

“Mandy we’ve discussed this before. When your looks start to go, we are buying you new ones” (Hayek, 2009). This quote was a line uttered by Marc in the season premiere of *Ugly Betty* in early October. He was trying to comfort Mandy, the thin attractive receptionist at *Mode* – a fashion magazine – who was concerned that she would lose her job if she lost her good looks. A majority of popular shows on television these days feature thin and very attractive main characters for the most part, but don’t usually address the issue of body image and weight in the dialogue of the program. *Ugly Betty* is a popular show that revolves around the fashion magazine industry and openly discusses and even pokes fun at some of the stereotypes regarding this very issue. The link between media exposure and body dissatisfaction can be explained in the application of social comparison theory, internalization of the thin ideal, and modeling.

Imagery from television and magazines can create unrealistic expectations among its viewers. Not only are the models and actors thinner and fitter than most of the population, but their images are touched up and airbrushed before being released. Magazines spend a lot of money to make sure that they have the right lighting and camera angles to get the best possible picture from the shoot. It’s not surprising then that viewers and readers report higher levels of body dissatisfaction after reading a magazine or watching a television program like *America’s Next Top Model*.

Body dissatisfaction is the extent to which someone is unhappy with his or her own body and frequently arises when he or she compares their own body with other people’s and those depicted in the media. One can find plenty of research concerning body dissatisfaction in young women, but that amount quickly drops off after the adolescence and college-age group. One possible explanation for this occurrence is that body dissatisfaction appears to “become relatively stable across the adult lifespan” (Bessenoff and Del Priore, 2007, p. 215).

Bessenoff and Del Priore looked at how the age and weight of women may have influenced their level of body dissatisfaction and their social comparison to magazine images across their lifespan (Bessenoff and Del Priore, 2007). Because of the disparity in age and weight shown in women's magazines, older women's level of body dissatisfaction wasn't really affected. If an older woman only sees young women in a magazine, she simply may not compare herself to the younger woman. When someone closer to her age is shown in the pages of a magazine, they typically wear more conservative clothing, which may be less threatening to one's body dissatisfaction levels (Bessenoff and Del Priore, 2007).

In the 2009 October issue of *Fitness*, the magazine included an article telling readers what they should eat in their 20s, 30s, and 40s to stay thin for life (*Fitness*, 2009).. Each age group had its own page with recipes for success and a diet to-do list. The 20s age group featured an image of two young women, one of which was wearing a sleeveless shirt, smiling (*Fitness*, 2009). The page for those in their 30s had a picture of a salad and a female hand holding a fork, while the 40s page had no image. Outside of advertisements and the true stories of real people losing weight, the issue did not feature a single older woman (*Fitness*, 2009). All of the women showed in the magazine appeared to be under 30 or maybe in their early 30s. It's easy to understand why older women don't have lower body dissatisfaction levels because they doesn't have anyone to compare to in the magazine.

Body dissatisfaction could be a mental predictor of disordered eating tendencies. Disordered eating consists of behavior like poor body image, binge eating, extreme dieting, overexercising, and the abuse of diet pills and laxatives (Moriarty and Harrison, 2008). Moriarty and Harrison report that "an estimated 5 million Americans experience some form of clinical disordered eating" each year (Moriarty and Harrison, 2008, p. 361). Research doesn't suggest that the frequency of reading beauty magazines or watching TV results in

eating disorders, rather media exposure may only be a substantial factor if a “young woman’s pre-existing psychological or affective state has created a sensitivity or vulnerability to the images and messages” (Thomsen, McCoy, Gustafson, and Williams, 2002, p. 130). Anorexic women are more likely to be influenced by the media than their nonanorexic counterparts as they see star female characters, who seemingly get thinner and thinner each year, rewarded and placed on a pedestal.

In her book “The Body Project,” author Joan Brumberg studies diaries of women spanning decades to put together an intimate history of the American girl and she examines how expectations and body norms have changed throughout the last century. For example, greater emphasis was placed on one’s moral character rather than one’s appearance in the early nineteenth century (Brumberg, 1997). In the Victorian era, a thin waist was ideal so women wore corsets to achieve the desired look. Society today also views a thin waist as ideal, but women today will diet and exercise to achieve that look. The ideal may have remained similar; however, the means of achieving that ideal shifted from external modifications to internal control (Brumberg, 1997). Even back in the 1920s, girls wanted to model their appearance off of famous movie stars or the “sophisticated women she saw in popular magazines” (Brumberg, 1997, p. 100). The idea of being conscious of one’s body and trying to improve one’s appearance appears to have remained constant over centuries, but the extent to which individuals are willing to go to make these improvements varies by time period.

