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## Mirror, Mirror on the Wall, Who's the Thinnest of Them All?

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Societal standards of feminine beauty are presented in all forms of popular culture, thus bombarding women with images that portray what our society considers to be the “ideal body type.” Whether women see it on the runway or the front page of magazines, blown-up on billboards or on the big screen, these images are consistently depicted and easily described with one word: skinny. Such standards of thinness are completely unattainable for most women. Indeed, most models and actresses shown in the media are considered by doctors and nutritionists to be well below a healthy body weight. The regular use of unnatural, unhealthy and unrealistic models sends the implicit message that in order for a woman to be beautiful, she must be stick-skinny. Mass media portrayals not only skew our societal perceptions of what it means to be “healthy” but filmmakers predominantly cast thin women to play likeable and intelligent roles. For the thin and beautiful heroine, success permeates all aspects of her life. In contrast, overweight actresses are commonly cast as less successful characters that are used as tools of amusement for audiences.

Constant exposure to the “need to be thin” ideology creates a challenge for women to reach a level of contentment with their physical appearance. In a recent study of body image-related issue cases conducted by the Central YMCA and the Centre for Appearance Research at the University of the West of England, found that at least 1 in 4 adults (54.1% women and 23.7% men) feel depressed about their bodies. About a quarter of girls (25.4%) compare their bodies to people on TV and over one third of girls (35.2%) would like to look like the models who appear in magazines. More than half of women (50.4%) compared their bodies to “people on TV” and 30% of women said they would like their bodies to look like the models that appear in magazines (YMCA Campaign for Body Confidence). Such adulation of the skin-and-bones body type causes many women to feel insecure with who they are by undermining their self-esteem and

confidence and fostering feelings of inadequacy and social anxiety. Omnipresent images of ultra-thin models encourage women to sacrifice their health in order to be considered attractive by societal standards. Today we live in a world in which “healthy” is defined as “skinny” and “skinny” has morphed from a physical characteristic into a lifestyle. This lifestyle is pitched to women as a standard of living: you either want it or you don't; if you do, you will be willing to sacrifice anything in order to achieve it.

### *Female Body Image*

Body image is multidimensional in its reference to “how individuals think, feel and behave with respect to their physical attributes of weight, body shape and size and appearance” (Chandler & Sabiston, 165). It is an evaluative component of a woman's level of satisfaction with her physical self. It also accounts for discrepancies between one's current physical state and an ideal or desired state (Chandler & Sabiston, 165). Body dissatisfaction is often a result of a comparison of physical reality with the internalized ideals that are represented in all aspects of mass media. Researchers refer to women's concerns with their physical appearance as "normative discontent," implying that body dissatisfaction affects almost all women at some level (Striegel-Moore & Franko). Women are at higher risk to display disturbed body image if they hold dysfunctional beliefs and media-driven predispositions about their physical appearance. Pervasive images of unrealistic, rail-thin models distort perceptions of the ideal female body image.

The prevalence of such unrealistic media images of women suggests that such body ideals are no longer a standard of exception (attainable by models and celebrities) but are a societal norm, encompassing the average woman. Repetitive exposure to such images influences women's abilities to understand that such standards are unrealistic. As women constantly view

images of ultra- thin models, actresses and celebrities in the mass media, a notable change occurs over time that effects women's perception of this unrealistic standard of beauty as "reality" (Schooler, 38). Research highlights how seriously these seemingly normal images affect the lives of average women. As Tiggeman (2003) and Schooler (2004) found, an individual's awareness of the effects of media images to be an indicator of how she internalizes the "ideal body type." Women who were less aware of the media's effects were more likely to show symptoms of body image disturbance. It has been shown that if a woman is able to recognize that the standards valued by the media are unrealistic, she is likely to show a higher level of resilience to body image concerns. In contrast, if a woman does not recognize that media expectations are almost unattainable, she will be more likely to internalize, and thus be negatively affected by the "thin ideal" (Tiggemann, 2003).

In support of these findings, Schooler's research demonstrates that TV viewing promotes poorer body image among women, particularly those with low self-esteem who are liable to be more vulnerable to media effects. Individuals who watch more television and who are exposed to specific types of media (e.g., soap operas, movies, music videos) displayed greater dissatisfaction with their physical appearance (Tiggemann, 2003). A woman's ability to acknowledge the unrealistic nature of these idealized characteristics and her ability to recognize where such images are most prevalent strongly affects the way in which she internalizes these images.

