Fashimia – Combating Negative Female Self-Image Through Online Community

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FASHIMIA - COMBATING NEGATIVE FEMAILE SELF-IMAGE THROUGH ONLINE COMMUNITY

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Master of Science degree.

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RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

FASHIMIA - COMBATING NEGATIVE FEMALE SELF-IMAGE THROUGH ONLINE COMMUNITY

By
Dar’ya Bondareva

A Research Paper Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
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Approved by:
Robert Spahr, Chair

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AN ABSTRACT ON THE RESEARCH PAPER OF

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The present study aimed to investigate the power and influence of fashion magazines on Caucasian teenaged girls, aged 13 to 18 years old. Strong negative associations were found between exposure to fashion magazines and teenage girls’ perceptions of their bodies. Furthermore, the present research studied teenagers online activities and behavior in order to support the statement that the best way to reach teenage girls in digital era is through online community. The lack of websites and magazines that promote positive and healthy body image reinforced the need for creation of an online community targeted at “plus size” teenaged girls aged 14 to 20. Detailed description of the goals, content and interaction with the members of the Fashimia online community are provided in this paper.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTERS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1 – Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2 – Body Image</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3 – Online Communities and Teenagers</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4 – Fashimia – Keeping Teen Girls Safe Online</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 5 – Conclusion</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDICIES</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A – Links</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITA</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURE</td>
<td>PAGE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 7</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 8</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 9</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 10</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 11</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 12</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Fashion print media is considered to be one of the top institutions influencing and setting beauty standards (Oppliger, 2008). There are a number of controversies linked to this aspect of fashion that are important to explore. First, it is important to explore the negative effects from exposure to the pictures portraying unattainable models’ bodies on the female audience. Particularly, how fashion magazines can create stereotypes, and influence female perceptions of their bodies. Fashion print media can have harmful psychological effects on the teenaged female audience. When young girls are constantly exposed to unrealistic pictures of fashion models, they are more likely to consider their own bodies as not attractive enough. This can lead to lowering of their self-esteem, depression, and the spread of eating disorders.

The target audience of this research is Caucasian teenaged girls, ages 13 to 20 years. Teenagers are mainly influenced by beauty images; 80 percent of these girls are constantly dieting (Wilson & Blackhurst, 1999). Teenagers are obsessed with the desire to be thin. “They equate thinness with strength and goodness. Weight loss is seen as a direct correlation with virtue” (Renn & Ingall, 2009, p.50). Extreme skinniness successfully promoted by fashion magazines became almost every teenaged girl’s dream. According to Thomsen, Weber & Brown (2002), fashion magazines play an important role in triggering dieting practices among teenage girls. Specifically, “It is believed that reading beauty and fashion magazines leads many young women to internalize and embrace the sociocultural thin ideal and, in turn, motivates them to attain it, sometimes through pathogenic practices” (Thomsen et al., 2002, p. 2). Therefore, it is extremely important to
focus on teenaged girls, aged 13 to 18 years.
CHAPTER 2

BODY IMAGE

Studies show that 99 percent of the American population is not able to attain body proportions portrayed in fashion magazines (Oppliger, 2008). According to Turner et. al. (1997), exposure to fashion magazines is causing strong desires among women to be thin, dissatisfaction with their bodies, and frustration about weight. A large number of studies were carried out in this field. Turner et.al, Thomsen et.al, Pinhas et.al, Thomsen et.al, and Shaw, provide an exploratory analysis, with a hard data and useful implications on the body image satisfaction of teenaged girls. With the effective use of survey methods, where participants were mostly white teenaged girls, scholars were able to reveal the negative consequences of the fashion magazine exposure in the teenaged female audience. The findings showed that most of the patients were heavy media users, and several described their consumption as an “addictive behavior” (Thomsen et.al., 2001, p.53). Beauty and fashion magazines were read frequently by all of the surveyed females. All girls appeared to be sensitive, and vulnerable, which emphasizes that teenaged girls are more influenced by fashion images. Moreover, as some of the girls revealed, fashion magazines inspired them to be thin. A majority of the females demonstrated a greater anorexic risk when they were motivated by a desire to improve themselves by being thinner. These results supported all the authors’ hypotheses that ”body image satisfaction is, indeed, influenced by their exposure to the thin ideal presented in fashion magazines” (Turner et. al., 1997, p.6). Even though magazines were viewed by participants for a short period of time, the results were significant. Immediate effects indicated that media images of the ideal human body used in fashion magazines has a direct
influence on the mood states of females (Shaw, 1995; Thomsen et. al., 2002; Pinhas et. al., 1999; Tiggemann et. al., 2009; Prabu et. al., 2003; Cusumano et. al., 1997). This suggests that fashion images of thin models are influential and may play a role in the spreading of eating disorders (Pinhas et. al., 1999).

