

BODY IMAGE AND THE MEDIA:  
THE MEDIA'S INFLUENCE ON BODY IMAGE

By

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## ABSTRACT

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Media images of the unattainable thin body can be found almost anywhere. These media images are seen on billboards, magazines, in commercials and in ads. There has been continual interest in women's body image throughout the years. Women's self-esteem, eating patterns and how these two concepts are affected by what a women sees in the media have been researched. This line of research is important because discovering the link between poor body image and the media's portrayal of women could allow for success interventions to be evaluated and implemented. An intervention could lead to fewer cases of anorexia and bulimia and could lead to increased self-esteem and a more positive body image amongst women.

The purpose of this study was to substantiate the media's influence on body image. Forty-three University of Wisconsin Stout undergraduate students voluntarily participated in the study. The control subjects participated by filling out the Body Image States Scales (BISS). The experimental subjects viewed 120-second power point presentation showing media images of

women followed by completion of the BISS. The BISS consists of six questions, rated on a likert type scale that inquires about the subject's feelings regarding their physical appearance at a particular moment in time.

Data analysis using independent sample t-tests was used in this study. Analysis suggested that individuals who viewed the media images of women felt less physically attractive than the individuals who were not exposed to the media presentation.

Also, individuals who viewed the media presentation felt worse about their looks than those individuals who did not view the media presentation.

Additional findings suggested that overall the two groups' satisfaction with their body, looks and attractiveness were not found to be significantly different. The four questions that did not reveal significant findings dealt with more specific aspects of body image. For example, body shape, size and weight were a few of the specific aspects that were questioned.

In the future, replication of this research with a wider pool of subjects perhaps internationally, using a pre-test post-test design, or exposing the experimental group to the thin ideal for a longer period of time is recommended.

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## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

Media images of unattainable body ideals fill women's magazines, TV commercials, movies, and advertisements. Several studies have been done that indicate ways in which a woman's body image, self-esteem, and eating patterns are affected negatively by what she sees and hears from the media. According to Altabe and Thompson (1996), Heinberg and Thompson (1995), and Fallon (1990), social endorsements found in the media portraying an ideal body have led to body image disturbance in some women, as well as implicated the development of eating disorders in some women. Furthermore, Heinberg and Thompson (1995) found that females who were exposed to appearance-related media were less satisfied with their body shape than females who were exposed to non-appearance related images. Women who were less satisfied with their bodies had a lower self-image and a lower self-esteem than women who were satisfied with their physical body.

Many popular magazines for females (and even male-oriented magazines) tell women to focus on their physical, outside attributes (i.e. body shape, muscle tone, bone structure, hair, makeup, clothing, etc.) and rarely mention the importance of being smart, sophisticated, funny and/or possessing many other positive attributes that have nothing to do with physical attributes. Anderson and DiDomenico (1992) found that the media representation of the thin ideal has been connected to the predominance of body image dissatisfaction and dieting disorders. This is yet another reason why this connection between the media and body image is important. This connection is serious because low body image sometimes leads to disordered eating (anorexia, bulimia, binge eating), which in turn can lead to death. The American Anorexia and Bulimia Association states that 1000 American women die of anorexia each year

and that people with eating disorders have the second highest fatality rate of the psychological disorders. Interventions need to be implemented to reduce the number of women dying each year because of body image disturbance disorders. Discovering the link between body image and media images could be the start to finding a successful intervention.

Striegel-Moore and Smolak (2000) found that beauty is the core feature of femininity as portrayed by the media and the core factor in the attractiveness stereotype of women. Social values about women and beauty promote risk factor for developing an eating disorder. Social pressure to be thin is experienced by many women and young girls. Crandall and Rothblum (cited in Striegel-Moore & Smolak, 2000) studied women and beauty and found that overweight girls and women experience significant social pressure, including teasing about weight, discrimination, and condemnation. The thin ideal has been constructed by society and by the media and women and girls are expected to conform to it.

The purpose of this study was to determine if women's exposure to media images of the thin ideal negatively affects body image perception. Stice and Shaw (1994) stated that one of the strongest transmitters of the pressure to look like the thin ideal may well be the mass media. It is hypothesized that the more images of the "thin ideal" body a woman is exposed to through the media, the more her body image is affected negatively.

### ***Statement of the Problem***

The purpose of this study is to substantiate the media's influence on the body image of University of Wisconsin-Stout women in Menomonie, WI. Data was collected in the spring of 2003 via The Body Image States Scale, which consists of six questions (likert scale) regarding dissatisfaction/satisfaction with their body shape and size. The subjects were divided into two groups, control and experimental. The control group was given the BISS and the experimental



group viewed a 120-second power point presentation that showed media images of women followed by the BISS.

### ***Hypotheses***

There are seven null hypothesis proposed in this study. They are as follows:

Ho1: There is no statistically significant difference within the sample scores on the Body Image States Scale between the control group and the experimental group.

Ho2: There is no difference between the control and experimental group's feelings regarding physical appearance.

Ho3: There is no difference between the control and experimental groups feelings regarding their body shape and size.

Ho4: There is no difference between the control and experimental groups satisfaction with weight.

Ho5: There is no difference between the control and experimental groups feelings about physical attractiveness.

