Spring 2013

The Effects of Advertising and the Media's Portrayal of the "Thin Ideal" on College Women's Self-Image

Mary Sheehan
Providence College

The Effects of Advertising and the Media's Portrayal of the "Thin Ideal" on College Women's

Self-Image

Mary Sheehan

Providence College

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Social Work.

2013

Abstract

This study explores the relationship between media images' portrayal of the "thin ideal" and college women's self-image and self-esteem. A review of the literature validated the researcher's hypothesis that women are negatively affected by the media's portrayal of "ideal" body types. However, the review of literature also presented a contrasting theme that media images can positively affect women through motivation and determination to maintain healthy lifestyles. A mixed methods study using Rosenberg's Self Esteem Scale and media images portraying different body types was used to examine this relationship. Findings indicated that the level of the women's self-esteem prior to completing the survey will have an impact on the level of women's self-esteem after observing the images. In addition, findings gathered that women who have body types that are not considered "ideal" by society do not believe that their own body types are ideal; rather, body types that are more desired than their own are the "ideal" body types for which women should strive to resemble. An implication for future research and practice is concerned with the sensitivity of the relationship between media images' portrayal of a "thin ideal" and college women's self-esteem.

The Effects of Advertising and the Media's Portrayal of the "Thin Ideal" on College Women's

Self-Image

Advertising and media images play an important role in everyday life, and sometimes the messages being relayed to young women about beauty are harmful and skewed. Young women are exposed to these potentially harmful messages at a young age, and are, therefore, continuously present in their lives. In reality, no one actually knows what true beauty really is, so advertisers have created an unrealistic depiction of a truly beautiful woman over the years. There are different opinions about what real beauty is, including a concept of the "thin ideal" being portrayed in some advertisements that are always visible to people and can have detrimental effects on those observing the images.

The media is a very influential part of peoples' lives, and even if we don't remember all of them, Johnson (2009) reports that we are exposed to as many as 5,000 ads a day, which seems like an astronomical number, but it is realistic with the type of consumer economy we have today. Many of those ads that focus on women could be portraying messages regarding health, beauty, exercise, and these messages would normally be beneficial to women in terms of proper methodologies to care for oneself. However, some of these messages could also relay a detrimental message to women that they should look a certain way, similar to the "thin ideal" woman, a woman that does not represent the average body type of an American woman.

This thesis will explore the effects of advertising and media images on women, particularly college women, in terms of self-esteem, body image and the "thin ideal", and unhealthy living habits. In addition, it will explore how beauty and women are represented in the

media in terms of idealized images and the types of detrimental effects that this type of media can have on women. Media images including TV programs, magazines, Internet, and advertising in general, all have an equally powerful effect on women's self-esteem. The primary focus of the methodology will be college women. This topic is important to social work because it concerns the well-being of those affected by the images in media and advertising, and strives to encourage positive influences on people.

Social work stands for human dignity, human rights, and gender equality, among many other things, which is one of reasons why this topic is significant to social work. The advertising this thesis will focus on sends the skewed message of what men and women should look like; an unrealistic and unnatural model. Equality is always relatable to social work, in addition to human rights and human dignity. The topic of self-image is always present in advertising worldwide because there is always that pressure to look good and beautiful, which can cause self esteem issues with women. This thesis will specifically look at college women's self-esteem, but the research and literature will look at all women as opposed to only college women.

Review of Literature

Idealized Images/Representations of Women in the Media

There are many definitions of "beauty", which could be based on one's ethnicity, personal values, and what is determined to be beautiful and ideal by society. Ashmore, Englis, and Solomon (1994) focused on cultural determinants of real beauty, and claims that "physical attractiveness is not a one-dimensional construct" in the definition, meaning physical attractiveness has multiple factors to it, not only the one thing that meets the eye (p. 49). Because society is incredibly tied up in the preconceived notion that beauty only equals physical

appearance and attractiveness, while beauty can encompass every aspect of a human being, these other aspects are more often disregarded, however, because they are not visible to the human eye. Society does not take culture into consideration when they define beauty; rather, they focus on the traditional focus of beauty's constituent elements, which is confusing and unfair to those of different cultures that could have their own definition of beauty.

In order to better understand cultural and ethnic factors in one's perception of beauty and self-esteem, Frisby (2004) conducted a study on African American women, with a purpose of determining "whether idealized images in advertising" impact African American women "to feel more attractive or more unattractive", and if race matters in the "effects of idealized images on African American women's perceptions of body esteem" (p. 323). The study found that African American women are "less concerned with weight, dieting, or being thin" compared to their Caucasian study counterparts, in addition to not being heavily influenced "to conform to the thin ideal or dieting behaviors that are typically found with Caucasian females" (p. 325). Frisby's (2004) study supports the hypothesis that culture and ethnicity can contribute to one's perception of beauty, and a new thought that culture and ethnicity can also contribute to one's reaction to the thin ideal and idealized images.

Moreover, English, Solomon, and Ashmore (1994) focus on advertisers who have a specific type of beauty in mind for their media using "casting, wardrobe and props, make up, and so on" to further "sanction ideals of beauty" (p. 51). When young women look at pictures in ads or watch TV programs that portray beautiful women, they are unknowingly coerced into believing that they are seeing true beauty. These ads teach young women how they should look

in society if they want to comply with society's expectations of women, which is not always a realistic or healthy expectation.

As a result, Cohen (2012) in cooperation with the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders conducted studies on teen health and the media, and found that the participants "were dissatisfied with their own bodies" when they watched music videos and TV shows (p. 1). In addition, it reported that "53% of American girls are 'unhappy with their bodies" by the time they are thirteen years old, and the percentage "grows to 78%" by age seventeen as a result of seeing ideal body types in the media (p. 1). Similarly, Cohen cited Signorelli (1997) who reveals that advertisers create television commercials aimed at teen girls, of which 56% used beauty as a product appeal (p. 29). This emphasis of beauty, being thin, and self-image is revealed to girls at a young age and continues well on after their teen years, and can inhibit eating disorders and compulsive exercising in the future.

