

English 1101

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“Trendy or Healthy”

As I lay on my futon, musing over my latest escapades, I smirk at the commercial on television. A beautiful model, probably standing 6-feet-tall and barely over one hundred pounds, is carried up the stairs to the bedroom by her exotic lover. Exactly for what is the advertisement? Oh, of course—it is for dieting. I laugh aloud because I am sure I was in the same blissful situation the other night, only I do not weigh 110 pounds. I am an average woman, with an average-figure, and the average love handles to boot, and yes, I have a man. Surprising, right? Americanized media would like the average woman to believe that in order to find happiness, love, and sex, she also needs to be thin. This so-called “need to be thin” is a myth played out by the media. In fact, this thin thing is a passing development altogether. Throughout the years, society’s conception of beauty has consistently been a passing trend of the selective elite, imposed by the media in order to sell products, while the true basis of beauty is a biological feature that has remained constant over time.

Whether a woman is fat or thin, blonde or brunette, 18 or 35 years old, appearance is always a top priority. Since the beginning of print and other forms of media, women have been used to advertise products. Although sales have increased, respect for women has dwindled. Men ran all the earliest marketing companies solely for profit. Therefore, in order to appeal to the massive male population, advertisers showed women scantily dressed, with provocative headings in bold print. Using women’s sexuality to appeal to men was the easiest selling tool. However, appealing to women was another challenge. Instead of using men to sell products to women, the male advertising world played on women’s insecurities to advertise.

One typical concern of women was the urgency to marry young. Mothers and fathers encouraged their daughters to act like young ladies in order to find a decent husband. *The Lady’s Preceptor*, an eighteenth-century etiquette handbook written by Julia Cherry Spruill, gave conventional advice for women during this period. In an excerpt from this handbook, women were directed to “abstain from gossip and a spirit of contradiction, to be careful not to be too quick and passionate in conversation, or too inquisitive; and to endeavor that Cheerfulness, Sweetness, and Modesty be always blended in your countenance and Air” (Pride). *The Lady’s Preceptor* was meant to help train women to be perfect homemakers. Women, in turn, were trapped by these societal conventions. Most professions and schooling were not available to women, and those that were obtainable by women were not respected, not high-paying, and not desirable. Therefore, the only allowed route to financial security or to escape an uncongenial family situation was through marriage (“Pride”).

Because women had neither money nor independence, they were not asked what they wanted; they were told what they needed. A newspaper advertisement in the 1900s for Listerine has a pretty, yet unhappy, woman slouched over a chair. The ad reads, “Geraldine was really pathetic . . . most of the girls in her set were married, or about to be . . . Birthdays crept gradually toward that tragic thirty-mark . . . She was often a bridesmaid but never a bride” (Marcus 198). This early form of marketing transformed ordinary products into daily necessities. In the words of journalist Michelle Cottle from the *Washington Monthly*, “The fashion and glamour industries have perfected the art of creating consumer needs” (430). Women did not just need mouthwash.

They were told subliminally by the media they had to have it, especially if they wanted to marry and to be accepted by society.

Although women are not as concerned with marriage as they once were, the desire to be beautiful is still paramount. So, what is considered beautiful? Recently, beauty has become synonymous with being thin; however, it was not always this way. From the early 1400s to 1700, Western culture fantasized about big-breasted, plump, and somewhat maternal-looking women. Even though the media was not as dominant as it is today, beauty was still viewed through the eyes of artists. During the early 1900s, upper-class society women set the standards of fragility with their pale skin. Women would powder their faces and seek shelter from the sun under the shade of an umbrella. Then the hourglass figure became popular and was embellished with a tight corset. Soon, the focus was on Marilyn Monroe. Marilyn was the newest female icon, wearing a size 14, and dominating headlines. Finally, eyes turned to the Barbie era in 1959, creating a huge contrast in the figure and form of an ideal woman (Sones "Fashion"). Barbie was first introduced as a teenage fashion doll, but soon became the envy of all women. Controversy erupted when it was discovered that if Barbie were a real person, her measurements of 36-18-36 would be impossible to achieve. According to statistics, the likelihood of a woman being shaped like Barbie is less than 1 in 100,000 (Bellis).

As this unattainable figure permeated throughout American, it not only changed the covers of magazines but also affected American women directly. According to "Women in America," eating disorders have increased as models' sizes decreased ("Women"). In 1972, twenty-three percent of American women were unhappy with their appearance. In 1997, this number rose to fifty-six percent (Sones "About"). The media's negative approach toward women has been a governing force in society that has now become an epidemic for the entire world, discouraging women everywhere. Studies show that "eating disorders are more prevalent in industrialized countries, suggesting that cultural factors play a role" (Goode 398). A direct correlation between the media and its influence on people, specifically women, has been demonstrated through a case study in Fiji. After exposing young Fiji girls to Americanized television, a drastic change concerning their own body images became apparent. A culture that was once encouraged to eat in abundance was confronted with the idea of being overweight. One girl said that she needed to start working on her eating habits and start exercising in order to look like the characters from *Beverly Hills 90210* (Goode 399). According to an article written by Ellen Goodman, "within 38 months [of being introduced to Westernized television], the number of teenagers at risk for eating disorders more than doubled to 29 percent" and "74 percent of the Fiji teens in the study said they felt 'too big or too fat'" (401). Eating disorders increased, and the Fiji girls' depression over their seemingly unattractive qualities in comparison to America's media portrayal of beauty surfaced.

