Society’s Effects on Women’s Body Image

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SocS 461, 462
Senior Project
Social Sciences Department
College of Liberal Arts
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Winter 2010
Abstract

Included is an in depth look at the various aspects of society that effect how women view their bodies. Included are topics such as the print media, advertising, television programs, children’s toys, clothing sizes, plastic surgery and the diet and beauty industry. Each of these topics is examined in detail and related back to not only how they affect today’s woman and the way in which she views her body, but how companies use women’s manipulation to their benefit in achieving maximum profits for their corporation and thus perpetuating the highly patriarchal system.
Society’s Effects on Women’s Body Image

All over America, women struggle with their body image on a daily basis. The weight loss apparatus of society rears its head in many different facets of modern day culture. The media and social “norms” play a major role in perpetuating the Western cultural ideal of extreme thinness (Mintz & Betz, 1986; Parker, Nichter, Vuckovic, Sims, & Ritenbaugh, 1995; Rand & Kuldau, 1990 as cited in Jefferson & Stake, 2009). Women also experience much higher levels of dissatisfaction with their bodies than do men (Miller et al., 2000; Mintz & Kashubeck, 1999; Feingold & Mazella, 1998 as cited in Jefferson & Stake, 2009), and this gender difference has significantly increased over time since the 1970’s (Feingold & Mazella, 1998 as cited in Jefferson & Stake, 2009). Every year billions of dollars are spent by women in the diet and beauty industry. Americans spent $50 billion annually on diet products in the 1990’s (Fraser, 1997). Women spend a small fortune on enhancing, changing and “improving” their physical appearances with such things as diet pills and plastic surgery. Women are socialized into a society where it is perfectly acceptable to constantly berate their bodies and talk about what they’d change about their physical appearance on a daily basis. Why is it that our society accepts, encourages and perhaps in many cases, causes this type of behavior? Women are manipulated and controlled by companies seeking maximum economic profit. Companies use various mediums
in which to manipulate women such as advertising, products being sold on the market and clothing. Also, the increased lack of social stigma on plastic surgery and the trend toward healthier eating and dieting play a large roll. These ways in which the media and companies manipulate and control women are all symptoms of a highly patriarchal society. When women can be “pre occupied” with mundane, superficial worries such as their physical appearance, they’re easily controlled, and thus the reigning system of patriarchy continues to rule.

Oprah is an incredibly influential and admired woman. In 2007, she became the world’s first black, female billionaire (Oprah Winfrey becomes first female black billionaire, 2003). She inspires many people in this country to do a great many things, but has a particular influence on women. It’s no secret that Oprah has been battling with her weight since as long as the public has known her; she makes it very public and clear that her weight is an issue in her life. So much so, that on the cover of her January 2009 issue of her magazine "O", she publicly shamed herself for gaining some weight in the last year. The cover features two pictures of Oprah. One in 2005; very slim and trim, with a midriff baring top on. Also one in 2009; looking a bit heavier, wearing an expression of shame and remorse on her face. The caption reads in oversized lettering, "How did I let this happen again?" Inside the magazine article Oprah proclaims, "I'm mad at myself. I'm embarrassed. I can't believe that after all these years, I'm still talking about my weight." and "Standing between Tina Turner and Cher, I felt like a fat cow." This is a woman who is the head of many profitable organizations to
help needy children and was one of President Barack Obama's main supporters, financially and morally. She helped elect the first African American President in United States' history, and yet the decision was made to feature her weight above all else on her January 2009 cover. This sends a very clear and precise message to women all over the country that, it doesn't matter what great and grandiose things you've done in life, if you're not thin, those things don't matter. Also, if you do gain weight, you'd better fess up to your "mistake" and fix the "problem." Oprah also featured a section on her show and in her magazine that was focusing on bettering yourself in 2009. She outlined what she would be talking about each day of the week for one of the first weeks in January. At the very top of that list, listed before one's Health, Spirituality, Money and Relationships, was "Your weight." Again sending a very clear message as to what should be most important in a woman's life. Women are being manipulated, molded and shaped by this type of mass media. They're taught, from very early on in their pre-teen years, what is important and valuable as a woman. This type of indoctrination is setting women up for a life long battle with all things having to do with self esteem and self worth. Companies know that if they have this stranglehold over women, potential for economic gain is limitless. And though Oprah is an individual person, she is also representing a corporation; a corporation whose sole purpose is obtaining maximum profits.
THE BARRAGE OF ADVERTISING