Concern over weight and appearance related issues often surfaces early in females' development, and continues throughout the lifespan. The importance of physical appearance is emphasized and reinforced early in most girls' development. Studies have found that nearly half preadolescent girls, ages 6 to 8, have stated that they want to be slimmer (Striegel-Moore &

Franko, 2002). Body dissatisfaction and disordered eating patterns are especially prevalent in adolescents and college females. Body image becomes a major issue for females as they go through the pivotal stages of puberty. Girls in mid-adolescence frequently report being dissatisfied with weight, fearing further weight gain, and being preoccupied with weight loss (Striegel-Moore & Franko, 2002). Researchers found 20% of 9-year-olds and over 40% of 14-year-olds report wanting to lose weight. Ironically, most girls who express a desire to be thinner are within the normal weight range for females their age (Striegel-Moore & Franko, 2002).

The early onset of poor self-esteem in a young girl's life has the ability to set the foundation and shape her self-perception as she matures. Studies have concluded that girls' self-esteem drops as they move from grade school to high school (Feldman & Elliot, 1992). One study found that 69% of grade school boys and 60% of grade school girls responded that they were "happy the way I am." The same study found 46% of high school boys and only 29% of high schools girls reported being "happy the way I am". Overall, girls' self-esteem dropped at three times the rate of boys. Low levels of self-esteem in girls did not disappear with maturity, as girls with low self-esteem often grow up to be women with low self-esteem. Low levels of self-esteem are linked to increased rates of body dissatisfaction and depression, increasing the risk of eating disorders in adolescents and adults (Feldman & Elliot, 1992). Body dissatisfaction as it exists throughout a women's lifespan is important in that it highlights the fact that body dissatisfaction is a dangerous and debilitating female phenomenon.

### *Social Comparison Theory*

For females, social comparison theory provides some explanation for how media images impact how women view their own bodies. It examines how individual women evaluate themselves in relation to others, both ideal and realistic. On the basis of weight, women judge

themselves as being better (thinner) or worse (heavier) than other women. Within the social comparison theory lies two views; first, an upward comparison which results in depression of mood and second, downward comparison, which correlates with elevation of mood. Applied to thinness, an “upward comparison would result from a woman who compares herself to a very thin model who fares better than she does on this physical construct” (Krahe & Krause, 349-350). This comparison leads the real woman feeling weight-related appearance anxiety, negative mood and bodily dissatisfaction. In contrast, a downward comparison would occur if an average-weight woman was to compare herself with an obese woman who is visibly worse-off on the basis of physical thinness. A comparison such as this one would elicit a positive mood and a surge in the average-size woman’s self-confidence. Unfortunately women today are bombarded with media images of unattainable body types, thus causing an increase in the occurrence of upward comparisons between real women and unrealistic model types, resulting in self-objectification.

Women who consistently experience downward comparisons are more likely to feel dissatisfaction with their bodies which commonly causes women to obsess over their imperfections, resulting in depression, social anxiety and the onset of eating disorders. Krahe and Krause (2010) found that White, college-aged women who were exposed to advertisements portraying thin models were more likely to select the “diet” version of a snack offered to them after their viewing of the ads. The women who had been exposed to normal-size models statistically chose the normal variant snack. Pervasive images of the ideal body type caused more women to engage in restrained eating habits (Krahe & Krause, 352). Ubiquitous presentations of super-skinny models not only effect the way women chose to eat, but these

images have the potential to cause detrimental effects for women by putting them at risk for developing eating disorders.

With the gap between the average woman's body size and the ideal widening to become larger than ever before, the average woman, who is targeted by all forms of mass media, is at risk for experiencing consequences of continuous exposure to the media's "ideal woman." Such potential consequences include lowered self-esteem, increased depression, excessive dieting practices and the emergence of clinical eating disorders. This omnipresence of ultra-thin images provides impossible conditions for women to not participate in the act of self-objectification at some point in their life. "Self-objectification describes a woman's tendencies to look at her body as an object of evaluation on the basis of cultural norms of female attractiveness" (Krahe & Krause, 349). Jean Kilbourne's most recent update of her documentary series, *Killing Us Softly*, also explains advertising's depiction of women. Her work reveals that the average person is exposed to three thousand advertisements per day and will spend three years of their life watching TV commercials alone. Her documentary focuses on advertising as the foundation of the mass media and she argues "advertising tells us who we are and who we should be" (*Killing Us Softly 3: Advertising's Image of Women*). The main point argued by Kilbourne is that advertising sends the message to women that states, the most important feature of a woman is her appearance.

