Title: Point: The Media Promotes an Unhealthy Body Image for Adolescents.

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Abstract: The article presents an argument connecting representations of beauty in mass media to the development of negative body image in young people. The author argues that the quantity of images of ideal men and women viewed by young people on television, in advertising, and in the fashion industry lead to increased rates of body image issues and eating disorders. The manipulation of images to create an ideal image for media consumption is also addressed.

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Point: The Media Promotes an Unhealthy Body Image for Adolescents

Thesis: The media's representations of beauty and the ideal body are harmful to young people and contribute to an unhealthy, negative body image, as well as eating disorders among adolescents, especially young women.

Summary: Images featuring extremely thin women and overly muscled men are prolific in the media and advertisements. These images present a limited and potentially unhealthy idea of what young people should look like. This unrealistic expectation is very harmful to young people.

There is a clear and proven link between body image dissatisfaction and eating disorders (Department of Human Services 2002). This is because it is difficult for a young person to see all these 'perfect' bodies and maintain a healthy image of their own bodies as, for many, it is impossible and unhealthy for them to try to attain this ideal. Oftentimes, the ideal presented is manipulated and altered by computer software, so many of the models do not, in reality, look anything like their images in advertisements.

Solutions to this body image problem need to come from the fashion industry, education programs, and families. Children and young people need to be reminded that they cannot and should not try to emulate a false image of beauty.

Body Image & Media

Society is continually inundated with images and advertisements. When the television is not on, billboards are bursting with images of beautiful, 'perfect' people advertising products. A young woman today sees more images of the outstandingly good-looking women than her mother did in her whole adolescence (Women's Health Queensland Wide 2007).
What has previously been seen as a problem solely for young women is also affecting young men. More and more images of muscled, toned, and tanned men are appearing in advertisements, placing pressure on young men to live up to this image of masculinity. Young men are increasingly feeling dissatisfied with their bodies, with 34 percent wanting to put on weight to attain the physique of male models and actors. However, the pressure still greater on young women, with 70 percent of them wanting to lose weight (Women’s Health Queensland Wide 2007). Although the body images presented in the media of young women and men are different, the message they convey to today’s young people is the same—your body is not good enough unless it looks like this, no matter how unrealistic or unhealthy that may be.

**Poor Body Image**

These images of ‘perfect’ men and women are causing an increase in body image issues and eating disorders among young people, primarily young women. This means many women feel they are not the right shape or size, and this dissatisfaction can lead to serious physical and psychological problems. By seeing bodies that are unrealistic, young women wonder why they cannot achieve that ideal. Everyone has different physical make up, body measurements, skin colour and hair types, yet the range represented in advertisements and through other media are extremely narrow.

Body image issues can range from feeling overweight to chronic eating disorders, which can lead to death. Some of the consequences of poor body image are anorexia, bullimia, low self esteem, depression, binge eating, and obesity.

**Media Representations**

The ideal that is being presented to young women and men is fundamentally flawed, and this begins before most people realise. The Barbie doll, a simple children’s toy, represents an extremely false image of how a woman should look. If Barbie’s exact proportions were replicated in an adult women, she could not stand up because her breasts would be too big, and her feet are too small to hold up her weight (Centre for Excellence in Eating disorders 2009).

When women purchase clothing, they face another hurdle. Only 1.1 percent of women could have the same height, waist, and hip measurements as a standard shop mannequin (Centre for Excellence in Eating disorders 2009). So about 99 percent of women who shop for or see ads for clothes are not (and usually cannot realistically be) the same weight as the model advertising them.

The consequences of the disparity between the ideal and the reality becomes clear through the statistics. Only 2 percent of American women think they are beautiful (Dove 2009). Sixty-seven percent of young women envy other people’s bodies and only 25 percent of eighteen through twenty-two year olds were happy with their bodies (Women’s Health Queensland Wide 2007; Centre for Excellence in Eating disorders 2009).

As mentioned, the images young women see of models in advertisements are unrealistic and hard to attain. Many times, they are impossible to attain as the images are manipulated by computer programs such as Photoshop to such a degree that the end result often does not resemble the original model. This distortion makes the image even more unrealistic and unattainable for young women and men.

**Solutions**

In an effort to deconstruct the modified images of models, the Swedish government has a website that shows how a young woman is changed for a fashion shoot. It shows and explains how her hair, eyes, lips, jaw, and body are slightly modified to present a more ‘perfect’ image (Swedish Ministry of Health and Social Affairs 2009). Dove, the beauty brand, came out with an advertising campaign called ‘Evolution’. In one commercial, an ordinary-looking woman undergoes extensive hair styling and makeup application, and then her image is digitally retouched, until the final image, which is used on a billboard advertisement, is complete. The commercial reveals the extent to which a model’s appearance is altered before it is used in an advertisement.
Projects such as these help to debunk beauty myths and remind young people that the images they see are not real, and should not make them feel bad about themselves. Dove has also launched a campaign using women who are size fourteen and sixteen, larger than ‘normal’ models, but far more representative of women in society. Dove is using this as part of a marketing campaign in the hopes that it will appeal to women of all shapes and sizes in a positive way.

In the spirit of representing reality, Madrid fashion week has implemented compulsory medicals for models and has refused to allow undersized models on the catwalk (Women’s Health Queensland Wide 2007). However, changes such as this are relatively small steps taken by the fashion industry. More needs to be done within the industry, but there are other options to educate consumers.

Education programs have been proven to be very effective at debunking myths about body image. These programs, conducted in schools over time, generally consist of educating young women and men to critically view the media and advertisements around. It is explained how these ads are constructed, who benefits from them and how the consumer is being manipulated to buy a product and a false image of perfection.

Before young people even get to school and long after they leave, there is another weapon they can use against false representations of beauty. Parents and families need to foster positive body image amongst young people. Children and young adults need to constantly be reminded that being healthy and happy is far more important than looking like a computer-generated supermodel.

**Ponder This**

1. How clear is the author’s argument? Are there portions of the argument that require clarification? If so, what are they? How could you make the argument stronger? If not, what are the strongest contributing factors to the author’s argument?

- 2. Does the author argue more effectively for education programs or parental support? Explain.
- 3. In your opinion, does the author’s tone suggest that the author is trying to convince the reader, or that the author believes that the reader already agrees with the argument presented? Explain
- 4. Consider the tone the author uses when discussing poor body image. How does the tone of the article shift when the author addresses media representations? What effect does this have on the reader? What effect does it have on the validity of the argument? Explain.

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