Social comparison theory posits that “individuals have a strong desire to compare themselves to others in order to gain valuable information about the self, and comparison to those viewed as better than oneself (i.e. upward social comparison) may threaten self-evaluation” (Bessenoff and Del Priore, 2007, p. 215). By comparing one’s body to images

portrayed on television or in magazines, women may have higher levels of body dissatisfaction, particularly with their weight, according to this theory.

It's important to first distinguish between two categories of magazines that cater to women before diving into what the research says about these magazine types. While it may seem that most of these magazines act as self-help publications for readers whether it's through workout suggestions or tips on the best uses of makeup, beauty and fashion magazines must be considered separately from health and fitness magazines. Fashion and beauty magazines would include the likes of *Allure*, *Glamour*, *InStyle*, and *Elle*, while fitness and health magazines are publications like *Fitness*, *Shape*, and *Self*.

Steven R. Thomsen references a study done by Harrison and Cantor that found that “only fitness magazine reading was a significant predictor of disordered eating in women” and reading beauty and fashion magazines was “the best predictor of body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness” (Thomsen, 2002, p. 993). Thomsen surveyed 340 college-age women to decipher how reading health and beauty magazines affect body shape concerns. He found that health and fitness magazines linked directly with body shape concerns and indirectly linked “through beliefs about men’s thinness expectations and to a lesser degree through expected future weight gain or loss” (Thomsen, 2002, p. 988). After perusing a recent issue of *Glamour* and *Fitness*, it seems that beauty and fashion magazines show ways to externally improve one’s appearance, while health and fitness magazines demonstrate how to alter, usually slim down, one’s body through internal controls. This explanation may be why the direct link to body shape concerns was only apparent with fitness and health magazines.

In the November 2009 issue of *Glamour*, there is a wide range of topics covered by the magazine including money management, sex, beauty and fashion tips, and love. The focus of the magazine appears to be ways to improve oneself and ultimately relationships.

Beauty and fashion tips are given to create one's "sexiest going-out looks now" presumably to help meet men or keep your man happy (*Glamour*, 2009, p. 209). The 246-page issue seemed to have an overabundance of articles devoted to men, sex, and love – what men like, how to look good for a date, etc. This finding appears to support the results of the Thomsen survey that discovered reading beauty and fashion magazines was "linked to body shape concerns only indirectly via beliefs about men's thinness expectations" (Thomsen, 2002, p. 988). Magazines like *Glamour* emphasize how these self-help tips will help your relationship with a significant other or help you land a man so it makes sense that body image concerns were a result of what readers expected men to desire in a standard of beauty.

The survey of college women by Thomsen et al. also found that a little over 60% of the participants read beauty and fashion magazines at least once a month, which demonstrates that a significant chunk of college-aged women read these types of magazines (Thomsen et al., 2002, p. 122). The results of the survey also found that "the reading frequency of beauty and fashion magazines was most strongly predicted (positively) by women's motivation to improve themselves" (Thomsen et al., 2002, p. 129). This find goes back to the notion that these magazines can be viewed as self-help guides in improving one's appearance.

The person's motivation to read a certain type of magazine may make them more susceptible to the images and messages portrayed within it. "It is not the amount of reading alone that drives the risk, but rather these needs that prompt the reader to turn to a particular magazine" (Thomsen et al., 2002, p. 131). Health and fitness publications such as *Fitness* focus on demonstrating how the reader can eat healthier and exercise to attain that ideal body and be healthy. A subscriber or frequent reader of a fitness magazine likely wants to lose weight, become healthier, or find new ways to stay in shape. Their motivation to read *Fitness*

or other similar magazines is seemingly to help ease their level of body dissatisfaction.

Beauty magazines like *Glamour* don't seem to provide ways to alter one's lifestyle and body. The content provides ways to improve a relationship or use fashion and makeup to hide your body's flaws and please your man. It's about making external modifications rather than altering one's body internally.