Ho6: There is no difference between the control and experimental groups feelings about their looks.

Ho7: There is no difference between the control and experimental groups feelings about their looks compared to others.

### ***Definition of Terms***

There are six terms that need to be defined for clarity of understanding. These terms are:

Body image - Lightstone (2001) defined body image as follows: body image involves our perception, imagination, emotions, and physical sensations of and about our

bodies. It's not static- but ever changing; sensitive to changes in mood, environment, and physical experience. In other words it is how you feel others perceive you, what you believe about your physical appearance, how you feel about your body, and how you feel in your body.

Media - Webster's defined media as: a way of communicating with the general public; newspapers, magazines, TV, and billboards.

Sociocultural Theory - Wiseman, Gray, Mosimann, and Ahrens (1992) defined sociocultural theory in regards to body image as societal standards for beauty that emphasize the desirability for thinness and that this thin ideal is accepted by most women, although it is impossible for many to achieve.

Bulimia Nervosa - According to Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR) the criteria for bulimia nervosa is as follows:

- A. Recurrent episodes of binge eating. An episode of binge eating is characterized by both of the following: 1) eating, in a discrete period of time (e.g. within any 2-hour period), an amount of food that is definitely larger than most people would eat during a similar period of time and under similar circumstances. 2) a sense of lack of control over eating during the episode (e.g. a feeling that one cannot stop eating or control what or how much one is eating)
- B. Recurrent inappropriate compensatory behavior in order to prevent weight gain, such as self-induced vomiting; misuse of laxative, diuretics, enemas, or other medications; fasting; or excessive exercise.
- C. The binge eating and inappropriate compensatory behaviors both occur, on average, at least twice a week for 3 months.

D. Self-evaluation is unduly influenced by body shape and weight.

E. The disturbance does not occur exclusively during episodes of Anorexia Nervosa

Anorexia Nervosa - The following DSM-IV-TR criteria must be met to be diagnosed with anorexia nervosa: A. Refusal to maintain body weight at or above a minimally normal weight for age and height.

B. Intense fear of gaining weight or becoming fat, even though underweight.

C. Disturbance in the way in which one's body weight or shape is experienced, undue influence of body weight or shape on self-evaluation, or denial of the seriousness of current low body weight.

D. In postmenarcheal females, amenorrhea, i.e., the absence of at least three consecutive menstrual cycles.

Body Dysmorphic Disorder - The DSM-IV-TR defines Body Dysmorphic Disorder as follows: A. Preoccupation with an imagined defect in appearance. If a slight physical anomaly is present, the person's concern is markedly excessive.

B. The preoccupation causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.

C. The preoccupation is not better accounted for by another mental disorder (e.g., dissatisfaction with body shape and size in Anorexia Nervosa).

### ***Assumptions***

The researcher assumes the following:

1. The subjects will answer the questionnaire honestly;
2. There are different levels of body image; and
3. The media images used will be representative of the thin ideal.

### *Limitations*

The findings of this study may be limited by the following:

1. All measures are self-report and pressure may have existed for the women to respond in a certain way, thus, answering dishonestly;
2. The subjects may not be representative of the population as a whole;
3. The media images used may not be representative of the thin ideal;
4. Women are exposed to the thin ideal everyday thus recapitulating the what they see throughout their lifetime.

## CHAPTER II

### Literature Review

#### *Introduction*

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the literature on body image and on the media's portrayal of the thin ideal. The first section discusses body image and focuses on the etiology of body image and its prevalence in American society. The next section will explain how the media portrays women and how this portrayal can affect a woman's body image perception. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the role of sociocultural theory and how it influences a woman's body image.

#### *Body Image*

Body image has been defined in many different ways. Cash & Pruzinsky (1990) defined body image as a person's thoughts, feelings, and perceptions about their body overall, including appearance, age, race, functions, and sexuality. They discussed body image as being multidimensional, consisting of a cognitive and an emotional dimension. Cognitive body image includes beliefs and self-statements about the body. Emotional body image is comprised of experiences of appearance, whether the experiences are comfortable or uncomfortable and if there is satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the body. Body image is a subjective experience; it depends on how the individual interprets himself or herself. How a person perceives their body is how they perceive themselves. Banfield and McCabe (2002) concurred that body image is multidimensional, however they identified three aspects: cognitions and affect regarding body, body importance and dieting behavior, and perceptual body image. The cognitive dimension relates to thoughts and beliefs about body shape and the affective dimension includes the feelings that a person has towards their bodies' appearance.

The second dimension, body importance and dieting behavior, can be described as behaviors associated with grooming and dieting. Women who focus more on their body shape tend to engage in more grooming and dieting behaviors than women who do not focus so much on body shape. The last dimension, perceptual body image can be described as the accuracy an individual has when judging their shape, size and weight. Although researchers agree that body image is multidimensional in construct they do not agree on the amount or nature of the dimensions.

Body image is not static; it can change over time or in a few moments. Cash and Pruzinsky (1990) found that watching television could change a person's body image by influencing them to think about their weight, attractiveness, or appearance. Body image is static in the sense that it changes over the life span. Grogan (1999) concluded from several studies that body image is influenced by many factors (family, friends, teacher, peer and society) and as a person gets older the influences on body image change and may become stronger or weaker, thus creating flux in body image over the life-span.