**Fashion magazines and eating disorders**

It was implied that fashion magazines have direct influences on the accumulation of eating disorders, such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia (Shaw, 1995; Thomsen et. al., 2002; Pinhas et. al., 1999; Tiggemann et. al., 2009; Prabu et. al., 2003; Cusumano et. al., 1997). In 1995, 34 percent of high school-age girls in the United States thought they were overweight: today 90 percent do (Renn et. al., 2009). Nowadays, teenaged girls are surrounded with the images of super-skinny models, and slim celebrities. Every magazine writes about how to make ones body look sexier, how to lose weight, healthy diets, and beauty tips. As a result, teenaged girls may grow up with an improper understanding what normal body size is (Lee, 2003, p. 135).

However, the issue of spreading eating disorders is more complex than it seems to be. A lot of factors can cause eating disorders, and fashion magazines are not the only ones to blame. None of mentioned above studies answered the question: does looking at pictures of skinny models really cause anorexia in teenaged girls? Studies indicated that females who were exposed to the fashion images were more likely to suffer from anorexia or bulimia. This suggests that an “obsession with skinny models may well be linked to eating disorders,” but it is less likely that the images of skinny fashion models directly cause eating disorders (Renn et. al., 2009, p. 108).

**Body image in fashion magazines. How it all started**
In the early fifties, pictures exposing women’s bodies were not common in fashion print advertising. Fashion models mostly were pictured covered with clothes and accessories. Nobody wanted to take a risk and break out of the socially appropriate rules of that period. However, it is important to mention one example of the controversial and innovative campaign of that time. Owners of the lingerie company Maidenform, Bea Coleman and Ida Rosenthal, took a risk and launched “I dreamed I was… in my Maidenform bra” campaign that ran for over twenty years. Created by Norman, Craig and Kummel Advertising, this campaign pictured women “acting out fantasies” (Moog, 1990, p. 22), while dressed in Maidenform bras. For example, one of these ads pictured a lawyer lady, wearing a bra, who “dreamed I swayed the jury in my Maidenform bra” (Moog, 1990, p. 22). This ad “unleashed and exposed the secret fantasies of traditional women of the fifties and invited them to step brazenly into dreams of power and influence” (Moog, 1990, p. 22). With the help of this ad, other clothing companies took risks and tried to help women of the fifties reveal their fantasies and show themselves. It was the beginning of body revealing advertising campaigns.

Figure 1
Thin or regular?

In the past 25 years, models have decreased extremely in size. “Twenty-five years ago, the average female model weighed 8 percent less than the average American woman. Today models weigh about 23 percent less than the average woman” (Renn et. al., 2009, p.107). It is common in the fashion world that thin models are often the best endorsers of fashion clothes. While evaluating an overall physical appearance of the fashion models in the ads, it is obvious that fashion ads are more likely to portray models as impossibly thin (Ashmore, Solomon & Longo, 1996). Consumers are surrounded with ads portraying skinny and beautiful models. One of the most popular looks, the so-called heroin chic look, became enormously fashionable in 1993 (Tungate, 2005). Images, picturing the model looking boney and undernourished, appeared to be in all contemporary fashion magazines (Tungate, 2005). Top model Kate Moss (below) became an icon of the heroin chic look, cultivating in the female audience the desire to be skinny (Tungate, 2005).

Figure 2
The message that the audience is more likely to get while looking at all these pictures is that being at least size five will bring happiness and success into their lives. However, not everybody is aware that models are not perfect; they are the same as all of us. The truth is thoroughly hidden, with the use of special effects: “models are airbrushed; they’re spackled with body makeup to cover bruises, stretch marks, and discolorations” (Lee, 2003, p. 146). Moreover, it is important to consider the age range of the models, which vary from thirteen to eighteen. Therefore their bodies are young and they can eat anything they want to eat (Ashmore et al., 1996).