Studies have found a correlation between media exposure and the development of body dissatisfaction, which “occurs as the individual compares her perception of her actual body size with the internalized ideal” (Thomsen et al., 2002, p. 116). When a reader sees how society defines beauty and attractiveness in attitudes and behaviors, the individual will internalize these beliefs and adopt it as a personal standard for attractiveness and will then act in a manner to try to reach this standard. This theory of internalization of the thin ideal goes along with traditional gender roles in that the woman believes she must be thin in order for men to view her as attractive (Thomsen, 2002). Thomsen hypothesized that one's frequency of reading beauty and/or fitness magazines would be linked to body shape concerns and possibly indirectly because of how they may perceive men's desire for women to be thin (Thomsen, 2002). It seems that a majority of women know that these thin-ideal standards are unrealistic, but women still think that these ideals are important to other people, including men, and thus feel compelled to try to attain them.

Body image was actually one of the focuses in the November 2009 issue of *Glamour*. In the previous month's issue, *Glamour* had included a picture of a near-nude woman – a plus-sized model – that appealed to readers because they could identify themselves with her. The November issue asked readers, “What size should models be? The beauty revolution starts here” (*Glamour*, 2009, p. 11). On the editor-in-chief's page, the question “What is an ‘ideal’ body?” is posed and the text acknowledges that it has become harder to attain over the

years. She promises readers that the magazine will make an effort to portray a greater variety of body types and sizes in the pages of *Glamour* because “In the real world, women of all body types – whether pixie-ish like model Noreen Carmody or curvy like Lizzie – have sex appeal, full, fabulous lives, and men drooling all over them. Our pages should tell the same spectacularly confident and diverse story” (*Glamour*, 2009, p. 33-34). The positive feedback was overwhelming because readers finally found someone similar to themselves that they could compare themselves to.

The concept of gender development is based on the premise that one’s gender is differentiated from another because of cultural and biological influences, including “personal, behavioral, and environmental factors” (Bussey and Bandura, 2004, p. 92). Gender identity is crucial for everyday activities such as introductions, speech thanks to gender-specific pronouns, and how one dresses. Modeling is “one of the most pervasive and powerful means of transmitting values, attitudes, and patterns of thoughts and behavior” (Bussey and Bandura, 2004, p. 95). With regards to gender development, modeling is a means of conveying gender-appropriate behavior and attitudes. Specifically, individuals observe family, friends, co-workers, and the media to see what is the commonly accepted behavior for women and men so that he or she can act accordingly. An individual is more likely to model him or herself after another when seeing the gender-linked social sanctions occur (Bussey and Bandura, 2004). For example, a thin attractive blonde is fawned over on TV and receives notable advantages because of the way she carries herself and her appearance. The observer would then be more apt to model that behavior with the hopes of receiving the same rewards. As previously mentioned, gender development can be influenced by parents, peers, education, occupational systems, and the mass media (Bussey and Bandura, 2004). Social learning theory suggests, “modeling is more likely to occur for

behaviors performed by attractive characters or behaviors that are rewarded” (Moriarty and Harrison, 2008, p. 364). Thin television characters are seen as attractive and rewarded more so than overweight characters so it stands to reason why viewers would try to model their attitudes and behaviors after the thin characters.

The premise of the show *Ugly Betty* is that this girl is in her early 20s, Betty, is hired to become *Mode*'s editor-in-chief's assistant even though she doesn't know fashion because he is a womanizer and needed an assistant he wouldn't fall for. Betty does not get rid of the braces or thick-framed glasses because she is all of sudden working in fashion. Her appearance has become a joke at the office with co-workers creating a blog with pictures of bad outfits Betty has worn to work (Hayek, 2009). While Betty isn't huge in body size, she is larger than her co-workers at *Mode* because of the pressure to stay slim in the fashion industry. In the 2009 season premiere episode a co-worker takes a stab at Betty's weight by saying to her, “Now Betty for the first time in my life, I want bigger from you” (*Ugly Betty*, 2009). In the 2009 season, it appears that Betty has realized she will never be taken seriously until she starts to model her behavior and style to the standards of the *Mode* office. The show has been lauded for its part in breaking stereotypes about Latino people as well as for, in a way, making a mockery of the key ideals in the fashion industry.

As shown in the application of social comparison theory, internalization of the thin ideal, and modeling to three media examples, there is a link between media exposure and body dissatisfaction. It appears that there has been a movement for images of more realistic women in the media whether it's in the pages of *Glamour* or on the TV screen with the shows like *Ugly Betty*. Media outlets should become more aware of the impact their programming or articles have on their consumer's body image and act accordingly, perhaps by offering better characters for people to compare oneself to.

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