

Mass Media and Its Influence on the Adolescent Mind:
A study of student perceptions of body image and magazine advertisements
Benjie Achtenberg Macalester College 2006

Abstract: America's mass media produces, creates and promotes multitudes of ideas and theories that have enormous influence on the American adolescent population and their perceptions of themselves. The following study and its results will examine 9th grade students' perceptions of their own body image and self-image as they relate to the media. This study is intended to show how 9th grades are affected by the media's presentation of the ideal male and female body and the potentially negative effects that ensue. The ultimate goal of this study is to inform educators of the importance of a comprehensive education in media literacy, especially for students entering high school. I plan to accomplish this study with the use of student and teacher surveys, a poster/collage presentation and student reflective journals. The surveys will serve as a basic quantitative analysis of student perceptions while the presentations and reflection journals will serve as a means of qualitative analysis. As this action research will show, the media does present male and female bodies in unrealistic ways that in effect lead young people to believe that those bodies are the norm and are what all should strive to achieve. These unrealistic images and stereotypical norms can and sometimes do lead young people, especially girls, to make unhealthy decisions, and cause confusion about how to correctly care for one's body during adolescent development. These unhealthy decisions can and do manifest themselves in forms such as diets, dieting pills and solutions, excessive exercise and in extreme cases; eating disorders.

Research Questions:

How does the media, specifically popular magazines and print media, affect or influence the body images and self-images of adolescent boys and girls?

The following questions are come from the first part of the student survey.

1. Who influences your body image/self image more... your parents? Your friends? Your Teachers? The media?
2. What types of male bodies does the media present?
3. Do you think that these images directly affect how males feel about themselves and how males take care of themselves? Please explain briefly.
4. What types of female bodies does the media present?
5. Do you think that these images directly affect how females feel about themselves and how females take care of themselves? Please explain briefly.
6. Are these images the ideals in our society?
7. Are these images realistic? How many people do you know who have body types like those presented in the media?
8. What misconceptions of how men/women are “supposed” to look are most prominent in the media?
9. Where do you see these “ideal” “stereotypical” male/female bodies the most in the media? Magazines? Movies? TV shows? What types of TV shows?

The second part of the student survey includes questions about students’ individual perceptions of their own body, based on a body size chart (as pictured below in the appendix).

The following questions come from the teacher survey.

1. Are students concerned with body image?
If so, in what ways do student show their concern about their body images? How are their concerns manifested? Eating disorders? Exercise issues?
2. Is there pressure on students to have/maintain a certain type of body image?

3. Please explain where the majority of this pressure comes from? The media? Parents? Peers? Coaches?

4. In what ways do you believe that teachers can have an impact on students' body images? What can you as a teacher do to help/support students who are suffering from low self-esteem and a negative body image?

Literature Review: Within the past two decades there have been multiple studies done on the media's effect on adolescent body image and self-image. Many of these studies, done in the past 6 years, have shown that the media, especially advertisements and articles both in print and on screen play a significant role in the development of adolescent's perceptions of their own body image and self-image. From *The Relationship between Reading Beauty and Fashion Magazines and the Use of Pathogenic Dieting Methods among Adolescent Females* (Study #1), we learned that,

Teenagers are believed to be among the heaviest users of many forms of mass media, particularly, specialized magazines. Recent circulation figures reported by the Standard Rate and Data Service indicate that more than 6.5 million adolescent females read Seventeen, Teen, and YM, three of the most popular magazines targeted at teenage females, each month.

Additionally, this study, among many others analyzed a number of magazines targeted at adolescent females and have suggested that their content supports the idea that female happiness and success are tied to physical appearance. More specifically female happiness and success are tied to the normative constructions of the female body, which promote ultra-thinness as the preferred state of health and beauty as well as the most important form of self-improvement. These ideals, however unrealistic and unhealthy, are the ideals in our society and thusly drive many adolescent females to make dangerously unhealthy choices with regard to their appearance and weight. "Conservative estimates suggest that 1 out of 100 females is anorexic and 3 out of 100 are bulimic," as quoted from Renee A Botta's study, *Television*