However, in the last 10 years plus size models started to appear on the pages of fashion magazines. Fashion magazines all over the world started to feature plump, regular girls in their editorials, signaling that all body types are not only beautiful, but also worthy of being pictured. The idea of that the readers want to see normal bodies began to spread among the editors of some well-known fashion magazines such as Marie Claire, Glamour, V Magazine, Bazaar and Vogue. Issues featuring models with normal bodies, sizes 6 to 12, appeared in the bookstores. For example, in June 2000, an issue of Marie Claire magazine placed Sophie Dahl and Pamela Anderson, on the alternative covers with the question, “Is this the ideal body shape? Realistically curvy Sophie Dahl vs. impossibly perfect Pamela Anderson” (cited in Lee, 2003, p. 142). As result, the issue featuring Sophie Dahl on the cover sold more copies than the issue with Pamela Anderson. This points out the existence of public demand to see volumptuous bodies on the pages of fashion magazines. Furthermore, in their September 2009 issue, Glamour featured seven plus - size models naked, revealing their curves, belly rolls and round shoulders (Figure 3). For January 2010, V Magazine issued
an eight-page editorial, shot by Terry Richardson, and titled "One Size Fits All." Photos portrayed plus size model Crystal Renn paired with straight-size model Jacquelyn Jablonksi. Each model wore the same sample clothes, and they were purposefully styled the exact same way and posed very similarly (Figure 4).
However, most of the times fashion magazines, along with other mass media, keep pushing forward sex appeal using the perfectly proportioned female body, no more than a size two. Examples of the appearance of plus size models are very rare.

Who’s fault is it?

When editors of fashion magazines are asked why they rarely use normal-sized models, they respond that the sample clothes that designers give them for the photo shoots is the size zero. This suggests that editors are trapped with the sample sizes, which constrains them into using skinny models. Therefore, it might be the designers’ fault in the lack of diversity in fashion magazines. “Who can blame us, say designers; we’re simply showing our clothes on the bodies they look best on” (Lee, 2003, p. 150). Designers simply follow this notion by designing clothes that will fit only thin models. Some designers, such as Dolce & Gabanna, Prada, Donna Karan, Ralph Lauren and Liz Claiborne have plus size lines. However, the number of these lines is very small. Lee (2003) indicates that “only 26 percent of all women’s clothing sales are in plus-size category” (p. 151). Moreover, some designers, such as Karl Lagerfeld, demand women to lose weight in order to wear their clothes. The menswear section is experiencing a similar problem. Lee (2003) indicates that “Designers are adding more fitted sweaters and skinny pants to their collections, emphasizing the need for a lean body with well-shaped pecs and arms” (p. 151). Therefore, the whole fashion industry is involved in this issue. Thus, the changes might be possible only with the collaboration of the editors, designers, and other professionals in the fashion industry.

Fashion images and photo manipulation
In fashion print, the visual picture is highly important; it is the key that connects the magazine and the consumer. “A lot of money is being spent on this one key image” (Tungate, 2005, p. 107). Fashion photography is a “collaborative effort, requiring the participation of art directors, stylists, and make-up artists” (Tungate, 2005, p. 107). Having powerful tools, such as high-end cameras and special editing software, allows contemporary fashion photographers to turn every regular picture into an advertising masterpiece. It is important to consider all the special techniques that are used in fashion magazines to create the perfect picture. All the powerful tools, such as high-end cameras and special editing software, allow fashion photographers to turn every regular model into a beauty queen (Lee, 2003). All photographs used in fashion magazines have gone through airbrushing, retouching, soft-focus cameras, composite figures, and filters so the final product completely differs from the original (Thompson & Heinberg, 1999). Models become more beautiful and skinny, they do not have bruises and cellulite, which might mislead teenaged girls who are not aware of Photoshop being used as a tool. Among shocking examples of photo manipulation, the Ralph Lauren 2009 ad campaign made it to the top of the list (Figure 5). The photo portrays 23-year-old 5-foot-6-inch 120-pound French-Swedish model Filippa Hamilton looking alienated and unrealistically thin. Her hips and waist were smaller than her head, which made her look not only disproportionate, but also extremely unhealthy. According to the model, she was fired for being overweight not long after the scandal. In their response to this scandalous ad, Ralph Lauren’s administration blamed it on poor imaging and a bad retouching job (Melago, 2009).
Figure 5
CHAPTER 3
ONLINE COMMUNITIES FOR TEENAGERS