Kilbourne accounts for the preponderance of young, tall, and extremely thin women used by advertisers to epitomize the current beauty ideal. Such images intensify the message sent to women which encourages the idea, "looks are everything." As the highest-selling women's magazine since 1972, *Cosmo*, is just one of the many catalysts through which the media portrays how our society views attractive, desirable and successful women. Reaching about 20 million

women each month, *Cosmo* remains the best-selling magazine in college bookstores and the No. 1 magazine for women with children (*Beauty Redefined*, 2011). With its notoriously racy covers and pages filled with diet, beauty and sex-tips, *Cosmo* further pressures women into thinking that achieving a model's figure will allow you to "have it all." This magazine, like many others, targets women by selling a lifestyle that accompanies attainment of a super-slender body type. It includes all that women want: a sleek physique, a successful career and a perfect love/sex life. This lifestyle is presented to women through images of unhealthily skinny models who represent a small fraction of the female population. And yet, every month this magazine boasts 3 million in sales by providing women with another month's dose of stick-skinny images that will cause many to subject themselves to social comparisons. This cycle continues month after month and year after year as women continue to read and share such publications that leave them feeling insecure, inadequate and just plain fat.

Ads in magazines such as *Cosmo* portray a body type that statistically 5% of American women have, yet ironically is the only one women see as desirable and acceptable. Women are told by their constant exposure to visual media (fashion magazines, television advertising and programming) that it is only acceptable to be thin and any deviation from that ideal is met with contempt and hostility. "Perhaps the greatest contempt these days is for women who are considered in the least bit overweight" (*Killing Us Softly 3: Advertising's Image of Women*). As theories such as Kilbourne's are becoming more mainstream knowledge, there have been marked attempts to counteract such detrimental media images through the promotion of natural beauty of real women. Perhaps the most well-known is Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty, launched in 2003. Their efforts target a recent survey conducted by Dove that revealed only 2% of 3,000 women surveyed in ten different countries, described themselves as beautiful (Dye, 114-115).



Their motivation is to expose the unrealistic standard of beauty and its damages to women's self-image and self-esteem. Dove's efforts seek to provide an alternative definition of beauty by uniting women through the shared concept of "real beauty" (Dye, 116). Although Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty is a step in the right direction for the portrayal of women's bodies in mass media, these commercial, print and web advertisements are not enough to undo the damage caused by ever-present ads depicting a different ideal. It is these most common ads of tall, skinny women that Kilbourne argues are harmful in sending the wrong messages to girls and women. She highlights a specific ad that reads, "I'd probably never be married now if I hadn't lost 49 pounds." This advertisement almost promises a single lifestyle to all overweight women as it celebrates the married-bliss of which thin women are able to achieve. Ads such as this exemplify the powerful media images that are responsible for female misconception of their need to be painfully, unnaturally thin.

In support of Kilbourne's study, researchers have found that viewing thin-ideal female images did lead to increased negative mood and body dissatisfaction. This disturbing finding "demonstrates negative effects after only very brief exposure (11 images of thin idealized female bodies in about ten minutes), which is far less than what would be contained in a single issue of a fashion magazine" (Tiggeman & McGill, 39). This brief exposure to print media images of thin female models has been shown to induce greater weight concern, body dissatisfaction, self-consciousness, negative mood and decreased perception of one's own attractiveness (Tiggeman & McGill, 40). If such research concludes an immediate dissatisfaction felt by women after viewing only eleven images of unhealthily skinny models, then these feelings must be experienced on an exponential caliber by the 20 million *Cosmo* readers who willingly subject themselves to a new issue every month. It is these women are "at risk" for experiences these

detrimental effects. Such conclusions prove our society's routine ways of scrutinizing, criticizing and judging women based on their appearance. Through social comparison and self-objectification women are not only subject to self-inflicted scrutiny, but also that of other women around them. The degree to which women engage in the comparison and objectification processes indicates the impacts on female levels of body dissatisfaction, negative mood and weight stimulated anxiety.

### *Women in Popular Movies*

As if mass media has not utilized enough channels of communication to solicit the "ideal body image," movies today are full of young and attractive women whose body weight is significantly below that of the average woman in real life (Krahe and Krause, 349). Female celebrities in pop culture films further enforce the pressure on women to be skinny not only by epitomizing the ultra-thin ideal body type but also through the idea of fat stigmatization. The theory of fat stigmatization is defined as the "devaluing of an individual due to excess body weight" (Himes & Thompson, 712). This stereotype is a result of "negative attitudes and cultural beliefs that equate body fat with gluttony and laziness, and the belief that weight can be controlled with self-regulation" (Himes & Thompson, 712). In entertainment media the promotion of the thin ideal of women is analyzed by distinguishing the two roles in which women are cast in films. First, attractive images of successful, thin women are promoted as models to be imitated or copied. Second, images or characterizations of overweight and obese women are stigmatized, further reinforcing the thin ideal (Himes & Thompson, 713). In pop culture entertainment fat stigmatization is presented in the form of commentary and humor. Although many current movies display female roles who exemplify these characterizations,

perhaps two of the most overwhelmingly popular films are *Mean Girls* (2004) and *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006).

