BEAUTY BRAINWASHED: MEDIA IMAGES’ INFLUENCE ON HETEROSEXUAL AND LESBIAN WOMEN

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Introduction

Since the emergence of advertising in the early seventeenth century, its goal has changed drastically from providing information, to encouraging enrollment or the desire of a product. Today’s advertising bombards the public with images that subliminally create the belief that the product being offered can deliver happiness, beauty and success. Many studies have been conducted regarding the effects of these images on both women and men, often finding that present day advertisements seem to dictate the meaning of beauty, perfection, success and happiness. Although homosexual men have been studied in regards to these effects, there seems to be a lack of research in regards to lesbian women and media images’ influence on body perception. The few resources available regarding this topic seem to conclude that lesbian women are often less affected and therefore more satisfied with their appearance than straight women. In an effort to discover not only the differences of body perception between straight and lesbian women, but also the reasons behind these differences, this project examines media psychology, personal experiences among lesbian and straight women, and subsequent consequences of the media’s influence on body perception.
A Brief History of Advertising

The first form of advertising was developed by Cardinal Richelieu and Theophraste Renaudot in the form of an information board. Attempting to reach the maximum amount of people in Paris, Renaudot created La Gazette in 1631\(^1\). Shortly after, England followed suit, using advertisements as a means of communicating lost and found items as well as changes of address as a result of the Great Fire of London in 1666\(^2\). The first forms of advertising were informative and helpful, but the benefits of this form of knowledge would quickly spread to sellers, allowing them to persuade consumers to buy their products. An example of such products is coffee. This brewed drink was advertised as a wonder-drug, a cure-all drink, promising to rid one of illnesses and increase both health and longevity. It is at this point in history that we begin to see the effects of media persuasion, as people flocked to coffee houses to indulge in this miracle cure\(^3\).

By the 1950s, advertising had experienced a crash and was reemerging as a new organization in response to post-war consumer demands\(^4\). A man who stood out among other advertising moguls and can be credited for how advertising is run to this day is David Ogilvy. Ogilvy understood that brand messaging had to be centered around a lifestyle and a storyline, grabbing consumers’ attention with bold, clear images that encouraged a desire for the advertised product.

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Ogilvy has been credited as the father of modern advertising: he understood that the primary goal of advertising is to sell a product and he developed methods to do so.\(^5\)

Since Ogilvy’s time, advertisements have taken on a life of their own, presenting themselves in facets of everyday life. Billboards, magazine ads, television commercials and radio announcements are part of everyday life, unavoidable to the public. Advertisements have become part of Western culture, generating ideas, deciding new concepts and telling the public what to buy, consume, wear and essentially who to be.

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Media Influence on the Changing Ideal of Beauty

Objectively, it is difficult to understand the concept of beauty. What is beautiful? What does it mean? If beauty is in the eye of the beholder, as the old adage claims, then the beholder, in this case, is the media.

Although individually, people recognize different types of beauty, as a society, North America has been bombarded with a specific concept of perfection and beauty, associated with success and happiness, demonstrated and encouraged by print media advertisements and images.

Associating beauty with thinness is a relatively modern concept in Western society, emerging in the mid twentieth century. Until the nineteenth century, plump, full bodied ideals of sexuality and fertility were encouraged and sought after. This shape represented favorable “socioeconomic conditions…associated with wealth, health and youth”⁶. The turn of the nineteenth century saw an emphasis on hourglass figures, exaggerated by wearing binding corsets. This trend continued until the emergence of the flapper image in the 1920s, where slenderness became increasingly prevalent as the apex of sexuality and attractiveness. The 1930s saw a push towards a softer figure with a larger bust, but maintained the concept of a slender lower body presented in the 1920s. The concept of the female sex symbol emerged in the 1940s and 1950s, as exemplified by icons like Marilyn Monroe and Elizabeth Taylor. By the 1960s, the thin-ideal had reemerged and was increasingly popular among models, celebrities and subsequently the public. The waif-like image of beauty, demonstrated by models like Twiggy, became all the rage, encouraging unhealthy lifestyle habits. According to Dr. Maggie Wykes, author and lecturer at the University of Sheffield, the popularization of thin-ideal images was

simultaneous with the “increase in volume, spread and representative role” of the mass media\textsuperscript{7}.

The desire for thinner icons may have been a response to the optical effect created by the camera (people look larger than they are, on the screen), although this is not mentioned by Wykes in her examination of the changing body ideal.

Although this is a case of which came first, Wykes seeks to demonstrate the new means of reaching the public eye through mass media and its increasing influence throughout the Western hemisphere.

