

The Objectification of Women in Mass Media: Female Self-Image in Misogynist Culture

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Abstract

The objectification of women in the American mass media has a long sorted history. Critics, however, argue is that such an analysis is an exaggeration, which they dismiss along with most feminist critiques of society. This paper argues that the image of an “ideal” woman (as presented by the media) is harmful. It employs quantitative and qualitative methodology to explore the impacts, on a micro and macro level, of absorbing sexist media that presents the audience with unattainable or objectified images of femininity. This paper analyzes the increasing rate of cosmetic surgeries, eating disorders, and related deaths to reveal how mediated images of the ideal woman effect female self-image. These trends are then illuminated with statistics regarding violent crimes and sexual activity. Using a sociological perspective, I explore how the media’s objectification of women continues unabated and impacts society as a whole.

Introduction

What is the price of perfection, and more importantly, who defines what perfection is? For American woman, the answer is often the media. Social trends highlight how the media and its “ideal” image of femininity have impacted women in unprecedented ways. Women have always been objectified in advertisements and entertainment, but has the exploitation improved in recent years? This paper explores the extension of the media’s power as a result of the rapidly expanding availability of information that has been occurring since the introduction of the Internet, and its effects on self-esteem, personal satisfaction, and cultural standards in the United States.

This paper analyzes data regarding cosmetic surgery, eating disorders, sexual assault, and stalking crimes. This analysis utilizes medical and sociological literature,

supported by qualitative interviews that argue adverse and unrealistic portrayals of women in the media negatively impact American women's self-image and respect.

An Ideal that is Not Real

The representation of women in the media has always been exploitative. It has, throughout the years, reduced women to being nothing more than objects to be won, prizes to be shown off, and playthings to be abused. It has also created a definition of beauty that women compare themselves to. Also, men compare the women in their lives to what they see on television screens, in magazines, and on billboards. Both the self and society has suffered because of the objectification, sexism, exploitation and assessment.

In 2010, following a set of three studies that "examined the associations among sexist beliefs, objectification of others, media exposure and three distinct beauty ideals and practices," researcher Viren Swami and colleagues, found that sexism exists where beauty ideals and practices are rigidly consumed and followed, (Swami et al. 2010:367).

In patriarchal societies, the roles and privileges accorded to women are inferior to those assigned to men, and as such, sexism plays a central role in the continuing oppression of women. Moreover, and as predicted by the "beauty ideals are oppressive (BIO) hypothesis (Forbes et al., 2007), the existence of patriarchal structures and attitudes should result in significant relationships between sexist attitudes and the endorsement of beauty ideals and practices, (Swami et al., 2010:366).

Because of the harmful "ideal" put forth by the Western media and accepted in large by American patriarchal society there are drastic increases in plastic surgery, a steady (not decreasing) number of sexual assaults, and an overwhelming occurrence of eating disorders. Yet, when a woman gazes at an airbrushed beauty wishing for the model's thighs or slender hips she fails to register that the image she sees before her is not real. Our understanding of the images we see seldom takes into consideration the "beauty" we see are fabrications. These images are designed by graphic artists commissioned to change appearance and stimulate desire.

Each image is painstakingly worked over. Teeth and eyeballs are bleached white; blemishes, wrinkles and stray hairs are airbrushed away. According to Louis Grubb, a

leading New York retoucher, "Almost every photograph you see for a national advertiser these days has been worked on by a retoucher to some degree...Fundamentally, our job is to correct the basic deficiencies in the original photograph or, in effect, to improve upon the appearance of reality" (Jacobson and Mazur 1995).

The deception in these images goes largely unnoticed, which leads women down a road of destructive self-comparison.

"ABC aired the first televised Victoria's Secret fashion show in 2001. It was a cavalcade of legs and breasts interspersed with centerfoldish interviews with the models" (Levy 2005:21). The extent to which the models were airbrushed for this fashion show is unknown, but regardless it is important to keep in mind that most fashion models are thinner than 98% of American women (Smolak 1996). A Victoria's Secret fashion show is rather mild compared to other examples of popular entertainment. However, it still showcases atypically thin and primped women to the public.