Images and Adolescent Girls' Body Image Disturbance. The media's affect on adolescent body image is not solely associated with females but with males too. "Body image issues for males have focused on increasing weight and shoulder/muscular shape. In particular, the desire to develop muscularity has emerged as an important issue among men and adolescent boys," from *Body Image and the Appearance Culture among Adolescent Gils and Boys*. These studies brought to my attention the phenomenon of adolescents being heavily influenced in a negative way by the media targeted at them. My study looked at many of the same factors as these previous studies, but at the same time took it one-step further by asking the students to write and reflect on their own personal experiences as well as how the study itself affected them and their perception of the media. My research and results will show that the media plays a large role in the creation of body type ideals for both males and females. Additionally this study will show that the media affects how adolescents think about their own body images whether that be indirectly through types of characters and actors on TV and in magazines or directly thought exercise advertisements/shows and dieting advertisements. Though significant, these studies all concluded that the media played a secondary role in influencing adolescents' perceptions. This influence was second only to peer influence, which was reported to be the most powerful.

Data Collection:

My study population was a class of 27 ninth graders of mixed gender enrolled in a single trimester of health education at a Midwestern private Catholic high school in an urban area.. The students were predominantly white (91%), while 7% were African American and 3% were Latino. My research was part of a unit on body image and self-image, which was a main component of the health class's curriculum. Each student was required to participate in the study, as each part of the study was incorporated into the daily lessons, although all

students had the ability to omit answers whenever they so desired as well as write whatever they wanted in the free response portions of the unit.

The three primary methods of data collection were a survey given to each student, a collaborative poster/collage project and presentation and a one page written response about the unit. The survey was administered first and consisted of two parts; the first included general questions about body image, gender and the media and the second included more personal questions about weight, body shape and size. The surveys were all completed anonymously. Additionally there was a teacher survey, which was given to the facilitating health teacher and the two school counselors.

The second part of the data collection was the poster and presentation. The poster project was completed in pairs or triads. It was an open-ended project where students were given a blank poster board and asked to look through a multitude of popular magazines (provided by the students and the teacher) to select images that were stereotypes of body images, or that presented males and females in unnatural or unrealistic ways. Other than the stereotypes of bodies theme, students were given the freedom create their poster-collages in any way they wanted. The next part of this portion of the study was the presentation to the class of the poster boards. Students were given approximately two to three minutes to share and discuss their posters and any insightful ideas they had with their classmates.

The third and final aspect of the data collection was a one page written reflection on the in-class discussions, the poster/presentation part and the survey results, which were synthesized and given back to the students the day they began to write the responses.

Data Analysis and Interpretation:

As was noted in each of the previously referenced studies, the media does play a significant role in the development of body and self-images of adolescent boys and girls. Unlike the

conclusions of the previous studies, my data showed that the media is the single most influential source in these students' lives with respect to their perspectives of body image. As quoted from a selection of student surveys:

“more muscles = sexier;” “without muscles you won't get the girls,” “the images make you want to take steroids and get super jacked.” “girls don't eat because they want to look like the famous women in the media, girls want to get plastic surgery to fit in;” “they want to be able to share clothes with their friends;” “always worry about carbs and eating too much;” “and many girls have eating disorders.”

These were just a few of the responses from the survey of the media's affect on boys and girls. Many of the students correctly noted that the stereotypical images in the media were not typical of the general population or of the people, they know. Another interesting piece of data was that both boys and girls agreed that magazines were the most influential of all of the media outlets.

The second part of the survey data, which lead me to my most prominent conclusions, was the analysis of body types as seen below in the appendix. Most of the data was not surprising, except for questions 1, 2 and 5. Almost 75% of female respondents said they saw themselves as body type #3 or #4, but when asked what body type they wanted to be, almost 70% reported body type #2 and #3. This to me speaks volumes to the influence of the media and the perception that young females have about their own bodies. As a participant and observer in the class, I noted that none of the females looked overweight or were of notably different sizes than other females in the class. Nevertheless, to see that 70% of the girls in this class wanted to be skinnier than they were already was disturbing. As one can see in the body size scale, pictured below, #2 and #3 of the females are both extremely skinny. Given this data, I made the correlation between the students' responses saying that the media influenced them and the desire to be skinnier.

