

Spring 4-6-2012

# The Impact of Media on Body Images of Young Women

Brittani D. Wynn

*Brittani Wynn*, [brittaniwynn1@gmail.com](mailto:brittaniwynn1@gmail.com)

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The Impact of Media on Body Images of Young Women

by

Brittani D. Wynn

B.S., Southern Illinois University, 2010

A Research Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Master of Science Degree

Department of Mass Communications and Media Arts  
in the Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University Carbondale  
April 2012

APPROVAL

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Brittani D. Wynn

A Research Paper Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Science

in the field of Professional Media & Media Management Studies

Approved by:

Dr. Kavita Karan, Chair

Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University Carbondale  
May 7, 2012

## AN ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH PAPER OF

Brittani D. Wynn, for the Master of Science degree in Professional Media and Media Management Studies, presented on 6 April 2012, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: THE IMPACT OF MEDIA ON BODY IMAGES OF YOUNG WOMEN

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Kavita Karan

Extensive literature has focused on the media influences on the body images of women. This is a quantitative study that examines the relationship between the impact that media has had on women and their body image as adolescents, as well as their current relationship with the media and their body image. It also examines if women feel that the media accurately portrays women in magazines and TV shows, and if they are influenced by the images in following them and changing their lifestyles to look like them. One hundred and fifty-one women studying at a university were surveyed over the period of one week, and their results were charted and analyzed in this study. The results showed that young women are working towards good health by eating well and exercising. However, media has a definite role in defining the body images of women, and most of them were not satisfied with their body images and preferred to be skinnier. Media not only influences them in determining their body images as adolescents but also continues to influence them in their adulthood.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Kavita Karan for her time spent helping me through this process. In the College of Mass Communications and Media Arts, I would like to thank Prof. Jan Roddy and Ms. Linda Gassel for accepting me into the program and for helping with any questions throughout these past four semesters at SIU. Thank you to my friends and colleagues for always being there when I needed them most. Lastly, I would like to thank my family, especially my mom, Daniell Weinoffer, for believing in me, for pushing me forward, and most of all for picking me up whenever I fell down. I wouldn't be where I am today without any of you and I appreciate all that you have done for me.

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## CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

If you looked at images of women in magazines from decades ago, you would see women of all different shapes and sizes. Today, if you were to look at a magazine cover or a television commercial, odds are that the woman being shown is tall and extremely thin. Today's media and our society have begun to cast out those who do not fit this ideal image of beauty. Here, the problems lie mainly within adolescents and how they are affected by social pressures to be projected as the thin ideal shape, size, and weight. Media can affect people in many ways. According to *Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders* (ANAD, 2012), "95% of those who have eating disorders are between the ages of 12 and 25." Those aren't the only effects of pressures to be an ideal shape, which also include binge eating, depression, and body dysmorphic disorder. In a survey of 185 female students on a college campus, 58% felt pressure to be a certain weight and of the 83% that dieted for weight loss, 44% were of normal weight (ANAD, 2012). Given the changes taking place in society, this study conducted attempts to investigate into whether or not there is a connection between how women perceive their bodies as adults due to media they were exposed to as adolescents.

The present study focuses on women 18 to 25 years of age, in order to determine whether or not media, specifically television and magazines, has an effect on women and their body images as adolescents. The study also examines if women currently have problems with their body images and to study the extent of media influences from the time they were adolescents to being adults, and if they are more or less likely to be influenced as adults. Also, the study seeks to determine what ways women are conscious of their body image and the efforts they make to keep healthy,

along with their current opinions of the media's portrayal of the average woman. The literature review helped to develop the hypothesis of this study - television shows and magazines that adolescents were exposed to will have a negative impact on women and their body images as adults. This research study could conclude that women that have a negative body image due to the influence of media as adolescents will also have a negative body image as adults. Research into many articles, books, and past theses provided the background and the theoretical framework for the study (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Haines & Neumark-Sztainer, 2006; Harrison, 2000). The data was collected from women in the Student Center at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale through the week of March 26 to 30, 2012. This was a purposeful sampling of female students, between the ages of 18 and 25, who were approached and agreed to take 5 to 10 minutes from their work and lunch to take the survey.

The study is divided into five sections. The first section introduces the topic of study and the second chapter reviews the literature and defines the important terms used throughout the paper. The first part of the literature review is based on the subject of female adolescent identity based on a prominent psychologist's, Erik Erickson and his psychosocial theories (Cherry, 2010). The theories explain the focus of the current research on female adolescents. It is important to carefully understand that at this stage in life, a person's psychological structure is being developed and this can have an impact on how a person perceives things later in life. In this case, how an adolescent female perceives her body image in relation to media, which in turn could have an effect on how she sees herself as an adult.

The second part, discusses the different types of media, how it is an important

part of our culture, and also how media dictates trends and messages to our society (Thompson & Heinberg, 1999). The next two sections of the literature review will focus on two types of media, television and magazines. These are the two most important media that advertisers use to target adolescents, and they are the two most viewed media used by adolescents. According to Jennifer Irving (2008), children spend up to eight 8 hours a day consuming some type of media. Lastly, we will discuss the positive, and the possible negative, effects that media can have on a female adolescent if she becomes dissatisfied with her body due to the exposure to media content. This study takes a further look into health and mental issues like eating disorders, body dysmorphic disorders, and obesity.

## CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews previous articles, books, and papers written about the impact of media on adolescent girls. The evidence and arguments stated will look at negative body image issues related to the impact of messages and images transmitted by media.

For the purposes of this study, advertising will be operationally defined as anything viewed by the public, such as a commercial or print ad, with the purpose of selling a product or a service to the viewer (Strasburger, 1995). Media will be defined as a tool used to transmit ideas, images, messages, or information to the public (Irving, 2008). Body image will be defined as a person's inner perception of physical self (Groesz, Levine, and Murnen, 2002). The term adolescent is defined as individuals, in these case females, who are between the ages of 13 and 18, who are beginning their development into adulthood (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Self-esteem will be defined as to how much inner self-worth one has, and seeing oneself in a positive light, rather than a negative one (O'Dea, 2004). Lastly, body dissatisfaction will be termed as having a poor body image of oneself (Levinson, Powell, & Steelman, 1986).