Notable author and feminist, Susan Brownmiller, accounts with painstaking details her journey into womanhood in her novel Femininity. Brownmiller refers to a woman's quest for self-love and acceptance as "obsessive concentration," describing the inhumanity of trying to look a part that does not exist, (1986:25). The author argues that the war against women is not only in photographs, it is everywhere and it is supported, even administered, by an ever-present media. Brownmiller asks:

How can she be immune to the national celebration of this season's movie star sporting this season's body, to the calendar art in the neighborhood gas station, to the glamorous model in the high-fashion photograph, to the chance remark of a lover, the wistful preference of a husband, the whistle or the unexpected hostile comment heard on the street? (1985:25).

Brownmiller makes a key point; the ideal is illustrated everywhere. It is inescapable and due to the recent ease of access to all forms of media in our increasingly visual culture, such images have the ability to reach and affect an even more dynamic array of viewers.

The Nielsen Company reported (2008) that more than 80% of Americans have a computer in their homes. Of that group, 92% have Internet access, a number that increased over 77% from the previous year. In 2000, only 30% of Americans had

internet access in their homes (Census 2000). Surely the surge in Internet usage has helped advertisements and entertainment media reach more people. Importantly, instant streaming movie and television sites such as HULU (which relies on advertisements to stay afloat) have also helped to spread glamorized Hollywood ideals. Therefore, the technologically altered *femme fatales* that make up America's "ideal" woman are sure to reach more viewers.

The Physical Effects

From 2000 to 2009, as reported by the American Society of Plastic Surgeons (ASPS) (2009), there was a:

- 36% increase in breast augmentation surgery, an 84% increase in abdominoplasty (tummy tuck)
- 4,184% increase in lower body lifts
- 4,191% increase in arm lifts
- 132% increase in buttock lifts
- 65% increase in breast lifts

What the ASPS did not report increasing was any cosmetic procedure that did not somehow lift or eliminate naturally padded areas of a woman's body, or add to attraction points that women (and men) wish were more padded and perky. As a matter of fact, all cosmetic surgical procedures between 2000 and 2009 *decreased* in frequency except those listed above and pectoral implants and breast reduction for men.

In addition to the 91% of cosmetic surgeries underwent in the U.S. being performed on women, there is also a similarly disturbing trend of females with eating disorders. The National Eating Disorder Association (2005) reports that ten million American women are afflicted with Anorexia or Bulimia Nervosa, and there is a reported 20% mortality rate for severe cases of these illnesses when left untreated (The National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders). Why are women finding themselves in uncompromising states of dissatisfaction? It is apparent that widespread Internet use, the advent of "reality television, an endless stream of advertisements showcasing before and after photos of people losing a large portion of their body mass

by taking a pill, and modern music videos that portray women wearing hot pants and jiggling their “booty” in front of the camera, are actually encouraging women to take dangerous measures to “look good,” as defined by an unrealistic media crafted ideal. The viewing of this “sexy” monster supreme does not only inspire surgery and eating disorders. Many women find they are not happy with themselves or their bodies and the media machine is pushing more images that refuse to let women find peace.

While studying various types of ideology present in magazines, particularly New Woman (NW) and SHE, scholars Eggins and Iedema discovered that the magazines set a standard for women to follow or ideals to aspire to. These ideals, in turn, create a personality for the consumer and reinforce the sexist belief that one gender (male) is superior to the other (female). Thus, the female has a set of guidelines that instruct her how to behave, when to wear make-up, how to dress, what her body should look like, and how to treat her lover.

The different coding orientations displayed by the magazines instantiate not merely different interests, but divergent views of acceptable and accepted female behavior and notions of femininity. SHE presents a static world in which women as a generic class are warned of the negative consequences of stepping outside feminine sex roles. Its voyeuristic preoccupation with the negative consequences of transgression defines all that which deviates from the norm as other, (Eggins and Iedema. 1997: 189).