From the poster presentations, that data gathered merely reinforced already understood notions of what the stereotypes were in the media. It was interesting to see the differences

between boys and girls. Most of the boys selected and highlighted images with bulging muscles and curvy women in scantily clad clothing while many girls focused on smaller details such as facial complexion, hair color and style and messages about dieting and weight loss programs. One insightful comment made by one of the female students during her presentation was that of all of the popular magazines viewed; it was the ones geared toward young women that had the most exaggerated stereotypes and pervasive/overt messages.

The media's constant barrage of slender, scantily clad women and buff, muscular, tan and half-naked men reinforced the notion of the "ideal" male and female bodies, which is exactly the type of imagery that has a negative affect on adolescents. Adolescents, especially teenagers give lots of power and credibility to many of the popular magazines used in this study. They read them daily, and in many ways use them as signifiers of what is "cool" and what is "hot" at any given time. Many students commented during their presentations and in their journals that they read the magazines and enjoy seeing the images because their favorite celebrities were featured. The draw that magazines and print media have for young people is very strong and consequently, influential. This powerful influence is derived from the media's ability to present such images in ways, which seem normal and acceptable, when in actuality; many of the images of perfect bodies have been airbrushed or digitally altered. The images that infiltrate the minds of young people effectively manipulate their sense of self, especially with regard to their physical appearance. When young men and women are constantly, seeing "skinny, big breasted, tall, tan, and sexual" women and "muscular, tan, tough, trim, and sexy men" they begin to think that those images of the male and female body are the ideal and are the only acceptable and attractive body types. I am presenting the media's power to influence the youth of America in a negative light as I see it because these ideas, stereotypes and notions of a healthy body can be detrimental to adolescents' psyche and their sense of self. This negative effect is especially harmful to adolescent females, as they

tend to be the primary target of these types of stereotypes. In my view, the media is promoting these unrealistic and unattainable body types so that negative self-images will be fostered in young people leading them to buy the products being advertised and thusly promoting and supporting the consumerist, mentally unhealthy dynamic life style in which we currently live. They will never be able to look like the made up famous people in the media or the idealistic models in advertisements, therefore the cycle of unhappiness and disappointment in themselves continues.

Finally, with the journals I was able to glimpse into the minds of the students and actually read what they each personally thought. It was interesting to see that most of the students felt like they understood that the media was portraying stereotypes of male and female bodies. The majority of the students wrote that they enjoyed seeing the survey results of their class and were surprised that so many people felt like the media was a big influence. I would attribute this discrepancy between the survey results and journals to the fact that I asked the students to write about their opinions and put their names on their journals whereas the surveys were anonymous. Most of the boys wrote that the media does not influence them in a very powerful way, just subtly in that they should get stronger in order to succeed more in the world, i.e. with women and athletically. A common response in female journals was that they constantly see and hear messages about how they should be skinny and fit in order to be popular. Though many of these messages are subtle, they seemed to be plainly overt to many of these 9th grade girls. They noted that most advertisements in the media did not explicitly say, "be skinny" or "you must not be fat" but that because of the clothes women wore and how there was not variation in body shape and size in the media, they inferred that that was how they should look. It is clear that the media does influence adolescents (some more than others) with regard to their body images and it is usually in a negative way. The teacher survey served the purpose of an outsider's perspective to the media influence on students.

When asked if teachers could also play a role in influencing students one way or the other, all three teachers said yes. They all indicated that they, as educators, should be involved in influencing students in a positive manor. Teachers “should teach students to be their own person” and not be influenced by the media in such a way that is detrimental to their health and well-being.