Americans are bombarded by ads on a daily basis and are greatly affected by them. According to Jean Kilbourne, Americans are exposed to 3000 advertisements per day (Hodgson, 2005). According to one study, women's magazines have 10.5 more ads and articles promoting weight loss than do men's magazines. Furthermore, over 3/4 of the covers of women's magazines include at least one message about how to change your physical appearance (Hodgson, 2005). A Motrin ad found in a popular women's magazine reads, "I want to be a hot mom. Not the kind who wears high-waisted mom jeans. I still love things like new high heels. They're painful, but so what? I love them like a child. Sort of." Motrin is conveying various different messages in this one, 37 word advertisement. First, they're telling you that even if you're a mother, you must be "hot." No matter how busy, stressful or chaotic your life may be as a mom, you still need to wear sexy jeans and glam yourself up with high heels. Secondly, they're conveying that even if said clothing is painful or uncomfortable to wear, it doesn't matter; wear it anyway. Pain is beauty. Last, there is a little logo in the corner of the ad that reads in fine print, "Motrin; We feel your pain." This last message tells women that even if you're a mother and you didn't feel this way, Motrin is telling you that you should. Another advertisement found in a women's magazine is from Swave. It reads, "Is motherhood messing with your hair?" Again suggesting to women that even though you may be busy taking the kids to
practice, cooking dinner and cleaning the house, your hair must always look good. And finally, if a company feels they can't find models skinny or beautiful enough to properly sell their product, we see the presence of hand drawn or cartoon women. This allows the company to make models even more unrealistically flawless and thin. This type of advertising is subliminally persuasive and has a large effect on the way women view their physical appearance. If women can be dominated and controlled via advertisements, it is easier to manipulate them for profit and capital gain. Advertising is just one way companies use women for increased profits through manipulation.

Jean Kilbourne, recognized for her research in the advertising industry, illustrates how advertising affects women on a daily basis:

In addition to products, advertising attempts to sell women the myth that they can, and should, achieve physical perfection to have value in our culture. There is a tremendous amount of contempt for women who don’t measure up to the advertisers’ ideal of beauty. This is particularly true for older women and women who are considered overweight. Media images of female beauty influence everyone. They influence how women feel about themselves, and they influence how men feel about the real women in their lives (Hodgson, 2005).

Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy picked up where Marx left off and further explored the economic realm of Marxian theory. They explain a concept they call Monopoly Capital. Monopoly Capital is when:

one or a few capitalists control a given sector of the economy. Clearly, there is far less competition in monopoly capitalism than in competitive
capitalism. In competitive capitalism, organizations competed on a price basis; that is, capitalists tried to sell more goods by offering lower prices. In Monopoly Capitalism, firms no longer have to compete in this way because one or a few firms control a market; competition shifts to the sales domain. Advertising, packaging and other methods of appealing to potential consumers are the main areas of competition (Ritzer, 2008: 296).

Baran and Sweezy explain why advertising and packaging have become very important in marketing and selling products. These industries have focused on perfection of their ads to sell their products. Because of monopoly capitalism, they no longer have to focus on competition by making prices low, so they can put all their focus time in to the advertising. Advertising in the beauty industry has become somewhat of a science for this very reason. Companies know that if the advertising is persuasive and convincing enough, it will pay off for them in sales. And because the images they "sell" are unattainable, the profits are never ending. These companies are well aware that if women can be manipulated to the point where they’re convinced the product is an absolute necessity, women will forever need their product to attain the level of beauty manufactured, fabricated and promoted by said company. This control and dominance over women is essential to these companies for maximum profits.

Television advertising also perpetuates this mass media driven phenomenon. Female characters in TV shows and movies have gotten noticeably smaller in body size during the last half a century (Martz, Petroff, Curtin, & Bazzini, 2009). Evidence shows that women who are
below average in weight are overrepresented, while overweight women are underrepresented (Grabe, 2008). Researcher Gregory Fouts studied the female role in situational comedies and found that over 3/4 of the female characters are underweight, and only 1 in 20 are above average in size. He also found that heavier actresses tend to receive negative comments from male characters about their bodies and 80% of these negative comments are followed by audience laughter (Media Awareness Network). There are many researchers who postulate that these images on TV do, in fact, effect women’s perception of their own bodies. According to Hargreaves & Tiggemann (2004) as cited in Grabe (2008), when women were shown TV commercials and music videos that featured women who represented the “thin ideal,” the women studied showed an increase in body dissatisfaction as compared to women who were shown “neutral” images.

