treatment by their slave owners and were granted certain privileges, such as working and living in the house, as opposed to working in the field and living in the far less desirable slave quarters. Even after the abolition of slavery in the U.S., educational institutions, clubs, and other organizations within the African American community would determine who was worthy of attending college or being granted access to exclusive clubs by administering the "paper bag test." This was done by comparing skin color to a brown paper bag. Anything darker than the bag was deemed unattractive. Unfortunately, this test is still perpetuated over social media today, and lighter skin color is still a modern definition of beauty. At the turn of the century, feminism was on the rise, advocating for the empowerment of women and challenging of traditional gender roles. When Victorian dresses went out of style and the Roaring '20s brought the hem lines of the flappers, according to the article, "100 Years of Shaving Ads Show How We've Been Tricked into Going Hairless" by Komar (2016), a writer who specializes in body positivity, "a lot more seemingly-innocent hair was exposed. And with that, an idea of a new problem arose." The answer to that problem would be the lady razor, which was invented in 1915 by Gillette. In 1922, women's magazines began to run hair removal ads, exploiting women's fears and insecurities. From this point in time to the present, women were forced to believe that being hairless was synonymous with beauty and femininity. Aggressive marketing aimed at women has culminated since the 1930s, and now advertisements are extremely sexually suggestive and put forward the notion that a woman should make her body as attractive for a man as possible.

Because of tools like Photoshop, women are constantly faced with unrealistic and unattainable beauty standards; thus, according to experts like Kilbourne (2014), the image of

women in advertising is worse than it has ever been. Kilbourne, who is internationally recognized for her groundbreaking work on the image of women in advertising, states in her lecture, "The Dangerous Ways Ads See Women," that the obsession with thinness is worse than ever because of programs like Photoshop. One striking image in her lecture features a model that was digitally altered to be so skinny, that her head was larger than her pelvis. "This," Kilbourne states, "is an anatomical impossibility." Another expert in this field, Engeln (2013), who is a psychologist and body image researcher at Northwestern University, has coined the term "beauty sickness," which is defined as an obsession with appearance, a persistent lack of self-satisfaction with body image, and a strong and relentless drive to achieve beauty, as it is defined by American society. In her lecture, "An Epidemic of Beauty Sickness," Engeln states that it is impossible to engage with the world while chronically monitoring one's body appearance: "When you are beauty sick, you cannot engage with the world, because between you and the world is a mirror. And it's a mirror that travels with you everywhere; you can't seem to put it down." Besides the altering of body size, Photoshop has been used to lighten the skin tone of people of color. Kilbourne (2014) states, after displaying another photo example of a woman's vaginal area that was cut off to accentuate "the dreaded thigh-gap," that the images advertisements construct are impossible standards for everyone and anyone to achieve, but they are particularly impossible for women of color, "who are considered beautiful only insofar as they resemble the white ideal: light skin, straight hair, Caucasian features, round eyes." As a result, some people of color have resorted to toxic skin bleaching creams to lighten their skin and ultimately remove the melanin. They do this to fit into society's definition of beauty, no matter the cost to their health (Campbell, 2016). The argument that women are smart enough not to be affected by images in the media is brought up constantly and has been proven valid, but it does

not change the fact that most women who see these unrealistic images feel negatively toward their own bodies.

Grown women may have the presence of mind to see an extremely altered photograph and determine the standards put forth are unrealistic and unattainable, but adolescent girls may not know better. Negative body image in adolescent girls, according to the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders (n.d.), is largely caused by images in the media. In a study conducted on fifth grade ten-year-old girls, more than half of the group told researchers that they felt dissatisfied with their own bodies after watching a music video featuring Britney Spears. Another study reports that by the age of thirteen, "53% of American girls are unhappy with their bodies. This grows to 78% by the time girls reach seventeen." As a result of negative body image, eight million or more people are diagnosed with an eating disorder in the U.S. – consequently, "more than 90 percent of those afflicted are adolescent and young adult women" (National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders). Unfortunately, body negativity is not the only danger that threatens young women. More often young women are being sexually objectified in advertisements. Kilbourne (2014) states in her lecture that we basically allow the nation's youth to be sexualized through images in the media, but in turn do not educate them about sex. Children are getting a very powerful and very damaging kind of sex education from the media and popular culture, even though "the United States is the only developed nation in the world that doesn't teach sex education in its schools." Girls are encouraged to objectify themselves and to obsess about their sex appeal and appearance at very young ages. These messages shape their gender identity, sexual attitudes and behavior, values, and their capacity for love, connection, and healthy relationships well into adulthood.

Media messages about sex and sexuality often exploit women's bodies and glamorize sexual violence, and this is perfectly demonstrated in the popular novel by James (2015), *Grey: Fifty Shades of Grey as Told by Christian.* Although the *Fifty Shades of Grey* novels have gained a considerable amount of success, having sold over 100 million copies worldwide and set the record in the United Kingdom as the fastest selling paperback of all time, the franchise has also come under a barrage of criticism, deemed by feminists to be one of the most offensive books to have ever been published. Critics and readers have castigated James mercilessly for controversial themes in her first three novels that glamorize sexual violence and romanticize domestic abuse. James' fourth novel, *Grey,* a retelling of the events of the first book in the series by the male character, introduces a whole new spectrum of offensive themes by objectifying the female body and perpetuating Eurocentric beauty standards. In one particular instance, Christian's inner dialogue states, "She's wearing a little makeup. . . I remember when she first fell into my office how ordinary I thought she looked. . . With a little makeup and the right clothes, she's a goddess" (James, 2015, p. 200). Statements such as these carry the implication that women are only beautiful when wearing make-up and body contouring apparel. Another notion that is frequently suggested is the beauty of the female character's pale skin. Eurocentric features are typically described as pale or white skin; long, flowing, usually light colored hair; light colored eyes; a long, straight nose; small face; and a slight, thin body. James encompasses these ideas and applies them to her main character, alienating a large majority of her audience.