A complicated aspect to this "thin ideal" is included in Dittmar, Halliwell, and Stirling (2009)'s study on the impact that "thin medial models" have on women's body image (p. 43). There is a "widening gap [of] body sizes of medial models and ordinary women", which can have an impact on women's perception of their own bodies in relation to models' bodies that are much different from their own (p. 45). Due to this gap that expands more and more every year, women create an "internalization of the ultra-thin ideal as a personal goal", and has been found to be a "potent correlate of body dissatisfaction" in Dittmar, Halliwell, and Stirling (2009)'s study (p. 45). With this personal goal in mind, women are focused on their body image, "influencing psychological functioning and unhealthy body-shaping behaviors" to achieve the "thin ideal" body type (p. 45).

The concept of "thin ideal" is a widespread term used to describe the specific body type that has been understood to be the ideal shape of a woman. The U.S. Department of Health (2009) explored the meaning of the ideal shape of a woman by, first, determining the average body of an American woman, which "is 5 feet 4 inches tall, and weighs 140 pounds", while "the average American model is 5 feet 11 inches tall, and weighs 117 pounds" (p. 1). Models in advertisements and fashion magazines represent an unrealistic, unhealthy, and underweight body type that does not match up to the actual average body type of an American woman. Women are constantly exposed to this unrealistic body type, and it is implied in statistics regarding eating disorders and compulsive exercise that some people believe that they need to live in a particular manner that helps them look like these "thin ideal" models. The "thin ideal" contributes to the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders' (2012) statistic on students that "95% of those who have eating disorders are between the ages of 12 and 25" (p. 1).

Advertising and media as a whole clearly portrays a certain type of image known as this "thin ideal" that contributes to women's low self-esteem and skewed perception of the ideal image to which they should compare themselves. The literature showed that advertising and the media as a whole can have a negative effect on women's self-image; however, it also showed that some women are not affected by the portrayal of the "thin ideal" at all. For those women who are negatively affected, there are several detrimental effects of the images portraying the "thin ideal" on which this next section will focus.

Detrimental Effects of Images Portraying the "Thin Ideal"

Literature has shown a wide variety of effects that advertising and media images has on self-image, supporting both positive and negative effects. Bessenoff (2006) conducted a study on

female college undergraduates, and found that "exposure to thin-ideal advertisements increased body dissatisfaction, negative mood, and levels of depression and lowered self-esteem" (p. 239). Moreover, the research study also looked closely at the major differences in the results between women who were affected by the media exposure and women who seemed to not be affected by the media images at all. They concluded that "body dissatisfaction and thin-ideal internalization" were two major factors that differentiated the two groups of women who had their own body dissatisfaction and preconceived thin-ideal internalization (p. 239). They define body dissatisfaction as the "negative evaluation of one's body", but found that this negative evaluation "has been found to moderate the effects of thin-ideal media exposure on body esteem, weight satisfaction, and even depression" (p. 239). In addition, they define thin-ideal internalization as "acceptance with social standards of thinness", and they discovered that the acceptance or agreement with these standards "has been found to moderate the effects of exposure on body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behavior" (p. 239). Lastly, a major factor that ties both body dissatisfaction and thin-ideal internalization together is social comparison, during which one compares themselves to others, and in turn, is "the main source of the negative effects produced by exposure to thin-ideal media" (p. 239).

Similar to Bessenoff (2006), Wang (2010) conducted a study on the effects of media exposure on attitudes toward body image and self-efficacy and found that "the mass media are at least partially responsible for female adolescents' and college students' increased body dissatisfaction and eating disorders" (p. 50). Both Bessenoff (2006) and Wang (2010) use the term "body dissatisfaction" being a major effect of the media images to which women are exposed. However, something that Wang's (2010) study includes that Bessenoff's (2006) does

not is that of a study that was conducted by Carney and Louw (2006), as cited in Wang (2010), that found "media exposure or more specifically, body image exposure, can lead to positive outcomes", such as healthy dieting and physical activity (p. 51) instead of always negatively impacting body image.

Similar to Bessenoff (2006) and Wang (2010), Harper (2008) looked at the effect of thin ideal images on women's self-objectification, mood, and body image, and found that women who looked at images "featuring a thin-idealized woman reported greater state self-objectification, weight-related appearance anxiety, negative mood, and body dissatisfaction" (Bessenoff, p. 1). Media images clearly have a negative effect, but also through Carney and Louw (2006), as cited in Wang (2010), media images can have a positive effect on dieting and physical activity.

Focusing more on weight loss promoting and possibilities of resulting in eating disorders, studies have been conducted and compiled by Spettigue and Henderson (2004) to determine the role of the media in eating disorders on men and women, and one of the studies by Anderson and DFomenico (1992), as cited in Spettigue and Henderson (2004), found that women's magazines contain "10.5 times the amount of diet promotions as men's magazines", with the thin-ideal type of woman becoming more popular, but the "weight of the average North American woman" increasing (p. 1). With the two sides of the scale become more different, the unrealistic expectations of a thin-ideal body type increase. Several experiments have been conducted to closely look at the media's role in the causation of eating disorders in women, and while studies such as Pinhas et al. (1999) and Stice and Shaw (1994), as both are cited in Spettigue and Henderson (2004), find that "females exposed to thin media images experience an increase in

body dissatisfaction and emotional distress", other findings such as Champion and Furnham (1999), cited by Spettigue and Henderson (2004), found "no immediate effect" of the media images on women's self-image (p. 1).

As cited in Spettigue and Henderson (2004), Ricciardelli, McCabe, Holt, and Finemore (2003) found that there is a "perceived pressure to be thin from the media" that leads to "body dissatisfaction and eating pathology", but another study by Hargreaves and Tiggemann (2003), as cited by Spettigue and Henderson (2004), poses the idea that the "media may have an indirect effect...on boys' expectations of females' appearance", which is a negative effect that had not been covered by any other study in this literature review. Although there are still points on having an effect on females' body image, it is a unique piece of literature that talks about the media influencing boys' expectations of females' appearance, which indirectly has an "effect on females' body image" (p. 1).