Women with a negative body image experience negative feelings about themselves. Cash, Ancis, and Strachan (1997) found that the negative feelings that some women have about their bodies are only minor annoyances, but for other women the negative feelings they have about their body cause great distress that interferes with their everyday life. When a negative body image gets severe, it may contribute to several disorder, including body dysmorphic disorder, anorexia nervosa, and bulimia nervosa. A negative body image could also lead to anxiety, depression, lowered self-esteem, sexual dissatisfaction and dysfunction. Cash (1999) concluded that investment in physical appearance comes at a high price - undermined self-worth as the body fails to meet societal standards.

Body image is learned and influenced by self-esteem. Lightstone (2001) stated that body image is psychological in nature, and is more about a person's self-esteem and less about their actual physical attractiveness as judged by others. Lightstone (2001) reported that body image is learned by what occurs in families and among peers and that the biggest influence on body image is the culture a person comes from. Cash (1999) concurred with the idea that family, peers and society influence body image. Cash, Anis & Strachan (1997) supported the finding that body image is related to self-esteem, however, they concluded that a negative body image leads to diminished self-esteem. Cash, Anis & Strachan (1997) stated that a person's early socialization about physical appearance and their experience of their body during childhood and adolescence influences how they will view their body as they get older.

Body image discontent is quite common in America and is increasing. Cash, Fleming, Alindogan, Steadman, & Whitehead (2002) reported that over half of the female respondents surveyed in a national magazine evaluated their overall appearance negatively. Over the years, the number of women dissatisfied with their bodies has increased and will more than likely continue to do so. Cash (1999) reported that it has become so prevalent that women are dissatisfied with their body shape and weight that feeling negatively about one's body has been termed a "normative discontent."

Cash (1999) summed up society's body image problem as follows:

The quality of our embodied lives can be heightened or diminished by the views we hold of our own physical appearance. Many people, often women, invest their self-worth into size and of their body and attempt to conform to exacting cultural standards of beauty. Body image dissatisfaction can compromise self-esteem, emotional health, social and sexual well being, and adaptive eating behaviors. People who are overweight or obese can have an especially damaged body image. The continued pursuit of scientific knowledge concerning how body image problems develop and how they can be prevented and overcome is imperative (p. 602).

## *The Media*

For years, the media has been influencing society in many ways. The media decides what the public sees and how it is portrayed. Women are predominately portrayed in the media as thin, waif-like women, without imperfections. They shows the thin women as happy and successful. Some women are affected negatively by constantly being bombarded with this thin ideal. Plastic surgery, drastic dieting, low self-esteem, negative body image and disordered eating are all part of what may happen to women who are constantly in contact with the thin ideal. The media portrayal of women and how this portrayal affects women will be discussed below.

### The Media's Portrayal of Women

The thin ideal is widespread. It seems that thin women are everywhere in society from TV to magazines to billboards. However, those thin women are not our next-door neighbors, they are not our friends and family, they are images of women that most of society cannot attain. They are the models who have stylists do their make-up and their hair, they are airbrushed to rid themselves of imperfections, they are posed to look sexy; they are the images of the media. Most women cannot live up to these images because not everyone has make-up artists and stylists living with them, they cannot always hide their imperfections, and they do not normally pose themselves in the ways that the media poses their models.

The media portrays women in an unrealistic manner. According to Paff and Buckley-Lakner (1997), advertising has historically included stereotypical and unrealistic images of women. These thin ideals encourage women and men to focus on a woman's appearance and body shape. The cultural message that was found to be suggested in some magazines was that women should spend time and engage in behaviors that will make them more physically



attractive.

The media constructs reality for its audience. Media presents ideologies and value messages. The media makes it socially acceptable to have a negative opinion about heavier people, especially heavier women. According to Pollack-Seid (1989) the popular media does not show heavy women leading normal, multifaceted, social lives. They are often seen as objects not fit for love, let alone sexual desire. To be thin is to be loved, and to be heavy is to be unlovable. Cash & Pruzinsky (1990) found that slim women are seen as glamorous people leading glamorous lives and heavy people are seen as lazy, unhappy people not worthy or able to lead a glamorous lifestyle. Society will never be thin enough. Pollack - Seid (1989) also stated that most women think that they are never thin enough or taught enough to believe that they are not fat. They can never diet or exercise enough to feel good about themselves. This “new religion” to attain the ideal body is painful and a long road to travel.

Women cannot get away from the media’s images of the thin ideal. The thin ideal is displayed on bill boards, magazine covers, television commercials. According to a study done by Silverstein, Perdue, Peterson, and Kelly (1986) (cited in Unger and Crawford, 1996) women are exposed to more media messages about their bodies than are men. They found that in forty-eight issues of magazines there were sixty-three ads for diet foods in women’s magazines and only one in men’s magazines. They also found that women’s magazines had many more adds for sweets and snack foods. They concluded from their study that women receive more messages about food and how they should stay thin while at the same time thinking about food.

Our society values beauty, and the thin ideal that the media shows us is what is considered to be beautiful, to be the ideal that every woman should strive for if she wants to be happy.

Society defines what is desirable and what society desires is the thin waif-like figure portrayed on television, magazines, books and on billboards.