As it was indicated in a previous chapter, fashion magazines promote a culture of thinness among teenaged girls and have direct negative effect on their perceptions of their bodies. This suggests that teenaged girls need additional help, and that a more practical and effective way to educate these girls about this issue needs to be established. First, it is the parents’ responsibility to educate their children about the negative role of media images. “Parents, educators and physicians must all take a proactive role in discussing weight with young girls, in teaching them about the media images and the food that they consume and in providing the treatment they need as early as possible” (Agrell, 2008, p.204).

Second, it is important to have more educational material such as websites, videos, and animations on the web. It is well-known that teenagers represent a new generation, also called Digital Natives. According to Palfrey & Gasser (2008), “Digital Natives live much of their lives online, without distinguishing between the online and the offline. Instead of thinking of their digital identity and their real-space identity as separate things, they just have an identity” (p.4).

Therefore, it is extremely important to educate teenaged girls on their use of the Internet.

Teens: Real world VS online

Nowadays the generation of Digital Natives spend most of their time online where they develop their social and technical skills in ways some adults do not understand or value. Participation in the digital age allows teenagers more than just access information online. It takes it to the next level – creation of the content. By using new media youth learn from each other, share information, and
develop their social skills. The freedom that new media gives to Digital Natives is endless. Internet is the place where teenagers can have the power of authority to decide what and how to learn for themselves as opposed to how they are asked to learn in most schools (Ito et. al., 2008). Online learning has changed the traditional ways of study. This notion should challenge the way many adults and parents view the young generation of Internet users. It is important to highlight that the Internet plays a crucial role in a teenagers’ development of identity and values. According to Laine (2010), “Many teenagers identify more strongly with their online peers than with their real-world friends” (p.1). This suggests that the most effective way to reach teenagers and effectively get a certain message to them is with the use of Internet.

Ito et. al. held an extensive US study on teenagers and their use of new media. According to this study, there are two types of teen interaction with digital media: friendship-driven and interest-driven (Ito et. al., 2008). Specifically, both of these interactions are based on making friends online and accessing online information. Teenagers are very active online, they value online activity and are generally highly motivated to participate in online communities. They tend to learn from each other more than from adults (Ito et. al., 2008). This suggests that online communities are the hottest spots where teenagers are “hanging out,” socializing, sharing information and learning.

Among the top four teenage online activities are: customizing products, playing games, socializing, and simply having fun. Using interactive media, the possibilities are endless. Teens can be completely in charge of their creations, they can have control over the media they consume. According to Douglas (2010), the average teenager spends 31 hours per week online. Out of these 31 hours, they
spend nine hours socializing with their peers on social networking sites, and two more hours in virtual communities. More than three hours are spent researching for their homework, and the last three hours they spend educating themselves on personal issues such as teenage pregnancy, drugs, cosmetic surgeries, and love (Douglas, 2010). Furthermore, Lenhart & Madden (2007), indicated that “59% of all American teenagers engage in at least one form of online content creation; 35% of all teen girls blog, compared with online boys, and 54% of girls post photos online compared with 40% of online boys” (p.2). This suggests that blogs, with their ability to provide centralized control and access to real-time features, are most popular among teenaged girls.

On blogs teenagers like to customize their profiles, and to share their artistic creations such as pictures, stories, and videos (Lenhart, Madden, Macgill & Smith, 2007). While analyzing social networking sites, Lenhart et. al. (2007) highlighted that the most common action of communicating with their peers, is to “post a message or comment to a friend’s profile, page or wall. More than 4 in 5 social network users (84%) have posted messages to a friend’s profile or page” (p.13). Therefore, social network sites are one of the most popular forms of communication among teenagers, as these sites give them opportunities to present themselves to their peers and be a part of a group of like-minded friends.