*Mean Girls* opens with the introduction of main character, Cady Heron, played by Lindsay Lohan. At 16 years old her zoologist parents have decided to move out of Africa and into a suburban area. Cady realizes very quickly that life outside of the wilderness will take some getting used to. Within her first few days of attending public high school Cady is introduced to the psychological warfare and unwritten social rules that teenage girls face today. It is not long before she makes friends with Janis Ian and Damian who explain to her the “law of the land.” “Beware of the plastics” is the first piece of advice Cady receives from her new friends. The Plastics are an elite social group that consists of the three crude, thin and beautiful, popular girls. Regina George, played by Rachel McAdams, acts as the unofficial leader or “Queen Bee” of the group. Her minions and full-time followers include Gretchen Wieners and Karen Smith. These young women are highly specific about who they socialize with as they rest at the top of the high school’s social hierarchy. As the Plastics immediately take an interest in Cady, Regina proclaims, “Okay, let me just say, we don’t do this a lot, so you should know that this is like, a huge deal,” to which Gretchen excitedly chimes in, “we want you to have lunch with us every day for the rest of the week!” (*Mean Girls, 2004*). Officially accepted into their cliché, Cady, with the encouragement of Janis and Damian, begins to socialize with the Plastics.

Cady’s acceptance into this superficial group of girls reflects society’s approval of her body type as well as the fat stigmatization theory. Himes and Thompson’s research is largely at play in the distinction of the two categories of girls at Evanston High. From the opening scenes, *Mean Girls* separates the admired super-skinny socialites from the overweight outcasts who merely serve and offer praise to the Plastics. The labeling of these girls as “Plastics” reinforces

the idea that their bodies are too perfect to be real. It is Cady's "hot bod" that lands her a seat at the Plastics' lunch table, sending the subliminal message that "thinness is the only way to achieve beauty and {social} success" (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 288). Furthermore, the bond these three phonies share is solely based on the power accompanied with their ideal bodies and their rejection and ridicule of their overweight peers. The Plastics present the idea that they would never befriend a fat girl further expressing society's stereotypical view of the overweight as, "guilty of laziness, stupidity and sloppiness" (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 288). In "girl world," your weight has enough power to determine not only your lunch seat but your social status.

As the movie progresses, Regina back-stabs Cady by pursuing a boy whom Cady had expressed interest. In an attempt to get back at Regina, Cady, Janis and Damian devise a plan to take down the "Queen Bee." First on the agenda, the group chooses to target Regina's body in hopes that losing her thin frame will result in her ultimate "fall from grace." By convincing Regina that Kalteen bars, used by Cady's mother to help the children in Africa gain weight, are actually diet bars, Cady's plan is set in motion. In only a short amount of time Regina gains weight, causing her to look less and less like a typical member of the Plastics. In an attempt to uphold rules Regina had previously forced upon the other girls, Gretchen boldly addresses Regina's obvious weight issue by pointing out, "Regina, you're wearing sweatpants. It's Monday" to which Regina replies, "So...?" Gretchen growing annoyed says, "So that's against the rules, and you can't sit with us." In a desperate attempt to regain control of the conversation Regina replies "Whatever. Those rules aren't real." An angry Gretchen shouts out, "You can't sit with us!" Finally Regina angrily confesses, "These sweatpants are all that fits me right now" as she looks at Cady who has given her the alleged "diet bars." Feeling both angry and hurt by her "friends," Regina shouts, "Fine! You can walk home, bitches!" as she storms off. After taking

only a few steps she bumps into an overweight girl who Regina used to make fun of for being obese. This girl, no longer intimidated by Regina, due to her excessive weight gain, shouts, "Watch where you're going, fat ass!" (*Mean Girls*, 2004). Regina is publicly humiliated in front of the entire cafeteria and ostracized by her friends because her body no longer fits the ideal mold.

The scene in which Regina is shunned from the Plastic's spotlight epitomizes the research of Mitchell and Reid-Walsh, whose work focuses on fat stigmatization. As seen in *Mean Girls*, "by adolescence, many overweight girls experience some form of social isolation" (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 289). As audiences watch Regina's weight cause her friends to reject her, viewers experience how "being overweight is often a barrier to being accepted into girl's friendship circles" (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 289). *Mean Girls*, along with these researchers' conclusions prove that even among friends, a girl's body shape and size can influence her position within her social network. The character Regina George is perhaps one of the most recent examples of entertainment media's representation of the importance of weight and the role it plays in relationships, typically among high school girls.