Responding to the belief that women are being affected by eating disorders, Bissell and Zhou (2006) focused on how the "thin ideal", as mentioned in their study on entertainment and sports media, impacts eating disorders and body-image distortions. Their results showed that "interest in body-improvement television content was positively related to all four scales" of eating disorders, which included bulimia, anorexia, drive for thinness, and body dissatisfaction, as mentioned in previous literature (p. 12). Although Bissell and Zhou (2006) found these results, they cite another study by Harrison (2000) that was done on 12th grade girls, and found that those "who read sports magazines" are "fairly dissatisfied with their body shape"; however, the simple "exposure did not predict disordered eating or drive for thinness", so these conflicting

results cannot prove the correlation between exposure to sports media and disordered eating or drive for thinness (p. 6). Bissell and Zhou (2006) had their own results, but as they reviewed literature such as the study done by Harrison (2000), they discovered that exposure to media images of the thin ideal varies in every person.

Advertisements that are teaching women these skewed lessons can encourage women to consider harmful actions to themselves, such as compulsive exercise and eating disorders to look like the unrealistic model in the photograph, in addition to the initial feeling of low self-confidence and dissatisfaction with their body. Park (2005) studies the exposure to magazines using the thin-ideal type that does not represent the average body type, and found that it has an effect on eating disorder symptoms and a woman's satisfaction with her own body when comparing herself to the thin-ideal model. In addition, Park (2005) looked at the psychological side to the exposure; how a woman perceives herself and the situation will affect her fate in developing an eating disorder and being satisfied with her body type. Environmental factors such as family and peers contribute to a woman's attitude about her body image and self-esteem, and will further impact eating habits, exercise habits, and self-confidence.

Spettigue and Henderson (2004) cite a study by Naomi Wolf (2002), who is a feminist writer and spokesperson on beauty myths, and she argues that "our culture disempowers women by holding them prisoner to an unattainable beauty ideal" (p. 1). Wolf's argument supports this thesis' hypothesis that our culture is harming women by encouraging them to attain a specific beauty ideal that is actually unattainable, and, as a result, are holding women prisoner. Her beauty empire strongly believes in "purchasing advertised products for improving one's appearance" when there is a problem that needs to be solved, with a "strong emphasis on the

value of beauty and appearances for women" (p. 1). This particular belief is not the type of message this thesis supports because the advertised products reject natural beauty, and, ironically, contribute to the "beauty ideal" from which she believes women are being held prisoner.

There have been several studies conducted to explore the effects of media images and the "thin ideal" on women's self-image, and several of the authors of this literature agreed that the media has a direct effect on women's body dissatisfaction, mood, depression, social comparison, and eating distortion and disorders. The best way to determine if this thesis' hypothesis is accurate currently is to conduct a quantitative research study on college females, both examining the pretest and posttest results of a self-esteem scale, with images of different body type models controlling the results of the participants' self-esteem.

Methodology

An exploratory mixed methods model, with a quantitative focus was used to explore females' self-esteem before and after observing images of different models with different body types. Data was collected to compare and contrast self-esteem in pretest and posttest with the images controlling the results of the levels of self-esteem, and to determine the various effects that the images have on college females' self-esteem in comparison to their pretest and posttest self-esteem.

Participants

Participants consisted of a convenience random selection of women at a small, Catholic college in Southern New England. The surveys were distributed in various locations on campus,

such as the student center. The researcher emailed campus club members to recruit volunteers, and the researcher requested that their volunteers ask their friends to participate in the survey. Participants' only requirement is that they are female.

Data Gathering

Before the participants received the survey, they were provided an Informed Consent. After completing the first portion of the survey, which included the Rosenberg's Self Esteem Scale, they then observed pictures, and ranked their level of self-esteem on a scale of 1 to 5. (See Appendixes A and B)

Data Analysis

Once the survey was completed, the data was compiled and analyzed in SPSS, to address the female participants' self-esteem before and after their exposure to media images that vary in body types, in relation to Rosenberg's Self Esteem Scale. Moreover, themes from the qualitative aspect of the survey, were reviewed for themes and patterns.

<div align="center">

Findings

</div>

This study explored the effect of media images portraying various body types, including the "thin ideal" body types, on college women's self-image and self-esteem. Participants first completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale in order to measure the female participants' self-esteem before taking the survey. This survey measures the participants' self-esteem, not only relating to the effect of media images on their self-esteem, but also the state of their overall self-esteem.

After completing the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, participants completed self-esteem Likert scales after five media images portraying different body types. The first image exhibits an

anorexic model; the second image portrayed a healthy and fit body; the third image displayed an overweight woman; the fourth image portrayed a curvy woman; and the fifth image showed a group of women of various body types that are not necessarily considered as "ideal" body types (See Appendix B for body type images). This research showed that women who originally have low self-esteem will most likely have a lower self-esteem after viewing media images portraying "thin ideal" bodies while women who have high self-esteem won't be as impacted by the images. Most participants had "Neutral", "Moderate", and "High Self-Esteem" prior to taking the survey; however, these participants selected "ideal body types" that were more accepted by society than their own body types.

Questions regarding demographics including age, class year, ethnicity, and the types of magazines the participants read were asked, in addition to selecting a body type that best represents the participants' own body type and the females' idea of an ideal body type. There were 74 total participants, with a mean age of 20.7. Of the 74 participants, 43 (58.1%) were seniors, 15 (20.3%) were juniors, 14 (18.9%) were sophomores, and one (1.4%) was a freshman. Sixty-nine identified themselves as Caucasian, one identified herself as African American, two identified as Hispanic, and one identified as Lebanese. Lastly, the most popular magazines were *Cosmopolitan* (36 readers), *People* (30 readers), *Fashion Tabloids* (six readers), *Women's Health* (six readers), and *Glamour* (six readers). The survey questioning magazine-reading habits was motivated by curiosity about the types of media images the participants could be viewing (See Appendix D for a full list of magazines and the number of readers for each magazine).