As film became the desired form of entertainment, the increase in the idolization of film stars emerged. Advertisers, as early as the First World War, had determined that women were the primary consumers. The admiration of film stars encouraged advertisers to utilize iconic figures in their campaigns to promote clothing, cosmetics and the notion of beauty, happiness and success\textsuperscript{8}, a means that is still used in present day advertisements.

Western society bases its concept of sexuality and attractiveness on popular images and celebrity icons. Wykes demonstrated changing societal concepts and ideals in conjunction with film stars, models and their representation among mass media images, campaigns and advertisements. The issues presented from media exposure have gained a lot of attention and subsequently, encouraged the development of an academic discipline used to examine the effects and problems presented by mass media images known as media psychology.

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid. p.37.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid. p.42.
Media Psychology

Psychologists have become more interested in media psychology as a field of study, examining how individuals perceive themselves in relation to media images and influence. Social comparison theory (SCT) has been used to explain the media’s effects on young women’s body perception and dissatisfaction. SCT refers to the comparison of an individual to print or televised media images. Dr. Joanne V. Wood, Professor of Psychology at the University of Waterloo further researched the concept of Social Comparison Theory originally developed by social psychologist Leon Festinger in 1954. Wood determined that problems with body dissatisfaction were more likely to develop when a substantial gap between ideal self and perceived self was present.\(^9\)

Media images surround everyday life and are therefore extremely influential in dictating societal values, expectations and desires. Research within the field of body image and media psychology has discovered that “women exposed to images of “ideal” were more likely to report negative feelings about their own body, a need to change their weight and body shape”, demonstrating a stronger sense of dissatisfaction and awareness.\(^{10}\)

For the purposes of this project, media psychology was examined in the context of beauty perception in comparison to popular media images. The majority of the research indicated a strong correlation between body image dissatisfaction (BID) and the exposure to thin-ideal media images. Research has found an increasing trend of thinness among models in print advertisements and magazines images. According to Spitzer, Henderson and Zivian, North American women, within the past thirty years, have become increasingly larger in body size,


creating a significant gap between the media’s thin-ideal images and realistic body size and
shape. The findings of the research conducted by Spitzer et al. suggest that media images do
impact women and “contribute to the development of eating disorders.” Examining the
influence of media images as well as their consequences helps to understand the impact that
popular advertisements have on Western society.

**How the Media Alter Our Thinking: Advertising’s Influence on the Brain and Perception**

Images are meant to convey a message, to communicate a thought or an emotion. Advertisements use the power of images to create a sentiment or notion about a specific product, person or idea. The pictures demonstrated in advertisements are worth a thousand words; stimulating strong feelings and desires among readers.

The concept of subliminal messaging and brainwashing is not new to Western society, if one considers war propaganda throughout the years. Media outlets of all sorts play on emotions, fears and desires to accommodate the product of service being advertised. Advertisements from World War I sought to recruit soldiers and donations by reaching out to the public with the message that “your country needs you”, playing on emotions such as pride to enlist the aid of young soldiers. Rather than report the truth, broadcast media was encouraged to “support the war effort” for the nation’s sake.

Through specifically chosen photographs and models, advertisers play on society’s innermost fears and desires, as demonstrated by the example of the war effort. The images

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presented seek to sell a product, but subsequently also sell an idea of beauty. Dangerous consequences can arise when a consumer cannot objectively observe an image. When the desire to appear like the models do in these images and a subsequent dissatisfaction consumes the audience, dangerous measures and extreme behaviors can develop.

The images presented in print ads are not the images that are initially captured. Through computer alterations, Photoshop and airbrushing, the images are transformed into an ideal. When I had my undergraduate picture taken, the photographer’s ability to transform my appearance was remarkable. Simply by clicking and dragging the cursor, he was able to eliminate hair frizz and dark shadows. He claimed that he could easily change anyone’s appearance, whether it be thinning the nose, lengthening the face or making the lips appear fuller. Keeping in mind that this was a small town photographer with limited resources, the technology available to professional “photo shoot” photographers is astonishing. Technology is used to increase the appeal of a photographic image for the purpose of the client or company.

Advertisements to this day promote the goal of selling a product or service, even under the guise of being informational. For example, pharmaceutical products seek to advertise and sell through informing the reader or audience of the benefits of the product. Rather than blatantly encourage its audience to desire this product, subliminally, these messages implant a notion of better health through its consumption.

Meanwhile, the liquor and automotive industries, and obviously as the fashion and cosmetics industries as well, specifically design and alter their photographic campaigns to create a relationship with their audience. By creating this relationship, the advertisers create specific feelings and sentiments, creating in readers a sense of desire or need to take part in or own the product being sold. Dr. Wykes explains that the creation of emotions among readers has been a
part of advertising since the 1900s. Specifically geared towards women, the notion of identifying with the models, or desiring to be the model, has been used to generate sales; “…buy the product, to be like the girl to get your man”\(^{14}\).

