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The Influence of Fashion Magazines on Body Image

Introduction

For a considerable time, I have had issues with my body which were unresolved, as these same issues were a part of a related concern; namely, I have struggled to understand the relationship between physical being and appearance with the idea of self. Being overweight was my normal state in childhood and adolescence, and I never was without a sense of how this limited me in social arenas. I believe I never suffered from a severe lack of self-esteem, yet I also could not reconcile my identity within a world in which perfect body types are virtually everywhere in media. Specifically, the fashion magazines I read and saw all around me reinforced a feeling that I was not “right,” even as I knew the images were extreme and often unhealthy. To that end, and even as my journey with these issues has come to a resolution, I feel it critical to explore how – and why – fashion magazines have such an enormous influence on our concepts of ourselves, and how better understanding this may translate to a stronger sense of identity.

Exploration

The first source I turned to in my exploration was Wyke's and Gunter's *The Media and Body Image: If Looks Could Kill*, and because a perusal of this book revealed that it focused on virtually all my concerns. The casual tone of the title notwithstanding, the authors rely on a great deal of research, as they break down their analysis of media's relationship with body image in a variety of specific ways. There is the expected emphasis on the issue of media on promoting unhealthy behaviors in girls, encouraging them through relentless presentations of excessively thin models to emulate the body types. This is not, however, reiterated to no point, and there is as well interesting information regarding responses to this circumstance. For example, more

recent research examines similar effects on boys and men, who are influenced to resemble male body types equally extreme in muscularity and slimness. Then, the fashion magazine industry is not without conflict here; in 2001, the Editor in Chief of Marie-Claire resigned because her efforts to use models with fuller figures met with refusal from advertisers and creative teams (Wykes, Gunter 53). Other chapters present an enormous amount of research regarding the ways in which magazine and other images affect girls, with some unexpected results. For instance, many young women shown to be influenced by the inundation of hyper-thin female models images assert that their role models include Catherine Zeta-Jones, Jennifer Lopez, and other celebrities not slim. Then, there is a range of influence beyond the extremes of eating disorders, as the images create a vast practice of restrained eating in girls and women, which translates to ongoing fixation (Wykes, Gunter 194). While much of this book was informative to me, I still felt that the process of the influence was missing, and was eager to learn exactly how image becomes the ideal, even as we girls and women know the reality.

My concern to better understand the psychological processes behind the influence, then, led me to a number of scholarly studies, and one in particular was interesting to me. In “Body dissatisfaction: Can a short media literacy message reduce negative media exposure effects amongst adolescent girls?,” the authors decide in 2011 to try an experiment: they exposed 127 British school girls to an intervention video explaining the negative effects of extreme body image presentations, and then assessed responses to advertising using hyper-thin models. Every phase of the experiment is conducted carefully, and the intervention video is designed to “speak the language” of the girls aged between 10 and 13. Then, the authors make it clear that they are proceeding based upon the vast evidence of negative influences of fashion models as excessively thin. The results are strong and, “demonstrate that providing information about the unrealistic nature of media images may have immediate benefits for young girls” (Halliwell, Easun, &

Harcourt 402). While this did not reveal more to me about how fashion magazine images actually influence girls, it provided some insight; that is, it reinforced for me something I have long considered, in that young girls are vulnerable to “immediacy.” That is, it may not be the cumulative effect of fashion ads that has impact, but the reality that they have impact so frequently. This would explain why a timely intervention is helpful.

I then turned to Cash's and Smolak's 2012 *Body Image: A Handbook of Science, Practice, and Prevention*, believing this would provide more insight into why I was unable to literally know the processes translating the unrealistic ideal into issues for myself and for other girls. What I uncovered was even more documentation supporting the eating disorders are linked to the images discussed. I did, however, gain another perspective. Research seems to indicate that fashion magazines have a directly social effect on girls; their impact does not derive from celebrity admiration, but also from a sense that the models are peers. This occurs through the socialization aspect of the images; as actual peers see the same models and purchase the same products “used” by the models, the models then become “equals,” which sets the standard for beauty as impossibly thin (Cash, Smolak 79). This was extremely interesting to me because it connects the distanced world of the fashion models to the ordinary one wherein girls – like myself – are influenced. It had not occurred to me, in fact, that the pervasive nature of magazine images would have this immense effect.