THE POWER OF EVERY GIRLS FAVORITE DOLL

The debate on Barbie’s influence on young girls’ body image has been going on for many years. Barbie is advertised as a companion and a role model for young girls across the country. According to Greenwald, Marchant & Savaian (1996), 99% of girls in the U.S. will own a Barbie, and the average girl owns somewhere around 8 of them. She is, however, a grossly misinterpreted version of what the average American woman actually looks like. Barbie is grossly
disproportioned and, in some instances, her body wouldn't even be able to function. According to Pedersen & Markee, Barbies and comparable dolls were studied and compared to real women’s measurements. It was found that women would have to be anywhere from 6’2” to 7’5” tall to be comparable to Barbie (Pedersen & Markee, 1991 as cited in Dittmar, Halliwell & Ive, 2006).

According to Norton, Olds, Olive and Dank (1996), using anthropometry, researchers compared Barbie’s dimensions to what they would correlate in a human woman’s body with mathematical equations and found the following results. After a statistical analysis, they found that the average z-score of Barbie was -4.17. This means that less than 1 in 100,000 real women have body dimensions comparable to Barbie. They also found that “her waist would be 39% smaller than that of anorexic patient’s” (Rintala & Mustajoki, 1992). Also, Barbie’s body fat content would be so low that she would be unable to menstruate.
In 1965, Slumber Party Barbie came with a book entitled "How to Lose Weight" which advised its readers, "Don't eat." The doll also came with a bathroom scale reading 110 pounds, which would be around 35lbs underweight for a woman 5' 9" tall (Eames, 2003). Young children internalize the morals and values they learn in their early years through playing and make believe (Dittmar, Halliwell & Ive, 2006). Also, according to Kuther & McDonald, “dolls provide a tangible image of the body that can be internalized as part of the child's developing self-concept and body image” (McDonald, 2004). For a young girl who has not yet been taught what a healthy weight is, or what the average woman looks like, she may think 110 pounds is completely normal for a woman.
of a 5’9” stature. This is teaching girls from an extremely young age that woman must be beautiful, flawless and thin. Subsequently, this is very possibly the kick start of a lifelong battle for a girl with her appearance and weight, always striving for an unrealistic and unattainable goal. Whenever you use a semi-colon, it should be followed by a complete sentence. Statistics show that the prevalence of eating disorders is quite a bit higher in females than males. According to The South Carolina Department of Mental Health, an estimated 8 million people in the U.S. have an eating disorder, 7 million women and 1 million men. Furthermore, an estimated 10-15% of people with anorexia or bulimia are male, thus 85-90% of those are female.