Researchers in the field of visual communications (visual literacy), have explained the influence of print advertisements by examining the neurological and psychological processes of perception, in conjunction with the tactics used by ad companies and photographers to ensure that the strongest possible image is captured and released to the public. Professor of Communications and published author in the field of visual literacy, Paul Messaris, Ph.D., explains how specific angles are used in photographs to encourage within the viewer certain feelings. Messaris claims that in “haute couture” fashion ads, the models are often photographed in a way that makes it appear as though they are looking down on the reader, eliciting desire to obtain what the model has. Subliminally, the models in the ads observed by Messaris are telling the reader that he/she is socially inferior because they do not possess what the model has\(^{15}\).

Simultaneously, advertisers seek to build a relationship between the model and the reader, as mentioned above. Messaris explains that

“By presenting us with models whose sexual or financial or other types of success we may wish to emulate, advertising images draw upon our tendencies for identification in order to strengthen our emotional involvement with ads”\(^{16}\)

Biologically, women and men are responsive to sexually suggestive images. Within men, the desire for specific biological attributes within a woman is exploited in media images, creating a physical desire among men, and a desire among women to possess these attributed. Messaris


\(^{16}\) Ibid. p.44.
explains that men have developed a penchant towards fit, slim models with full lips, demonstrating “high levels of estrogen, therefore, highly fertile”\textsuperscript{17}. Based on this notion, the understanding of women’s desires to appear like these models becomes legitimate. Beauty is a tool that biologically and historically, is and has been used to attract the opposite sex. Specific attributes are displayed, exaggerated and flaunted for the purpose of attracting a mate. The images demonstrated in advertisements seek to encourage a specific lifestyle and appearance. Women strive for this appearance, without realizing however that they aspire to be like an unrealistic and altered photograph, which can only by attained by means of drastic surgeries, airbrushing and computer imagery. These images present women with a societal acceptance of beauty, without considering the consequently damaging psychological and physical effects.

The Dangers of Print Media Influence

Social psychologist and published author in the field of media psychology, Dr. Karen E. Dill, explains why print advertisements and other forms of media are a threat to our well being: “…we live in a culture where we are powerfully influenced by messages from the mass media but where many of us misread that influence because we believe we are invulnerable to it.”\textsuperscript{18}

People in Western society, according to Jean Kilbourne among other experts in the field of media psychology, is apt to believe that they are unaffected by the daily bombardment of advertisements and images that they experience. This alone, according to Dill, causes a tremendous problem, as these are more often than not the people who are the most affected by these images. Kilbourne and Dill both explain that after the release of their respective


publications, they were approached by people who would tell them that they were not affected by advertisements. These people were often dressed in specific name brands and exemplifying current trends, seemingly unaware that they had been told to purchase these products by mass media outlets\textsuperscript{19}. Being in denial about the effects of popular media images increases the intensity of its effects, as individuals have not properly prepared themselves to decrease the influence.

Although some people may believe they are unaffected by media messages, Dr. Gaye Tuchman maintains that the mass media subliminally affect societal values, without blatantly expressing its intentions. “…[M]edia representations matter because they are not a truthful reflection of real lives but a symbolic account of what is valued and approved…”\textsuperscript{20} A higher risk for “the development of eating disorders was found among women who internalize or buy in to media messages”\textsuperscript{21} demonstrating that the media can affect self-perception and body image dissatisfaction. Considering that the images presented are often airbrushed, altered and actually depict an unrealistic ideal, the consequences of attempting this image can be dangerous. Print advertisements, as well as television programming, have been found to affect body image perception among women\textsuperscript{22}.

At a subconscious level, print advertisements are determining what society should strive to acquire and gain. Advertisements would be observed more cautiously if the message delivered was obvious, but this would also limit their influence.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid. p.306.
The Dangers of Thin-Ideal Desire: Body Image Dissatisfaction

Body image dissatisfaction can, in some cases, lead to extreme measures in an attempt to attain the desired image, including cosmetic surgery and eating disorders. Although eating disorders and poor body image stem from more than a single cause, societal pressures and media influence certainly contribute the development of anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and other forms of eating disorders.

Eating Disorders: Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa

Eating disorders are categorized as a disorder involving either eating too little to achieve or maintain a low weight, or the compulsion to overeat. For the purpose of this research, I will examine only the disorders that are relative to maintaining a low weight or losing weight.

Anorexia nervosa is one of the two most common eating disorders identified, the other being bulimia nervosa. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM IV), in order for a person to be diagnosed as anorectic, the following criteria must be met:

“A. Refusal to maintain body weight at or above a minimally normal weight for age and height (e.g., weight loss leading to maintenance of body weight less than 85% of that expected; or failure to make expected weight gain during period of growth, leading to body weight less than 85% of that expected).