Having grossed \$8.6 million on its opening day and ending opening weekend with total revenue of \$24.4 million, the success of *Mean Girls* surprised even its Paramount producers. As the film played on 3,159 screens at 2,839 theaters, research conducted by Paramount revealed audiences were composed of 75% women, while 50% were under the age of 18. Their research also found over 90% of moviegoers rated the picture either "excellent" or "very good" (Gray, 2004). Through its overwhelming popularity *Mean Girls* has managed to reveal its use of fat stigmatization and idolization of the perfect body type to entertain audiences. As it's presented in the form of commentary and humor, *Mean Girls* fans have been subject to possible

internalization and reinforcement of these sociocultural stereotypes of “overweight” and unrealistic standards that define “beauty.”

As pop culture films continue to express such messages to women, *The Devil Wears Prada* starring Anne Hathaway as Andy Sachs, serves as another source of pop culture through which visible stereotypes and ideals are displayed. As a recent college graduate who has aspirations of writing for *The New Yorker*, Andy finds herself fetching coffee and picking up dry cleaning for her haughty boss, editor-in-chief of *Runway* magazine, Miranda Priestly. The demands Miranda places on Andy are both endless and impossible as she is sent to find unpublished manuscripts of *Harry Potter* for the editor's young daughters, forced to go without lunch and bathroom breaks, and must weather the taunts and insults leveled at her lack of fashion sense and her size 6 body type. Andy clearly does not fit into the designer-drenched environment in which her new position places her (Schickel, 2006). Surrounded by extremely thin and fashionable women, Andy's sense of style, or lack thereof, and her unheard-of behaviors which include actually eating during lunch break, forces her to stand out like a sore thumb in the world of *Runway*.

As Andy learns one of her first days on the job, while having a conversation with fashion consultant Nigel Kippling, at *Runway* your body type holds a lot of weight (no pun intended!). As sample clothes (sizes 0 and 2 only) constantly pass through the *Runway* wardrobe, Andy (who is an average woman's size 6) is unable to don these fashions and engage in one of the most sought after perks of her new position. Nigel feels he is helping Andy when he brings her “weight issue” to her attention. He explains that the reason Andy does not see other women eating is because this habit has gone out of style “...since two became the new four and zero became the new two.” Andy innocently offers, “Well, I'm a six...” to which Nigel replies,

“Which is the new fourteen” (*The Devil Wears Prada*, 2006). From her first day, Andy is made to feel that her weight casts her as a minority in the *Runway* world. From the get-go it is evident that her healthy, average women’s size 6 body type represents the way in which she does belong among the skin-and-bones *Runway* fashionistas.

As the film progresses and Andy finds herself unable to complete one of the impossible tasks demanded by Miranda. Her snooty boss expresses her disappointment by revealing to Andy that she was hired for this position because Miranda “decided to take a chance and hired the smart, fat girl.” She explains how this decision contradicted Miranda’s normal instincts she usually follows in which she, “always hire{s} the same girl- stylish {and} slender...” (*The Devil Wears Prada*, 2006). Himes and Thompson’s theory of fat stigmatization is seriously at play in this scene as Andy is blatantly told her size differs her from all the current and previously employed *Runway* women. Andy is stereotyped as overweight and subject to devaluing comments as a result. In the *Runway* mindset, thin is in and Andy’s size 6 physique does not fit this mold.

It does not help Andy to forget that she has been labeled a size 6 as she works side-by-side with Miranda’s first assistant, Emily. Tall, stick-skinny and stuck-up, Emily embodies all that a stereotypical *Runway* employee should be: fashionable, career driven and convinced she is the envy of all women. “Skinny” defines Emily’s lifestyle as she reveals her intense diet tactics to Andy in preparation for an upcoming trip to Paris for Fashion Week. As Andy admires Emily’s skinny waist, she complements her, “You look so thin.” Emily excitedly replies, “Really? It’s for Paris, I’m on this new diet. Well, I don’t eat anything and when I feel like I’m about to faint I eat a cube of cheese. I’m just one stomach flu away from my goal weight” (*The Devil Wears Prada*, 2006). Already visibly very thin and in no need of more weight loss, Emily

is convinced that maintaining a thin figure is an important part of her lifestyle. As long as she can fit into the clothes worn by models her life will remain "perfect." Himes and Thompson would argue that Emily's role in this film is to idealize the lifestyle attained by the thin, successful woman. As she represents this stereotype, Emily has achieved all that women hope to attain, further convincing Andy as well as audiences that the key to success is becoming a size 2.