Also noted by Eggins and Iedema is that some of these magazines, NW for their study, have dissonant messages for women. Some of the media, wanting to be a kind of tool for empowerment, is sending subtle messages for women to change themselves but, similarly, they also hint that this change and empowerment must not challenge or upset patriarchal societal norms. (1997: 191).

The Cognitive Effects

A 2006 study completed by scientific researcher M. Kurosaki and colleagues showed that women, when looking at photos of their body that were distorted as fat, cognitively processed the image in the same way as fearful information. The women, also shown true to life images of their body, displayed high brain activation patterns in the prefrontal cortex when viewing and interpreting body image, which illustrates that

they process body image through emotions. Impulsive and emotional responses can elicit other negative mental and physical responses and prompt emotions such as depression (Kurosaki et al. 2006).

In 2007, Hans-Christoph Friederich, researcher and consultant for the Center of Psychosocial Medicine at Heidelberg University Hospital in Germany, took this concept a step further when he and his colleagues studied the impact of viewing images of fashion models.

The present study investigated the functional neuro-anatomy of body shape self-comparison using media images as a source of body dissatisfaction. In our experimental paradigm, body dissatisfaction was conceptualized as the dissonance between the heightened internalized thin-ideal evoked by media images and the perception of one's own physical shape (Friedrich et al. 2007:675).

Using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) technology to compare brain responses to media generated "ideal" bodies versus interior designs, Friedrich found anxiety ratings in all eighteen non-eating disordered women who took part in the study were "significantly higher" when the participants viewed images of idealized bodies. They also found, in congruence with the previous study, that the fear network of the brain is particularly activated when anxiety ratings increase.

Differential activation of the fear network including the amygdala and AC in response to slim body shapes confirms at a neurobiological level the existence of substantial body dissatisfaction in a subgroup of non-eating disordered women (Friedrich et al. 2007:675).

This substantial body self-dissatisfaction also affects the basal ganglia, which is "regularly observed in emotional processing and is most commonly induced by emotions involving motivation behaviors of approach (e.g., happiness) or withdrawal (e.g., disgust)" (Friedrich et al. 2007:678). In other words, viewing images - like ones presented by the media - is proven by more than one study to negatively affect healthy cognitive patterns of the audience, which affects the well-being and happiness quotient of the individual.

Mary Nightengale (pseudonym), a 30 year old woman originally from Upstate NY, who now resides in Canada, is one of the millions who have fallen victim to messages behind the mediated ideal female image. Hence, she has spent considerable time trying

to conform to the standard. Of her experiences, Nightengale says:

My eating disorder started my senior year of high school. I remember reading teen magazines as a young girl and wanting to look like those girls, but I had not a clue how to achieve that goal. At 17, what started out as a friendly competition with a friend turned into something else. At first she lost more weight than me, but after my first real heartbreak and [High School] graduation and starting college, I felt that controlling my eating was the only way I could have any control. What started out as exercise and a healthy diet turned into obsessive workout and calorie counting, until I lost control and became bulimic for about a year. I also had breast implants when I was 19. Mine were unusually small, so on top of feeling I lacked femininity, I also felt like a freak. My doctor gave me larger implants than I had asked for, which led to me being treated like a ditz for 10 years (Interview 2010).

Years later, at 5'7" and 130 pounds, Nightengale still finds herself struggling with her body image.

"I think about my weight constantly. I always wish to be just a little bit smaller. I would say at least three to five solid hours of my day are me thinking about food, my weight, how I'm going to lose more, and how I am going to keep it off."

Nightingale's battle is ongoing and has lasted for over 15 years, but she is far from alone. The longing she felt looking at slim images in beauty magazines or on the television is a very familiar desire. Scholar Kara L. Kerr, in an article for the *Priscilla Papers* that focuses on body image and depression in girls writes:

Negative body image in adolescent girls is of growing concern in modern Western societies. As girls go through their puberty, their bodies gain adipose and move farther away from the thin ideal for women. One must only take a look at a fashion magazine to see how the current ideal body is often asexual and childlike. Such a medium influences these girls and often causes them to become dissatisfied with their appearance. In addition to pressures to be thin, Western culture also promotes the objectification of women. This encourages women to take an observer's view of their bodies. Roberts and Gettman revealed the extent to which this objectification has been internalized by showing that merely reading words concerning the body's physical appearance induced a state of self-objectification in women. These women reported significantly higher levels of body shame and appearance anxiety compared to men (2010:21).