THE CONFUSED STATE OF WOMEN’S CLOTHING

Another source of pressure for women lies in the actual clothes they’re purchasing. Because there are not standardized sizes for women’s clothing (Gardyn, 2003), a woman may be a size 12 in one brand and 16 in another; thus making her shopping experience all the more frustrating. Men’s clothing, in contrast, is produced based on a standardized system. The size of the pants is directly correlated with the inches of the waist and inseam, thus making sizes from all different manufacturers consistent, dependable and eliminating confusion. Women’s clothing is simply sized by a single number. Juniors sizes are “odd” numbers and Women’s and Misses sizes are “even” numbers. These
numbers fail to correlate with any standard form of measurement like the men’s sizes, and are thus different from brand to brand. According to Gardyn, “most women’s size systems can be traced back to a 1941 study that fielded measurements from a small sample of mostly white, young women in the military” (Gardyn, 2003). These gave the industry informal standards to work from but an official system was never adopted. Smaller or larger sizes were then constructed off of this “average” model and altered for a smaller or larger fit from there. This is highly inaccurate, however, because people’s bodies do not get bigger or smaller in the same proportion (Gardyn, 2003). According to an article in the New York Times by Burnett (2008), the Health Ministry in Spain did a study of over 10,000 women aging from 12 to 70 years old where laser scanners were used to measure every aspect of the female body. They concluded that most of the women fell in to three body types: hourglass, pear shape and cylinder. The researchers also surveyed the women and found that 4 out of 10 women stated they had trouble finding clothing that fit while shopping and this was mostly due to the clothing being too small. Furthermore, in women’s clothing, anything above a size 12 is considered Plus Size and is often times offered in very limited quantity in a store. The average size of the American woman is a size 14 (Gardyn, 2003), and yet the majority of the clothing sold in stores is never produced in this size. There is also evidence that high end designers are just not interested in even designing or producing larger sized clothing for women. Marshal Cohen of the NPD Group stated that in “a recent conversation with one
very high-end designer, [the designer said] `I do not want to see a woman wearing my product who is a size 12 or 14. It is bad for my image’” (Gardyn, 2003). Often times, if plus sizes are, in fact, made and sold in a store, they cost more money than do “regular” sized clothes. Also, if plus size clothes are sold, they’re in a hidden, harder to find section of the store and separated from the “regular” sized clothing. This, coupled with the limited availability and higher prices of plus size clothing in general, perpetuates the idea that clothing manufacturers are telling women it is not acceptable to be larger than a size 12.

THE FAD OF PLASTIC SURGERY

The proliferation of advertisements that barrage women on a daily basis has created a rise in plastic surgery. Women are the number one recipients of plastic surgery by far. In 2002 women had 87% of all the cosmetic surgeries performed and in 2006 almost 11 million procedures were performed in the United States alone; up 7% from the previous year (Navarro and Mireya, 2007). The most popular procedures are breast augmentation and rhinoplasty. In fact, 295% more breast augmentation procedures were done in 2007 than in 1997 (The American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery). Clearly we see plastic surgery is on the rise and most of the recipients are women. Kilbourne also states that "Most women who have had breast implants lose sensation in their breasts, so their breasts become an object of someone else’s pleasure rather
than pleasurable in themselves. The woman literally moves from being a subject to being an object” (Hodgson, 2005). Many times, a woman’s breast implants are even paid for by her male significant other, a dead give away that the implants are being purchased for someone else’s liking and pleasure other than the woman’s. A common side effect of breast augmentations is the loss of sensation in the nipple itself. According to Dr. Nahai, president of the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, this can happen anywhere from 10-70% of the time (Marcus, 2007). Furthermore, a complication of breast reduction surgery involves the nipple and areola needing to be completely removed and reattached as skin grafts. Some basic risks of plastic surgery include, but are certainly not limited to anesthesia complications, blood loss, blood clots, infection and seroma. Seroma is a collection of fluid under the skin during liposuction, tummy tucks and breast augmentations. (Marcus, 2007). Despite the many risks associated with plastic surgery and yet the number of women going under the knife continues to rise. According to the National Clearinghouse of Plastic Surgery Statistics, the number of procedures rose 48% from 2000 to 2006 (Marcus, 2007). The proliferation of such surgeries can be seen as just another form of societies control over women. According to Dr. Tolman, a professor of social welfare at Hunter College School of Social Work, the phenomenon is “just another means of asserting externalized control over women’s sexuality…” (Zylbergold, 2009). The more ways in which women are controlled, the easier it is to maintain the status quo of patriarchy.
THE DIET & BEAUTY INDUSTRIES MANIPULATION

Another part in the weight loss apparatus of society is the Diet and Beauty industries. Both industries are extremely profitable and they'll do anything they can to keep turning profits. Based on a study done in the late 1990's, Americans spent $50 billion annually on diet products. This exceeds the projections for the entire federal Education, Training, Employment and Social Services budgets by $5-$10 billion. This is also the equivalent of the gross national product of Ireland. (Fraser, 1997). These industries want to continue to make a profit off of Americans' constant struggle to lose weight, and most of the campaigns are geared toward women. These companies know that if they set an unrealistic and unattainable goal, tell women that is what they're supposed to look like, and sell them products they claim will help them achieve these goals, they have a never ending cycle of profits. Because the goal of beauty and body shape is completely unrealistic, due to such things as Photoshop and airbrushing, there will be an endless demand for their products. Every time their products are purchased, the cycle is reproduced. For instance, 20 years ago the average model weighed 8% less than the average woman. However, today's models weigh roughly 23% less than the average woman (Hodgson, 2005). The following website has a perfect example of Photoshopping in these industries:

