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Advertising and its Negative Effects on Teenagers

Today we are bombarded with images of what is considered sexy and appealing in advertising and on television. Women are faced with many pressures to be unhealthily thin and to look like the models in fashion magazines. Teenagers today are faced with many pressures to conform to a specific body type that society expects us to obtain. This increasing pressure causes young people to have a distorted idea of body image and many men and women are becoming emaciated in order to look like what is acceptable. The emphasis that advertising industries puts on body image is affecting teenagers in a negative way by making them feel insecure about their own bodies and giving them false images of unrealistic body types that teenagers assume they must achieve in order to be accepted by society.



Our culture has become obsessed about weight, appearance, and body image. One can look through any fashion magazine or browse through the health section at a bookstore and easily find the ideal for a woman's body. She is young, thin, fit, white, and has a shiny, white smile. These images that are found in advertising and

on television makes some feel as though their body is the enemy. We should be able to love our bodies no matter its size or shape (Moe 1).

“Body image is the picture you form in your mind about the appearance of your body (Moe1).” Body image is also related to how one may think others view their body. When advertising industries create false images of ideal body types this causes society to have unrealistic expectations of what the average body should look like. “Body image is linked to internal sensations, emotional experiences, fantasies, feedback from others, and plays a key role in a person’s self concept (Gale 11/7/02).” Young women and men are faced with self-doubt everyday when they see images of body types in advertisements that are flawless and seem to get everything they desire. When one feels unhappy about his/her weight and appearance it is a sign that he/she feels bad about his/her life in other ways (Moe 2).

What happened to our appreciation of different body types? Artists of the 1400’s often painted women with full-figured bodies. It was acceptable and expected for a woman to have a round rear end, breasts falling out, and a stomach that was far from flat. In fact, fat abdomens were a sign of fertility as well as big breasts, which signified the nourishment of children. People of the late Middle Ages valued signs of fertility highly. The “ideal” image then was looking well fed. Until the 1800’s the rounded figure was a sign of prosperity and success. Artists such as Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) often used full-figured women in his works (Moe 10).

Before the 1900’s, it was common for women to wear long, bulky skirts, which were not form fitting in any way on the lower body. The fashion then made it difficult to compare the hip or thigh sizes of different women. Before the twentieth century and

before mass media began creating images of what was considered fashionable, women had less pressure to conform to a particular body type (Moe 10).

Women living in the contemporary U.S. today often find themselves disgusted by the parts of their bodies that they see as larger than the societal ideals. Our bodies should be sources of joy and celebration, yet women are constantly measuring their bodies in hope of absolute perfection. The images we view in advertising give us the illusion of flawlessness. For example, techniques such as airbrushing and computer enhancement give the models we see in pictures an unrealistic look of excellence. In fact, the models used in fashion magazines today “weigh more than 20 percent less than the average woman (Shaw185).” There is only about 5 percent of the female population in our society that weigh what an average fashion model would weigh given her height. Advertising gives us the ideal feminine body type as one that is “absolutely tight, contained, and bolted down” (Bordo 190). What we need to acknowledge is that women come in all shapes and sizes and this variety is part of our beauty (Shaw 185).

The body is an incredible possession we all try hard to understand. We learn what our bodies mean and how they should be experienced through the society in which we live. Therefore, because of the images society gives us, we see our bodies as “cultural artifacts.” Women’s bodies are being objectified which means “seeing the body as an object and separate from it’s context (Shaw 185).” Teenagers are aware of the messages these sexual ads send. The media and entertainment industries are supporting this objectification of women’s bodies and are taking away our identity and self-expression (Shaw 185).

Groups with higher power and influence tend to be more concerned with the beauty ideal and are setting the trends and enforcing the standards. The common, everyday young adults who are affected by these beauty standards are not the ones who are creating these ideals. Multibillion-dollar beauty product and fashion enterprises are very much connected to these beauty standards. Author Joan Jacobs Brumberg explains in his reading *The Body Project* how garment industries in the U.S. have helped to sexualize women's breasts through their development of the bra. Standards are being created by corporate powers, advertising, and the fashion, cosmetics, and entertainment industries everyday (Shaw 189). In addition, Hollywood, has a policy that in order to have a role in film and television a woman must weigh 100 pounds or less (Douglas 33). The media has such an anorexic ideal for women who strive to be actresses (Douglas 33). We are encouraged to accept these standards (Shaw 189).