In a survey taken by Charisse Goodman, the abundance of thin women in the media was overwhelming. In eleven popular magazines, advertisements showed 645 pictures consisting of thin women as opposed to 11 heavysset women (408). This trend is consistent in newspapers, television, and store flyers. However, this is disproportionate to reality and contributes to everyday women trying to live up to impossible dreams. The average American woman is 5'4" tall and weighs 140 pounds, compared to the average American model who is 5'11" tall and weighs 117 pounds ("Women"). Just like the children in Fiji, everyday American women are trying to live up to an impossible body image. In reality, the media focuses on a body type that represents less than ten percent of society. Researchers believe that advertisers intentionally

normalize unrealistically thin bodies in order to create an unattainable image to encourage consumers to buy more products (Risha).

With thin as the minority, it is a shame that the desire to be thin has become the central focus of American society; however, if the past is any indication of the future, thin will not be “in” for long. The misrepresentation of reality in the media is of concern because it conflicts with nature and biology. Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution states, “Natural selection acts to preserve and accumulate minor advantageous genetic mutations” (Darwin 162). In other words, the better traits stay around and harmful traits are slowly weeded out. The desire to be thin is a potentially harmful attribute that will eventually be one of the discarded traits.

According to Darwin, there are specific characteristics that have remained desirable since the beginning of time. Therefore, true beauty is not a random preference which has been cultivated through time. Thus, attraction is enacted through the subconscious based on specifically evolved traits. Subliminally, men are attracted to women “for purposes of sex . . . not for fun but reproduction” (Sones “Biological”).

With this principle of attraction in mind, the true concept of beauty has gradually evolved over hundreds of thousands of years. Human ancestors used observable traits to determine the reproductive benefit of one potential mate over another. Men have always desired a female who is healthy and able to bear children; therefore, they used physical indicators. These indicators have become the evolutionary preferences in age, skin complexion, and body shape to determine health (Goehring). Judging by physical attractiveness is therefore not a new concept; however, the specific preferences, such as thinness, are. An example of an evolutionary trait is women’s hair. For example, “woman’s long shiny hair is not intrinsically more beautiful than short hair . . . the preference for long shiny hair evolved because when we were hunter-gatherers long hair, healthy, shiny hair, indicated a well-nourished body and it told the history of the health of its wearer and her potential fitness to reproduce” (Sones, “Biological”). Another evolutionary trait is skin appearance. A “clear, smooth skin, absent of sores and lesions, is another obvious indicator of health” (Goehring).

Besides these obvious health factors, men note other preferences subconsciously. Most men prefer a waist-to-hip ratio of .70, regardless of a woman’s overall body size and weight; accordingly, the most reproductively capable women have a waist-to-hip ratio between .68 and .80. Higher ratios are known to cause long-term health problems (Voracek).

Other than inherently attractive traits, other standards of beauty vary a great deal across time and culture. For instance, women in China obsess about binding their feet in order to make them smaller, whereas American women care little about their shoe size (Goehring). These preferences are due to culture, not evolution. Not all culturally based inclinations are bad. In reference to the women of Fiji, their old culture of blissfully large women was a reflection of a higher status because those women could afford to eat. America, in contrast, is plentiful, and, therefore, “plumpness is not a reflection of status” (Goehring). Bad traits evolve when a culture influences society to go against health to try to attain beauty. A woman in Fiji losing weight to appeal to American standards is one example of the negative influence of society.

So where did this thin train of thinking evolve from? The answer is that it did not. Ironically, “men have been found to universally prefer the average-sized female figure, as opposed to one that is particularly thin or fat,” and so it is *women* who consistently rate a thinner female figure as the ideal size (Goehring). This trend is, in part, due to the nature of competition, and due to the media. Because this emaciated figure has no evolutionary basis, like the “bob” and the “shag,” it can be categorized as a trend. Current cultural trends “tend to be exaggerated ideals

of a dimension of beauty that usually have little (if any) evolutionary basis to begin with” (Goehring).

In conclusion, “true evolutionary standards all evolved for a reason, and if they had been at all unhealthy, they would not have withstood the test of time” (Goehring). Because this new skeletal figure is not the norm, is not fundamental, and is not healthy, it is not an adaptive trait. Therefore, if Darwin is correct, through time and evolution, America will deconstruct its own negative cultural standards.

However, seeing the errors of a trait is half the battle. Science can only take society so far. In order to counteract thinness, women have to stand up against their own insecurities brought on by these injustices. It is a tragedy that “almost half of American children between first and third grade want to be thinner,” that “four out of five ten-year-old children are afraid of being fat,” and that “half of nine and ten-year-old girls say that being on a diet makes them feel better about themselves” (“Women”). It is a shame that women allow the media to play on their own fears for monetary benefit, that “Americas spend over forty billion dollars a year on dieting and diet related products,” and that “between five and ten million women and girls in the United States struggle with eating disorders and borderline conditions” (“Women”).

Women must take a stand against this atrocity. The more women obsess about their weight, “the more marketers will exploit and expand that fear” (Cottle 430). Journalist Stephanie Lynch makes this plea to women that before society can be convinced to stop placing impossible images in front of women as representations of the ideal, women need to stop accepting those images as truth. It is essential that we teach our girls that they are beautiful, regardless of their shape and size, and what they may see as imperfections merely makes them unique and special. By standing against the cultural norm of unobtainable beauty, we can overcome the negative body image that haunts so many women, and keep from passing it to another generation. (Lynch)
In order to conquer the injustices imposed by the media and society, women need to work on their inner beauty rather than focus on external appearances.

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