A few short scenes later, Emily is suffering from a nasty cold, probably as a result of her poor diet practices. She is obviously willing to sacrifice her health in order to achieve these thin standards encouraged by the fashion industry. However, Emily does not realize that these practices are harmful to her health; rather she sees them as necessary sacrifices she must make in order to maintain this extravagant lifestyle.

As Andy begins to lose weight, she not surprisingly becomes more successful at work further reinforcing the idea that "skinny" is more than a bodily characteristic, it is a lifestyle. While speaking with Nigel about his new promotion, Andy offers congratulatory comments to which Nigel remarks, "You bet your size 6 ass!" Andy excitedly corrects him, "Size... 4!" (*The Devil Wears Prada*, 2006). Andy, eager to share news of her weight loss, views her new size 4 physique as her assimilation with the *Runway* ideals and her achievement of success. From this scene forward Andy's character represents an image of the thin ideal. She is skinny, successful and seen as an image for girls and women to admire.

In one of the film's final scenes, Andy comes to the realization that all of her sacrifices may not give her what she wants out of life. When she shares this with Miranda, who has essentially sacrificed everything to become an ultra-thin top magazine editor, Miranda scoffs at this notion, "Oh, don't be silly - EVERYONE wants this. Everyone wants to be US" (*The Devil Wears Prada*, 2006). Miranda's powerful words solidify the message presented to audiences



that career success and a lavish lifestyle can only be accomplished by a woman willing to sacrifice everything, especially her health. Andy's increased level of success throughout the film was the first way in which she proved she could succeed at *Runway*. As Andy's character transformed from a fat stigmatized character to an admired success, she exemplifies the reinforcement of the thin ideal from both perspectives. As an "overweight" size 6 woman she felt the pressure to be thinner and it is at her lowest weight that she experiences the height of her career.

The popularity of *The Devil Wears Prada* allowed for these messages to reach girls and women all over the globe. Shown in movie theaters internationally, the film grossed \$27,537,244 on opening weekend and a domestic total of \$124,740,460. With millions of viewers subject to the comparative roles of the positively reinforced sacrifices to be thin and the negatively treated "overweight" character, girls and women further internalize these perceptions of fat stigmatization and the success seen in being skinny.

*Mean Girls* and *The Devil Wears Prada* provide audiences with a strict separation between popular characters who model thinness and receive positive reinforcement in comparison with the overweight characters who receive punishment in the form of negative commentary (Himes & Thompson, 716). These female character portrayals increase internalization of the thin ideal. These movies are consistent with sociocultural theories which maintain that the development of poor body image and restricted eating habits among women are due partially to unrealistic standards of beauty and the role of the mass media in transmitting such messages on the silver screen.

*Societal Dispositions of Thin vs Fat*

As women continue to be bombarded with images of unnaturally thin models and actresses, the average woman is at risk for adopting this unrealistic standard of beauty as "reality." Many women come to view the ultra-thin ideal to be "normal," thus perceiving any woman who does not fit this mold as "abnormal." Furthermore, not only does mass media present overweight women as unfavorable but "for decades, the word 'fat' has been associated with laziness, filth and inactivity (Chang & Johnson, 2010). In an attempt to answer the question, "Is it okay to be fat?" ABC News reporters discuss the derogatory terminology of 'fat,' as it is commonly used to ridicule or make fun of a person's excess weight. It is so often used as a term of offense and has "become a pop culture punch line" (Chang & Johnson, 2010). As our societal perceptions of "acceptable" and "unacceptable" female body types continue to change, these stereotypes effect the relationships women of all ages form with one another.

Research has shown that people who are overweight or obese are frequently ridiculed and stereotyped in popular entertainment and news media. Negative or stereotypical portrayals of obese people in news photographs can communicate biases to viewers. For example, "photos that depict obese persons engaging in stereotypical activities (e.g., eating junk food), or photos that place unnecessary emphasis on excess weight and isolate obese persons' body parts (e.g., abdomens, buttocks) can be stigmatizing and perpetuate negative attitudes" (Heur, McClure & Puhl). Eventually our population becomes immune to such repetitive and unflattering pictures of overweight or obese people causing the internalization of stereotypes in which one associates "skinny" as acceptable and "overweight" or "fat" as not only unacceptable but worthy of ridicule.