### How Women Are Affected By The Media

The media affects women in many different ways. In a body image and media study by Heinberg and Thompson (1995), it was concluded that media-presented images of the thin ideal and attractiveness might negatively affect a woman's mood and body satisfaction. King, Touyz, and Charles (2000) supported these findings, stating that media exposure causes some women to feel more dissatisfaction with their body shape. Then they resort to extreme measures to reach the thin ideal such as dieting to attain the thin ideal body, smoking more to control weight and putting themselves through reconstructive surgeries. Rabak-Wagner, Eichhoff-Shemek, and Kelly-Vance (1998) found that the mass marketing of body images has been a powerful force in creating the 1990s thin ideal standard for women. Furthermore, Garner (cited in Stice & Shaw, 1994) found that as the number of magazine articles on weight loss diets and exercise increased, the occurrence of eating disorders also increased. Grogan (1999) agreed that women are encouraged to undergo pain to change their bodies.

Women experience negative feelings about themselves when they are exposed to the media's thin ideal. Stice and Shaw (1994) found that exposure to the thin ideal resulted in subjects feeling unhappy, shameful, guilty, depressed, and stressed, which in turn decreased their confidence. They also stated that the ideal body image portrayed in many popular magazines has negative effects on the affective state and body satisfaction of female readers. Unger & Crawford (1996) agree that women experience negative feelings when exposed to the thin ideal. They held that many women and adolescent females develop distorted body perceptions. They believe themselves to be bigger, fatter, wider than they really are. This

unfavorable view of their bodies leads to decreased self-esteem.

Grogan (1999) stated that women viewers of the media engage critically with the imagery, using it to inform their body image. Bloom, Gitter, Gutwill, Kogel, and Zaphiropoulos (1999) reported that the media tells woman that they are nothing without their looks. Women begin to believe what the media tells them, thus increasing their negative body image. The media allows for women's bodies to be objects for men to look at and lust after. Women's bodies become objects to the media and to some people who view the media. Sometimes women's bodies even become objects to themselves, objects to be criticized when standing in front of a mirror. In a study done by Cash, Ancis, and Strachan (1997), it was concluded that the messages women receive about the importance of their appearance are so socially reinforced that the attainment of feminist ideology has little impact on them. The messages that the media and society send women about the importance of their appearance is internalized by women and tends to be ingrained in their core beliefs about themselves.

The media implicitly implies that being beautiful has social benefits and advantages. Cash and Lavin (2001) studied the effects of exposure to prior research about appearance and stereotyping. They found that a woman's body image is adversely affected when she is exposed to the prior research findings that suggest that beauty equals social benefits. For example, women are told that beauty equals benefits, and attractive people receive these social benefits and unattractive people are discriminated against. Some women may assume that they are not attractive and therefore should not receive social benefits. Having these negative thoughts about ones self may lead to a negative body image and decreased self-esteem.

The media sends conflicting messages to women. Unger and Crawford (1996) reported that women's magazines send out messages to be thin through dieting ads, weight control, and

articles on exercising. Women's magazines also send out many messages about food through ads for sweets, snacks, and recipes. So the conflicting message that women receive is to constantly think about and eat sweets and other foods, while at the same time staying thin and beautiful.

The media portrays women in an unrealistic manner. Female models in the media are predominately thin, tall, big breasted and Caucasian. Society and culture turn the bodies of the media into the ideal body shape that all women should and need to attain to achieve true happiness. Women resort to plastic surgeries, extreme dieting, and spend large amounts of money on beauty products to attain the image of the thin ideal. Viewing the thin ideal everyday on television, in magazines and on bill boards may decrease a women's self-esteem, negatively influence body image, and lead some women to clinical eating disorder behaviors.

### ***The Role of Sociocultural Theory on Body Image***

Davis and Katzman (1999) explained that culture influences what people eat, what clothes they wear, and how they fix their hair. In Western culture, women and girls are influenced by the unrealistic thin ideal and are constantly told that thin is beautiful. In the following section social and cultural influences on body image will be discussed and explained.

King and Tsiantas (2001) defined sociocultural theory when discussing body image as follows: "Western women experience pressure from sources such as parents, peers, and the media to maintain thinness. Social comparison theory emphasizes the role of comparing one's appearance to others," (p. 141). Sociocultural theory combines ideas and concepts learned from social and cultural factors such as the media, family, friends and history. King and Tsiantas (2001) suggested that the internalization of sociocultural messages regarding thinness influence body image disturbance. Schwartz (1986) said that our slimming and weight-

watching culture has instilled upon society the notion that the body, when weighed, tells the truth about the self. Society is saying that the physical body is the true person, if the body is good then the person is good (i.e. thin), if the body is bad (i.e. not the thin ideal) then the person is bad.

Stice (2002) stated that “sociocultural influences have long been suspected of promoting disturbances of body image and eating. These sociocultural pressures center around the idealization of thinness and physical fitness, and the disparagement of overweight, and they primarily originate from the mass media, family, and peers,” (p.103). Society pressures people, especially women, to be the thin ideal. Women who are thin are reinforced for being thin, and women who are overweight are punished for not achieving the thin ideal.