What is cool online? Teenagers’ verdict

User generated content has become one of the most popular online activities among teenagers. Online teens are actively engaging with information and, more importantly, their peers these days (Douglas, 2009). Modern web is more a communication medium than a database of various contents. There are numerous social networking websites that have teenagers as active members.
Seven of the most popular and well-known among teenage communities were evaluated for the purpose of studying their content. How are they different from each other? What are their flaws, and which functions would be useful for this project?

Myspace.com is a social networking website where younger teens create profiles, post photos, music, update their mood features and create journals. It is also popular among musicians for the purpose of promoting their music. Among the features that set this community apart are moods features - small emoticons that are used to depict a mood the user is in. Profile customization allows users to customize their user profile pages by entering HTML into such areas as "About Me", "I'd Like to Meet", and "Interests" (www.myspace.com). On the other hand, the website lacks simplicity. It is overwhelming, it has too much information, it is very slow, and requires high-speed Internet. Possibly, that is one of the reasons why the website is currently in decline.
Facebook.com is a rapidly developing social utility that connects people with friends and others who work, study and live around them. According to The New York Times, in July 2010 Facebook had 500 million users around the world, and the number is growing every day. Among numerous reasons why Facebook is so popular, is that it is very simple, clean and easy to use. The status update function has become very popular among teenagers, as it allows users to inform their friends of their whereabouts and actions every day. The photos application, where users can upload albums and an unlimited numbers of photos, are another very common feature used by everyone. Finally, achievement points that are implemented in the thousands of online games by Facebook, is one of the units that made City Ville, Farm Ville, Mafia Wars and other games very popular.

Another major social networking website is Twitter. According to www.invideous.com, “Twitter is a social networking and microblogging service, that enables its users to send and read other users' messages called tweets. Tweets are text-based posts of up to 140 characters displayed on the author's profile page”. Easy accessibility of Twitter is one of the best functions of this website. All users can send and receive tweets via the Twitter website, compatible external applications (such as, for smart phones), or by Short Message Service (SMS). Moreover, users can customize Twitter by choosing who to follow, and then see tweets from those folks as soon as they’re posted. “Top tweets” that are updated every minute on a website’s home page is a very useful idea as it allows current members to see what are the most popular topics among millions of users.

Among other popular social networking websites are Friendster, Teen Ink, Habbo Hotel, My Yearbook and many others. Teen Ink stands apart from all these communities mentioned above, as it is entirely devoted to teenage writing, art,
photos and forums. It’s a great place for teenagers to develop their writing skills, share their work and get feedback. It is very informative as it has information about summer camps for teens, various college reviews, and examples of student essays.

Since the target audience of this project is teenaged girls ages 13 to 20, and because online communities have been shown to be so important to teenaged girls, it is crucial to evaluate those online communities that are targeted specifically at teen girls. One of the websites that has the most diverse information for teenaged girls is gURL.com (Figure 7).

The target audience of this website is girls aged 13 and up. This community provides them with life and relationship advice through unorthodox methods, by letting them participate in polls about break-ups, or share advice about how they deal with unexpected situations. Girls can also share real life stories of abusive relationships, school bullying, and get other points of view. A lot of the following functions of this website could be applicable and useful for the current project. Help me Heather is place on the website where girls can pose questions about dating, sex, friendship, and body issues to a professional psychologist named Heather. (http://www.gurl.com/findout/helpmeheather/).
Shout out board is a message board where girls can join the conversation, post their pictures to discuss their bodies, or just ask for advice from other girls (http://www.gurl.com/connect/boards/pages/0,,621992,00.html). Fast facts is an educational function under the “find out” menu, where girls can find out scientific facts about various diseases and the available treatments (http://www.gurl.com/findout/fastfacts/). Polls are the most common and popular function in all online communities for teenage girls. On gURL.com they are located on the home page and under the “play” menu. By voting in polls, girls can...
choose their opinion on the topic of the day and see the results of how many girls voted on certain topic (http://www.gurl.com/react/polls/question/0,,714754,00.html). Another popular interactive function is various kinds of quizzes - trivia quizzes, personality quizzes, love quizzes. These quizzes are diverse, very educational, fun and easy to take. At the end, girls can paste the code into their blog or web page to show off their result to others, or to send the analysis to anyone, including themselves. (http://www.gurl.com/play/quizzes/).

