

## Popular Culture's Influence on the Mental Health and Body Image of Girls and Women

The following is a summary of the panel presentation given by Lori Peters  
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Every day we are inundated with information that has the potential to influence our thoughts, opinions, and beliefs. Within minutes we have the ability to access the latest breaking news, most popular music video, or fashion trends.

The average young person spends a total of 6 ½ hours each day with the mass media (APA, 2010) and is exposed to about 3000 advertisements (AAP, 2006). Some of these are sought out; while many others are unwanted but strategically placed into our visual path as we walk to work, wait for the bus or in line at the grocery store.

Almost every aspect of popular western culture is about marketing, and the beauty ideal being sold to girls and women everywhere is that to be beautiful you must be thin, sexy, young, and light skinned. The promise sold along with this ideal is that once it's achieved you are guaranteed happiness. What the mass media fails to warn us of is the collateral damage that occurs in the pursuit of this unrealistic and unobtainable ideal.

The majority of the images bombarding us portray women as unnaturally thin, flawless, and in positions of vulnerability. Women's bodies are often dismembered, objectified and sexualized. Women typically serve as decorative sexual objects in advertisements, music videos, and even sports. Popular culture has also sexualized girls and women by dressing girls to look like adult women and adult women to look like young girls (APA, 2010).

Seeing women portrayed in these ways leads to the internalization of limiting and damaging standards, with girls and women believing that appearance and sexualized behaviour are their most valued attributes (APA, 2010).

Eighty to ninety percent of girls and women are dissatisfied with their body. Research has found that exposure to mass media images depicting the "thin ideal" is associated with greater body related concerns and anxiety (APA, 2010). This is not surprising when the majority of images we see are so photo-shopped and digitally enhanced that they no longer accurately reflect the model being used in the image.

Sexualization and objectification undermine confidence and comfort with one's own body, and lead to shame, anxiety, and self-disgust (APA, 2010). Studies have found that only three minutes of viewing fashion magazines left 70% of women feeling depressed, guilty and ashamed (APA, 2010) while 10 minutes of watching a music video portraying ultra thin models left adolescent girls feeling

dissatisfied with their bodies (Bell, Lawton & Dittman, 2007). The women in these images have become increasingly thinner with girls getting the message to take up less space in the world as they strive to become a size 0.

A recent study out of the Centre for Appearance Research in the UK found that 95% of the women surveyed had negative thoughts about their weight during the past week, often several times a day. Thirty percent of the women surveyed said they would trade at least one year of their life to achieve their ideal body weight and shape. As well, 26% said they would sacrifice either a promotion, salary, spending time with their partner, friends, family, or their health in order to achieve their ideal weight and shape (Diedrichs, 2011).

In 2007, the American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls compiled a report that linked sexualization with three of the most common mental health problems found among girls and women. These include eating disorders, depression, and low self-esteem.

The APA reported that frequent media exposure to cultural beauty ideals is associated with higher rates of eating disorders (APA, 2010). A study of 12,000 children ages 9-14 found that media involvement actually preceded the onset of weight concerns and increased girls' efforts to look like their media ideals (Tiggemann, 2004).

Particularly strong evidence for the media's role in shaping girl's body image can be seen in Ann Becker's research on how television affected the cultural norms in Fiji. In 1995, without television, girls in Fiji appeared to be free of the body image concerns that were common in the West. Food was enjoyed and girls aspired to the traditionally robust body shape that was normative for their culture. By 1998, after just a few years of viewing television shows like Beverly Hills 90210 and Melrose Place, girls living in Fiji began to internalize the body ideals of the West, describing their bodies as "too big and too fat". Dieting and eating disordered behaviours followed (Becker, 2002).

The APA (2010) also reported the causal connection between exposure to ads featuring idealized women and the significant rise in depression scores. In addition, they found girls who had a more objectified relationship with their body were more likely to experience depression and lowered self-esteem.

Popular culture's obsession with thinness has also led to weight bias involving stigma and discrimination of people of size. Rarely do we see fat people depicted favorably in the mass media and children as young as five have learned to fear and dislike fat. Numerous studies document harmful weight based stereotypes of fat people as lazy, weak willed, unsuccessful, unintelligent, and lacking self-discipline. Images of fat people in the media are frequently objectified and dismembered. These harmful stereotypes lead to stigma and discrimination in many areas of life and affect people's employment, income

level, relationships, and access to medical care. Weight based stigma remains a socially acceptable form of prejudice and is often justified for two reasons. Firstly, people believe that everyone should be able to control their weight through diet and exercise and secondly, people believe that stigma and shame are useful ways to motivate people to adopt healthier lifestyle behaviors (Puhl & Heuer, 2010).

Popular culture encourages the assumption that body shape and size determines health when in fact the determinants of health are multi-factorial and complex with weight only accounting for 9% (Bugard, 2009). Weight, like height is a human trait that varies across any population in a bell curve. An individual's weight is determined largely by genetic predisposition and only marginally by environmental factors like eating and physical activity. Height and weight also vary between populations due to changes in economic development, access to food, and advances in medicine and immunization (Wann, 2009).