Constant exposure to negatively depicted images of obese people promotes the internalization of fat stigmatizations, causing many Americans, especially women, to fear future weight gain. There is an increasing fear of becoming fat among Americans who express weight-related worries. In a survey conducted by Gallup in 2005, a majority of women, 57%, say they worry about their weight, while fewer than 4 in 10 men (39%) said they experience weight-related worries. Interestingly, younger women (those aged 18 to 49) were found much more likely to worry about their weight than were older women (those aged 50 and older) or men of any age. The latest poll finds that 62% of younger women worry about their weight all or some of the time, while 51% of older women do so. Among men, 40% of younger men and 38% of older men say they worry this often (Carroll, 2005).

The different levels of anxiety can be linked to the occurrence of such images in the media. Research suggests that majority, 71%, of women represented in commercials were between 20 and 35 years old while only 6% were 50 years old or older. While representation of men between the ages of 36 and 50 years old encompasses 41% of television commercials, only 13% represents those aged 50 or older (Ganahl, Prinsen & Netzley, 550). Women however, are “commonly cast as younger, supportive counterparts to men and older women are still the most underrepresented group” (Ganahl, Prinsen & Netzley, 545). These results explain the heightened concern of females to fit the idealized body image thus fearing future weight gain which would only increase feelings of weight-related anxiety and contempt.

Recent studies suggest that feared weight-gain and fat stigmatizations are internalized by young children, thus effecting their perusal of relationships. Negative attitudes towards obesity are present in children as young as 3 years of age (Musher-Eizanman, et al., 614). Preschool children believe that children who are overweight possess more negative personality and

behavioral characteristics than do other children. Ironically, even children who are overweight themselves hold negative attitudes toward overweight individuals. Researches have utilized this successful technique in assessing anti-fat attitudes among children by eliciting reactions to figures of various body sizes (from very thin to very fat). Their findings conclude that children possess the most negative attitudes toward overweight figures, and these attitudes become more extreme as children get older (Musher-Eizenman et al., 615). One way in which children's anti-fat attitudes manifest behaviorally is in peer interactions. Research shows that overweight children are at risk for peer rejection, victimization, and teasing (Musher-Eizenman et al., 615). Young children's associations based on weight differences are proving children dislike overweight peers while they are more accepting and willing to interact with average weight children.

Child development and body image expert, Dr. Robyn Silverman has devoted her most recent research towards her new book titled, *Good Girls Don't Get Fat: How Weight Obsession is Messing Up Our Girls & How to Help Them Thrive Despite It*. Her work examines the attitudes towards children who are considered "overweight" and "fat" and the emerging "aversion toward chubbiness among children at a surprisingly young age" (Silverman, 10). Dr. Silverman's website highlights some of the most shocking research of which her book examines. Some of this research concludes that among children ages 3 to 5 who were shown pictures of different body types, largely associated the words "thin" with "nice" and "fat" with "mean" (Fat Talking Tots, 2011). Furthermore, children age 5 years old express strong adverse feelings towards other children who were labeled "fat." This disapproval of overweight children manifested itself in responses of strong desire not to play with such child and even stronger expression of not wanting to look as this child did. This finding was consistent even among children who were

considered to be overweight themselves ("Fat Talking Tots," 2011). Dr. Robyn's work proves that children as early as 5 years of age have been exposed to and have accepted the negative stereotypes our society associates with the "overweight" population as evidence suggest these children use such perceptions in choosing their potential friendships.

As pop culture continues to embrace the thin ideal and devalue the overweight, research suggests young children will continue to internalize and utilize fat stigmatization before graduating from preschool. Our societal associations of good feelings with thin people and feelings of disgust with overweight or obese people are presenting themselves in the decisions of young children. Research and newly emerging books attempt to examine the internalization of the thin vs fat disposition that is resonating in children before they are even old enough to realize how it affects their relationships. As children continue to express these negative attitudes towards children who were overweight, further hindering their selections of potential friends, it is uncertain how these stereotypes will manifest themselves later in their lives.

#### *How Far Will Women Go?*

As popular movies, advertisements, fashion models and magazines serve to impress upon women the necessity of attaining an unrealistically slender body type, America's diet industry, in a shameless attempt to provide women with unnatural ways of achieving their goal weight, continues to further promote these pressures through unhealthy products and regimens. Continuous introductions of the latest fad diets prove the industry's attempt to target women's desperations to lose weight in hopes of reaching new levels of success. Success, as our society has so blatantly pointed out, first begins with the ability to zip on a pair of size 2 jeans. Although most fad diets are cast off as ridiculous right from the get-go (the Cabbage Soup Diet, the Acai Berry Diet, even the Tapeworm Diet - that's right, this diet promotes the ingestion of tapeworms

in order to lose weight) there are some diets that form a lasting impression on society and transform from a fad to a pop culture phenomenon.