The survey also gave the participants the chance to select a body type representing the perception of themselves and a body type representing their ideal body type. These questions allowed the researcher to make connections between self-esteem, perception of oneself, and perception of an ideal body type. Of the 74 participants, eight (10.8%) identified their own body type as "Very Thin"; 25 (33.8%) identified as "Fit"; 31 (41.9%) identified as "Curvy" (hourglass-shaped); and nine (12.2%) identified as "Average", which can be defined as having a few extra pounds on the body, while of the 74 participants who were asked to choose an ideal body type, 27 (36.5%) circled "Very Thin", 34 (45.9%) circled "Fit", and eight (10.8%) circled "Curvy".

Open-ended questions regarding feelings and reactions to the five photographs of various body types, perceptions of society's portrayal of the ideal body type, and details regarding the importance of dieting and exercise were presented to each participant. The first question, "What has society taught you about the ideal body type?", included common themes such as "The skinnier you are, the better" and "Society portrays the ideal body type as unrealistically skinny. Anything less than that is portrayed as not as pretty and inferior", while a few different responses included themes such as "That I am beautiful as I am" and "It's up to you if you are satisfied with your body".

The second question, "Why is exercise important to you? If it is not important, please explain why", included common themes such as "to stay healthy", "It is a stress relief for me", "I exercise to lose weight", "It makes me feel good", and "I love to eat".

The third question, "Why is dieting important to you? If it is not important, please explain why", included common themes such as "I would much rather exercise than diet. I love food too much to sacrifice my eating habits for looks", "I like eating what I want!", "I don't diet, but I know the importance of eating healthy", while some other themes included "Not very important. I like eating healthy but I've never considered myself on a diet" and "I disagree with dieting and the idea of eating differently just to lose weight".

The fourth question pertaining to the first image, "Describe how this image makes you feel about yourself", extracted the most answers with the same theme "The model is not even attractive, she's too skinny", "She looks sickly and I feel healthier", while some other responses shared the theme of "It makes me never want to eat again".

The fifth question pertaining to the second image, "Describe how this image makes you feel about yourself", extracted answers that all shared the same theme "This girl looks more ideal, a body type that seems obtainable", "She has the ideal body", and "I'd want a body type more like hers!".

The sixth question pertaining to the third image, "Describe how this image makes you feel about yourself", revealed answers that shared the theme "I feel like I look like her", "It is wonderful to see a real woman showing off her body", "I'm curvy; I like that she is too", while some other participants thought "I wish I was that confident" and "I feel that I look more like her and do not like how big my hips are".

The seventh question pertaining to the fourth image, "Describe how this image makes you feel about yourself", extracted responses that shared the theme "Makes me feel healthy",

"This image makes me feel lucky that I don't have a weight problem", and "I am happy that I am not this heavy", while others shared a theme "It doesn't make me feel any way at all" and "Makes me realize that bigger people can feel beautiful. However, people still need to be healthy, and being too big can be unhealthy".

The eighth and final question pertaining to the fifth image, "Describe how this image makes you feel about yourself", extracted the theme "This picture makes me feel good, showing women of all shapes and sizes feeling confident", "Empowered. There are so many different women in our world, all shapes and sizes. What matters is how you feel on the inside", and "I love it! Just embraces everything about our bodies and I remember to embrace myself", while other participants' responses underscored a different theme; "I'm envious that the women are confident in their own skin", "I have an average body type", and "this makes me feel mixed about my body. Not good, not bad. It makes me feel a little bad because they all have nice bodies" (See Appendix C for additional direct quotes of the participants).

Although the number of surveys collected does not fully represent the entire female population of the college campus, the data results thus far display that all participants (74 women) believe that the "ideal body type", which represents the participants' perception of the ideal body for which they should strive to resemble, is "Fit", "Curvy", or "Very Thin", with "Fit" getting the most responses for "ideal body type" (45.9%), followed by "Very Thin" (36.5%), and "Curvy" (10.8%). Five responses were missing from the system. In addition to choosing an "Ideal Body Type", the participants chose a "Body Type", which represents the participants' perception of their own bodies. Out of the 74 participants, 41.9% identified their bodies as

"Curvy", 33.8% identified as "Fit", 12.2% identified as "Average", and 8% identified as "Very Thin", which was interesting because 45.9% believe that an ideal body type is "Fit" while 36.5% circled "Very Thin", 10.8% circled "Curvy", and none chose "Average".

These results indicate that most of the participants, particularly the individuals who circled "Curvy" and "Average" do not believe that their own body type is an ideal body type; rather, they believe that the ideal body type is more desirable than their own body type. In addition, when a correlation test was run on SPSS between Body Type and Ideal Body Type, there was a significant relationship between the participants' own body type and their idea of an ideal body type $(r (72)=.001, p < .01)$.

The results for the relationship between "Body Type" and "Self-Esteem" show that the 74 participants had relatively high self-esteem, with results of 33.8% "Neutral", 44.6% "Moderate Self-Esteem", 12.2% "High Self-Esteem", 4.1% "Some Self-Esteem", and 2.7% "Low Self-Esteem", and having body types of "Average" (12.2%), "Curvy" (41.9%), "Fit" (33.8%), and "Very Thin" (10.85%). It was expected that women with bodies such as Very Thin, Fit, Curvy, and Average would have self-esteem ranging from "Neutral" to "High Self-Esteem", with the exception of a few who had "Low" and "Some Self-Esteem". In addition, when a Correlation was run on SPSS, the results indicated a significant relationship between "Self Esteem" and "Body type" $(r (72)=.004, p < .01)$.

Summary and Implications

This study explored the effect of media images on college women's self-image and self-esteem. The various images that women are exposed to every day can have a detrimental or

positive effect on self-image and self-esteem, and this study explored the effect of media images portraying various body types on college women's self-esteem. Research by various authors in the literature review section, such as Cohen (2012) and Bessenoff (2006), supports the researcher's hypothesis that college-age women's self-esteem can be impacted by media images, particularly those images portraying a "thin ideal" body type.

After reviewing the results of the surveys that were distributed to the participants, there were several themes and commonalities among the qualitative responses and Likert scale ratings, along with differences in some of the responses as well.