Among other online communities targeted at teenaged girls are websites such as www.seventeen.com - the website of the famous fashion and lifestyle magazine Seventeen. The most interesting function of this website is the virtual makeover, as it allows girls to adjust different make-ups, hairstyles and body shapes. Other evaluated communities for girls are www.beinggirl.com, www.smartgirl.org and www.girlsense.com. All these websites share the same purpose – to provide information, advice and tips for teenaged girls.

**Dangerous websites for teenaged girls**

Looking closer at online activities of teenage girls, it is important to say that the internet can give invaluable information about anything that girls are interested in, like health, love, or other female issues. But it can also provide negative, misleading, and sometimes dangerous information. Therefore, it is important to look closer at the pro-anorexia, or Pro-A, websites and their misleading health information targeted at teenaged girls.

Pro-A refers to the promotion of anorexia among young women by means of the Internet. “Pro-A prays to anorexia” – it is the motto of one of the most popular pro-ana websites, Prothinspo (http://www.pro-thinspo.com).
Anorexia is promoted as a lifestyle choice rather than an eating disorder. These young women proclaim themselves to be proudly anorexic. To improve their social life without their parents’ supervision, they created an online community, where they can discuss their dieting problems and share their beliefs. Since their appearance on the Internet, a number of these websites have grown, most of which are hosted on free homepage sites (Shade, 2003). Even though lots of pro-ana websites were forced to shut down their activity, they find a way to survive. They re-open their websites under different names, hosted on different homepage sites, sometimes with restricted password access. Teenage girls, who are obsessed with starvation and being impossibly thin, run most of these websites. Visitors and members of pro-ana web communities are mainly teenaged.
girls diagnosed with eating disorders (Wilson et. al, 2006).

Most of the content is similar on these websites. It consists of general information about eating disorders such as acronyms, information about Anorexia, Bulimia, anorexic/bulimic dangers, calorie charts, height/weight charts, and body mass index. This suggests that these girls are well aware of what Anorexia is, what the consequences of eating disorders are, how to calculate body mass index, and what daily intake they should have to support their body. The most popular content on pro-ana websites are “thinspos”: images, photographs of fashion models and celebrities, poems, songs, tricks and tips, and motivational quotes (Figure 9).

Figure 9

For example, www.Prothinspo.com provides a “positive mental reprogramming process” with 242 suggestions on how keep the girls from eating. Here are some of these suggestions: “Eat on a blue or black plate. Dark colors usually make you feel fuller, faster. When you get a craving, count to 100 really slowly, and it might pass. Eat in front of the mirror. Hell, eat in front of the mirror
naked and see how much you want to eat then” (http://www.pro-thinspo.com/).
The biggest part of “thinspirational” content is images of skinny and anorexic fashion models and celebrities. Girls post a great amount of these images daily, stating that their main goal is to be able to look like one of these size zero models. One of the members of the “Skinny Size Me” blog posted the following quote - “I am NOT on a healthy weight loss plan, I'm on a do whatever it takes to look like a super model plan" (http://day-by-day87.tumblr.com/).

Finally, the main reason why all these girls are becoming the members of pro-ana websites are chat-rooms and forums, on which members seek companionship by posting about the daily details of their lives, their accomplishments in weight loss, and inspirational pictures of skinny models and celebrities. The members of these forums are extremely supportive, they share the same idea, and they understand each other and support the same lifestyle.
CHAPTER 4
FASHIMIA - KEEPING TEENS SAFE ONLINE

It is alarming and disturbing that most of the teenaged girls think their natural weight is essentially fat, and what they will do both physically and mentally to keep themselves well under their natural body weight. Unfortunately, media such as fashion magazines and the Internet take an important part in teenaged girls’ negative perception of their bodies. Most of the time media plays a negative role in the process of teen self-education. There is a very small amount of websites and magazines that promote positive and healthy body image, body diversity and natural beauty.