Societal Effects

The objectification of women not only induces states of shame and fear in women; it also promotes the treatment of them as inhuman playthings. The sexual exploitation of women is especially predominant in advertising, which is impossible to

escape because ads are omnipresent. Thin, barely clothed bodies appear in magazines and on the backs of buses. Intimate close-up shots of smoky bedroom eyes belonging to a woman wearing only lace negligee stare down at passerby from high billboards. Pelvic shots and chiseled bodies come through the television and the computer. They are in every clothing store and adorn the pages of weekly sales circulars.

The mechanism used in these ads is quite simple: Attractive bodies are employed to grab attention and simulate desire, which advertisers hope will then be transferred to the product. Buy the beer, get the girl. In this way, women's bodies are equated with commodities, presented as rewards of consumption. By instructing men to regard women's bodies as objects, ads help create an atmosphere that devalues women as people, encourages sexual harassment, and worse (Jacobson and Mazur 1995:84).

Often times the women portrayed in these ads are not even whole. The pictures show only legs, torsos, or an open mouth with rouge lip color provocatively placed atop a glass bottle. This reduces women to collections of parts, something less than human. This objectification and exploitation has changed the rules of society and along with it the attitudes of men and women have changed.

Just as simple films relying on crude jokes and violence are perfect for the global marketplace, since they require little translation, so is advertising that relies entirely on image. Bare breasts and phallic symbols are understood everywhere. As are the nude female buttocks featured in the Italian and German ads for similar worthless products to remedy the imaginary problem of cellulite. Unfortunately, such powerful imagery of pollutes the cultural environment (Kilbourne 1999:72).

Whether or not these images "pollute" the cultural environment, they certainly change it. For example, it is now cool for women to obtain as many sexual partners as possible, and if you can sell your sexiness (as seen by the frequent parading of Paris Hilton and the sex videos that made her famous for millions of young women who now idolize her) you can do anything.

When feminist Ariel Levy began research for her novel *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (2005) she made connections with the production crew of popular adult entertainment line, Girls Gone Wild (GGW), and, in 2004, traveled with them in Miami. GGW is a line of videos and clothing that captures Spring Break as a series of exposed breasts, gyrating buttocks, and heavy girl-on-girl

action. In recounting her time with the crew, Levy explains the pressure put on young women to take their tops (or bottoms) off for the camera or to make out with one another on film. Doing so won the girls a brief introduction into soft core pornography and a GGW t-shirt. Levy further explained how easy it was to get these young women to “flash for the brand:”

Usually the girls started out joking. They would plead with Puck and Sam (production crew) to give them GGW hats, and then they would pretend to peel up their shirts or lift their skirts. But little by little, the tease became the truth, and they took off their clothes as the camera recorded them for future viewing by God knows who (Levy 2005:13).

The girls in front of the GGW camera are not the only ones exploiting their bodies for attention. Bar scenes on any Saturday night are filled with mid-drifts, mini skirts, platinum heels and a lot of skin. If you aren’t daring enough to traverse the sea of alcohol poisoning, pills and provocative dancing, you can peruse the thousands of public Facebook pages to see very young girls aping soft-core pornography for their profile pictures. Or, you can just tune your television to a music video station and watch the “scantly clad young women dance and writhe lasciviously...The women are mostly just props” (Arnett 2002:256). Again there is the indication that women are not seen as people, but as a thing to be played with or used, much like a prop would be. Furthermore, the modern music video (a predominant form of entertainment for young viewers), has the ability to not only objectify women but to enforce racial boundaries.