Action Plan:

Given these results as well as those of previous studies, I would advocate for a media literacy unit in every health course in every school. Students should be given the critical thinking tools to analyze the media and all of its messages so that the media’s negative influence on youth can be curtailed. This media literacy would help students to understand how and why the media portrays people the way it does as well as how to differentiate between realistic images and fake, made-up images. This is a very utopian goal, but if all students in addition to learning how to read, write, add and subtract, became critical thinkers and were able to understand and combat the power of the media, our future generations would be healthier and wiser and attack the plight of eating disorders from at least one angle. As for the class at Cretin in which I performed this study, I would continue to support and expand upon the current curriculum. All of the components of this study, as well as the ensuing discussions after the fact were all useful in engaging the students in thoughtful and meaningful conversation about self-image, body image and the media’s influence. Based on the survey results I would recommend that the students be actively engaged in conversation and reflection about their own body image and how they personally see themselves in relation to the stereotypes and norms presented in the media. Getting students to actively analyze and think about the media and its relation to body image is important for the simple reason of encouraging the thought process. Having students become more conscious and aware of their

own feelings about their body images and self-images will only serve to enhance their understanding and competency in being media literate.

More specifically, I would include in discussions and lecture the fact that one's body needs to be able to function in a healthy manor for anything else to happen. Eating healthy and exercising is pertinent to maintaining a healthy, heart, lungs and brain. Without the healthy functioning of these and every other major part of one's body, it will not matter how muscular or how skinny one is. Having a healthy body is infinitely more important than looking like a super model.

Final Thoughts:

I was not surprised at the results I received from my research, as they are common in most schools across the country. I was satisfied with the research I did and the data I collected as I think that it accurately represents 9th graders and their perceptions of the media and body image. I found that they were slightly critical of the media and had an ability to see in some cases through the media's guise, but they all still have a lot to learn. I would hope that a comprehensive media literacy and body positive curriculum could be the norm in all schools in the future so that we can avoid the negative effects of a negative body and self image that plague current generations.

References:

“Body Image and the Appearance Culture Among Adolescent Girls and Boys”—Diane Carlson Jones of University of Washington, Thorbjorg Helga Vigfusdottir of Reykjavik University, Yoonsun Lee of University of Washington

This article examines the relative influences of peers, appearance magazines and the internalization of appearance ideals among adolescent boys and girls. The basis of this study is that girls more so than boys are plagued with negative self images and internalized appearance ideals that in reality are unachievable. As a result of internalized appearance ideals, females are more prone to having what is called “body dissatisfaction” and therefore are more susceptible to eating disorders, diets, dieting pills and other various forms of body manipulation for the sole purpose of losing weight to resemble the so called “appearance ideals.” The results of this study showed that peer influences, including peer conversations

and peer criticism were the most influential in affecting both boys and girls body/self images. Appearance magazines have a more significant effect on girls self images than on boys as there are many more of these magazines targeted at adolescent girls than there are for boys.

“The Relationship between Reading Beauty and Fashion Magazines and the Use of Pathogenic Dieting Methods among Adolescent Females”—Steven Thomsen, Michelle Weber, Lora Beth Brown—Adolescence (Journal)

This article examines the specific relationship between girls’ body/self image and reading appearance magazines. The study showed that lots of adolescent girls read these magazines and use the images and ideals in them to somewhat define themselves, set goals for themselves and to create ideals for themselves in relation to their body shape and size. The results of this survey showed that although magazines have significant influence on adolescent girls in creating ideals about body shape and size, peer influences and other outside, less tangible forces have more influence.

“Television Images and Adolescent Girls’ Body Image Disturbance”—Renee Botta

This article addresses the role of television images and their influence on body/self images of adolescent girls. Those who have a critical lens through which to watch/examine television images are less affected by the negative and biased body images than those who have no critical lens through which to look. The results of this survey suggest that those who use the media images to create goals for themselves and their bodies fall into a chain reaction that can ultimately lead to eating disorders and other potentially harmful “solutions” to lose weight and achieve their goals/ideals.

Appendix #1

****Note: All surveys will be done anonymously****

(16) Female responses (11) Male responses

Part I

1. Who influences your body image/self image more... your parents? Your friends? Your Teachers? The media?

Media = 13	Media = 8
Friends = 9	Friends = 3
Parents	Family = 2
Siblings	Sports Teams
Grandparents	

2. What types of male bodies does the media present?

Muscular = 9	Muscular = 6
Strong = 6	Nice abs = 4
Nice abs = 5	Trim = 2
Tan = 3	Tall = 2
Fit = 2	Sexy = 2
Tough	Rough
Hot	Good Looking
	In shape

3. Do you think that these images directly affect how males feel about themselves and how males take care of themselves? Please explain briefly.