### *Female Adolescent Identity Development*

Adolescence is a term used to identify a complex time when a younger person begins to start to develop a sense of self, psychologically, in order to figure out where they belong and who they are as individuals (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). In order to try to determine exactly what an adolescent goes through during development, Erik Erickson famously developed a psychosocial theory based on stages that develop a person's personality (Cherry, 2010). Stage one is from birth to age one, and at this stage, trust and mistrust is learned. Stage two is between the ages of one and three and this is

where a sense of independence begins to develop. Stage three of the psychosocial theory includes those ages three to six where children are more assertive. Stage four begins at age six to puberty where a sense of pride is developed (Heffner, 2011). For the purposes of this study, psychosocial stage five is the most important stage of development. During stage five, adolescents are “exploring their independence and developing a sense of self” (Cherry, 2010). During the 1940’s, Erikson developed the idea of personal identity and argued that during adolescence the most valuable development is searching for an identity in order to have a strong sense of self as an adult (Irving, 2008). Erikson goes on to state that positive encouragement and reinforcement is needed during this stage in order to gain a strong identity to become strong and independent individuals in the future (Cherry, 2010). If a child does not gain this strong sense of self then the child will become insecure, and can become confused about who they are as they continue to develop into an adult.

It is common for many adolescents to feel lost and to struggle in order to “find themselves” in a world where we are constantly being told to fit into a certain mold or category. It becomes extremely important from a developmental standpoint for a young girl to begin to have a positive sense of identity because this will ultimately effect her development as an adult (Blyth, Simmons, & Zakin, 1985, p. 208). Therefore, this study focuses on women as adults from their perceptions of media as an adolescent. Today in America it has become increasingly difficult to develop a sense of identity due to ever-changing socio-cultural environments. An adolescent’s exposure to media is also a critical socio-cultural factor that has increased substantially over the years. Adolescents

are told who to be, what to be, and where to be on a daily basis by advertisements and television shows, which can make it difficult for young people to be their own person.

During this time adolescents begin to view themselves as individuals with unique qualities and beliefs (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Appearance is the most important factor for overall positive self-esteem, especially among females (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Irving (2008) states that adolescents not only search for self-acceptance, but are also looking for “meaning and a purpose” (p. 6). At this age adolescents are trying to learn what kind of a person they are going to be, and how they can accomplish getting there. However, because adolescents are so young and impressionable, they become extremely susceptible to outside influences.

According to Groesz, Levine, and Murnen, (2002) female adolescents are the most susceptible to other influences for several reasons. One reason is that as a society we have learned to compare ourselves to other individuals, especially during adolescence because the body is beginning to develop physically. The authors continue to state that when females compare themselves with other females, and their body shapes are not the “ideal” (p. 1) shapes, they then begin to “agonize” (p. 1) about their bodies. They also state that adolescent girls, as well as college women, are most affected by poor body image (Groesz, Levine, and Murnen, 2002). Young women are exposed to all types of influences, like brands and products, to create the ideal image that society portrays as acceptable (Irving, 2008).

Buying products to construct an image can further confuse an adolescent’s sense of self. The idea that you can “buy” a self-image is where the psychological damage to self-perception can begin. Due to this reason, physical characteristics can matter more

than the person themselves. In turn, people become by-products of the products and brands that they consume. If young female adolescents become “things,” it becomes hard for them to feel any self-worth or have positive self-esteem. Adolescents feel the need to find a role model and someone that they can look up to, like a mentor (Steinberg and Morris, 2001). Media products have become the mentors of our younger generation.

### *The Media*

As previously stated, media is a tool used to transmit ideas, images, messages, or information to the public (Irving, 2008). Most often, media uses magazines and television to promote a product or a service. In our society, media has become the most important and influential factor of our culture. It can shape trends and ideas and is the tool of politicians, activists, and advertisers. People typically “trust the media” (p. 82) in order to construct a sort of structured organization in a world that needs stabilization (Strasburger, 1995, p. 82). We trust our televisions and our magazines to give us the right information and to set societal guidelines. As stated previously, media can be an extremely influential factor in an adolescent female’s lifestyle. This often makes them the most targeted group by advertisers.

According to Thompson and Heinberg (1999), there are many sociocultural factors that can play a role in contributing to body dissatisfaction, such as pressure from family, friends, teachers, and coaches, but media continues to gain the most attention from researchers. Another reason why media is such a popular topic with researchers is because adolescents are exposed to “as many as eight to ten hours of various media per day” (Irving, 2008, p. 7). This much exposure to any type of influence is bound to have some type of effect on those that are exposed to it. One question that is typically argued

in these studies is: out of all the outside influences adolescents are faced with, is media really the cause of body dissatisfaction? There has been extensive research to prove that exposure to television and magazines that depict females with thin “ideal” body physique “can create strong body dissatisfaction, poor self esteem, and body image” (Irving, 2008, p. 7). Our media creates images, but does it create the meaning behind those images?

First of all, in order for advertising to be successful, there has to be a cultural understanding of “shared meanings” that are placed on things, such as people or places (Kang, 1997). In other words, advertisers do not direct a meaning towards viewers; however, the meaning has already been created by the viewer (Kang, 1997). One could argue that the problem is not the media itself, but rather the messages decoded by the viewers. However, because the media set most of our cultural standards, it is appropriate to assume that the meaning we connect with the image was portrayed by a message from the media in the first place.