B. Intense fear of gaining weight or becoming fat, even though underweight.

C. Disturbance in the way in which one's body weight or shape is experienced, undue influence of body weight or shape on self-evaluation, or denial of the seriousness of the current low body weight.

D. In postmenarcheal females, amenorrhea, i.e., the absence of at least three consecutive menstrual cycles. (A woman is considered to have amenorrhea if her periods occur only following hormone, e.g., estrogen, administration.)"

It is estimated that “0.5% to 1.0% of all females” have or will suffer from anorexia nervosa as some point in their lives. Anorexia nervosa is a serious illness, influenced by

various factors like societal pressures, media influence, and peer pressure. Among people who suffer from eating disorders, the desire to be thin outweighs the importance of health.

Bulimia nervosa is identified by the DSM-IV as having the following characteristics:

“A. Recurrent episodes of binge eating. An episode of binge eating is characterized by both of the following:

(1) eating, in a discrete period of time (e.g., within any 2-hour period), an amount of food that is definitely larger than most people would eat during a similar period of time and under similar circumstances

(2) a sense of lack of control over eating during the episode (e.g., a feeling that one cannot stop eating or control what or how much one is eating)

B. Recurrent inappropriate compensatory behavior in order to prevent weight gain, such as self-induced vomiting; misuse of laxatives, diuretics, enemas, or other medications; fasting; or excessive exercise.

C. The binge eating and inappropriate compensatory behaviors both occur, on average, at least twice a week for 3 months.

D. Self-evaluation is unduly influenced by body shape and weight.

E. The disturbance does not occur exclusively during episodes of Anorexia Nervosa.”

Anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa can both lead to severe physical and psychological trauma. According to the University of Maryland Medical Center, people with low self-esteem are at a higher risk of developing an eating disorder.

The desire to be thin and the dangerous measures used to achieve this goal can often lead to the development of physical and psychological issues. Despite some anorectics being

significantly underweight, their body perception is severely skewed, encouraging within them a sense of anxiety and the desire to continue, if not worsen, their eating habits and behaviors. Anorectics may display physical symptoms of “low body temperature; cold intolerance; cold extremities…; fatigue; episodes of dizziness; constipation; periodic vomiting; shortness of breath; thinning hair; a coating of fine body hair”\(^{28}\). Physical symptoms of bulimia nervosa include “[fluctuating] body weight; constipation; diarrhea; nausea; gas; abdominal pain; dehydration; missed periods or lack of menstrual cycle; damaged tooth enamel; bad breath; sore throat; mouth sores”\(^{29}\) as well as “poor concentration and fluctuating moods”\(^{30}\). Continuation of anorexia nervosa can eventually lead to severe and sometimes fatal consequences, such as heart failure, circulatory collapse and the organ failure\(^{31}\). In addition to the physical consequences of eating disorders, some sufferers may also experience debilitating psychological effects. Depression, anxiety and feelings of extreme guilt or shame often develop among sufferers of eating disorders, while obsessive compulsive patterns, insomnia and substance abuse are less common, but can develop\(^{32}\). Despite some anorectics being significantly underweight, their body perception is severely skewed, encouraging within them a sense of anxiety and the desire to continue, if not worsen, their eating habits and behaviors. Similarly, sufferers of bulimia nervosa feel an extreme guilt and shame at their behaviors, subsequently leading them to feel worthless.

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\(^{32}\) Ibid. p.333.
and continuing the behavior in an attempt to simultaneously punish themselves and obtain a desired body weight and size.

Causes of Eating Disorders

Researchers and experts in the field of eating disorders agree that oftentimes, the causes of eating disorders are not singular, but involve many contributing factors, two of which are media influence and the societal pressure to be thin

Professor Ronald Comer of Princeton University’s Psychology department explains that “Western society not only glorifies thinness, but creates a climate of prejudice against overweight people”, which not only fuels the desire to be thin, but plants a seed of fear regarding weight gain and obesity. The media encourage this thin-ideal appearance among women, displaying advertisements for weight loss programs and utilizing overly thin models as spokespeople for various products. In addition to these advertisements are “attractive ads for consuming foods, especially "junk" foods” encouraging the public to take part in the consumption of these products, while implanting a desire towards slenderness. The National Eating Disorder Association has identified the psychological factors contributing to the development of eating disorders as “low self-esteem, feelings of inadequacy or lack of control in life, depression, anxiety, anger, or loneliness”. “Cultural pressures that glorify “thinness” and

place value on obtaining the “perfect body”, narrow definitions of beauty that include only women and men of specific body weights and shapes [and] cultural norms that value people on the basis of physical appearance and not inner qualities and strengths\(^{37}\) have been marked as the societal/cultural factors that influence eating disorders. When both societal and psychological factors are present, the risk of developing an eating disorder increases. It is possible that the cultural factors develop within women the psychological effects, strengthening the probability of extreme measures to attain society’s concept of physical attractiveness.