Research demonstrates the harm caused by weight based stigma, putting people at greater risk for depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and body dissatisfaction. Studies also indicate that children who experience weight based teasing are more likely to have psychological distress, engage in binge-eating, and unhealthy weight control behaviours like bulimia. Weight based stigma is also linked to children feeling more negative about sports and being less involved in physical activities. Findings are similar in adult populations (Puhl & Heuer, 2010; Wann, 2009).

Popular culture encourages and supports the pursuit of weight loss often prescribing the same practices for heavier people that are diagnosed as eating disordered in thin people. This pursuit of thinness supports a 55+ billion dollar dieting industry which in reality is not effective and harmful to the physical and mental health of many. In short, continuing the "war against obesity" encourages the damaging cycle of body loathing which just keeps people at war with themselves (Wann, 2009).

### **Creating Positive Change**

So what can we do?

We need to increase awareness and take action. Our efforts to create change will not only help girls and women living here but also those living in countries where we have exported our harmful cultural ideals.

We need to equip children and adolescents with media literacy skills. Young people benefit from learning to be critical thinkers and how to deconstruct the images and messages being presented to them. This needs to begin in childhood, before beauty ideals are internalized. Girls who participate in media

literacy programs have less internalization of the thin ideal and increased skepticism about the realism of images (APA, 2010).

Social activism is required to directly change our socio-cultural environment. Fashion and Advertising industries have long alleged that models who reflect the general population are not used because “thinness sells” and there is no consumer demand for larger models. However, Dove’s 2004 Global Report on “The Real Truth about Beauty” interviewed 32,000 women from ten countries and found that the majority (75%) of women wished that the female beauty ideal did a better job of portraying women of diverse physical attractiveness, age, shape and size. In response, Dove started to include “real women” in their advertising campaigns.

Research has found that advertisements using average weight models were equally effective as ads using thin models, therefore challenging the belief that “only skinny sells” (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2004). A second study released this year had similar findings, but also reported that women who internalized culture’s beauty standards actually felt better about their bodies when they viewed advertisements containing “average sized models”. This suggests that advertising can be both socially responsible and still make a profit (Diedrichs & Lee, 2011).

Social activism helps girls and women identify and strengthen the characteristics necessary to resist personal objectification and sexualization. It also provides a forum to use our voices and purchasing power to influence the media’s portrayal of girls and women (APA, 2010).

About-face is a media activism website you can become involved in. About-face encourages people to become involved in letter writing, petition, and boycott campaigns to actively challenge the negative and harmful portrayal of girls and women in the media. Many of these campaigns have had advertisements successfully removed from billboards and print. About-face also has creative ideas for how to get girls active in your own community. Examples include creating *love your body* scales and sticking body affirming messages onto mirrors in fitting rooms.

About-face also promotes and celebrates advertisements that show diverse images of girls and women portrayed in positive, confident, active, and natural ways. Girls and women’s self-esteem and well being are enhanced when they see images that reflect their own ethnicity, race, ability, and body shape and size. We can all contribute to this by posting diverse images in our schools, workplaces, and homes.

The National Eating Disorder Information Centre (NEDIC) in Toronto also encourages people to actively seek social change. Their campaign used the tagline “Cast responsibly. Retouch minimally” and featured a tiny T-shirt which

was sent to fashion editors and press with instructions to “Please try this on to experience how your ads make us feel.” NEDIC’s online petition to fashion leaders and marketers is still available for you to sign. Also part of the campaign was a series of interactive transit posters located in the fashion district that asked women to shed their weight problems by trashing their fashion magazines.

Changes to legislation are another avenue for change. Governments in Australia, France, and the UK have emphasized the need for changes to current media imagery, including greater regulation, reduction or notification when airbrushing is used and an increase in models body shape and size to promote more diversity. This suggests promise that it is not just about the individual needing to learn how to resist these influences but that larger social structures have to ensure that the media, fashion and advertising industries have a responsibility to promote positive body image.

We must also work collectively to end weight stigma. This will indeed promote a healthier environment for all. Adopting a Health at Every Size Approach to health promotion for everyone regardless of body shape and size has been shown to have positive health outcomes (Association for Size Diversity and Health).

Health at Every Size promotes:

1. **Health enhancement** through paying attention to the emotional, physical, and spiritual well being without focusing on weight loss or achieving a specific “ideal weight”.
2. **Size and self-acceptance** – This refers to respecting and appreciating the wonderful and natural diversity of body shapes and sizes, rather than pursuing an idealized weight or shape.
3. **The pleasure of eating well** – involves eating based on internal cues of hunger, satiety, and appetite; eating based on individual nutritional needs and enjoyment, rather than on external food plans or diets. It is important that we continue advocate for affordable and accessible food options for everyone regardless of income level.
4. **The joy of movement** – involves encouraging all physical activities for the associated pleasure and health benefits, rather than following a specific routine of regimented exercise for the primary purpose of weight loss or management.
5. **An end to weight bias** – recognizing that body shape, size, or weight are not evidence of any particular way of eating, level of physical activity, personality, psychological issue, or moral character; and confirming that there is beauty and worth in every body (written by Karin Kratina and Ellen Shuman).

## Presenter Bio:

Lori Peters received a Master in Social Work degree with a clinical focus on the treatment and prevention of weight preoccupation and eating disorders. Lori is currently employed as Program Coordinator of the Provincial Eating Disorder Prevention and Recovery Program located at Women's Health Clinic in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

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