Over the years women have become the target and focus of many advertising campaigns. For this reason, the media has been scrutinized for their depiction of women (Kang, 1997). Women in the media are often subject to objectification. Barbara Frederickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts (1997) define the term objectification as, “the experience of a woman being treated as a *body*, or a collection of body parts, valued predominantly for it’s use, or consumption, by others” (p. 174). If female adolescents are subjected to women being objectified in their daily doses of media, such as in their favorite magazines and/or television shows, they can begin to develop low self-esteem.

Adolescence is the time in a young female’s life when they begin to find their

identities, exposure to media can also make it difficult to realize that the idealized bodies portrayed in the media are unrealistic (Tiggeman, 2006). During adolescence, young females begin to compare their bodies to other females. They begin to emulate the ideal body types of the women that they are exposed to, to identify with a role society has deemed acceptable in order to fit in. Many studies have shown the effects of media exposure on adolescents. Adolescents compare themselves to models and celebrities featured in magazines, commercials, and television shows and begin to feel body dissatisfaction and poor self-esteem (Stice & Whitenton, 2002). Groesz, Levine, and Murnen (2002) state, "In one study, adolescent girls described the ideal girl as 5 ft 7 in., 100 lb, size 5, with long blond hair and blue eyes" (p. 1). This evidence is alarming, mainly because 100 pounds is nearly anorexic for a female of that height. Comparing their adolescent bodies that are still developing, to ultra slender models and celebrities can cause other problems such as self-consciousness about one's perceived body image. Due to this self-conscious behavior, certain psychological issues may develop such as, Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD), anorexia, bulimia, obesity, and other mental and health risks (Weinshenker, 2002).

### *Television*

Researchers focus on how television impacts adolescents because "children spend the most time with this medium and it reaches the youngest ages" (Villani, 2001, p. 394). With all of the television that young females watch, it may become hard to ignore the female faces (and bodies) that grace their televisions each and every day. The vast majority of these women have the idealized body size, perfectly flawless skin, and "well-developed breasts" (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002, p. 2). In order to demonstrate

how a female adolescent may be dissatisfied with her body after viewing television, studies have been conducted on the impact of television shows. Kristen Harrison (2006) talks about one such study conducted on content analysis of comedies on television and it “demonstrated that overweight female characters received fewer positive body- and weight-related comments from male characters than did thinner female characters” which she says insinuates that “overweight characters are portrayed in a less flattering light than thin characters” (p. 119).

Women portrayed in media have grown increasingly thinner over the past 50 years, and in 1990 over half of the media personalities on television could meet the criteria for anorexia (Harrison, 2006). Considering the number of slim, slender television personalities, actresses, and celebrities featured on television, added with the amount of time that adolescent females spend viewing images of these women; it could be assumed that they have gathered that this is the ideal body-type. However, this slender body-type contradicts the love/hate relationship the media and television have with food. Strasburger (1995) quoted Louis Kaufman in saying, “Television presents viewers with two sets of conflicting messages. One respondent suggests that we eat in ways almost guaranteed to make us fat; the other suggests that we strive to remain slim” (p. 79).

Adolescents view over 20,000 food advertisements in a single year; most of these advertisements are for high-caloric snacks (Strasburger, 1995). Some could argue that television often advocates for a healthy-slim lifestyle, sometimes even promoting teens to get up off of the couch, stop watching television, and exercise. However, because of many factors, including being targeted by advertisers of high-caloric foods, such as brands like Hostess and McDonald’s, teens have started to consume, on average, “610

calories a day by snacking” (Strasburger, 1995). Research has concluded that older adolescents can differentiate the difference between “media fantasy and reality” (p.123) than their younger adolescent counterparts (Harrison, 2006).

However, as previously stated, the media’s stand on food and body-type contradict themselves. If this advertising works, is it likely that a female adolescent consuming large amounts of high-calorie snacks would be the “idealized” body-type? The chances are low, and that is where strong body dissatisfaction can morph into eating disorders, like anorexia nervosa and body dysmorphic disorders. Television viewing for long hours can also lead to an increased risk of obesity, which is another common health factor associated with television (Neumark-Sztainer, et al., 2007). A study found that girls who spent more than eight hours of their week watching television were said to feel greater body dissatisfaction than girls that spent less time watching television (Thompson & Heinberg, 1999). Other research concluded that the amount of television exposure was not a factor, but what the girls were watching that lead to body dissatisfaction. For example, soap operas, which depict ideally “beautiful” (p. 342) people in “real life” (p. 342) environments, which can skew an adolescent’s perception of reality and how they should look or act (Thompson & Heinberg, 1999). It is hard to determine if television actually has such negative effects because there are so many external factors that could influence the results of a study. However, on the Pacific isle of Fiji they conducted a survey on adolescent girls three years after television was first introduced in their culture (Strasburger, 1995). It was found that after the introduction of television, reports of bulimia increased by 12% and girls’ test scores for being at risk for an eating disorder was twice the usual score (Strasburger, 1995). Three years later, well over half of the

girls that watched the most television reported feeling “too big or fat” and stated that they were either on diets or had tried to diet (Strasburger, 1995).

### *Magazines*

Like television, magazines are also a prevalent medium to which female adolescents are exposed to all types of media content. Statistically, 59% of female adolescents spend several minutes in a day reading from reading a magazine and 77% of female adolescents have a magazine subscription (O’Dea, 2004). O’Dea (2004) states that, on an average, three in every four female adolescents included reading a beauty or fashion magazine in their daily habits and that this “makes magazines the most likely influential media format to perpetuate and reinforce society’s preference for thinness” (p. 12).

There are many kinds of magazines out there for adolescents; however, the most prominently subscribed to for the adolescent age range are “teen, women, and fashion magazines” (O’Dea, 2004, p. 12). These magazines typically consist of articles that are only about “beauty, dieting, and exercise” (Strasburger, 1995). The messages that young females are gathering from these articles and images of nearly anorexic cover girls and models featured in the magazines can lead to body dissatisfaction. Strasburger (1995) states that, “In one recent study, for example, 69% of nearly 600 girls in fifth to twelfth grades reported that their ideal body shape was influenced by reading fashion magazines” (p. 83). He also quoted a 15-year-old girl that spoke about her opinion on magazines:

Everybody feels like they are not good enough, not pretty enough, not skinny

enough. Every time you open a magazine you always see beautiful people. You have to look good to be a good person (Strasburger, 1995, p. 83).