**The Prevalence of the Thin-Ideal Image in Western Society**

The onset of body consciousness and body image issues does not occur instantly within a specific timeframe, but develops over time through subconscious conditioning. Toys marketed towards young girls demonstrate to a very impressionable audience an ideal aspiration. From Barbies, to Bratz, to television shows like Hannah Montana, young girls are exposed to a thin-ideal concept of beauty. As they grow into teenagers, the onset of puberty and the development of their bodies encourage feelings of insecurity while subliminally promoting the concept of thinness and beauty. From an early age, young women are exposed through various media outlets to a societal standard and acceptance of what beauty is. Research based on print ads and body weight conducted as early as the 1960s shows a significant decrease in “vital measurements” (ie. Hips and waist) among Playboy models\(^{38}\). Although it is less likely for a teenage girl to read Playboy magazines, the cover shots of young women are visible and “represent the sexual

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ideal”\textsuperscript{39}. While the weight of Playboy models has decreased, the bust size and use of breast implants has increased, appealing to men by demonstrating the thin-ideal as well as increased sexuality\textsuperscript{40}. The image favored by Playboy magazine seems to be flat stomachs, thin thighs, long legs and large busts; an ideal that is difficult to achieve among young women without cosmetic surgery. The objectification of these models as sex objects can encourage undesirable behaviors among women, eating disorders and plastic surgery for the purpose of attaining a supposedly desirable and attractive appearance.

Similar studies conducted during the years of the Playboy studies discovered an increase in thinness and decrease in body weight and curves within print ads and magazines\textsuperscript{41}, making these, along with other print ad images, poisonous to the easily influenced minds of young teenage girls.

Studies conducted throughout Nova Scotia, Ontario and British Colombia have all discovered a correlation between media images and weight dissatisfaction. According to Drs Sara Jane Cook, Kathleen MacPherson and Donald Langille, “The media promote[s] images of this unrealistic body shape and serve to perpetuate people’s dissatisfaction with the way they look and in the drive for thinness… Peer and parental pressure compounds these media influences”\textsuperscript{42}. Research has discovered that “greater exposure to television and magazines had a greater impact

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{40} See Appendix 1.


among adolescent girls”\textsuperscript{43} and that these images increased factors such as “body dissatisfaction, drive for thinness and pathological eating”\textsuperscript{44}.

It is no surprise that by the time these girls reach adulthood, many of them are plagued by body image issues and a strong desire to attain a specific appearance. Having been conditioned through various outlets from an early age, the effects of print ads may not be seen as a threat, but they do, in fact, alter our self-perception. The desire to look a certain way and to be considered attractive by societal standards, can in some cases lead to severe consequences. Some women may take extreme measures, ranging from cosmetic surgery to eating disorders, in order to fit in with what they have been conditioned to believe is perfect.

According to Dr. David Barlow, director of the Center for Anxiety Related Disorders at Boston University, the message that a thin body shape is preferable is “clearly aimed at women”\textsuperscript{45}. Western society is obsessed with body weight, endangering health and wellness for the sake of slenderness and perceived perfection.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid. P.109.
Understanding the Results: Examining Lesbianism

This project sought to examine whether there was a difference in how lesbian women and heterosexual women perceived themselves in comparison to media images. In order to better understand the reasons for the differences discovered throughout the process, a brief history of lesbianism is examined.

The Lesbian Subculture

Based on her research, Emma Donaghue discovered various instances of lesbianism in early eighteenth century England, supported by diaries and letters of women living as men in order to work and wed as men. Although in England, the lesbian culture was kept private and hidden, in Paris, lesbianism was accepted, if not encouraged as a prelude to marriage or an outlet for women who might otherwise be unfaithful to their husbands with other men\textsuperscript{46}. Romantic relationships between women were especially popular, but not specific to the aristocracy. No other country came close to France’s acceptance of female romantic relationships. The Netherlands, for example, condemned a group of women living as men, charging them with lewd and unnatural acts, fraud and the violation of gender roles\textsuperscript{47}. Through the examination of diaries, letters, novels and poems, the existence of lesbianism is clearly part of history. For example, the relationship between Benedetta Carlini, an Italian nun, and Bartolomea Crevilli is “one of the earliest reported cases of a sexual relationship between two women in early modern Europe”.


believed to have occurred around 1600\(^\text{48}\). Although female romantic relationships have existed through history, the emergence of a lesbian subculture did not become apparent until the 1920s, in conjunction with the feminist movement. Obstacles continued to be met from the 1920s on, however. Despite that, many of the issues faced by feminist movements did indeed encompass lesbians; specific issues were ignored or avoided by straight women. Lesbians were ostracized by not only men, but feminist organizations, some, like the National Organization for Women (NOW) going as far as to throw out lesbian members\(^\text{49}\). Joan Nestle, founder of the Lesbian Herstory Archives, claims that “We lesbians of the 1950s made a mistake in the 1970s; we allowed ourselves to be trivialized and reinterpreted by feminists who did not share our culture”\(^\text{50}\).

