

Media and Female Body Image

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With so many media outlets using so many images of the “perfect” female body, women and girls often get the message that their own body is not good enough. Girls watch more than 5,000 hours of television before kindergarten, and those hours are filled with more than 80,000 advertisements. Research consistently states that 90 percent of women are very dissatisfied with their bodies. By comparing their bodies to fashion models and actresses, it is understandable that women feel uncomfortable with their own bodies.

Thin is In

Women don’t get to see too many average body types in the media. Top models and movie stars are almost all extremely thin. Models are so driven to be skinny that about 40 percent of them have developed an eating disorder, according to a study by the Model Health Inquiry. How do all these thin models affect girls? Almost 90% of girls say they feel pressured by the fashion industry to be thin.

Hollywood and major TV stations also promote thin as the ideal female body type. When Julia Roberts starred in “Pretty Woman,” the media used her face in the movie poster but replaced her body with that of a thinner model. In 2008, CBS used a computer program to shave 15 pounds off of the TV journalist Katie Couric’s body to make her look more appealing in the ad for her show.

Beauty over Brains

Magazines, television shows, and movies seem to always portray women as beautiful objects rather than as people who can think or take action. Seventy percent of the content in teen magazines is related to beauty concerns instead of other issues that young women care about, such as career or academic issues. When a teen magazine does address careers, it tends to focus on fashion related issues, such as how to dress for the job. Mean-

while, television shows like the “Miss America” pageant focus on the swimsuit and evening gown competition, and they give less attention to the talent part of the competition.



Collage by Lenore Balliro

What Can We Do?

The media is a very powerful tool in shaping one’s perceptions, and research shows that the media contribute to many women having an unhealthy body image. But there are steps you can take! The Media Awareness Network recommends that you:

1. Think about your own media “diet.” Could you reduce your consumption of certain media?
2. Learn to question what the media are presenting. Work with others to name what is being shown to you and what is being left out.
3. Finally, ask: What is the purpose of the media? Who profits? Who loses? Who decides? Answering these questions could lead to taking action to advocate for your needs.

We are surrounded by media messages, and women are especially affected by them because the media’s portrayal of women is so narrow and so disconnected from reality. We do not have to be victims of the media, however. We can choose to consume less media, we can be more critical of the media we do consume, and we can join with others to advocate for media that meet our needs.

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Sources: Girl Scout Research Institute 2010; <www.media-awareness.ca>; <childrencomefirst.com>.