This kind of mentality shows that media can have negative effects on female adolescents in relation to their self-perception.

Because adolescents are maturing into young adults and are developing and maturing on a daily basis, it can be assumed that the younger the adolescent is, the more their self-esteem can vary from day to day (Steinberg & Morris, 2001, p. 92). This fact can be true of people in general, as we are all finding ourselves in one way or another and self-esteem is more of an inner individual process than anything. However, because adolescents are so vulnerable to outside influences, images and messages sent to them play a dominant role in their levels of self-esteem. For example, advertisers targeting adolescents sell products in magazines like “diets, beauty products, and exercise products and services” (p. 92), which reiterates their messages displayed in their articles (Steinberg & Morris, 2001)

Magazine articles often include stories on such topics as how to tone your body, what foods to eat to lose five pounds in a week, how to score a guy, and what foods one should stay away from if she wants to look her best. Female adolescents are exposed to hundreds of articles and images a day that glorify being the “idealized” body-type in order to be attractive to the opposite sex and to fit into our society. Body dissatisfaction can develop when self-esteem levels decrease when unrealistic body standards are not met and the correct response is not given from outside individuals. Strasburger (1995) states that in an “ongoing meta-analysis, 20 experimental studies show that high

exposure to images of thin models increases a young woman's negative feelings about her body" (p. 83). Why do images of other females depicted in these magazines have such an effect on young females?

O'Dea (2004) in a survey given to girls ages eleven through seventeen found that the most important thing that they wanted was to "lose weight and keep it off" (p.14). This is not surprising considering 80% of adolescent females say that have dieted by the time they reached their eighteenth birthday (O'Dea, 2004). Constant dieting and having the desire to be thin and the idealized weight, size, or shape has lead to many problems, including eating disorders. The images that these females are subjected to are typically unrealistic and fantasy. Advertisers portray their images and models as real everyday girls selling products to real everyday girls. Often times, this could not be further from the truth. Because of technological advances in computer software, it is easier to touch-up images and edit them. These photos can be so edited that a model with a size 3 waistline can be edited down two a size 0 waistline, acne can be erased, and models can be heightened. However, young girls believe that these models are actual representations of what ideally they should look like.

What a young female adolescent perceives as attainable beauty truly is not attainable at all without a photo-editing program, a team of makeup artists, a stylist, and hours of editing and touch-ups. This is one of the main reasons why researchers have focused a lot on recent print media because they have begun to "blur the boundaries between a fictionalized ideal and reality" (Thompson & Heinberg, 1999, p. 341). Due to the fact that adolescence is a time where young females compare their bodies to other developing females, as well as other women and magazines are used at tools of

comparison in our society (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002). The images can have other effects on adolescent females and their self-esteem.

Kang (1997) reported that after evaluating magazine advertisements and the women that were depicted in them, found that women were shown as homemakers and were very rarely, if ever, placed in positions of power. In some advertisements women were shown as dependent on men and women were merely depicted as sex objects. Also, the typical advertisements which featured women were for beauty, cleaning, food and drug products, clothing, and products for the home (Kang, 1997). Magazines are a way to view a society's standardization of roles, i.e. a woman's place is in the kitchen so she can cook and clean. The argument is that these advertisements portraying women in these roles, that are objectifying and subordinate to men, can have negative effects on female adolescents finding their identity. This can distort a young girls self-perception and self-esteem by altering her perception as to how she should be seen as subservient to men and less important in society. Distorted self-perceptions by the media can have extremely negative effects on the health of adolescent girls.

#### *Effects of body dissatisfaction influenced by media exposure*

Body image is a subjective term and can be affected by many factors including what a person looks like, a person's family, peers, and environment, and also the location of the individual (Levinson, Powell, & Steelman, 1986). Unable to attain a fantasy level of idealized beauty, an adolescent female's mental and physical health could be affected (Tiggemann & McGill, 2004). The need for studies in this area is important, mainly because over the past 30 years there has been a rise in the cases of eating disorders and other physical health issues caused by body dissatisfaction

amongst adolescents. This effect is caused by the “decrease in the weight of the ideal female body presented in the media” (Halliwell & Harvey, 2006). Due to extensive research, media exposure to adolescents of thin-ideal media images have been proven to correlate with adolescent girls desire for extreme weight loss and restrictive dieting (Harrison, 2006).

Anorexia nervosa is an eating disorder that can be caused by a negative body image and includes starving the body to stay thin, and can result in major health problems, even death (“Body Image,” 2010). Another result of negative body image is Body Dysmorphic Disorder, and can be caused by a distorted self-perception caused by “flaws” in their appearance (“Body Image,” 2010). Haines and Neumark-Sztainer (2006) in a study conducted on “a sample of 960 adolescent girls for 10 months” (p. 770) concluded that females who had poor body images were 1.5 times more likely to binge eat than the other girls. Binge eating is restrictive dieting, followed by extreme hunger, then “binging” on food to satisfy the hunger. However, because most of the current studies on the correlation between media and body dissatisfaction are so cross-sectional, it becomes hard to determine if “media exposure creates body dissatisfaction, or body dissatisfaction drives an individual to the media” (Aubrey, 2006, p. 160). Aubrey (2006) also states that longitudinal studies are not that common and would be more beneficial in getting accurate results.

Body image is the most dominant factor in determining an adolescents’ feeling of self-worth and a recent meta-analysis experiment conducted to test the association between media exposure and eating disorder, stated that “exposure to thin-ideal images” caused an increase in body image dissatisfaction among those tested (Haines &

Neumark-Sztainer, 2006 p. 775). Low self-esteem and depression can also cause females to over-eat, which in turn can cause obesity, which is another negative health risk caused by body dissatisfaction (Haines & Neumark-Sztainer, 2006). According to Strasburger (1995), there are four factors that have contributed to the recent obsession with weight loss and problems with eating disorders in our culture.