Stice (2002) reported that sociocultural pressures coming from the family promote body image disturbances. Pressure from parents to lose weight, teasing about weight, or positively reinforcing thinness or weight loss was found to correlate with eating disturbances and a negative body image. Stice (2002) found that not only do familial pressures promote body image disturbance, peer pressure also influences a person’s body image. Peer teasing about weight and perceived pressure from peers to be thin predicts body dissatisfaction.

Girls are taught, through culture and society, that to be thin is to be happy. According to Berg (2000), historically women were defined by the culture’s feminine ideal which dictated the way a women should physically and behaviorally present herself. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century women wore tight corsets to cinch their waist’s as small as 14 inches; the smaller her waist was the better she would marry. In accordance, if a person is thin, he or she will marry the right person, have a better more powerful job, and fit into “model size” clothes. Girls are also taught that if they are not thin, then they are lazy, will marry the wrong person, or be in an

unhealthy relationship, work in a bad job, and never be happy. Pollack-Seid (1989) reported that the thought of “never being thin enough” leads women to believe that they are not good enough for marriages, their jobs, their families, and their lives. It is like a downward spiral: not thin enough leads to not good enough in specifics, which leads to not good enough in all aspects of womanhood, and the final outcome is depression, decreased self-esteem, decreased body image, and self-hate. Pollack-Seid (1989) also found that some women have made important life-altering decisions based on their obsession with becoming thin, i.e. for example, hesitating to have children because of the weight that is gained during pregnancy.

Where does it all start? According to Berg (2000) young girls (age two) are watching television and are exposed to messages that show successful women are thin. They hear and see their siblings, mother, aunts, and cousins battle their bodies to achieve the thin acceptable body. They may hear their father and other male figures comment on a woman’s body in a judgmental manner in regards to her weight and/or looks. Broughton and Cleveland (1999) agree that at a young age girls worry about their appearance, body shape and body size. Girls get the message that their appearance is important, be it from a parent or the media. The messages are out there and affecting young girls/children in a negative manner. Broughton and Cleveland (1999) believe that perceptions regarding the body are influenced by the following: messages received from others about the body, an understanding or lack of understanding of the body as the core of being, and feelings about the body as influenced by these factors. They concluded that if external messages about the features of the body are negative the individual begins to understand that having this color of skin, height, weight, etc. is not valued by society, thus perhaps decreasing the self-esteem and body image of the person. Unger & Crawford (1996) stated that it is characteristic of female adolescents to be confused between thinness and

the perfect life. If women are not thin then they will not achieve the perfect life.

Ellis-Ordway (1999) concluded that it is no longer acceptable to discriminate against people because of race, socioeconomic class, age, sex, or religion. However it is okay and acceptable to discriminate against overweight people. Ellis-Ordway (1999) said “fat people participate in their own persecution, believing that their failure to be thin is due to some flaw within themselves, some lack of willpower. Genetically thin people then feel smug about their own superior willpower” (p.57). Society teaches people that everyone can be thin if they would just exercise more, take diet pills, buy workout videos and equipment, or get surgery. Society tells people that they can always change their body shape and size by losing weight. What society doesn't emphasize is that sometimes genetics is what causes a person to be overweight. Society puts people who are obese into a negative category. They are being discriminated against and this discrimination is being accepted.

Societal gender-roles also influence body image. Cash, Ancis, and Strachan (1997) did a study to investigate the relationship between body-image attitudes and gender attitudes. They concluded that women who held traditional preferences about gender roles when in male-female social relations were more invested in their looks and tended to internalize society standards of beauty. The internalization of societal standards on beauty is what leads to a negative body image and decreased self-esteem.

Rudd and Lennon (1999) discussed social power and appearance management among women. They stated that women create their appearance in accordance with society's ideas of beauty. Women evaluate their appearance based on cultural factors which feed into how they evaluate their self-worth and social power. Freedman (as cited in Rudd and Lennon, 1999) found a close connection between feeling socially powerful and feeling good about oneself.

Women who feel dissatisfied with their bodies may feel powerless in social situations. If they can gain a sense of power over their bodies by dieting and activity level, they may gain a sense of power and control in social situations.

Davis and Katzman (1999) stated that

“in western cultures, girls are influenced by the unrealistic ‘Barbie-doll’ body shape and constantly told that thin is beautiful, whereas boys are influenced by muscular images and told that they should be big and strong. Television, movies, and magazines provide constant messages about the ideal standard of beauty and how one should look and behave. Unfortunately, these standards are unrealistic and impossible for most people to achieve. Culture, however, is not just about beauty but about social and political organizations of family, power, and success” (p.58).

Fallon (1990) summed up how society influences body image as follows: “here we can see culture setting the standard (a thin ideal), individual biology providing a backdrop for inadequacy or falling short (i.e., a heavier body), culture providing the acceptable avenue for alteration (dieting), and one’s membership status (i.e., being female and having one’s self-worth be independent of one’s physical attributes) within the cultural group influencing the vigor with which one pursues the avenue of alteration” (p.81).

Negative body image is prevalent in American women. American culture influences body image in negative ways including what women eat, how they dress, do their hair, and how they present their bodies. Women engage in behaviors to reach the body shape and size of the culture’s thin ideal. Lastly, and most significant for this study, the media contributes to negative body image by displaying the thin ideal as a realistic and necessary means to live a happy life, forcing some women to take drastic measures to reach the thin ideal and infecting other women with a negative body image and lowered body esteem .