The first major theme was illustrated between the participants' perceptions of their bodies and their perceptions of the ideal body type. The 74 participants' body types included "Very Thin", "Fit", "Curvy", and "Average", while the participants' idea of an ideal body type included "Very Thin", "Fit", and "Curvy". Therefore, those participants who chose "Average" did not think that their body type was an ideal body type because they chose a body type more desirable, such as "Very Thin", "Fit", or "Curvy". If the participants who self-identified as "Average" had believed that their body type was their idea of an ideal body type, they would have chosen their own. However, because the results show that "Average" was not an ideal body type, those "Average" participants chose a body type that was more desirable and not their own body.

Additional themes came from the qualitative responses, which were the reflections after each media image portraying different body types, and the images included women of Anorexic, Fit, Curvy, and Overweight body types, and the last one displayed women of different sizes modeling for a real beauty campaign. In addition, participants answered and reflected on

questions regarding society's portrayal of ideal body types, the importance of dieting, and the importance of exercising. There were common themes for each reflection, and the first major theme was on what the participants have learned from society's idea of an ideal body type, which is that "skinny is best". On the other hand, a difference in this theme was that a participant believed that society has taught her that she "is beautiful as [she is]". This difference is interesting because this particular participant was of a Latino culture, and as previous research by Frisby (2004) showed, cultural beliefs and practices can contribute to women's self-esteem, and, therefore, some women from Latino and Hispanic cultures may not be as affected by these media images as those women from Caucasian descent. However, the majority of participants believed that society has taught them that the ideal body type is "skinny and beautiful" and "fat on the body is not acceptable", which is what the researcher had hypothesized.

Another aspect of the researcher's hypothesis is that society's idea of an ideal body type, which is typically an Anorexic body type, would not be the type of body that participants would desire. The first image that the participants viewed and reflected upon was of an Anorexic model, and the responses depicted two themes. The first theme was that the model was "too skinny", looks "sickly", and that the participants "would not want to look like that", which opposes society's typical depiction of an ideal body type. The opposite theme was that some participants felt more self-conscious when they saw the picture and felt like they "never want to eat again" and that the image "makes [me] feel fat". Most of the participants did not find the first media image's body type desirable, and, therefore, disagreed with the body type that society finds most desirable and ideal for women. Bessenoff (2006), Wang (2010), and Harper (2008) wrote similarly that images portraying the "thin ideal" body type would cause more "self-

objectification, weight-related appearance anxiety, negative mood, and body dissatisfaction"
(Bessenoff, p. 1); however, the results of this research study showed that most participants' self-
esteem was not heavily impacted by the "thin ideal" Anorexic image, as society has portrayed as
an ideal body type.

Although the researcher had success in collecting data and extracting themes from the
results, there were several limitations in the study. First, the honesty of the women in the survey
may be a limitation because the results don't resonate with reports from the campus counseling
services regarding prevalence of eating disorders and unhealthy habits on campus. Second, the
sample size is a limitation because the number of participants (N=74) does not represent the
college female population, and the results could be more generalizable with a larger sample size.

Some implications for future practice, policy, and research would be to use a larger
sample size. Although the researcher was satisfied with the number of participants who
volunteered, a larger sample size would have been better for this particular topic. In addition,
because previous research has supported that women who already have high self-esteem prior to
taking the survey would not be impacted by the images. Due to time constraints, the researcher
was unable to increase the recruitment of participants. Lastly, if researchers were to revisit this
topic and conduct their own research study, the researcher would suggest creating more concrete
definitions of each body type that is portrayed in the survey in case readers do not know what
specific body type labels mean, such as "average" or "curvy".

This topic is very important, especially in the American society, because the depiction of
the "thin ideal" is constantly present in women's lives, starting at a young age as well. The

researcher advises professionals to consider creating more policies regarding media images and the appropriateness of images that are being depicted to young girls that should not be exposed to those images until they are much older. It is a difficult thing to reduce and to stop, but the more professionals in counseling, advertising, marketing, and education, in addition to parents and educators are being made aware of the issue, the more steps that can be taken towards a common understanding of the impact that media images can have on women's self-esteem.

References

Ashmore, R.D., Englis, B.G., Solomon, M.R. (1994). Beauty before the eyes of beholders: The cultural encoding of beauty types in magazine advertising and music television. *Journal of Advertising*, 49-64.

Bessenoff, G. (2006). Can the media affect us? social comparison, self-discrepancy, and the thin ideal. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 239-251.

Bissell, K., Zhou, P. (2006). Must‑ See TV or ESPN: entertainment and sports media exposure and body‑ image distortion in college women. *Journal of Communication - Wiley Online Library*. Retrieved September 18, 2012, from http:// onlinelibrary.wiley.com/ doi/ 10.1111/j.1460-2466.2004.tb02610.x/abstract.

Body Image and Advertising. (2008-2012). Eating disorders: Body image and advertising . *Healthy Place: America's Mental Health Channel* . Retrieved September 8, 2012, from http://www.healthyplace.com/eating-disorders/articles/eating-disorders-body- image-and- advertising/.

Cohen, M. (2012). Teen health and the media. *University of Washington Experimental Education Unit*. Retrieved from http://depts.washington.edu/thmedia/view.cgi?section=bodyimage.

Dittmar, H., Halliwell, E., Stirling, E. (2009). Understanding the impact of thin media models on women's body-focused affect: The roles of thin-ideal internalization and weight-related self-discrepancy activation in experimental exposure effects. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology: Body Image and Eating Disorders*, 43-72.

Frisby, C. (2004). Does race matter? Effects of idealized images on African American women's perceptions of body esteem. *Journal of Black Studies*: *Sage Publications, Inc.*323-347. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/3180940?seq=3.

Jhally, S. (Director). (1999). *Killing Us Softly 3: Advertising's Image of Women* [Documentary]. United States: Media Education Foundation. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cJvfBCcA5mk.

Johnson, C. A. (2009). Media-portrayed idealized images, self-objectifica... [Eat Behav. 2006] - PubMed - NCBI. *National Center for Biotechnology Information*. Retrieved October 10, 2012, from http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-3445_162-2015684.html?tag=contentMain;contentBody.