http://homepage.mac.com/gapodaca/digital/bikini/bikini1.html. When the mouse
is drug over each image, one can see the extent to which each image was altered. The original images show a thin model in a bathing suit. The changed images show the same woman in the same bathing suit, but her figure has been significantly altered. Her skin has been smoothed, dark eye circles have been erased, breasts have been enlarged and even portions of her body and face have been completely removed to make the model appear even more sleek and slender than she was to begin with.

Note: These images were taken as freeze frame images from a video on Dove’s website showing the massive amounts of work put in to a finished advertisement. Professional hair & make up, professional lighting techniques, a professional photographer and Photoshopping practices are all standard procedures. These images show a “before” and “after” of this model.

This implies that even a beautiful, thin model is not “good enough” for the media. The images and messages that these industries produce have a profound effect on women of all ages. According one study, 4 out of 5 women are dissatisfied with their appearance (Hodgson, 2005) and 50-70% of normal weight girls believe they are overweight. Furthermore, in 2003 Teen magazine reported that
35% of girls ages 6-12 years old have been on at least one diet. Referring to Table 3 (Kritz, n.d.) the numbers imply that there may be an increased pressure on women as opposed to men to lose weight.

**Participants enrolling in the Weight Watchers program**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average Weight</td>
<td>198.4 lbs</td>
<td>164.7 lbs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage who are overweight</td>
<td>67.2%</td>
<td>61.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage who are obese</td>
<td>27.5%</td>
<td>33.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage trying to lose weight</td>
<td>28.8%</td>
<td>43.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to the graph, 43.6% of women were trying to lose weight compared to 28.8% of men.

As I have clearly outlined, there are multiple facets for the causes of the physical self loathing of women. We have seen that there are billions of dollars spent each year on both the side of the consumer of these products and the companies themselves in advertising for them. Baran and Sweezy help us understand why this may be happening with their Neo-Marxist theories. They explain why, in a monopoly capitalistic situation, emphasis and effort is placed on advertising rather than providing the consumer with the lowest price. There is, however, a silver lining to this phenomenon. The DOVE Company launched a campaign that focused on women of “real” size in our society. This campaign is called, “The Campaign for Real Beauty” and was launched in 2004. Dove
released various ads on television and in magazines that featured women of all sizes, shapes and colors.

These ads can be found on You Tube and also, DOVE’s site for their campaign: www.campaignforrealbeauty.com. According to their website,

The DOVE Campaign for Real Beauty is a global effort launched in 2004 to serve as a starting point for societal change and act as a catalyst for widening the definition and discussion of beauty. The campaign supports the DOVE mission: to make more women feel beautiful every day by widening stereotypical views of beauty. (Campaign for Real Beauty Mission, 2008).

Campaigns like DOVE’s and others help erase cultural stereotypes and lessen the burden for today’s average woman to be physically perfect.

Similar to DOVE, Fruit of the Loom launched a campaign where they introduced their “Fit For Me” line.
This was an undergarment line specifically intended for fuller figured women; where their advertisements featured women that were size 12 or 14 and of various different ethnicities. The advertisements didn’t hide “unflattering” body parts or use over the top make up like many plus size advertisements do. They featured models showing their entire bodies and done up in everyday make up.

The patriarchal society in which we live has clearly set up a system where the control of women is not only tolerated, but encouraged. Companies are well aware of the fact that if women are put in a place where they are constantly self conscious and always striving to be something they are not, the profits will be never ending. These companies set up unrealistic and unattainable goals for women, knowing women will always fail to achieve them and maximum profits will follow. The media is perpetuating the social “norm” of women focusing on their physical appearance and constantly loathing their bodies. This allows
women to be controlled which increases the inequality between men and women, perpetuates sexism in our society and thus exemplifies patriarchy to a tee.
## Appendix

### Table 1

Percent of American women who wore the following sized clothing in 2002.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Percent of Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Less than 1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Less than 1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Less than 1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30+</td>
<td>Less than 1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: NPD Fashionworld Consumer Panel
References