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the relationship between the media and body image using the Body Image States Scales as the testing instrument. The BISS and the procedures of the study will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.





## **CHAPTER III**

### **Methodology**

This chapter discusses the methodology used in this study. A description of the subjects and how they were chosen will be followed by a description of the instrumentation used. In addition, procedures, data analysis and data collection will be described. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the methodological limitations.

#### ***Subject Selection and Description***

Subjects for this study were full-time or part-time female students attending the University of Wisconsin-Stout in the spring of 2003 who volunteered to participate in this study. Subjects were undergraduate level students. Subjects were enrolled in undergraduate courses offered at UW-Stout, including Interpersonal Effectiveness, Community Resources and Introduction to Basic Counseling Skills. The subjects were randomly assigned to either the control group or the experimental group. The control group was given the BISS to complete along with directions and an informed consent. The experimental group received the consent form, instructions and viewed a 120 second power point presentation of media images of women followed by the administration of the BISS.

#### ***Instrumentation***

The Body Image State Scales (BISS) was used for this study. The BISS consists of six questions that inquire about the subject's physical appearance at a particular moment in time. The BISS addresses six body experiences: 1) dissatisfaction/satisfaction with body shape and size; 2) dissatisfaction/satisfaction with one's overall physical appearance; 3) dissatisfaction/satisfaction with one's weight; 4) feelings of physical attractiveness/unattractiveness; 5) current feelings about one's looks relative to how one

usually feels; and 6) the evaluation of one's looks relative to how the average person looks. People responded to the six questions based on a 9-point, bipolar, Likert-type scale, semantically anchored at each point.

The BISS is a new test developed and validated by Cash, Fleming, Alindogan, Steadman, and Whithead (2002). Although the BISS was standardized on males and females, only the female measures are discussed due to the fact that the current study consisted of female subjects. The test-retest reliability of the BISS over a 2- to 3- week period is .69 ( $p < .001$ ). Construct validity for the BISS was substantiated through significant correlation with Objectified Body Consciousness Scale (OBCS; McKinley & Hyde, 1996), and the Appearance Schemas Inventory (ASI; Cash, 2000; Cash & Labarge, 1996), and with subjects body mass index (BMI) measures. These results were found to be compatible with a cognitive perspective on body image. The research on the BISS provided psychometric evidence supporting the reliability and validity of the BISS.

### ***Procedures***

Data was collected in the spring of 2003 at the University of Wisconsin Stout from female students attending a section of Interpersonal Effectiveness, Introduction to Basic Counseling Skills, and Community Resources. The study had a control group and an experimental group. The subjects were subdivided into two groups by counting off by two. One group became the control group and the other was the experimental group. The BISS was given to the control subjects and the directions were read aloud. After the test was completed, it was collected from the subjects. The control group was dismissed after completing the BISS. For the experimental group an introduction to the study and an informed consent were discussed and explained. A 120 second power point presentation was viewed which displayed the thin ideal

as portrayed by the media in magazines. Advertisements for the presentation were chosen from a variety of popular female magazines, which included Elle, Cosmopolitan, Shape, Glamour and Jane. The pictures were scanned into a power point presentation format. Twenty photos were shown to the subjects for five seconds each. The BISS was handed out and the directions were read aloud. When the BISS was completed, it was collected from the subjects.

### ***Data Analysis***

The data for this study was analyzed using independent samples test. The t-tests were used to find out if there were any statistically significant differences between the control and the experimental groups BISS scores as well as the total scores. A t-test was performed on each of the six BISS questions that dealt with how the subject felt at a particular moment in time in regards to their body shape, size, weight or physical attractiveness. The means and standard deviations were also determined.

### ***Limitations***

One limitation to this study is that the media images that were used may not be representative of the thin ideal in other areas of the world and therefore the results should be used keeping that in mind. All subjects who participated in this study were attending UW-Stout and therefore the results should be used cautiously to infer to other university campuses. Women are exposed to the thin ideal on a daily basis and because of this the treatment that the experimental group received may have not had a strong effect on the participants as they may be accustomed to seeing it. Lastly, there has been limited research conducted on the BISS; however, it has been shown to be reliable and valid.

## CHAPTER IV

### Results

#### *Introduction*

This chapter will provide a summary of the data collected. A description of the statistics used to analyze the data will be given in table format. The research questions related to the control and experimental groups feelings towards their bodies, looks and physical appearance will be analyzed.

***Ho1: There is no statistically significant difference within the sample scores on the Body Image States Scale between the two groups which consist of a control group and an experimental group.***

**Table 1**

*t-test comparing the total scores between the control group and the experimental group*

Group	M	SD	df	t	p
Control	31.37	8.00	41	1.56	.126
Experimental	27.25	9.02			

The control group (n=19) was given the BISS only and the experimental group (n=24) completed the BISS after they viewed a 120 second power point presentation that showed media images of women. Data analysis failed to reveal a significant difference between the control (M= 31.37) and experimental (M=27.25) groups scores on the BISS. As a result the null hypothesis was not rejected.