Myers, Jr., P. N., & Biocca, F. A. (1992). The elastic body image: The effect of television advertising and programming on body image distortions in young women . *Journal of Communication* . Retrieved September 18, 2012, from http://www.mindlab.org/images/ d/ DOC828.pdf.

National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders (2012). Eating disorders statistics. *National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders, Inc.* Retrieved from http://www.anad.org/get-information/about-eating-disorders/ eating-disorders-statistics/.

Park, S. (2005). The influence of presumed media influence on women's desire to be thin. *SAGE Journals,* 594-614.

Richins, M. (1991). Social comparison and the idealized images of advertising. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 71-83.

Rosenberg, M. (1989). Self Esteem Scale. *Wesleyan University Press*. pp. 325-327.

Signorelli, N. (1997). Reflections of girls in the media: A study of television shows and commercials, movies, music videos, and teen magazine articles and ads. *University of Delaware, the Kaiser Family Foundation, and Children Now*. Retrieved from http://www.kff.org/entmedia/loader.cfm?url=/commonspot/security/getfile.cfm&PageID=14517. 29.

Smeesters, D., Mandel, N. (2006). Positive and negative media image effects on the self. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 576-582.

Spettigue, W., Henderson, K.. (2004). Eating disorders and the role of the media. *National Center for Biotechnology Information*. Retrieved October 10, 2012, from http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2533817/.

The Dove® Campaign for Real Beauty. *Dove® Skin Care, Hair Care, Body Cleansers, Lotions & Beauty Tips* . Retrieved September 8, 2012, from http://www.dove.us/Social-Mission/ campaign-for-real-beauty.aspx.

Troen, T. S. (2009). A study of the effects on women's body image of exposure to ideal female body images in advertising. *ProQuest*. Retrieved October 10, 2012, from http:// 0-search.proquest.com.helin.uri.edu/socialservices/docview/955176010/139DAB290CC1B85CA1F/2?accountid=13320.

U.S. Department of Health (2009). Eating disorders and body image. *Department of Health and Human Services Office on Women's Health.* Retrieved October 10, 2012, from http://www.womenshealth.gov/body-image/eating-disorders/.

Vaux, R. (2012). The negative effects of women's advertisements. *Small Business.* Retrieved October 10, 2012, from http://smallbusiness.chron.com/negative- effects-womens-advertisements-19326.html.

Wang, X. (2010). More than just anorexia and steroid abuse: effects of media exposure on attitudes toward body image and self-efficacy. *Atlantic Journal of Communication.* 50-62. Retrieved from http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/ 10.1080/15456870903210089#preview.

Wilcox, K., & Laird, J. D. (2000). The impact of media images of super-slender women on women's self-esteem: identification, social comparison, and self-perception. *Science Direct*. Retrieved September 15, 2012, from http://www.sciencedirect.com/ science/article/pii/S009265669992281X.

Appendix A

Consent Form

Dear Participant:

I am a senior social work student at Providence College, inviting you to participate in a study for my thesis research project. This study will explore Providence College female students' level of self-esteem after looking at media images portraying the "thin ideal". Research about this particular topic gives social workers the opportunity to learn about the effects of media images on college women's self-esteem and self-image, in addition to discovering ways to support college women who suffer from low self-esteem and self-image. The data will only be used for my thesis research project.

At the present time, Providence College female students are being recruited to complete a survey that explores the effects of various body types portrayed in media images. The survey should not exceed 10 minutes.

There are no anticipated severe risks associated with participation in this research study. Participants are free to decline participation in this study if they are not comfortable with the study materials. Benefits of participating in the study include contributing to the results of my research project, possibly using the survey as a therapeutic tool for self-esteem.

Participants' confidentiality will be protected by the researchers' collecting of questionnaires in a way that guarantees anonymity, i.e., no one will be able to connect your name or identity with the questionnaire you submit. All completed questionnaires will be destroyed after group data are compiled.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Participants may decline to answer any question or to participate in the study up until their submission of a completed questionnaire, and declination or resignation will not affect your relationship with the researchers or the Department of Social Work.

YOUR COMPLETION AND RETURN OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTOOD THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Thank you for participating in this study.
Margo Sheehan   msheeha4@friars.providence.edu
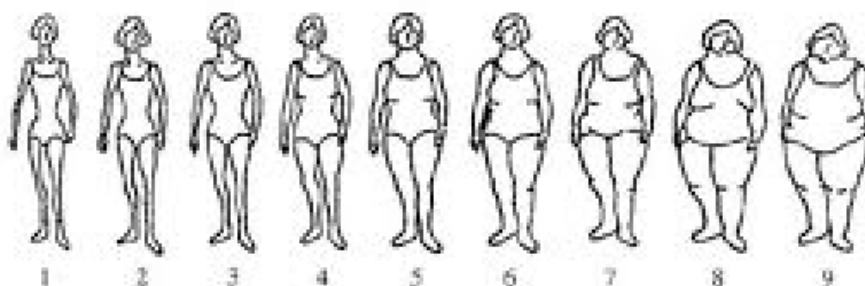
Appendix B

Survey

Age:_____
Class Year:_____
Ethnicity:_____
What kinds of magazines do you read?_____

<u>**Body Type**</u>:

Which of these nine figures do you think most closely resembles your body type? (circle number)