With this new thinking of fashion images as an actual social influence, I was then interested in learning if this factor resembled other social forces. To that end, I uncovered the 2001 article, “Exposure to media-portrayed thin-ideal images adversely affects vulnerable girls: A longitudinal experiment.” Here was a research study aimed at timing, so to speak; as it is well established that the influences are strong, the authors were concerned with whether they were lasting, and to me this reflected how social elements tend to lose impact over time. Employing a group of several

hundred young women in the San Francisco area, the study found that the thin-ideal is less influential over time, and as girls become long familiar to the magazines and other media: “There were no main effects of long-term exposure to the fashion magazine on growth in thin-ideal internalization, body dissatisfaction, dieting, negative affect, or bulimic symptoms over time” (Stice, Spangler, & Agras 283). In my mind, this reinforced how socially the images work, and how they again rely on immediacy. I recalled as well a period some years ago when I deliberately avoided fashion magazines, and experienced lessened self-conflict regarding my weight. In a sense, the “social group” insisting on the ideal was absent, and I believe this is important in countering the negative influences. They have, in a word, only as much power as our attention gives them.

As my exploration continued, I decided that there was little point in examining any material only emphasizing how the thin-ideal of fashion magazines negatively impacts on girls. Instead, I took a reverse approach to better understand the psychology, and researched the basic thinking regarding obesity in girls alone. In Sanderson's *Social Psychology*, I learned that there is a common reason why overweight girls experience negativity in their lives, as studies consistently report that such girls are less liked and less esteemed by “normal weight” individuals; namely, obesity is believed to be in the individual's control, so it is attributed to laziness (Sanderson 118). This may seem obvious – it was in fact no real surprise to me – but the interesting aspect of it is how this thinking, despite the modern awareness of the issues going to obesity, is still so prevalent. This being the case, I then “connected the dots” and surmised that the thin-ideals of fashion magazines then all the more promote self-hatred, which in turn goes to dangerous eating disorders. I perceived a clear trajectory: the social group is informing the overweight girl that she is lazy, the magazines idealize the hyper-thin, so a dual assault on actual self-esteem is in place. While I was fortunate to not completely be victimized by this, it does explain my long-

held confusion regarding my idea of myself and my weight.

Lastly, as the above attribution goes to stigma, I turned to Heatherton's *The Social Psychology of Stigma*, which provided a valuable perspective. It seems that, based on research, the negative influences of such stigma on anyone obese are variable, and depend on that person's core sense of self. Some people, simply, are more vulnerable than others regarding social approval (Heatherton 176), and I perceive this as also translating to a greater vulnerability to magazine influences. Once again this seems obvious, but it is important to comprehend its full meaning. If negative effects are based on susceptibility, then it is likely that building esteem levels equates to a greater resistance to negative influences. Put another way, we may address the harmful effects of thin-ideal images in ways removed from them, and enhancing the literal support the obese young girl receives in her life. This approach has value in my eyes because, and even when I was overweight, I was not comfortable with the idea of “attacking the external enemy.” In a sense, the magazines are an extension of unjust social stigma, and the unfortunate reality is that there will always probably be negativity regarding any obesity. Far better, then, to strengthen the *person*.

Conclusion

I was, as noted, fortunate, in that I was able to turn my life around and adopt a healthy lifestyle. Obesity is in my past, as I now am dedicated to real fitness. At the same time, however, I feel this exploration was and is necessary for me, if only to affirm my fundamental determination to do what is best for myself regardless of influences, and to investigate the processes likely in play in my own journey from overweight to fit. I must say too that this exploration has made me realize that I actually used the thin-ideal images in my journey; they were to me unreal but, more importantly, unhealthy, so they too represented a way of life to avoid. In this realization, however, then comes my greater conviction. If fashion magazines promote stigma and create

harmful influences, we defeat our own purposes by targeting them. Negativity is just as present in peer rejection, after all. When all of this is assessed by me, then, I conclude that the key to opposing the negative influences of fashion magazines and other such media is to regard them as what they are – unreal – and attend to the real being and identity of the girl exposed to them.

Works Cited

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