The development of social media in the past decade has radically changed the way society connects with one another. However, a new set of trends, called the "Skinny Body Challenges," have been cause for concern in recent years. There are countless variations of these challenges circulating through the Internet, but the article, "Why the Skinny Body Challenges

Are Harmful," examines the most common three challenges. Sasso (2016), a journalist for

Odyssey, explains that the belly button challenge is done by attempting to "wrap your arm

around [the back of] your waist and touching your belly button." This challenge in particular has

more correlation with flexibility than it does with thinness. The collarbone challenge "is done by

balancing as many coins as you can fit on your [protruding] collarbone." Lastly, the iPhone

challenge is accomplished by "putting an iPhone across your knees to cover them. If the phone

covers both knees, then you pass the skinny challenge" (Sasso, 2016). In a separate article,

Miller (2014), a journalist for *NY Daily News,* notes that the bikini bridge challenge started as an

Internet prank, but could "do lasting damage by giving people with eating disorders a dangerous

new goal to obsess over." The bikini bridge challenge is "the gap created between a woman's

bikini bottoms and concave stomach when she's lying down in a two-piece." Sasso (2016),

Miller (2014), and many health care professionals adamantly express that these challenges do not

define one's worth or beauty, and they strongly encourage young women to ignore these fads.

According to Cuen (2016), a journalist for *Mic*, in yet another article that focuses on the damage

inflicted by the body challenges, not all are specific to body appearance. One challenge in

particular that has caused the most concern is the panty challenge. Ultimately, the goal of the

panty challenge is for the wearers to snap a photo of their underwear after wearing them all day

and show no vaginal discharge. The lack of discharge is meant to imply that the girl engaging in

the challenge has a "clean" vagina. Although all body challenges are discouraged and considered

dangerous to the health of the participant, the panty challenge has caused extreme concern in

professionals who have been made aware of the fact that a great number of women and young

girls know very little about their bodies and vaginal health.

Figures in the media, such as music artists, actors, television personalities, etc., have a tremendous influence over their fans. Allen, an English singer and songwriter, has used her music as a platform to speak out against modern mainstream beauty standards and consumerism. Allen's (2008) lead single, "The Fear," off of her second studio album, *It's Not You, It's Me,* has been discussed and criticized for the themes the song incorporates, such as the postmodern condition. The first two lines of lyrics, "I want to be rich and I want lots of money / I don't care about clever I don't care about funny" can be misinterpreted if the listener is not aware that Allen is exemplifying satire, since today's popular culture typically emphasizes the importance of physical beauty and financial success. In the second stanza, she writes, "I'll take my clothes off and it will be shameless / Cause everyone knows that's how you get famous" (Allen, 2008). These lines are a perfect example of the sexual objectification of women in the media. Advertisements that feature women with little to no clothing and celebrities who become famous for making sex tapes are more often glorified than they are scrutinized for the implications they cause. Finally, the last two lines of lyrics in the second to the last stanza state, "Now I'm not a saint but I'm not a sinner / And everything is cool as long as I'm getting thinner," which ties into the theme that people are more concerned with their outward appearance, namely their weight, than they are with intellectual or even moral attributes (Allen). Allen's song invites listeners to ask what exactly the fear is. Although it is not explicitly defined, another artist makes similar connections between fear and consumption. While being interviewed by Moore (2002), a filmmaker, for the widely viewed and controversial documentary, *Bowling for Columbine,* Marilyn Manson states that if society is kept in a constant state a fear, they will consume the products that are marketed toward them.

When it comes to the argument regarding the image of women in advertising, some will argue advertisements and marketing that feature an artificially constructed image of the human form cause more harm to the psyche than they do good. Others will argue that the innovation of marketing revolutionized capitalism, and consumerism is vital to our way of life. Yet others will choose not to argue at all and claim that they are exempt from the influence of advertising. However, that is just not the case. Whether they are aware of it or not, "the influence of advertising is quick, cumulative, and for the most part, subconscious" (Kilbourne, 2014). It is impossible to escape the influence of advertising; and moreover, the influence of advertising is having a very real, very dangerous effect on the women and young girls who are exposed to them. Experts, such as Engeln (2013), suggest that to turn the tide against the effects of beauty sickness, society must invest less in beauty. This means that if watching shows like *America's Next Top Model* and reading magazines like *Cosmo* make people think more about their appearance, they should stop watching and reading them. Companies, like Aerie, that have chosen to hire more racially diverse models and have ceased the use of Photoshop to alter their images are paving the way toward creating a more positive body image in women of all ages. Hopefully this type of forward thinking will revolutionize the way women in advertising are portrayed in the future.

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