On a scale of 1 to 5, please circle your level of self esteem about your <u>body</u>, with 1 being "Low Self Esteem" and 5 being "High Self Esteem" (circle number)

```
|---------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|
1               2               3                4                5
Low Self        Some Self       Neutral          Moderate         High Self
Esteem          Esteem                           Self Esteem      Esteem
```
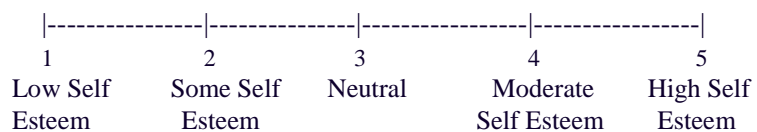
What is your idea of an ideal body type? (circle number) *if you do **not** have a body type, please do not circle a number
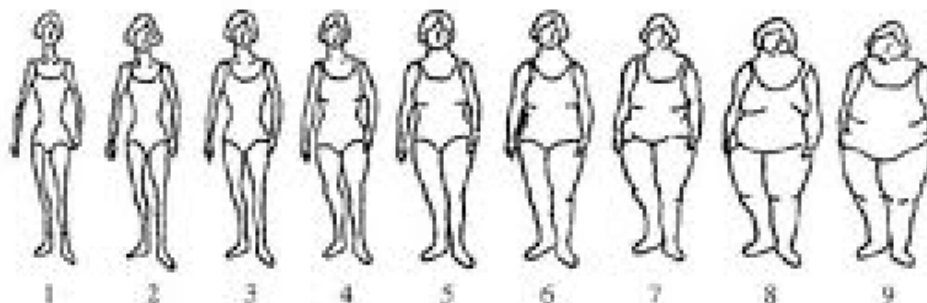
What has society taught you about the ideal body type?

_____

_____

Exercise and Dieting:

On a scale of 1 to 5, please circle the importance of exercise in your life (circle number).

```
 |---------------|------------|------------|------------|
 1               2            3            4            5
Not            Less        Neutral      Somewhat    Very
Important    Important                  Important   Important
```

Why is exercise important to you? If it is not important, please explain why.

_____

_____

On a scale of 1 to 7, please circle the importance of dieting in your life (circle number).

```
 |--------------|-------------|-------------|---------------|
 1              2             3             4              5
Not           Less        Neutral       Somewhat       Very
Important   Important                   Important      Important
```

Why is dieting important to you? If it is not important, please explain why.
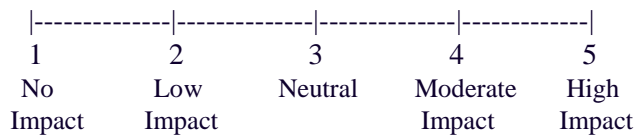
_____

_____

Media Images of Body Types:
Please circle the level of impact the following images have on your self image.

1.

Please circle the level of impact this picture has on your self-esteem. (circle number)

```
|-------------|-------------|-------------|------------|
1             2             3             4            5
No           Low        Neutral      Moderate      High
Impact      Impact                    Impact      Impact
```
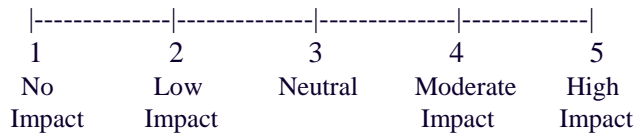
Describe how this image makes you feel about yourself

_____

_____

2.

Please circle the level of impact this picture has on your self-esteem.

```
|-------------|-------------|-------------|------------|
1             2             3             4            5
No           Low        Neutral      Moderate      High
Impact      Impact                    Impact      Impact
```

Describe how this image makes you feel about yourself

_____

_____

3.

Laura Wells

Please circle the level of impact this picture has on your self-esteem.

```
|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
1             2             3             4             5
No           Low        Neutral      Moderate       High
Impact      Impact                    Impact        Impact
```

Describe how this image makes you feel about yourself

_____

4.

Please circle the level of impact this picture has on your self-esteem.

```
|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
1             2             3             4             5
No           Low        Neutral      Moderate       High
Impact      Impact                    Impact        Impact
```
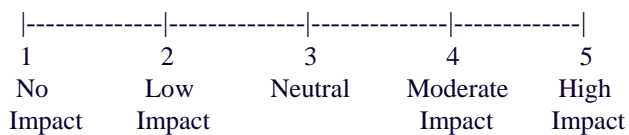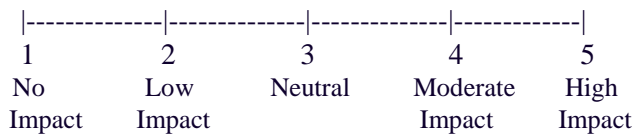
Describe how this image makes you feel about yourself

_____

5.

 Please circle the level of impact this picture has on your self-esteem.

|-------------|-------------|-------------|------------|
1   2   3   4   5
No   Low   Neutral   Moderate   High
Impact   Impact   Impact   Impact

Describe how this image makes you feel about yourself

_____

Thank you very much for participating in this survey!

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale:

Circle one number for each of the following ten items

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others	1	2	3	4
2. I feel that I have a number of good qualities	1	2	3	4
3. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure	1	2	3	4
4. I am able to do things as well as most other people	1	2	3	4
5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.	1	2	3	4
6. I take a positive attitude toward myself	1	2	3	4
7. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself	1	2	3	4
8. I wish I could have more respect for myself	1	2	3	4
9. I certainly feel useless at times	1	2	3	4
10. At times I think I am no good at all	1	2	3	4

Appendix C

Society: What has society taught you about the ideal body type?
-"Society has taught me that you must be skinny. Celebrities encourage the normal person to look like them when they have a personal trainer and money for people to do everything for them. Normal people have to work, take care of their kids, and run errands".
-"Society portrays the ideal body type as unrealistically skinny. Anything less than that is portrayed is not as pretty and inferior"
-"It is more appealing to be skinny"
-"The skinnier you are, the better"
-"The skinnier you are, regardless of appearance of overall healthiness, the better"
-"Thin, well groomed is best"
-"Skinny and fit is the best body type"
-"that it is an impossible goal for almost all women"
-"Society, through beauty magazines and constant media, says that the ideal body type is skinny and tall. I disagree with society"
-"That I am beautiful as I am"
-"Everyone strives to have the 'perfect body' in reality it's up to you if you are satisfied with your body"
-"Society says skinny is best. I believe fit and healthy is best"
-"Skinny with big boobs and big butt is the 'ideal'"
-"Bodies should be thin with very minimal fat, with big boobs"