***Ho2: There is no difference between the control and experimental group's feelings***

***regarding physical appearance.***

**Table 2**

*t-test on Satisfaction With Physical Appearance Using the Control and Experimental Group as the Independent Variable*

Group	M	SD	df	t	p
Control	4.84	2.089	41	.013	.989
Experimental	4.83	2.140			

A t-test for independent variable was performed to assess the difference the two groups under evaluation. The mean for the control group was found to be 4.84 while the experimental groups mean was 4.83. Data analysis found no significant difference between the two groups rating on the satisfaction/dissatisfaction physical appearance. Hypothesis two was not rejected.

***Ho3: There is no difference between the control and experimental groups feelings***

***regarding their body shape and size.***

**Table 3**

*t-test on Satisfaction With Body Size and Shape Between the Control and Experimental Group*

Group	M	SD	df	t	p
Control	5.42	2.114	41	1.476	.147
Experimental	4.33	2.390			

Data analysis found no significant difference between the control and experimental group

regarding their satisfaction with their body shape and size. A t-test was used to perform this analysis between the two groups. The mean for the control group was 5.42 and the mean for the experimental group was 4.33. The null hypothesis was not rejected.

***Ho4: There is no difference between the control and experimental groups satisfaction with weight.***

**Table 4**  
*t-test on Satisfaction With Weight Between the Control and Experimental Group*

Group	M	SD	df	t	p
Control	5.11	2.706	32	1.318	.197
Experimental	4.13	2.007			

Satisfaction/dissatisfaction with weight was addressed in the BISS. The t-test did not find a significant difference between the control and experimental groups on weight. The means were 5.11 and 4.13 respectively. The null hypothesis was not rejected.

***Ho5: There is no difference between the control and experimental groups feelings about physical attractiveness.***

**Table 5**  
*t-test on Feelings About Physical Attractiveness Between The Two Groups*

Group	M	SD	df	t	p
Control	6.05	1.224	41	2.260	.029*
Experimental	4.96	1.805			

\* Significant at .05

A t-test was performed on the control and experimental groups feelings about their physical attractiveness. A significant difference between the two was found. The control group

rated their feelings regarding their physical attractiveness as slightly/moderately attractive. The experimental group's average response was that they felt neither attractive nor unattractive. Ten out of the 24 experimental group subtexts felt that they were very, moderately or slightly unattractive (M=4.96). In the control group two out of 19 thought felt they were moderately or slightly unattractive (M=6.05). The null hypothesis was rejected.

***Ho6: There is no difference between the control and experimental groups feelings about looks.***

**Table 6**  
*t-test On the Groups Feelings Regarding Their Look*

Group	M	SD	df	t	p
Control	4.95	1.129	41	2.787	.008*
Experimental	4.04	.999			

\* Significant at .01

The t-test analysis found a significant difference between the control and experimental group regarding their feelings about their looks. As a result the null hypothesis was rejected. The control group's average response to their feelings about their looks (M= 4.95) was that they felt about the same as they usually do. The experimental group felt just slightly worse (M= 4.04) than they usually do about their looks. Of the experimental group 29.2% of them responded that they felt just slightly worse about their looks while 10.5% of the control group responded in the same manner.



*Ho7: There is no difference between the control and experimental groups feelings about their looks compared to others.*

**Table 7**  
*t-test on The Feelings About Their Looks in Comparison to Others*

Group	M	SD	df	t	p
Control	5.00	1.00	41	.105	.917
Experimental	4.96	1.488			

The data analysis found no significant difference between the control and experimental groups feelings about their looks compared to others. The mean for the control group was found to be at 5.00 and the experimental at 4.96. Ten control subjects and nine experimental subjects felt about the same about their looks as compared to others. Hypothesis 7 was not rejected.

Two of the seven hypotheses were rejected; Ho5: There is no difference between the control and experimental groups feelings about physical attractiveness and Ho6: There is no difference between the control and experimental groups feelings about looks. The remaining five hypotheses were not statistically strong enough to reject the null.

## CHAPTER V

### Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

#### *Summary*

This chapter provides a discussion of the results and conclusions that can be drawn from this research. Implications for the research findings will also be addressed, followed by recommendations for future research.

In summary, media images of the ideal body have been displayed to women for centuries. Although the ideal body shape and size have changed over the years, women have always tried to attain that ideal for themselves. This paper examined previous research regarding the ever changing body ideal and how it has impacted women over the years (Striegel-Moore, and Smolak, 2000; Altabe and Thompson, 1996; Heinberg and Thompson, 1995; Fallon, 1990; Stice and Shaw, 1994; and Anderson and DiDomenico, 1992). The concept of body image and how it can change over time was addressed (Cash & Pruzinsky, 1990; Banfield and McCabe, 2002; Grogan, 1999; Cash, Ancis, and Strachan, 1997; Lightstone, 2001). The media's way of portraying women to the public was discussed (Paff and Buckley- Lakner, 1997; Pollack-Seid, 1989; Silverstein, Perdue, Peterson, and Kelly, 1986). The role of sociocultural theory in the manner in which women are portrayed was explored.