Sacrifice, as it has been previously mentioned, is something women are expected to undergo in order to achieve our societal standards of beauty, which can be expressed by one word: Skinny. These sacrifices however, are cast off as trivial compared to the plethora of lifestyle perks women are convinced they will receive if they embrace the “skinny way of life.” Sacrifice, self-restriction and common sense are the three founding principles on which the authors of diet guide, *Skinny Bitch*, have crafted their methodology. *Skinny Bitch* pioneers, Rory Freedman and Kim Barnouin, self-title their work, “A no-nonsense, tough-love guide for savvy girls who want to stop eating crap and start looking fabulous!” This title provides every woman, and prospective *Skinny Bitch* convert, with a forewarning that this is no ordinary diet!

It's a wonder how a diet plan that completely denounces alcohol, caffeine, artificial and refined sugars, simple carbohydrates, all meat and all dairy products can maintain large fan base and lasting success. The authors use humor and sarcasm to educate women about the effects of unhealthy foods and detrimental health habits, *Skinny Bitch* is more than a diet, it's a lifestyle. Capitalizing on the belief that attaining the ideal body type will somehow result in fulfillment of one's wildest dreams, Tara Parker-Pope argues in her *New York Times* review, that *Skinny Bitch* contains, “punitive dieting tactics that prey on women's insecurities about their bodies,” (Parker-Pope, 1). By focusing on weight, the issue most women struggle with, this book further emphasizes magazine articles, radio ads, and product advertisements that all support the message that women must be thin. This piece of popular culture promises women that if they could just lose those “last twenty pounds” they will have it all in regards to their marriage, children, sex life and career.

The authors promise readers that any woman who so chooses to become a *Skinny Bitch* will embark on a new chapter filled with anything a woman could ask for; “good health, vitality, more energy, more confidence, better sex, great abs, [and] a tight ass...” (Freedman & Barnouin, 117). All the gains in losing, however, do not stop there. Freedman and Barnouin claim those who follow their strict guidelines will become “less resentful, more confident, interesting, beautiful, patient, tolerant and a fun person to be around,” (Freedman & Barnouin, 118). If barraging images of stick skinny models and actresses, or pervasive message of the ideal female body type depicted in movies and on television have successfully caused women to feel they must take action and achieve the ideal, *Skinny Bitch* has provided a regimen that promises to deliver these results.

By empowering women to no longer live their lives suffering from, what authors refer to as, “fat pig syndrome” (Freedman & Barnouin, 63), *Skinny Bitch* challenges women to trade all food related comforts and habits for the lifestyle they have always wanted. This brazen approach to healthy eating has sold over two million copies and it remains both an international bestseller and a #1 New York Times bestseller for over a year. Women all over the world have heard the proclamations of the *Skinny Bitch* ideology as it has been translated into twenty languages (<http://www.skinnybitch.net/>). As more women are exposed to the *Skinny Bitch* method, many chose to subject themselves to a vegan, organic-only way of life. Despite its radical disapproval of major food groups and overall inconvenience for any busy women to religiously follow, *Skinny Bitch* continues to fly off bookstore shelves. Its popularity among women exemplifies the pressures women feel to be thin by societal standards and the willingness of women to give up almost anything to achieve such a body type.

*Since When Have Women Been Forced to Choose?*

As women continue to be the target of mass media's over representation of the thin ideal, our societal view of "skinny" will continue to spotlight the unrealistic and unhealthy body type. Girls and women, in an attempt to achieve this front-page-worthy status, will continue to hold our culture's manipulated definition of "healthy." These misconceptions are accountable for poor body image as seen in girls and young women, dissatisfactory feelings and self-objectification and detrimental self-restricted eating habits.

Women's magazines and popular chick-flick depictions and definitions of healthy bodies should not be dismissed as entertainment or harmless sources of pop culture. These images and films do not innocently motivate women toward bodily ideals; they foster unattainable standards of beauty and thinness that will lead to inevitable failure for most. For women, happiness should not come at the high price of one's health. It is unfair to place women in such a situation in which a choice must be made between the lifestyle she has always wanted and a juicy cheeseburger.

Fashion magazines, advertisements, movies and television shows all belittle this dangerous choice society presents to women. This pressure to choose between a life as a thin and successful woman or size-6 "outcast" has clearly become accepted and embraced by society as products are now marketed for the "skinny girl" lifestyle. The transformation of the way in which women are viewed has taken a risky turn from a celebration of individuality to a pressured life filled with attempts to fit a cookie-cutter mold. Over the past century, these prominent messages delivered to us by the mass media have shaped the way the public views women's health in significant and damaging ways. In order to combat the work of these harmful messages our society must redefine "healthy" in the context of our "skinny obsession."



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