Ward and Rivadenerya’s (2002) analysis of popular Black music videos found sexual imagery in 84% of the videos, with the most frequently occurring sexual behaviors involving sexual objectification. The most prevalent activity for female characters in the videos (other than singing) was dancing sexually, followed by walking or strutting. Seventy-one percent of women in these videos were dressed in provocative clothing or wore no clothing at all, compared to the 35% of male characters dressed in these ways, (Gordon 2008:246).

Maya Gordon, after observing Black womanhood portrayals in the media, completed a study with a sample of 176 African American girls (aged 13-17) with the majority reporting to be “high achieving” students (earning Bs and As) who reported spending more than 67 hours per week immersed in Black media (television, music, and

music videos). Gordon measured media exposure, media identification, importance of being attractive, appearance attitudes, and racial identity. (Gordon 2008:248-250).

The results provide evidence of connections between media messages and girls' acceptance of attitudes emphasizing the importance of appearance for girls. As expected, frequent exposure to Black music videos, and stronger identification with one's favorite TV character and with more objectifying female artists were each associated with stronger endorsement of these attitudes, whereas identification with less objectifying female music artists was negatively associated with the importance of appearance for girls. The more objectifying female artists present images that emphasize women's appearance, sexuality, and desirability to men, and these findings suggest that girls who identify more strongly with these artists may be internalizing their messages about women, (Gordon 2008: 253).

Gordon found that hearing and identifying with a Black female musician on the radio, as opposed to identifying with a visual representation of Black women in music videos or on the television, seemed to decrease the importance of appearance. Her findings suggest a strong correlation between visual stimulation and mental processes that value beauty ideals.

Given the barrage of images representing women as pieces of a body (mainly breasts, butts, and legs) instead of as a person, it is no surprise that society has changed. As a matter of fact, if one is to consider social cognitive theory it makes perfect sense. "Human behavior has often been explained in terms of unidirectional causation, in which behavior is depicted as either being shaped and controlled by environmental influences or drives by internal dispositions" (Bandura 1999:23). Bandura is referring to the unique ability that humans have to absorb and mimic their environment. Individuals create a personalized reality that is reflective of what they observe and identify as meaningful in their environment, and then they act based on those observations. Therefore, if women are observing images thrust at them through mass communication as a guideline of how to act, they will begin to act in that manner because it mirrors their environment. If men are constantly viewing women as objects that must be possessed, or prizes to be won, they will begin treating them as so.

Bandura refers to this as modeling. Through modeling the observer learns what behavior is appropriate in what situations and begins to set up structure and rules for their environment based on the knowledge they obtained with their modeling. "A great

deal of information about human values, styles of thinking, behavior patterns and sociostructural opportunities and constraints is gained from modeled styles of behavior portrayed symbolically through the electronic mass media...The accelerated growth of electronic technologies has vastly expanded the range of models to which members of a society are exposed day in and day out" (Bandura 1995:25). Additionally, Bandura does not fail to mention that the electronic mass media is a machine that quickly and efficiently structures new symbolic environments for humans to construct and model.

When large portions of the population are modeling behavior after advertisements, reality television and, in some cases, soft-core pornography (GGW) it becomes a force that changes society as a whole, which, if the change is proven detrimental or damaging, is where a cause for concern grows. With women modeling behavior like Paris Hilton or the Spring Break beauties of GGW, the outcome looks bleak.

The few existing studies consistently point to a relationship between exposure to sexual content and sexual beliefs, attitudes and behavior. Two studies have found correlations between watching higher doses of "sexy" television and early initiation of sexual intercourse, and studies of adolescents have found that heavy television viewing is a predictive of negative attitudes toward virginity. In general, key communication theories and years of research on other kinds of communication effects, such as the effect of violent images, suggest that we are indeed affected by ubiquitous, graphic, and consequence-free depictions of sexual behavior that surround us in all forms of the mass media.

Jane Brown and her colleagues concluded from their years of research that the mass media are important sex educators for American teenagers...Brown faults media portrayals for avoiding the 'three C's' – commitment, contraceptive, and consequences – and concludes, 'It is little wonder that adolescents find the sexual world a difficult and confusing place and that they engage in early and unprotected sexual intercourse with multiple partners' (Kilbourne 1999:147-8).