How Fashimia can help

Considering the amount of time that every teenaged girl spends in online communities, it is important to develop websites in opposition to pro-ana communities. That is how the idea of creating an online community that will promote diversity in body types and sizes was born. The community got the name Fashimia as it combines the word fashion and the name of the main character/host of the website – Mia. Fashimia is primarily targeted at “plus size” teenaged girls aged 14 to 20. The major idea behind Fashimia is to promote positive body image, to encourage girls to stay true to themselves, and to be comfortable in their own bodies. This project takes a different approach to the experience of being a teen girl with a niche online community that provides educational information, visuals, interactive message boards, quizzes, expert advice for teen issues, polls and virtual makeovers. It is supposed to teach girls to accept fashion images without projecting them on themselves, and to reveal some techniques and “tricks” that are used by fashion magazines in order to get the perfect image.
Fashimia is an active and friendly community where girls can become members and make friends in minutes, browse through user profiles and images, and get friendly advice from girls of the same age. They can also post a blog entry about their concerns for their bodies, uncertainties with themselves, or view and rate each others photos, write their own review of an interesting photo shoot. The website allows users to contact other members, maintain those contacts, and to share online content with each other. The main goal of the website is to be able to provide the members and visitors with life advice through contemporary communication methods, by letting them participate in polls about body issues, or by sharing real life stories about their struggle with being themselves.

**Fashimia today**

Fashimia was launched on February 9, 2011 (Figure 10). As of March 31st it has been visited 153 times. Currently there are 31 active members who comment on Mia’s posts, and particiapte in polls and discussions. Unregistered users can view the content of the website without any restrictions, however, in order to be able to comment, take polls and post content, they need to register.

According to Google Analytics, Fashimia.com was viewed by 96 visitors from 31 countries. The countries that generated the most visitors are: USA, Canada, Lithuania, United Kingdom, Ukraine, and India. According to Google AdWords, the most popular keywords that got most of clicks - 41 within a twelve days period, is “plus size fashion”. The next six most popular keywords are “hot topics”, “mia”, “teenaged girls”, “fashion videos”, “plus size models”, and “learn to love yourself”. Negative keywords such as “anorexia”, “bulimia”, and “purging”, got zero clicks. This suggests that users are searching for information related to plus size fashion with the use of related keywords.
Furthermore, Fashimia consists of five sections that represent actions that visitors might take while visiting the website. They can learn more about the host, Mia, in the About Mia section. There Mia talks about her heartbreaking experience of being anorexic. It is hoped that this might be appealing to girls who are having thoughts about extreme weight loss and dieting. The next very important function of Fashimia’s menu is “Communicate”. The importance of this function is very high, as one of the goals of this community is to let girls to share their thoughts and to find support and help through through each other and Mia. Currently, there is only one page called “What you think?”, under “Communicate”. Here girls can give their feedback on the latest controversies that involve body image. For example, one of the latest posts that caused an interesting discussion among members was about the Lane Bryant scandal with Fox (http://www.fashimia.com/content/lane-bryant-scandal-fox-what-do-you-think). Lingerie company, Lane Bryant, released a sexy new lingerie ad that features a voluptuous plus size model in bra and panties as she gets ready for a date. Shortly
after the release, Fox and ABC channels chose not to air the commercial. Now
Lane Bryant is citing discrimination against full figured models and the
controversy has disturbed a lot of people.

Figure 11

The next action that visitors of Fashimia.com could take, is to “Get
Inspired” (http://www.fashimia.com/content/get-inspired). By clicking on the
“Get Inspired” menu button, girls will learn to love themselves and get inspired
through visual content such as videos and images. The most popular item on this
page is the post about an editorial in V Magazine’s “The Size Issue”, featuring
five plus-size models as they graciously posed in front of the camera in tight
clothes and swimsuits that highlighted their curves. One of the members,
ryasnykh, indicated that this post was very eye-opening and it inspired her to be
more comfortable with her own body (http://www.fashimia.com/content/curves-
ahead).
Another post that inspired a couple of members, was a Flash animation describing Mia’s story about becoming anorexic. Ryasnykh and sunshine commented on this post saying that they like it and find it very inspiring. Moreover, ryasnykh revealed that this animation made her think about her behavior towards her own body, and how she used to hide behind larger clothes and delete all pictures of herself that in her opinion reveal her “extra” weight. As her reaction to this animation she indicated: “Sometimes I’m too self-critical and forget that to be loved by others you need to love yourself 1st!” (http://www.fashimia.com/content/mias-story).