Firstly, the idealized and prominently featured woman has become increasingly skinnier over the past 60 years, while average everyday women are heavier than they were 60 years ago (Strasburger, 1995). Back then; the idealized image of beauty was a busty-buxom blonde with healthy curves. Today, part of that ideal image holds true, except the thick thighs and larger mid sections are now deemed inappropriate by the standards of the society. As a society we have constructed the ideal body shape throughout the years that women have tried to achieve or reach. In the early twentieth century women wore corsets in order to gain the “hourglass” figure, which then “changed from rounded to angular” (Kamalipour & Rampal, 2001, p. 86). In current times women have Spanx that are developed to suck in the curves, however, it is taboo to talk about such things. One reason is that women are supposed to be fit and toned and should not need the assistance of an undergarment to appear thinner.

Secondly, our society has turned the body into a symbol of status and success (Strasburger, 1995). For example, we associate thinness with hard work because it is hard work to stay thin, therefore, that person must be successful in all endeavors of their life. Thirdly, looking thin has become the socio-cultural norm among adolescent girls; being thin is “in” and if you are not thin you are out (Strasburger, 1995). Lastly, because of television shows like “The Biggest Loser” and magazines such as *Seventeen* that

devote so much time to exercise and dieting habits, young women believe that they can be a size 0 with diet and exercise (Strasburger, 1995). However, due to genetics and biology, it is not possible for every female to be the idealized size. The media advertise that exercise and eating the correct way can lead you to that ultra slim look, but that can be misleading and unreachable for the vast majority of American adolescent girls.

There are many influences that come from the media, especially from advertisers and celebrities, who portray the perfect fantasy lifestyle and body-type. These images and messages can confuse younger adolescent girls. Society is telling them who or what to be, when that is not necessarily who they want to be. There are many emotional and physical obstacles that adolescent girls must overcome in order to feel accepted into society. Media often glorifies the slender and the “beautiful” and that mentality is supported by advertisers and our culture. In turn, it becomes harder for adolescents to understand that intelligence and personality can get you far in life and that looks will only get you so far (O’Dea, 2006). Over all, if media exposure to adolescent females causes body dissatisfaction, then adolescents are at a higher risk for developing some type of eating disorder, which can have deadly effects on an individual suffering from this disorder (Haines & Neumark-Sztainer, 2006).

Therefore given the influence of media on body images in the literature, the present study aims to study how body images developed as adolescents continue to influence women as adults. It aims to study the following research questions and data was collected through a survey on a group of women from a university. The different approach that this study takes on past research is the fact that this research is conducted on adults to see their views on media and their body image as adolescents.

## Research Questions

1. To find to what extent are women conscious of their body images and the efforts they make to keep healthy?
2. To what extent does the media have an effect on the body images of women as adolescents?
3. Are women, who had negative perceptions of their body images due to the influence of media and other factors as adolescents, more or less likely to have negative body perceptions as adults?
4. How do women feel about the portrayal of women in media and if it portrays the average female correctly, and why do they feel that way?

H1- The hypothesis of this study is that if media has a negative impact on the body images of women as an adolescent, then they are more likely to have a negative body image as adults.

H2- The study also hypothesizes that women who workout will be happier with their bodies and be happier if they were skinnier.

H3- Lastly, this study hypothesizes women do not feel that the average woman is portrayed correctly in the media, and that women feel the average woman in the media is too thin.

## CHAPTER 3 – METHODOLOGY

A quantitative study of a purposeful sampling of 151 females in Carbondale, Illinois in the Student Center at a university was conducted in March of 2012. The participants were approached and asked to take a survey. The survey, comprised of 23 questions, was designed to best answer the research questions.

### *Participants*

Of the 151 females surveyed, who were between the ages of 18 and 25, a majority of the students were from Illinois, both southern and northern regions. The students were told that the participation was completely voluntary and that they did not have to participate in the study if they did not wish to do so. The survey also contained a cover letter that explained who was giving the survey, the purpose of the research, how long it would take, that the survey was anonymous and confidential, and if they had any questions to contact the me or my committee chair. The survey was reviewed and approved by the Southern Illinois University-Carbondale Human Subjects Committee and included their contact information as well.

### *Procedure*

After agreeing to take the surveys, the women were left alone and the surveys were collected from them when they were finished. The women were left alone so that they did not feel pressured into finishing the survey quickly, and to be honest and open with their answers. Once the surveys were collected I expressed my gratitude towards them for taking the time to fill them out.

## CHAPTER 4 – RESULTS

*Socio-Economic Profile of Respondents*

Of the 151 students surveyed, about 24% were between 18 and 20 years of age, 21.2% were 21, 19.2% were 22, 7.3% were 23, 15.6% were 24, and 11.5% were 25. The average age of those who took the study was 22 years of age. (Table – 1)

Table 1 *Age of Respondents*

Variables	%
18	10.6
19	7.9
20	6.6
21	21.2
22	19.2
23	7.3
24	15.6
25	11.5
	100.00

The respondent's year in education at the university also varied. 20.5% responded as being Freshman, 19.9% are Sophomores, 21.2% stated they were Juniors, 28.5% were Seniors, and 8.4% responded as being "Other," which includes Graduate level and specified programs. (Table – 2)

Table 2 *Level of Study by Respondents*

Variables	%
Freshman	20.5
Sophomore	19.9
Junior	21.2
Senior	28.5
Other	9.9
	100.00

Of the respondents, 74.8% of the respondents were Caucasian, 13.2% were African-American, 2.6% were Asian-American, 4% were Hispanic, and the total for other was 5.3%. (Table – 3)

Table 3 *Race of Respondents*

Variables	%
Caucasian	74.8
African-American	13.2
Asian-American	2.6
Hispanic	4.0
Other	5.3
	100.00

About a third were from Illinois and neighboring states and others from other states. Of

the 151 students, 24.5% were from Chicago, IL, 6% were from Carbondale, IL, 4.6% were from Saint Louis, MO, 5.3% were from Mount Vernon, IL, and 59.6% stated that they were from elsewhere, including places like Delaware, and Central New York.

