Beauty and Body Image in the Media

Images of female bodies are everywhere. Women—and their body parts—sell everything from food to cars. Popular film and television actresses are becoming younger, taller and thinner. Some have even been known to faint on the set from lack of food. Women's magazines are full of articles urging that if they can just lose those last twenty pounds, they'll have it all—the perfect marriage, loving children, great sex, and a rewarding career.

Why are standards of beauty being imposed on women, the majority of whom are naturally larger and more mature than any of the models? The roots, some analysts say, are economic. By presenting an ideal difficult to achieve and maintain, the cosmetic and diet product industries are assured of growth and profits. And it's no accident that youth is increasingly promoted, along with thinness, as an essential criterion of beauty. If not all women need to lose weight, for sure they're all aging, says the Quebec Action Network for Women's Health in its 2001 report Changements sociaux en faveur de la diversité des images corporelles. And, according to the industry, age is a disaster that needs to be dealt with.

The stakes are huge. On the one hand, women who are insecure about their bodies are more likely to buy beauty products, new clothes, and diet aids. It is estimated that the diet industry alone is worth $100 billion (U.S.) a year. On the other hand, research indicates that exposure to images of thin, young, airbrushed female bodies is linked to depression, loss of self-esteem and the development of unhealthy eating habits in

"We don't need Afghan-style burquas to disappear as women. We disappear in reverse—by revamping and revealing our bodies to meet externally imposed visions of female beauty."

Source: Robin Gerber, author and motivational speaker

Related MNet Resources
Lesson Library: Topic – gender portrayal

Articles
Too Few Animated Women Break the Disney Mold (Ottawa Citizen)

Codes and Regulations
CBC's Guidelines on Sex-Role Portrayal

Recommended reading, viewing, surfing

Studies
The Pervasiveness and Persistence of the Feminine Beauty Ideal in Children's Fairy Tales (Purdue University, November 2003)
Television Situation Comedies: Female Body Images and Verbal Reinforcements (Sex Roles: A Journal of Research, 1999)
Women and Weight: Gendered Messages on Magazine Covers (Sex Roles: A Journal of Research, 1999)

Articles
Wanted: Sexy Virgins (Women's ENews, November 2003)
Re-modeling For Perfection (CBSNews.com, April 2003)

The promise of perfection (Globe & Mail, June 2001)
women and girls.

The American research group Anorexia Nervosa & Related Eating Disorders, Inc. says that one out of every four college-aged women uses unhealthy methods of weight control—including fasting, skipping meals, excessive exercise, laxative abuse, and self-induced vomiting. And the Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute warns that weight control measures are being taken by girls as young as nine. In 2003, Teen magazine reported that 35 per cent of girls 6 to 12 years old have been on at least one diet, and that 50 to 70 per cent of normal weight girls believe they are overweight.

Media activist Jean Kilbourne concludes 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."

Unattainable Beauty

Perhaps most disturbing is the fact that media images of female beauty are unattainable for all but a very small number of women. Researchers generating a computer model of a woman with Barbie-doll proportions, for example, found that her back would be too weak to support the weight of her upper body, and her body would be too narrow to contain more than half a liver and a few centimeters of bowel. A real woman built that way would suffer from chronic diarrhea and eventually die from malnutrition.

Still, the number of real life women and girls who seek a similarly underweight body is epidemic, and they can suffer equally devastating health consequences.

The Culture of Thinness

Researchers report that women’s magazines have ten and one-half times more ads and articles promoting weight loss than men’s magazines do, and over three-quarters of the covers of women’s magazines include at least one message about how to change a woman’s bodily appearance—by diet, exercise or cosmetic surgery.

Television and movies reinforce the importance of a thin body as a measure of a woman’s worth. Canadian researcher Gregory Fouts reports that over three-quarters of the female characters in TV situation comedies are underweight, and only one in twenty are above average in size. Heavier actresses tend to receive negative comments from male characters about their bodies ("How about wearing a sack?") and 80 per cent of these negative comments are followed by canned audience laughter.

There have been efforts in the magazine industry to buck the trend. For several years the Quebec magazine Coup de Pouce has consistently included full-sized women in their fashion pages and Châtelaine has pledged not to touch up photos and not to include models less than 25 years of age.

http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/issues/stereotyping/women_and_girls/women_beau...
However, advertising rules the marketplace and in advertising thin is "in." Twenty years ago, the average model weighed 8 per cent less than the average woman—but today’s models weigh 23 per cent less. Advertisers believe that thin models sell products. When the Australian magazine New Woman recently included a picture of a heavy-set model on its cover, it received a truckload of letters from grateful readers praising the move. But its advertisers complained and the magazine returned to featuring bone-thin models. Advertising Age International concluded that the incident "made clear the influence wielded by advertisers who remain convinced that only thin models spur the sales of beauty products."

Self-Improvement or Self-Destruction?

The barrage of messages about thinness, dieting and beauty tells "ordinary" women that they are always in need of adjustment—and that the female body is 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."

HOW THE MEDIA PORTRAY:

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