One of the main goals of fashimia is to educate girls about the possible dangers of eating disorders; the “Learn” function takes an important part in the menu of this community. There are three important pages under Learn, such as Articles, Fast Facts and Book Reviews. The post that attracted the most attention among members was “Say No to Anorexia”. It described the death of French model and actress Isabelle Caro, who suffered from severe anorexia nervosa from
the age of thirteen and died on November Seventeenth, 2010 at age 28 (http://www.fashimia.com/content/say-no-anorexia). A couple of members were touched by this post, and expressed their opinions that this could be a very good example for teenaged girls of what not to do. On February Twentieth, 2011, Katyab posted “This is absolutely horrifying!! To think that a human body can look so frail and thin is eye opening! Thanks Mia for showing us the results of self destruction” (http://www.fashimia.com/content/say-no-anorexia#comment-24).

Finally, the function “Play” concludes the menu on fashimia.com. Play is a very important part of this online community as it allows users to interact by taking poles, and immediately seeing the results. Viewing the results they can find out how their answers compare with other fashimia followers (http://www.fashimia.com/forum/22). One of the most popular polls is “When you look in the mirror, what would you want to change about yourself?” (http://www.fashimia.com/content/when-you-look-mirror-what-would-you-want-change-about-yourself). Answers include: 1. My hair. I can't do a thing with it! 2. My body. I'm not comfortable with my proportions. 3. My features. There's no hiding my facial flaws. 4. My skin. Will it ever clear up? 5. Nothing. I'm happy with the way I look. Interestingly, questions number two and five got the same amount of responses. This suggests that almost half of Fashimia members (45%) are confident with the way they look and almost the half (40%) has difficulties with body image.

**Fashimia tomorrow**

Since it was first launched, Fashimia.com shows no signs of slowing. It has all the potential to get popular among teenage girls, and possibly to grow beyond this age group, having members of all age groups. What supports this
statement is that this online community is a media niche, as it discusses specific issues of body image represented by fashion media. Moreover, it raises all these issues in the form of social networking, which is extremely popular among teenagers as was indicated in previous chapters.

Active development of interactive functions such as quizzes, message boards, and virtual makeovers are the next big steps in the development of this online community. With the help of a virtual makeover, girls will be able to “adjust” different body shapes, calculate their body mass index and find out their healthy weight and natural body shape. The use of message boards will allow members to discuss their personal issues with Mia, who will give them useful advice from the perspective of a girl who battled anorexia and developed love for her own body. In the future, users will have more freedom on the website, as they will become content creators along with Mia. Some of the most devoted members will be able to have their own blogs under Fashimia.com, as they will be administrators with partial access to the website. Finally, fundamental to this project is that these additions will make the community stronger, will attract new users, and ultimately will influence perceptions of their bodies. This is the main goal of this project.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

This study concludes that teenaged girls are heavily, and negatively, influenced by images of skinny fashion models. Therefore, it supports the hypotheses made in the beginning. It is necessary to consider fashion magazines as an important and influential part of print media. Fashion images featuring thin and beautiful models may cause devastating effects on females’ self-perceptions. Moreover, previous studies indicate that there is a connection between fashion images used by fashion magazines and eating disorders such as bulimia and anorexia nervosa.

It is extremely important to take a step further in the fashion industry. If more people in positions of influence will cast a variety of plus-size models in photo shoots, fashion shows, ads, and commercials, then the body standards will slightly change. The audience will finally see that beauty comes in different sizes, ages and colors. Fashion images should encourage all girls to feel beautiful, and not the opposite way. More importantly, more educational shows, websites, and videos should be developed to deliver these messages to teenage girls. For example, this particular project makes a contribution as an educational and interactive demonstration of the negative effects of media exposure among teenage girls. Thus the present project tries to help teenage girls to achieve a more complex understanding of the role played by fashion magazines, and the development of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating. Fashimia makes an attempt to promote positive body image, as it tries to teach it’s audience to be comfortable with their own bodies. To start to love themselves the way they are.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A - LINKS

http:// www.beinggirl.com/
http://day-by-day87.tumblr.com/
http://www.habbo.com/
http://www.facebook.com
http://www.fashimia.com/content/curves-ahead/
http://www.fashimia.com/content/get-inspired/
http://www.fashimia.com/content/lane-bryant-scandal-fox-what-do-you-think/
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