The lesbian identity, for a long time, has been frowned upon, rejected and even used as a derogatory term\(^\text{51}\). Based on its tumultuous history, it is not difficult to understand the obstacles that present-day lesbians must overcome to feel accepted and comfortable with themselves.

**The Coming Out Process: Challenges in Acceptance**

Difficulties arise from recognizing that one is different from his or her peers. Upon the realization of this difference, one must struggle with not only self-acceptance, but the possible consequences or backlash from friends and family. This is how it feels to struggle with the realization of homosexuality. Homosexuality has been stigmatized throughout history in North America, as accounts from the early nineteenth century demonstrate, “warnings


\(^{49}\) Alicia Gaspar de Alba, “Malinche’s Revenge” in *Feminism, Nation and Myth: La Malinche*, (Eds) Rolando Romero and Amanda Nolacea Harris, Houston, TX: Arte Publico Press, 2005, p.52.


\(^{51}\) Alicia Gaspar de Alba, “Malinche’s Revenge” in *Feminism, Nation and Myth: La Malinche*, (Eds) Rolando Romero and Amanda Nolacea Harris, Houston, TX: Arte Publico Press, 2005, p.52
of homosexuality effectively placed gays into deviant subgroups.” Despite the strides taken to overcome this stigma, homosexuality is still considered taboo and not entirely accepted within Western society.

Sociologist Richard Troiden has developed a four stage model of homosexual identity formation, which helps to understand the obstacles which lesbians must overcome to obtain self-acceptance. These stages include a development of self and an “acceptance of the label homosexual as applied to the self.” Although all four stages of identity formation are difficult to undertake, the most difficult, according to lesbians’ personal accounts is coming out to their families and friends. It is sufficiently difficult to accept within oneself that they are homosexual, but this acceptance leads to the unnerving task of informing one’s loved ones.

Imagine having a great relationship with your family and having a great group of friends whom you adore and trust. Now imagine undertaking the task of coming out to them, knowing that some may not accept you for who you are, despite the many years of friendship and solidarity. This is what homosexuals face when confronting their identity. Although the coming out process is unique to each individual, the feelings of insecurity and fear are common.

**Lesbian Identity**

Upon the acceptance of a homosexual identity, lesbians may start to identify closer with either type of lesbian role; butch or femme. As described by sociologist Barbara Ponse, “the

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woman who plays the masculine role is called the butch, while the femme plays the stereotypical
traditional female role.” Although the onset of role identification may be present before the
coming out process, it is more likely to emerge upon self acceptance.

Butch lesbians identify closer with male figures, while femmes tend to see themselves as
feminine. Despite the identification among femmes, media images depicting women still seem to
be less effective in regards to body image dissatisfaction and perception. By interviewing both
butch and femme lesbians, I was able to obtain information regarding why this seems to be.

Gay vs. Straight: Advertising Images and Self-Perception

Some research has been conducted regarding the effects of media images on lesbians’
self perception and body image esteem. Results vary from showing no significant difference
between lesbian and heterosexual women’s self perception to signifying that lesbian women are
less affected by media images. The results of my survey demonstrated that lesbian women,
whether self-identified as butch or femme, were less likely to be affected by these images and
less prone to undertaking weight loss tactics, including dieting, eating disorders and cosmetic
surgery.

Research in this field has indicated that lesbian women were slightly less likely to be
preoccupied with their weight, and had a much higher appearance satisfaction than straight
women. Although not a substantial amount of data is available regarding sexual orientation and

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55 Barbara Ponse, “Identity Within the Lesbian Subculture” in Social Perspectives of Gay and Lesbian Studies: A
56 Letitia Anne Peplau et al., Body Image Satisfaction in Heterosexual, Gay, and Lesbian Adults, (original paper,
accepted 2 March 2008), California: University of California and Los Angeles – Department of Psychology:
body image satisfaction, the results published demonstrate either a slight difference, a substantial
difference, or no difference at all between lesbian and heterosexual women’s self-perception.