Of course there are strong women in this competitive world that work hard to overcome the media and it's standards. These women prove to the world that size does not make one successful or unsuccessful. A new television drama began airing in 1997 on ABC called *The Practice*. The show was successful right from the start with its realism and outstanding script. The acting on the show was more than superb and was riveting to watch. There was one actress who stood out, for women in particular: Camryn Manheim. On the show Manheim played Ellenor Frutt, a tough attorney who was exciting to watch. Manheim had struggled to find good roles as an actress. She was told that she would never get work on television if she did not lose weight. Then she proved to the world that she was one of the best when she won an Emmy in 1998 for Best

Supporting Actress in a Drama Series. She confidently held up her statue and said, “This is for all the fat girls (Douglas 34).”



Negative body image is not only occurring in females; it is also a problem for males. What we see on television, movies, and magazines sends out a message of what the “ideal” body type should look like. The common TV “hunk” is seen with a washboard stomach and a tight body, which causes men to be discouraged about their bodies (Moe 2).

Our culture has made the favored male body type as super-fit, firm, and full of muscles. *Psychology Today* conducted a poll in 1997 that asked men the question: “Do you ever diet?” The result was 58 percent of the men questioned answered yes. More results of this study proved there is an abundance of dissatisfaction with men and women’s body types. In a survey that questioned men and women if they would give up more than three years of their life to be the weight they wanted, 24 percent of women and 17 percent of men said that they would (Moe 80). Another poll done by *USA Weekend* asked males the question, “Which of the following would make you feel better about yourself?” Of the male respondents 38 percent chose “bulking or toning up” and 38 percent said “losing weight ”(Moe 81). It is no doubt that men share with women the pressures of having lean, firm, fit bodies. Some headlines of popular men’s magazines found on today’s super market shelves include:

- “Get Results Fast! Bigger Biceps When All Else Fails.” (Men’s Fitness, May

1998)

- “6 Secrets of Hard Muscles” (Men’s Health, May 1998)
- “Turn Fat to Muscle Now” (Ironman Magazine, May 1998)
- “The Secret to A Great Midsection? We Tell You the AB-solute Truth.”

(Exercise for Men Only, June 1998) (Moe 81)

Words like “thin” and “fat” seem clear but are actually used in drastically different ways by the two different genders. Men who call themselves “fat” or “overweight” are more likely to be above the national average in weight, whereas females see them selves as being “fat” as early as the third grade when they are in reality at a normal-weight. Skinny men are described in unpleasant ways with terms like pencil-neck, stick, or skinny twerp. Women, on the other hand, have positive words for thinness like slim, slender, willowy, or model-like. Women who are above average in weight are referred to as full-figured or plus-sized. Big men use many positive expressions for themselves, especially if they are athletic, for example: big daddy, monster, or hulk. Furthermore, men who are overweight are still found useful in society, but truly heavy women have few positions in society (Andersen 53).

“Self-perceptions of physical inferiority can strongly affect all areas of one’s life and may lead to avoidance of social or sexual activities or result in eating disorders (Gale 11/7/02).” When negative body image takes control the result can be that of an eating disorder. One eating disorder is anorexia nervosa is most commonly known as just anorexia, which means loss of appetite. Patients who suffer with anorexia are obsessively concerned about food and barely eat at all. Food is constantly on their minds, yet they practically starve themselves to death. Some of the symptoms of anorexia

include: thoughts and/or behaviors that include trouble with body image, feeling fat even though they are actually thin, an intense fear of becoming fat, a body weight that is 15 percent or more below normal weight for a person's age and height, and menstrual periods that do not reoccur for three cycles, or periods that are never started (Moe 59)

Another eating disorder is that of Bulimia Nervosa. People with bulimia nervosa, or bulimia, again are overly concerned about their body image. Bulimics "binge" which means they stuff themselves with a lot of food in a short period of time and then they "purge" which is getting rid of the food that they just consumed. Bulimics use dangerous methods of purging such as self-induced vomiting, the use of laxatives or diuretics, and overexercising. Those who suffer from bulimia are harder to recognize because they are usually of normal weight but may also be underweight or overweight (Moe 62).

There is another type of eating disorder that is not usually discussed as widely as the others, this is an eating disorder called binge eating disorder or compulsive eating. This disorder can be described by experiencing binge episodes to the point of discomfort and psychological distress, which can be triggered by feelings of regret or self-blaming. With binge eating disorder there is completely no purging (Andersen 36). "Eating disorders are on the rise, and the relationship [we] have with food is becoming an increasingly dangerous one (Ware 4)."