Even if women, as suggested by Kilbourne, are not finding sexual education through violent, fictitious media that media is still penetrating society in harmful ways. With a high percentage of Black women appearing "scantily clad" in popular entertainment it begs the question of how men begin to treat Black women. Are they further reduced to objects, more so than a White woman? Are they seen as more promiscuous or, more frightening, an easy target? The National Crime Victimization

Survey, 2008, finds one woman per hour being raped or sexually assaulted in the U.S.. The same survey also reports that 1,006,970 women are stalked annually in America, and of that number, 79% will report sexual abuse during the time that stalking occurs. Lorrie Gavin, public researcher for the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, revealed in an interview with National Public Radio that older teens reported their first sexual intercourse encounter as "forced," (Wilson 2009). It is true that crimes such as these have always existed, but one has to wonder if their continued prevalence is a result of a changing society with increasing mediated objectification of women.

Nightengale, too, said that she had fallen victim to both sexual assault and harassment. However, the negative effects of her good looks did not stop her from consistently trying to achieve the look that she regularly sees in the media:

When I see pictures of extremely thin models and actresses, it usually depresses me. I wasn't built like them, but it doesn't stop me from aspiring to their level of thinness. The need to be perceived as pretty and desirable became my main goal in life, not because I am vain, but because I learned how the world worked (Nightengale).

Levy uncovered similar findings while collecting research for her novel. She visited Head-Royce High School in California to speak to some of the students about their opinions on sex, dating, and what it means to be a young woman. One of Levy's interviewees, Anne, believes much the same as Nightengale. Anne, who Levy describes as a "tall, tan girl with lovely freckles across her cheek, long limbs and silky golden hair" says that her true passion in life is her looks. "'For me, it's all attached to guys,' she says. 'Like I have this weird link between certain guys and my own self-worth.'" Anne went on to explain that if she really likes a boy in school, she will make sure she keeps her weight in check, wears outfits they approve of (the less material the better), and engage in sexual encounters for their pleasure. When speaking of sex, Anne (not a virgin) explains it as something "competitive," because whoever "hooks up" with the most boys becomes the coolest girl (Levy 2005:150-54). Anne admits to not finding sex pleasurable, but believes it was a behavior she has to model in order to fit into the guidelines of attractive or worthwhile, and she is not alone. This has become the trend for young women and it reinforces to young men that women are objects or playthings.

If a woman's behavior is not contradicting the message sent by media, than it is largely assumed by members of society to support that message.

Summary

Many women are finding themselves in a vicious cycle that could, and often times does, include low self-esteem, depression, eating disorders, sexual assault and/or harassment, and an overall feeling of discontent as a result of a desire to emulate a visual standard that is near impossible to achieve. Some partners are reading women's modeling as an urge or desire to be treated or used as the object the media portrays them as. The result is an unpredictable dance between a woman and her environment that yo yo's between temporary contentment when attention is achieved, to severe depression after it is taken away. Women are then coerced to repeat the cycle by seeking out new forms of approval. Meanwhile, to achieve the title of sexy or desirable, intimate relations continue to lose meaning, resulting in high-risk behavior. Also, there is the sad reality that some of these women will fall victim to assault, harassment, and/or stalking, which will no doubt serve as a detrimental obstacle in achieving contentment.

Despite the physical, cognitive, emotional, and spiritual obstacles in the quest to achieve idealized beauty, women continue to chase it. While any woman stuck in the spider's web has different reasoning for prescribing to these "ideals," it seems quite consistent that the failure to obtain American beauty standards often leads to great body dissatisfaction and a probable inability to find peace. To combat sexism and objectification, society must reshape its patriarchal framework and move towards more egalitarian standards. However, with the media consistently flashing the "ideal" around every corner the likelihood of self-acceptance and a less judgmental society seems near impossible. Therefore, working towards a society where women can walk safely down the street without fear of assault, or can look in the mirror without negative mental and physical consequences begins internally and hopefully effects the external environment.

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