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between women's body image and the media's portrayal of women and the thin ideal. Forty-three female UW-Stout undergraduate students participated in the study. The Body Image States Scales was used as the testing instrument. The BISS gathers the subject's feelings about their bodies at a specific time with six likert type questions. The control group (n=19) only completed the BISS. The experimental group (n=24) watched a short slide show of how women are portrayed in

magazines followed by the administration of the BISS.

Data analysis found that there were two significant differences between the control and experimental group. The results suggest that individuals who viewed the media slides felt slightly unattractive at that particular time while the control group felt neither attractive nor unattractive. Secondly, a difference between groups was found regarding the subject's feeling regarding their looks. The experimental group felt slightly worse than normal about their looks and the control group felt about the same as they usually do about their looks. No significant differences were found between the control and experimental subject's satisfaction with their physical appearance, body shape, size, weight, or their feelings about their looks in comparison to others'.

### ***Conclusions***

This research suggests that the experimental groups' body image was only slightly changed in two of the six areas addressed after viewing the media images. This is an interesting finding that may suggest that women are already exposed to the media's images in everyday life and they have become resilient towards the images. It might also suggest that because women view the thin ideal body image day in and day out they would have to be exposed to those images for a longer period of time before it may affect their body image at that particular moment. This could also suggest that the body image of women has already decreased in response to the media images since they are exposed to them everyday.

This particular study found a significant difference between the two groups pertaining to how physically attractive they felt. The experimental group felt slightly unattractive while the control group felt neither attractive nor unattractive. This might imply that they do not feel insecure or self-conscious about anything in particular about their bodies, i.e. shape, weight,

size, physical appearance but may feel unattractive in general. They may not even know why they feel less attractive, however, it could be due to their exposure to the thin ideal. The thin ideal exposure used in this study only showed women as wholes and did not amplify one body part over another. This holistic portrayal may be a reason why the experimental group did not differ from the control group when asked about their feelings toward certain aspects of body image but differed from the experimental group in regards to their overall physical attractiveness. The control group also felt “about the same” about their looks and the experimental felt “just slightly worse” than usual. This, too, could suggest that the experimental group felt worse about their looks in general and not about one aspect of their looks specifically.

The other four of the six BISS questions dealt with more specifics about feelings towards the body. Perhaps the subjects felt fine about the specifics including shape, size, weight, and physical appearance because the media images shown to them did not concentrate on specific parts of the body. The results may have been different if the media images shown displayed specific parts, i.e. hip, leg, waist, face, etc.

### ***Recommendations***

Recommendations for further research and for the counselors will be addressed. New counseling techniques can be developed to assist women who are afflicted with a negative body image. This current study found a few significant differences between the two groups in regards to how the media may affect body image. Given the results of the study one suggestion could be to implement a body image and media course into the schools to educate young women to be critical viewers of the media. Teaching society to view the media more critically and informing society that the thin ideal is virtually unattainable for almost 95% of

the population is the first step to help women realize that the models are not real; they are airbrushed, trimmed to size by a computer, and posed to look the way that they do. Another suggestion could be to encourage self-esteem development to be incorporated into school curriculums. Society should be informed about the way that overweight people are being discriminated against and begin to develop ways to rid society of unjust discrimination. Society will need to redefine what is desirable and what is beautiful before women can begin looking into a mirror and actually liking their reflection.

This particular study only researched a small population, undergraduate female UW-Stout students. One recommendation when replicating this study would be to use a broader pool of subjects, wider age range, different areas of the state, or country could be helpful to get a result that can be generalized to the general public, not just college students. It would also be beneficial to see if the results of the study would be different among different age groups. Comparing young, middle, and old age groups in regards to their body image and how they are affected by the thin ideal of the media may be useful. Perhaps body image grows more stable as one grows older.

Another suggestion would be to use a pre-test post-test design, giving the BISS to both groups and then after viewing the media exposure re-administering the BISS, to see how the two groups change over time. Perhaps, some of the results of this study were not found to be significant due to the chance that college women may already be more comfortable and confident in themselves thus leading to a more positive body image. Women who are not in college or have not gone to college may have a lower level of confidence in themselves and may have a lower body image. By using a pre-test post-test design with college and non-college subjects one may find a significant difference in scores.

The images used in this study came strictly from magazines. Including T.V. commercials, magazines, billboard signs, clothing store mannequins, and clips from movies may help portray the thin ideal in a representative manner. Women are exposed to the thin ideal everyday thus recapitulating the what they see throughout their lifetime. Perhaps this could be taken into account when thinking of ways to increase the significance of this particular study. An international study comparing women's body image may lead to significant findings. Comparing women's body image from a country where they are not exposed to the thin ideal on a daily basis to the women in the United States who are bombarded with the thin ideal may provide answers to some of the questions regarding body image. One last recommendation would be to use media images of specific female body parts, i.e. legs, cheeks, arms, stomach, thighs or breasts. Perhaps it would be found that there is an affect on body image when viewing body parts as opposed to the whole body. There are many avenues in which to better the current study. Those mentioned above are just a few of the many that are possible. More research is needed in the area of body image and what causes one to have a negative body image. Perhaps studying internationally or finding ways in which to build a strong positive body image in childhood may be needed to allow for a more positive body image in the future. Prevention may be the key to living a life where women feel confident and secure about their bodies.

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