There are, on the other hand, individuals who find it extremely difficult to live happily with a certain body part that they find unacceptable. There is a solution to this living nightmare. What about "Cosmetic Enhancement 4 Teens?" This is a web page that was created to help teens learn more about the possibilities of cosmetic surgery. Of course one is emotionally affected and does care if another criticizes or makes rude

remarks about his/her appearance. In reality if no one truly cared about appearances or there was no desired look, then we would be walking around smelly, hairy, and wearing rotted clothing. The fact that humans are never satisfied gives us the room for growth and development. As a result of growth we are making progress. This is the reason why social acceptance is making such an impact in the world today. Social development is a powerful thing and how can we *not* feel obligated to conform to society's "ideal", when we are flooded by beautiful images everywhere we go. Cosmetic surgery for teens is truly a controversial subject, but teens today are more highly educated and are conscious of the risks and complications connected with general cosmetic enhancement. Furthermore, cosmetic surgery may be the answer that young adults are looking for who are experiencing themselves being turned down for job positions due to their level of attractiveness. Teenagers recognize that society tends to favor and provide for those who are attractive. "The fact of the matter is, humans are cruel-people are teased and there is simply no reason *not* to do anything about it." (Cosmetic 11/7/02)

Peter Zollo, the author of "Wise up to Teens: Insights into Marketing and Advertising to Teenagers," feels that teenagers are important consumers. Teenagers today are becoming more responsible for family shopping. For example, when teenagers leisurely walk down the aisle at a grocery store they are suddenly introduced to hundreds of products and thousands of brands. The common thing way to choose a brand is for teenagers to find what looks familiar to them or what they have seen in the refrigerator before. It is noted that teens spent up to \$47 billion of family money in 1998 (Zollo 12).

Teenagers are also important consumers because of the influence they have on their parents' spending. Teens are smart when it comes to getting exactly what they

want. Teens find that if they make the shopping trip with their parents, then they have a better opportunity at convincing the parent to buy a specific brand than they would if they just would have requested it. When it comes to eating habits of teenagers, moms “just know.” Moms would rather spend money on the food or brand that her teen prefers rather than wasting money on something that will not be touched (Zollo 13).

Today teenagers are so up-to-date on certain products and brands through advertising, computers, and stereos that it is common for parents to seek advice from their teenagers as to what they should purchase. Before buying a brand of jeans, many parents will discuss the purchase with the trend-setting, expert on the latest brand for designer jeans first. Parents today want to dress more suitably in hip fashions to accentuate their young attitudes and who better to keep them in fashion than their own teenagers? (Zollo 13)

Although we feel a concern for what teenagers are seeing in advertisements, teenagers view advertising differently than do adults. Advertising for teens is information about what is popular and is also a common topic of conversation. A large percent of teenagers feel that “good advertising helps [to] make decisions about what to buy.” Teenagers have seen the good and bad ads and therefore hold high standards for the ads that they do observe (Zollo 285).

There is always the risk of exposing teens to advertisements that are not exactly honest and can be misleading or confusing. Advertising industries try to follow some basic rules that teenagers have set for advertising to be accepted and not rejected. The number one rule is for advertisers to be honest. Teens are naturally cynical and agree that an advertisement that is sincere is refreshing. The number two rule is for an ad to make

teens laugh and have humor. Humor attracts teens to advertising. It is difficult to get it right, but when it is successful it broadens the advertisers audience. Another rule given by teenagers to advertisers is to be clear. Teenagers do not want to take time to view an ad repeatedly until the meaning of it sinks in. The message should be clear and known immediately. To teenagers, understandable communication in advertising correlates with the liking of the ad. The final rule given is for advertisers to show and tell teens about their product. When a teenager sees an ad that does not give the basic product information, the teen will most likely become frustrated and tune out the ad. Teens complain, "so many ads never even show the product (Zollo 288-291)." Information about the product is important and should be easily obtained.

Advertising is a way to see what our culture expects from us as men and women. Susan Bordo wrote an article entitled, "Hunger as Ideology," that focused on identifying the expected gender roles of men and women by looking closely at the messages that advertisements are sending. Women are often seen in advertisements as the one who prepares meals but is hardly ever shown eating the meal. Advertisements and commercials for weight-loss products and programs are usually geared toward women. A woman is expected to have a casual relationship with food and should only eat small amounts in order to achieve the slender, beautiful, ideal body. It is becoming more common for young girls today to watch what they eat in order to control their weight.

Advertisements assume that consuming food is easy for women. A woman craving food or having an internal need to eat is not romantic or sexy. An advertisement showing women holding Virginia Slims Menthol is clearly not thinking about food. The ad reads, "Decisions are easy: When I get to a fork in the road, I eat." The message to

women who choose to smoke Virginia Slims Menthols is that food is hardly ever on their mind and when you do eat it has no consequences, for without the “forks in the road” a woman could forget about consuming food all together (Bordo 140).

The relationship men have with food is seen differently in ads. Compulsive eating for men is seen as normal or even attractive in advertisements featuring men. In a Sugar Free Jell-O ad a teenage boy is portrayed as having no physical consequences when consuming large amounts of food because he is a growing teenage boy.