Rather than simply present the statistics of my surveys, I chose to dig deeper and attempt
to understand why these differences were present. By listening to accounts of coming out and the
difficulties surrounding the lesbian community, I could begin to understand how trivial
appearance and media comparisons were perceived in their eyes.
Research Results: Self Perception Among Lesbian and Heterosexual Participants

Although in some cases, the survey results were similar, the effects of these results were much different. By this, I mean that heterosexual women were more preoccupied with their appearance, despite the satisfaction level being the same as or close to that of lesbian women. Participants were asked to rate various aspects of their appearance on a scale of 1 to 5; 1 being the least satisfied and 5 being the most. Lesbian women were more satisfied with their facial appearance and extremities (hands, feet) than heterosexual women. Similarities were discovered within the body weight satisfaction. What must be noted is that the women who scored closely in terms of body weight satisfaction/dissatisfaction were various shapes and sizes. Heterosexual women were more likely to disapprove of their body weight, despite being in the normal to low BMI, while lesbian women were more likely to score an average of 3, regardless of body weight or shape. Of the 50 participants, 25 were lesbians, and 25 were heterosexual, both ranging between 20 -29 years of age. Of the results, 76% (19 out of 25) of the lesbian participants averaged an overall body and appearance satisfaction of 3 or higher. Shockingly, only 48% (12 out of 25) of the heterosexual women averaged 3 or higher in overall appearance satisfaction. Regarding extreme measures to alter one’s appearance (diet pills, eating disorders, considering plastic surgery, etc.), none of the lesbian participants indicated a history of or a desire to undergo any procedure or extreme measure to change their appearance, while 72% of the heterosexual participants (18 out of 25) had a history of dieting and/or eating disorders. Of these 18 women, all of them said they would consider plastic surgery for cosmetic reasons, the most likely being liposuction (16/18), rhinoplasty (13/18) and breast augmentation (12/18). It must be noted that although none of the responses of lesbian women indicated a desire or history of dieting and/or
eating disorders, a small number (10/25) maintained a healthy lifestyle by eating well and exercising for health purposes.

Considering these high numbers, I asked the participants about their beliefs on the reasons for these differences.

When asked why she believed she was not personally affected by print advertisement images, Jenna* claimed that based on her past, the obstacles she has faced internally and externally were much more important in the long run; “looking like a model is not that important [to me]. I have great friends, a girlfriend who loves me the way I am and I’ve been accepted by my family, what more could I want?” This was similar to many of the responses received when asking lesbian women why they did not believe they were as affected by these images. Upon viewing the images provided between the first and second surveys, Deb* claimed: “I don’t want to look like these girls, I want to be with these girls!”

Both Deb and Jenna are self-identified butch lesbians and understandably, do not and are not tempted to identify themselves as feminine, or adhere to the societal standards of feminine beauty. Based on this alone, one can understand how images of supermodels and actresses would be less likely to influence these women, although femme lesbians gave similar responses.

Femme lesbians still ranked higher as a majority in body satisfaction than heterosexual women. When asked why they believed they were less affected, the answers mirrored those of Jenna, mentioned above. The difficulties in coming out as a lesbian, whether butch or femme, are essentially the same; fear of rejection, teasing, abandonment and of being alone. Faced with the

* names of participants have been changed to protect their identity.
monumental struggle of not only accepting oneself as a homosexual, but also facing family and friends has proven to be a difficult task for many of these women. Sara* explains why she believes that despite her identity as a female, she is not affected as strongly by these images: “I’ve had to go through so much in my life to accept myself, to forgive those who can’t and to love those who have that being a size 0 with perfect hair and nails and makeup doesn’t even cross my mind. I’ve become stronger because of my sexuality and can resist pressure and people telling me who to be and what to look like”.

The heterosexual participants’ answers varied greatly from those of the lesbian women. The results of the surveys were explained to both sets of participants in order for them to understand how major the differences in body satisfaction were. When the results were discussed with one of the groups of heterosexual participants, one of the comments mentioned was “why would they want to look like those women? It’s much easier to find a [girlfriend] for them then it is for us to find someone”. This statement reflects earlier comments about the relationship between beauty perception and attracting a mate.

Despite the differences in lifestyle, education, marital status and income among the participants, the research suggested a greater overall appearance satisfaction among lesbian women. Based on the interviews, lesbian women accepted themselves better than heterosexual women. The concepts encouraged by advertisements (beauty = success, happiness, love) were attained or sought after through means other than appearance. Surrounding oneself with loving friends and family was more important than achieving the thin-ideal concept encouraged by media images and desired by societal standards. When asked how she believed media images affected her self-perception and ideal of beauty, Lisa* (heterosexual), did not believe that
advertisements were that affective. She believed that these images and campaigns informed her of new products and trends, while not seriously affecting her concept of beauty. Lisa is a perfect example of what was mentioned by Jean Kilbourne and Dr. Karen Dill. Although Lisa did not believe she was affected by these images, her survey results suggested the opposite. When asked why she exercised, Lisa replied that she maintained a healthy lifestyle in order to “lose weight and look good”. Her survey results also revealed that Lisa had struggled for years with an eating disorder and was plagued by insecurities about her appearance. Although she has recovered from her eating disorder, she continues to work in order to achieve the societal concept of beauty.

