

Media and the Mirror: Does popular culture push women to perfection?

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Ever sank your sweet tooth into a Skor bar? If eating one is indulging in a tasty experience, reading the slogan on the wrapper is an ironic one. When Hershey's introduced Skor bars to North Americans in the 1980's, the company borrowed the Dutchess of Windsor's phrase, "You Can Never be too Rich or too Thin," printing it right on the wrapper. Since when do chocolate and skinny go together?

Since they were paired by media savvy experts paid to manipulate the public's perception of what's desirable. The stakes are pretty low when you're talking candy but what about when the message, "never too thin", is packaged in the form of super models and super slim celebrities? Most of us know a chocolate bar may look better on the wrapper than it actually tastes, but what many people don't realize, is that the women featured in popular culture magazines look better on paper, too. Not only have their photos been airbrushed and digitally enhanced but they have the benefits of professional make up artists, hairstylists, and photographers who get paid to make models look like their namesake: perfect beings we should aspire to copy. No wonder 80% of women who responded to a recent People magazine survey admitted images of women on television or in ads and movies made them feel insecure.

Glance at the magazine covers at the checkout counter, and there can be little doubt: Western society is bent on beautiful bodies. But have we always been so body obsessed? And is the media truly to blame? How can women look beyond the mirror to see their true worth?

Thin Today; Curvy Tomorrow

Wanting to look good is nothing new for women, but according to the University of Wisconsin Health Services ("History of American Women and Body Image," 2004) obsession with body image is a relatively recent phenomenon. As early as the 19th century women wore corsets to cinch in waists, but while uncomfortable, such measures were not considered dangerous. It wasn't until the turn of the century, when the idea that the body could be shaped through



Photo by Paul Linden

self-control, that beauty became internalized and the scale became a measure of self worth.

In the 1920's women gave up their corsets, but they also lost their curves. The flapper look was all the rage and as women struggled to attain the thin, small breasted look of the day, their efforts to become smaller helped the dieting industry grow bigger.

The 1950's was marked by growth of another kind. Mass manufacturing of pointy bras encouraged women to enhance the body parts the 1920's had them tape down. At a voluptuous size 16, Marilyn Monroe was the decade's role model.

Just when they thought it was okay to celebrate their curves and maybe their appetites too, by the 1970's, women were told to slim down again. Only this time, merely trimming some fat would not do. Twiggy, the modeling world's first waif, set the standard with a look that was more prepubescent boy than grown woman.

In the 1980's, women invited aerobic queen, Jane Fonda, into their living rooms, and as her exercise videos instructed them "to make it burn", women learned to drop pounds and pick up dumbbells to sculpt muscles. Just to make things really difficult, by the 1990's, shows like Baywatch, featuring the silicone enhanced Pamela Anderson, added one more criteria to the formula for perfect: bigger breasts. That physical ideal has perpetuated into the new millennium. Toned and lean yet extra curvy in all the right places, today's 'in look' is next to impossible for most women to achieve.

The Media: To Blame or Not to Blame?

If the media consistently presents a thinner than average woman as the ideal, surely the media must shoulder some responsibility for frightening statistics that tell us four out of five American women are dissatisfied with their appearance. Even children are not immune to the message "thin is in", with 81% of 10 year old girls admitting they are afraid of being fat ("Media and Eating Disorders" by Radar Programs, USA). According to Radar, twenty years ago top fashion models weighed 8% less than the average woman but these days models weigh in at a whopping 23% lighter than average. The message that skinny is sexy is perpetuated by magazines like Playboy, where 25% of the centerfolds meet the U.S. criteria for Anorexia. Despite the fact many of the women featured in the media don't look "perfect" in real life either (computer-modified images often use compilations of different body parts; Many actresses use body doubles for specific shots), constant bombardment of these images diminishes self-esteem in many women. Clearly the media encourages women to endeavor to look a certain way, but are they really to blame if we make ourselves sick, physically and psychologically, trying to get there?

The Deanne Jade National Centre for Eating Disorders thinks not. "Body Image in our Time From a Feminist Perspective", suggests that, "Unrealistic and changing body standards breed a society of women who cannot accept their bodies as they are", but it also contends that, "Powerful as the media's 'thin is good' message is, it is unfair to exclusively blame the media for women's body image ills." The media simply plays upon society's likes and dislikes. According to Radar, "If fat sold 'Cokes', you can bet the a-ha girls would have been a size 40."

Sydney University associate professor in media studies, Catherine Lumby ("Falling for the

In Thin”, Australian Associated Press) appears to agree. She thinks young women are not as easily taken in as the media might hope. “I think the media overestimates its role,” she said. “As a result of the media young women are very aware of eating disorders because the media is obsessed with them...To their credit, most magazines portray eating disorders as pathological behaviour.” Lumby’s colleague, co-author of Australia’s guidelines for the treatment of eating disorders, Amanda Jordan, suggests that only a select group of women are at risk for serious body image issues, saying, “Constantly seeing ultra-thin celebrities creates an at-risk environment where people who are in other ways dissatisfied with themselves, unhappy or who haven’t found effective ways of dealing with their problems, will be inspired to more determined dieting.”

In a 2001 debate held by the Institute of Psychiatry in London, Eating Disorders Association Chief Executive, Nicky Bryant argued that the media is actually quite diverse and given that obesity in the Western world is at an all time high, the media has enjoyed limited success in promoting diets and exercise plans. According to Bryant, low self-esteem is at the heart of every eating disorder.

While many experts might contend that most women won’t develop eating disorders as a result of bombardment of media images, this is not to say most women won’t be negatively affected. According to the Deanne Jade paper, research with non-eating disordered college women found that many of them sought help for negative body image. “This suggests the discomfort of negative body image, even at sub-clinical levels, is sufficient to interfere with the quality of life. The sad part of this is that the pressures against body acceptance are so great that women feel incapable of changing without help.”

A Good Body is a Healthy Body

Maybe not to blame for eating disorders, the media is nonetheless an integral part of the body dissatisfaction epidemic that rocks the Western world. As consumers we can educate ourselves and teach our children that the world the media portrays is not a real one. Not only do many models and celebrities punish themselves with extreme workouts, near starvation, and plastic surgery to look the way they do, are they really any happier than the rest of us?

Apparently not. “Research clearly demonstrates women who meet the body/beauty ideal are just as likely to be unhappy about their looks as women who do not” (Deanne Jade). Experts suggest appreciating our bodies for their strength, fitness, and health, rather than for ornamentation is key to being happy with who we are. Regular exercise and a healthy diet are the best ways to build a “good” body; One that is fit and performs healthy functions, allowing us to lead active lives. Pampering our bodies with massages, throwing away the scales, making meal time a celebration of what’s really important in life—ties with our family and friends—can all lead to better body esteem.

Perhaps most of all, appreciating the wonder of the human body, with all its imperfections, and understanding the gift of good health, can lead us to make peace with the bodies we were given. Just ask women who have lost a battle to keep the bodies they were born with. Recent research (Deanne Jade) suggests that women who have had a mastectomy for breast cancer

are more satisfied with their bodies than those who have not been affected by breast surgery or disease.

Now there's a media message worth promoting from women worth emulating.