(Table – 4)

Table 4 *Hometown of Respondents*

Variables	%
Chicago, IL	24.5
Carbondale, IL	6.0
Saint Louis, MO	4.6
Mount Vernon, IL	5.5
Other	59.6
	100.00

Women were enjoying several leisure time activities and their favorite activities were walking (12.6%) or going running, 11.3% liked to workout or exercise, 26.5% preferred to spend time with their friends and family, and 41.9% enjoyed other activities such as going to the movies or reading. (Table – 5)

Table 5 *Leisure Activities of Respondents*

Variables	%
Walking/Running	12.6
Working out/Exercising	11.3
Hanging out with friends and family	26.5
Others	49.7
	100.00

*Efforts to be Healthy and Perceptions of Body Image*

To answer the first research question, “Are women who do activities to keep themselves healthy and fit are less likely to be influenced by the media that they consume?” we found that, in order to stay healthy and fit, 74.8% said they run, walk, or exercise, 13.2% eat healthy or diet, and 11.9% reported doing other things such as Pilates or yoga. (Table – 6)

Table 6 *Health and Fitness of Respondents*

Variables	%
Running/Walking/Exercising	74.8
Eat Healthy/Diet	13.2
Other	11.9
	100.0

When asked how satisfied they were with their physical appearance as an adolescent, a majority of them were not satisfied. 17.2% said “Not at All”, 33.1% said “Somewhat Satisfied”, 33.1% said that they were “Satisfied”, 13.2% stated that they were “Very Satisfied”, and 3.3% said that they were “Extremely Satisfied.” (Table – 7)

Table 7 *Body Satisfaction of Respondents*

Variables	%
Not at All	17.2
Somewhat satisfied	33.1
Satisfied	33.1
Very satisfied	13.2
Extremely satisfied	3.3
	100.00

In relation to the research question asking women if they thought that they would be happier if they were thinner or not, 28.5% “Strongly Agree”, 32.5% Agree, 19.2% said neither, and 19.9% “Disagree.” (Table – 8)

Table 8 *Preference to being Thinner*

Variables	%
Strongly Agree	28.5
Agree	32.5
Neither	19.2
Disagree	19.9
Strongly Disagree	0
	100.00

*Media Exposure*

Media exposure questions, particularly on magazine readership and television viewing were asked to determine if the consumption of media was relevant enough to the viewer to have an influence. According to the data, 7.3% of the respondents never watched TV throughout the week, 23.2% watched TV 1-2 hours a week, 47% watched TV 3-4 hours per week, and 22.5% stated that they watched 5-6 hours a week (Table-9)

Table 9 *Hours of TV Consumption a Week by Respondents*

Variables	%
Never	7.3
1-2	23.2
3-4	47.0
5-6	22.5
	100.00

In terms of the types of programs they watched, 28.5% said that they watched “Reality” TV, 33.8% respondents said “Dramas”, 11.3% said they watched “Comedies”, 2.6% stated that they watched “News”, 1.3% said that they watched “Health” channels, and 22.5% respondents said that they watched other types of shows, such as Sci-Fi and cartoons. 79.9% of women said that their main reason for watching TV was for “Entertainment”, with 4% saying they watched TV for “News”, and 1.3% watched TV for “Self-Improvement.”

Respondents were also asked how often they read magazines, 22.5% respondents stated “Never”, 60.9% said “Often”, 16.6% said “Often”, and 0% read magazines “Nearly Always.” (Table – 10)

Table 10 *How often Magazines are read by Respondents*

Variables	%
Never	22.5
Sometimes	60.9
Often	16.6
Nearly Always	0
	100.00

The women were then asked what magazines that they read. Out of the 151 respondents 41.7% read *Cosmopolitan*, 14.6% read *Seventeen*, 2.6% read *People*, 6% read *Glamour*, 9.3% read *Vogue*, and 25.8% said “Other” which included magazines such as *Ebony* and *Time*. 92.7% of the women said their main purpose for reading magazines was for “Entertainment”, 2.6% read magazines for “News”, and 4.6% read for “Self-Improvement”.

#### *Influence of Media – Magazine and Television*

Further, questions were asked to determine if the magazines and TV shows that the women watched as adolescents, and the shows they currently watched, had an influence on them and their body images. These questions are particularly useful to answering the research question that asks if the media has an influence or effect on women. According to the results, 24.5% of the women said they “Never” feel self-conscious after reading a magazine, 57.6% said “Sometimes”, 8.6% said “Often”, and 9.3% responded “Nearly Always.” (Table – 11)

Table 11 *Responses to “Are You More Self-Conscious After Reading a Magazine or Watching at TV show?”*

Variables	%
Never	24.5
Sometimes	57.6
Often	8.6
Nearly Always	9.3
	100.00

When asked if they compared themselves to other women after reading a magazine or watching a TV show, 25.3% said “Never”, 48% responded with “Sometimes”, 12% said “Often”, and 14.7% chose “Nearly Always.”(Table – 12)

Table 12 *Percentage of women who compared themselves to other women after reading a magazine or watching a TV Shows*

Variables	%
Never	25.3
Sometimes	48.0
Often	12.0
Nearly Always	14.7
	100.00

The respondents were then asked if they had ever tried to alter their body in anyway, such as dieting, exercising, binge eating, not eating, or plastic surgery. Out of the 151

respondents 29.1% said “Never”, 51.7% replied by saying “Sometimes”, 6% stated “Often”, and 13.2% said they that “Nearly Always” tried to alter their bodies. (Table – 13)

Table 13 *Felt the Need to Alter Body After Viewing Magazines or TV shows*

Variables	%
Never	29.1
Sometimes	51.7
Often	6.0
Nearly Always	13.2
	100.00

Of those, 46.4% who said they dieted, 25.8% said that they exercised, 4.6% said that they altered their bodies in some other way, and 23.2% said that they did not try and alter their bodies. It can be found that media does influences the ways in which women try to alter their body in different ways, as three fourths of the respondents tried to alter their body images as some point or the other.