It is clear that there is a difference between heterosexual women and lesbian women who participated in these surveys. The available research in this field has yet to come to a concrete conclusion and requires continued examination. Based on my findings, there is a correlation between sexual orientation and body image satisfaction/dissatisfaction in women of Sudbury, Ontario between the ages of 20 – 29. It is not necessarily sexual preference that affects body image perception, but primarily the obstacles having been overcome and the subsequent self-acceptance that promote a healthy body image. The surveys and following interviews demonstrated that heterosexual women are negatively affected by print media images, despite knowing the alterations conducted to achieve these images. Following in the footsteps of lesbian women could benefit women with a negative body image, leading to self-acceptance and a better perspective of life. Although the majority of heterosexual participants had a lower BMI than the lesbian participants’, there results were far more negative, as were the comments in the subsequent interviews.57

57 See Appendix 2, 3 and 4.
Heterosexual women have not had to overcome the same obstacles as lesbians. This is not to say that heterosexual women do not face challenges, but simply that they are more easily accepted by peers and family in regards to their sexuality. Sexual orientation is a big part of one’s life, basically paving a certain path in life as far as the future prospects of family life and love. Based on the survey results and interviews conducted for this project, lesbian women seem to be more accepting of themselves and others, and less likely to judge or shun others based on their perceived faults. Heterosexual women are more likely to undertake extreme measures to achieve what they believe is the beauty ideal, while lesbian women are content with their appearance, decreasing the perceived value of societal standards of beauty. Many possible explanations exist for the differences found in this research. Some reasons have been explained by the participants, while others can be determined from an objective standpoint. Based on the research, I maintain that lesbian women are less likely to suffer from the negative effects of print media images for two reasons: they do not identify with the models as they do not have the presented goal in mind (attract a man) and secondly, the issues surrounding their sexuality have increased their resilience to outside influence and made them stronger and more accepting of themselves.

Why is Western society so concerned with the concept of beauty and perfection? Why can most heterosexual women find something that they would like to change about themselves? These are questions that I have attempted to answer throughout the paper. Western society has been influenced by mass media and print advertisements, subconsciously allowing them to dictate the rules or beauty and success. By appealing to the instincts, desires and emotions of heterosexual women, print advertisements are able to brainwash them into thinking a specific way, benefiting their particular industry. Advertisements seek to sell, whether it be a certain car,
look, or product, the bigger picture suggests the promotion of a specific lifestyle. Success, beauty and happiness are all implied in print advertisements, encouraging consumers to give in to a certain trend or purchase a certain product. By associating desires, print advertisement has partly created an epidemic of thin-idealization. Print advertisements appeal to a certain audience, encouraging the desire to be a certain way. The subconscious suggestions in advertisements have been discussed in this project and demonstrated the target audience as heterosexual women and men. Subsequently, media images have created the societal standards of beauty and appealed to heterosexual women. By associating happiness and success with beauty, advertisements have created a beauty obsessed society. The messages of these advertisements encourage women to look a certain way in order to attract a mate which, as advertised, will lead to happiness, success and love. Lesbian women are less likely to be affected by these images because the advertisements are not geared to them. Lesbian women are less influenced by advertisements because of the challenges in acceptance that they have faced in their lives. Based on this research, the question that I continue to ask myself is, if advertisements sought to “control” the lesbian population as it does the heterosexual, how would the results of this research change? Hopefully, the way advertising and media images are set up will change for the better, eliminating the use of airbrushing and Photoshop, allowing for a more honest and attainable beauty ideal.
Works Cited


Appendix 1

Playboy, 1953. Retrieved 10 August 2011 from
http://www1.american.edu/bgriff/H207web/fem/playboycovermonroedec53.jpg

http://www.moviemags.com/search.php?search=discusses

Appendix 2

Size chart retrieved from:
Addo Enterprises, Inc. (http://www.safetybasement.com/v/vspfiles/photos/sizechart.jpg)
Shape FX (http://image.shapefx.com/shapefx/Images/layout/size_chart_apparel.gif)
RedTag Clothing (http://ca.bing.com/images/search?q=women's+size+chart&view=detail&id=3F1E7AD63C0A428D9BB3D93DB1A15B38C7996CDE&first=0)
## Appendix 3

### Results of Body Image Perception in Heterosexual Women

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Appendix 4

Results of Body Image Perception in Lesbian Women

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