More muscles = sexier
Without big muscles, you can't get the girls
Makes guys want to exercise everyday to try and get buff
Don't want to be a weakling
Want respect from both boys and girls
Boys become more self conscious
What they see in the media is all they know
Does not affect them at all
Get dieseled
Be like the men in the media
Don't care at all
Makes males not feel good about themselves
Work out more
Want to use supplements to get bigger
Get caught up in it all

4. What types of female bodies does the media present?

Skinny = 14	Skinny = 7
Big breasts = 5	Pretty = 2
Big butts = 3	Show lots of skins
Flat stomachs = 2	Curvy
Tall = 2	In shape
Tan = 2	Sexual
Hour glass figure = 2	Lots of make-up
Perfect hair	

5. Do you think that these images directly affect how females feel about themselves and how females take care of themselves? Please explain briefly.

Don't eat because they want to look like women in media = 5
Want to get plastic surgery = 3
Want to fit in = 3
Want to be able to share clothes with friends
Self-conscious
Want to achieve perfect body
Eating disorders = 4
Want nice bodies = 3
Implants
Plastic surgery
Always worry about carbs/calories

6. Are these images the ideals in our society?

Yes = 7	Yes = 3
No = 8	No = 5
Some = 1	Some = 3

7. Are these images realistic? How many people do you know who have body types like those presented in the media?

No = 8
Maybe a few
People in the media are fake/changed
Work really hard to look like that
Yes = 4

- No, not many = 6
- Some are believable
- Everyone strives to be perfect

8. What misconceptions of how men/women are “supposed” to look are most prominent in the media?

- Thin women = 7
- Muscular men = 5
- Extremely skinny body with flawless faces = 3
- Big breasts
- Chiseled abs
- They make it look like that is what you want to look like
- Skinny women = 6
- Being built/strong
- Big breasts
- Make you feel like you can’t be anything other than perfect
- Unhealthy weight/diets

9. Where do you see these “ideal” “stereotypical” male/female bodies the most in the media? Magazines? Movies? TV shows? What types of TV shows?

- Magazines = 11 (People, US Weekly, Playboy)
- TV = 8 (Laguna Beach, Real World, Desperate Housewives, Americas Top Model)
- Movies = 3
- Everywhere
- Magazines = 6
- TV = 3 (MTV)
- Movies
- All of the Above

Part II

The first set of questions relate to the body shape scale for your own sex.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Which drawing best depicts your current figure?		2	7, 8	5, 1	2	1			
2. Which drawing represents the figure you would most like to look like?		6, 1	6, 4	4, 4	1				
3. Choose the thinnest figure which you would still find acceptable for a person of your age.	1	10, 5	4, 3	1		1			
4. Choose the heaviest figure which you would find acceptable for a person your age.				1	5, 1	9, 6	1, 2		1
5. Choose the figure that you believe most other people would see as the most attractive for someone of a similar age to you.		7	6, 4	2, 4	2				

These next questions relate to the body shape scale for the opposite sex.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
6. Choose the figure that you find most attractive, assuming they are of similar age to you.		1	6, 7 7	4					
7. Choose the figure that you believe most other people would see as the most attractive for someone of similar age to you.		2	6, 8 8	6, 3 3	1				

Now a few questions about yourself -

8. Age

9. Sex

Female Male

10. On the following scale, circle one response about how much you are concerned that your current body shape is not as attractive as you would like.

not at all *somewhat concerned* *concerned* *pretty concerned* *always concerned*

4, 5 7, 5 2, 1 3

11. On the following scale, indicate how much you are concerned that your current body shape means you are not as healthy as you would like.

not at all *somewhat concerned* *concerned* *pretty concerned* *always concerned*

6, 6 6, 4 1, 1 2 1

12. Do you sometimes engage in dieting in order to lose weight.

Yes No

5, 11, 10