Exercise: Why is exercise important to you? If it is not important, please explain why.
-"It is important because it is healthy for your body. I always feel better after I have worked out..."
-Exercise is a stress relief for me. I know it is healthy and good for me."
-"I exercise to lose weight"
-"To stay healthy"
-"I love to eat, so I gotta burn it off somehow"
-"Staying fit, stress reliever, keep healthy"
-"I go through times when it is more important to me"
-"it makes me feel fresh and healthy"
-'It is important to stay healthy and to have self confidence"
-"I enjoy the feeling afterwards and the usual positive visible effects"
-"To release stress, changes up my routine, makes me feel good"
-"It makes me feel strong and confident, regardless of my weight"
-"To lose weight"
-"It helps me to at least keep me from gaining weight, if not hopefully lose it"

Dieting: Why is dieting important to you? If it is not important, please explain why.
-"...I try to eat healthy such as fruits and vegetables. I also drink a lot of water because it is healthy for your skin and body"

-"I would much rather exercise than diet. I love food too much to sacrifice my eating habits for looks"
-"To tone and lose weight"
-"Everything is good in moderation. I shouldn't have to eliminate things I enjoy"
-"My main issues are that I think I eat too much in comparison to my peers"
-"I don't diet, but I know the importance of eating healthy"
-"I like eating what I want!"
-"Watching what I eat is an easy way to watch my weight, but I'm not obsessive about it"
-"I disagree with dieting and the idea of eating differently just to lose weight. I think that eating healthy and changing one's habits are important things that should not be done for only a short period of time, as a diet is usually done"
-"I don't like it, but think it is necessary to be fit and thin"
-"Healthy; don't want to be eating junk food all the time"
-"Not very important. I like eating healthy but I've never considered myself on a diet"
-"To lose weight and get skinny"
-"I've tried to diet and it doesn't work, so I just try to eat healthier and watch what I eat"

Image 1: Describe how this image makes you feel about yourself
-"This image makes me feel good. This girl looks way too skinny and unhealthy. She doesn't look like she has eaten in awhile. Someone give her a burger!"
-"this is not something I aspire to look like. I do not find her look/weight appealing or desirable"
-"She looks sickly and I feel healthier"
-"It looks unrealistic, she looks unhealthy"
-The model is too skinny, but that's what is considered appealing"
-"I feel healthy, the model looks anorexic"
-"Glad I'm not this skinny!"
-"This woman is too skinny"
-"This image makes me feel glad that I am not a runway object"
-"I think she is unhealthily skinny"
-"Makes me feel good that I am not a skeleton"
-"The model is not even attractive she's too skinny"
-"Sad for the model"
-"It makes me never want to eat again"

Image 2: Describe how this image makes you feel about yourself
-"Makes me feel good. This woman looks healthy and comfortable in her own skin. Sure she has curves, but that is part of being a woman. When I am her age, I hope my body looks like this."
-"She has the type of body I strive to have"
-"This girl looks more ideal, a body type that seems obtainable"
-"I am more envious of this body because it is thin but muscular, so healthier"
-"I wish I could be that fit"
-"I'd want a body type more like hers!"
-"She has a nice body"
-"I appreciate that her thighs are not super skinny"
-"I'd like to look like that"
-"She looks strong. It's more what I'd like"
-"I wish I looked like that and am mad at myself for eating too much and not exercising enough"
-"I would love to have this body. She is not too thin but not chubby/fat either."
-"She has the ideal body"
-"She is healthy, good body-makes me want to achieve this. Also, feel that look similar and this happy with self"

Image 3: Describe how this image makes you feel about yourself
-"I feel like I look like her"
-"I wish I was that confident"
-"I feel thinner but envious because the model seems confident in her body"
-"I'm in good shape"
-"It is wonderful to see a <u>real</u> woman showing off her body"
-"I wish I could look as happy and proud of my body as she is of hers"
-"Good to see that women who are not overly skinny can still feel beautiful"
-"I'm curvy. I like that she is too"
-"I feel that I look more like her and do not like how big my hips are"
-"I feel like this is what I most look like. Not thin, kind of chubby, but not fat...somewhere in between fat and way too thin"
-"She seems pretty average and makes me feel like I'm the same"
-"Yayy to curvy women! This is what real women look like. Makes me appreciate self"

Image 4: Describe how this image makes you feel about yourself
-"This image makes me feel lucky that I don't have a weight problem...this weight cannot be healthy for her body. I am more concerned with her health than the way she looks"
-"It doesn't make me feel any way at all"
-"I feel like I have more self control"
-"Compared to her, I feel like I am skinny"
-"Makes me feel healthy"
-"She makes me feel good about my body"
-"Makes me realize that bigger people can feel beautiful. However, people still need to be healthy, and being too big can be unhealthy"
-"I am happy that I am not this heavy"
-"Makes me feel good about myself. As bad as it is to say about this woman, I am happy I am thinner than she is. It makes me feel good about my body"

Image 5: Describe how this image makes you feel about yourself
-"Empowered. There are so many different women in our world, all shapes and sizes. What matters is how you feel on the inside. If you are comfortable with your body and you are healthy, who is to tell you how much you should weight. If you are eating a balanced diet and exercising, I support them! Good for these women for posing in their bras and underwear".
-"This picture describes the 'every day' normal women"
-"This picture makes me feel good, showing women of all shapes and sizes feeling confident"
-"It makes me feel confident in my appearance"
-"I'm envious that the women are confident in their own skin"
-"I have an average body type"
-"It is great to see so many body types, all of them beautiful"
-"Good because I think I look like at least one of them and she is proud of herself"
-"I love it! Just embraces everything about our bodies and I remember to embrace myself"
-"Women comfortable in their own skin"
-"Shows that everyone is different"
-"This makes me feel mixed about my body. Not good, not bad. It makes me feel a little bad because they all have nice bodies."

-"These are real women! People should look up to these ladies. They look happy and as if they love their bodies. We all need to love ourselves!"

Appendix D

Glamour-6 readers

People-30 readers

Seventeen-5 readers

Vogue-4 readers

Cosmopolitan-36 readers

Women's Health-6 readers

Time-2 readers

Sports Illustrated-2 readers

Fashion Tabloids-6 readers

US Weekly-3 readers

Elle-3 readers

Allure-4 readers

Real Simple-1 reader

Pointe-1 reader

Runner's World-1 reader

InStyle-2 readers

National Geographic-1 reader