In order to see if magazines and TV shows influenced adults as adolescents, the survey asked, “Did the magazines and TV shows that you saw as a teenager influence you to change your appearance?” The survey concluded that 10.6% “Strongly Agreed”, 30.5% “Agree”, 23.8% said “Neither”, 27.2% “Disagreed”, and 7.9% said they “Strongly Disagreed.” (Table – 14)

Table 14 *Respondents Influence by Magazines and TV Shows to Change Appearance as Teenagers*

Variables	%
Strongly Agree	10.6
Agree	30.5
Neither	23.8
Disagree	27.2
Strongly Disagree	7.9
	100.00

Further questions asked the women the same question; whether the women felt that magazines and TV shows that they are currently exposed to influence them to change their appearance. Out of the respondents, 7.9% said they “Strongly Agree”, 29.1% “Agree”, 27.2% stated “Neither”, 26.5% said “Disagree”, and 9.3% “Strongly Disagree”.  
(Table - 15)

Table 15 *Respondents Influence by Magazines and TV Shows to Change Appearance as Adults*

Variables	%
Strongly Agree	7.9
Agree	29.1
Neither	27.2
Disagree	26.5
Strongly Disagree	9.3
	100.00

While watching TV or reading magazines, sometimes women try to alter their bodies to emulate a female idol, such as a famous actress or model. When they were adolescents, 1.3% said that they wanted to be like Jennifer Aniston, 4.6% replied with Beyonce, 19.2% said “Other”, and 74.8% said “No,” they did not have a role model they wished to look like. Using this same question but applying it to their current idols, 2.6% want to look like Angelina Jolie, 2% wished to look like Jennifer Aniston, 1.3% responded with Kim Kardashian, 15.2% said “Other”, and 78.8% said “No”, they do not have a female idol that they wish to resemble.

#### *Portrayal of Women in the Media*

The final question investigated if the media correctly portrayed the average female. Out of the 151 respondents none of them said that the media correctly portrays women, 5.3% “Agree”, 16.6% said “Neither”, 48.3% “Disagree”, and 29.8% “Strongly Disagree” with they portrayal of women in the media. (Table – 16)

Table 16 *Opinions on if the Media Portrays the Average Woman Correctly by Respondents*

Variables	%
Strongly Agree	0
Agree	5.3
Neither	16.6
Disagree	48.3
Strongly Disagree	29.8
	100.00

This was an open question and women could explain how they felt about this issue.

25.8% of the women responded by saying that the women were “Too Thin”, 8.6% said that “Real Women are Curvy”, 11.9% said that women in the media are “Unrealistic”, 8.6% replied that women are too “Flawless or Perfect” in the media, and 45% said “Other”. (Table - 17)

Table 17 *Feelings on How the Average Female is Portrayed in the Media By Respondents*

Variables	%
Too Thin	25.8
Real Women are Curvy	8.6
Unrealistic	11.9
Flawless/Perfect	8.6
Other	45.0
	100.00

Some examples of what the women said are; “Usually they only show super thin women, and obviously most people don’t fit into that category. But when a heavier woman is shown, it’s all about how “great” it is that a girl who’s not a size 2 is out in public, like most people size 10 and over live under a rock or something. Not to be super skinny is treated the same way in the media as people who are openly gay. As it is an inspirational story, it makes for good TV, but secretly in real life nobody wants to be the gay, or the heavy one, so “Good for her!” (As long as she’s not me) Everybody wants to be perfect.”

Another respondent stated, “With photo manipulation and airbrushing, I assume all images are not real. Women portrayed on television are unrealistic most of the time.” Another woman stated, “Having a Barbie body isn’t normal! The average female body that is portrayed in the media tends to be model thin, which is unhealthy.” On the contrary, a respondent stated, “I use the women in the media as inspiration to get thin and healthy.”

## CHAPTER 5 – DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Earlier research has focused on the influence of media on body images of adolescent girls. The present research further explored how those images, positive or negative, continue even as adult women in their current perceptions of their body images. This quantitative study with information collected from 151 women studying at the undergraduate and graduate levels in a university in Carbondale examined the extent to which they were conscious of their bodies, and to what extent the media had an effect on their body images as adolescents. A large part of the study focused on whether or not women, who had negative perceptions of their body due to the influence of media as adolescents, were more or less likely to have negative body perceptions as adults. The study was conducted on college women in order to compare and contrast their current relationship with media and their body image as adults. This study differs in the fact that women ages 18 to 25 were surveyed about their past relationship with media and how it contrasts with their current relationship with media. The following paragraphs discuss the major findings and conclusions that were reached by this study.

In what ways are women conscious of their body image and what efforts do they make to keep healthy? The findings concluded that women are conscious of their health and bodies. Most of the women are making efforts to control their diet and also exercising, running, doing yoga and Pilates to keep healthy. The majority, nearly 75% of the women surveyed, mostly run, walk, and exercise to stay healthy, while a little over 10% eat healthy and diet.

To what extent does the media have an effect on the body image of women as

adolescents? Nearly 41.1% of women stated that magazines and TV shows that they watched influenced them to change their appearance when they were adolescents. Also, nearly 50% of adolescents, “Sometimes” felt the need to alter their bodies after viewing a TV show or reading a magazine. These findings conclude that the media does have an effect on adolescents on an emotional and psychological level.

Are women, who had negative perceptions of their bodies due to the influence of media as adolescents, more or less likely to have negative body perceptions as an adult? As adolescents, 50.3% of the women were “Not at All Satisfied” or only “Somewhat” satisfied with their bodies and 64% stated that they would have been happier if they were skinnier. These findings can lead us to conclude that, as adolescents, these women could have had a more positive body image. Of these same women, nearly a quarter of them said they “Never” felt self-conscious after reading a magazine but nearly 60% said they “Sometimes” do. Likewise, nearly half of the women surveyed say that they compare themselves to women after watching TV or reading a magazine. However, only, 37% of women said that they currently are influenced to change their appearance by magazines and/or TV shows, compared to 41.1% when they were adolescents. It is evident that media can have a negative impact.

Do women feel that the media portrays the average female correctly, and why do they feel that way? The study did conclude that, women do not feel that the media portrays the average woman correctly. Nearly 80% of those surveyed say that they “Strongly Disagree” and “Disagree” with how the media portrays the average female. The majority felt that the media portrays the average woman on TV to be too thin and

unrealistic.

Therefore, the study found that though some women had a negative body image, there was moderate evidence to show that there was a relationship between a negative body image as an adolescent to current body image. Women also felt that the current media do not portray the female body correctly and that the women shown in the media are too thin and unrealistic. The strengths of this study are that it was conducted on actual college students in a college setting. However, some limitations for this study are that these women are well educated and were already in an academic setting, therefore, possibly more media literate and health conscious. Also, this study is asking women to look into their memories; memories are not always the best tools to rely on. Another limitation is that this study was conducted only on females. A male's perspective on how the media portrays males is an important research area to explore as in recent years men are also getting more conscious of their body images with several beauty products and several men's magazines and television programs on men's health and beauty that may have an impact of their body images.

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## APPENDIX

**Survey: The Impact of Media on Body Images of Young Women**

Greetings!

My name is Brittani Wynn. I am a graduate student in the Mass Communication and Media Art Program at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale.

The purpose of this research is to collect data about the relationship and impact that media has had on women as adolescents and if it has any relationship to how media currently affects them.

Participation is voluntary. The survey will take approximately 5-10 minutes of your time. This survey is anonymous and you will not be asked to give your name. All responses will be kept confidential within reasonable limits. Only those directly involved with this project will have access to the data.

Should you have any further questions or concerns about this study, please contact my advisor, Dr. Kavita Karan, or myself.

Thank you,

Brittani Wynn  
Graduate Student  
[britwynn@siu.edu](mailto:britwynn@siu.edu)

Dr. Kavita Karan  
Associate Professor  
(618) 536-3361  
[kavitak@siu.edu](mailto:kavitak@siu.edu)

This project has been reviewed and approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Committee Chairperson, Office of Sponsored Projects and Administration, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL 62901-4709. Phone (618) 453-4533. E-mail [siuhsc@siu.edu](mailto:siuhsc@siu.edu)

Please, circle or write your answers in the space provided with the most appropriate answer for each question.

1. How old are you?

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2. What is your Race/Ethnicity?

1. Caucasian
2. African-American
3. Asian-American
4. Hispanic
5. Other

3. Where are you from? (Ex: Carbondale, Chicago, etc.)

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4. What year of study are you in?

1. Freshman      2. Sophomore      3. Junior      4. Senior      5. Other: \_\_\_\_\_

5. What are your favorite leisure time activities?

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6. What do you do (like walking, dieting, exercising) to keep healthy and fit?

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7. How satisfied were you with your physical image?

1. Not at all
2. Somewhat satisfied
3. Satisfied
4. Very satisfied
5. Extremely satisfied

8. How many hours a week did you watch TV?

1. Never      2. 1-2      3. 3-4      4. 5-6

9. What type TV shows do you watch?

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10. How often do you read magazines?

1. Never      2. Sometimes      3. Often      4. Nearly Always

11. Please, list what magazines you used to read or read most often. (Ex: Seventeen, Cosmo, Vogue, etc.)

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12. What was your main purpose for watching TV?

1. Entertainment    2. News    3. Self-improvement    4. Other? \_\_\_\_\_

13. What was your main purpose for reading magazines?

1. Entertainment    2. News    3. Self-improvement    4. Other? \_\_\_\_\_

14. Do you feel more self-conscious about your body after watching a TV show or reading a magazine?

1. Never    2. Sometimes    3. Often    4. Nearly Always

15. Did you ever compare yourself to women on TV shows or magazines?

1. Never    2. Sometimes    3. Often    4. Nearly Always

16. Did you ever feel the need to alter your body to look like the women in these TV shows or magazine?

1. Never    2. Sometimes    3. Often    4. Nearly Always

17. Did you ever try to alter your body? (Ex: diet, exercising, not eating, binge eating, or get plastic surgery)

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18. Answer this statement: "I would have been happier if I were thinner."

1. Strongly Agree    2. Agree    3. Neither    4. Disagree    5. Strongly Disagree

19. Do you feel that the media portrayed the average female body correctly?

1. Strongly Agree    2. Agree    3. Neither    4. Disagree    5. Strongly Disagree

Explain: \_\_\_\_\_

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20. If you had a favorite female celebrity as a teenager, who was she? Did you wish to resemble her and why? If no, skip this question.

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21. Did the magazines and TV shows that you saw as a teenager influence you to change your appearance?

1. Strongly Agree    2. Agree    3. Neither    4. Disagree    5. Strongly Disagree

22. Do the magazines and TV shows that you currently watch influence you to change your appearance?

1. Strongly Agree    2. Agree    3. Neither    4. Disagree    5. Strongly Disagree

23. If you currently have a favorite female celebrity, who is she? Do you wish to resemble her and why? If no, skip this question.

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Thank you for your time.

VITA  
Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University

Brittani D. Wynn

brittaniwynn1@gmail.com

Southern Illinois University Carbondale  
Bachelor of Science, Communication Design, May 2010

Research Paper Title:  
The Impact of Media on Body Images of Young Women

Major Professor: Dr. Kavita Karan