Advertisements that include men and food send the message men are supposed to have large, insatiable appetites. This manly way of eating is shown in the names of products such as: “Manwich,” “Hungry Man Dinners,” and “Manhandlers” (Bordo 144). It is never thought that a man would have a dangerous relationship with food.

Food can supposedly give women the emotional thrills and passion they are seeking to experience. Advertisers use images that women might enjoy to sell food products. For example, in an ad for Haagen-Dazs ice cream, a man is shown diving into a mound of “deep chocolate” ice cream. This ad is meant to make a woman feel excited even tempted to eat consume this food (Bordo 147-148). The act of eating should be sexual, compulsive for women as assumed by advertisers.

Eric Brown is a communication major at Ball State University and I interviewed him concerning the messages that advertisements send to young people today. I asked him if he felt that television portrayed males and females in stereotyped ways. He responded to my question, “Women tend to have more romantic, family roles and are shown as more emotional and weak. I usually see men on television as having leadership roles or professional roles and are most of the time very active and strong characters.”

Next I asked Mr. Brown if he saw this same gender identification in food or clothing product advertisements found in magazines. He answered, "Yes. Advertising today is sending strong messages about what role a male or female should hold. What is most common is the use of sex appeal in advertisements to sell a certain brand of clothing or food product." My final question for Mr. Brown was if he thought that teenagers are affected by what they see in advertisements in a negative way. After some thought Mr. Brown replied, "Teenagers have many pressures of conforming to a specific fashion, behavior, and body type. Teenagers are smart when it comes to finding the hidden messages in advertisements. Negative advertisements like cigarette ads seek out the weak teens and get them hooked early. Some teenagers are strong and have positive parental guidance and steer clear of negative advertisements. All teenagers are effected by advertisements just as everyone else, teens expect everyone to be honest and might get confused when something they thought would make them cool turns out to be a bad choice." Mr. Brown stated his views and I thanked him for answering my questions with much thought. Advertising does affect teens in more than one way. I feel that parents do have a strong influence on how their teens perceive these ads and how they should be interpreted.

Selling products to children has become a common practice since the 1990's began. Advertising has a very powerful influence on our American culture. It is estimated that before teenagers graduate high school they will have seen about 360,000 advertisements on television. They are also exposed to advertisements on the radio, in magazines, and on billboards. Toys and food are the most frequent products seen advertised to young children (American 1).

The Children's Television Act of 1990 ordered that broadcasters consider a child's educational or instructional programming when advertising a product to children. This Act is already having its problems because broadcasters are not fulfilling the intent of the new law. The only way to ensure that stations are obeying the letter of the law and the intent of the law is by local monitoring. The specific intent of the The Children's Television Act is to create a better television-programming environment for the children. An example of the violation toward this law is for networks to air cartoons and claim that they are educational programs. In addition, The Children's Television Act also improves the quality of programming by limiting the commercial time during children's programming to 10 _ minutes per hour on weekends and 12 minutes per hour on the weekdays (American 1).

There have been many studies done to document the effects that advertising has on children. Young children under 8 years old are unable to understand the intent of advertisements and therefore accept the ads as true statements. The youngest television viewer cannot even tell the difference between an advertisement and the regular television program. Commercials also broadcast foods during children's programs that are not always healthy choices. The most widespread nutritional disease among children in the United States is obesity, which has been associated with television viewing. Commercials during children's programs often promote food that is high in calories and is unhealthy for the child if consumed in large amounts (American 2).

Youth respond most to television and Internet ads because these ads spark their interests. Youths are less likely to ignore enjoyable, colorful, moving graphic ads than older people. Children click on these eye-catching ads more than any other age group.

Advertisements that are fun, humorous, and exciting capture a young child's attention without much hesitation. Adults are more concerned with the price of a product whereas a young child is more curious about the features a toy has or how good a candy bar tastes (McIntyre 2).

Teenagers spend a huge amount of money each year since their income is spent more on items they want rather than things they might actually need. Fitting into the crowd is what teenagers are all about. They are becoming their own individual person, yet they dress similar to their peers or idols. Brand names are very important to teenagers. They don't just buy a pair of shoes; they prefer to buy a pair of Adidas or Filas. If teens are not wearing the "in" style they tend to feel unpopular and unimportant. They are aware of sales and will try to save their money when they can since they are not quite ready for the adult responsibilities like paying bills (McIntyre 2).

Teenagers, in contrast to children, are developmentally able to understand the purpose of advertisements. This is not always beneficial considering that many products advertised to adolescents are harmful to their health such as cigarettes and alcohol. Beer, wine, and liquor companies spend over \$2 million on advertising and promotion per year and cigarette companies spend a whopping \$3.25 billion per year on advertising alone. Advertisers stand firm that their intent is to promote brand selection but what needs to be acknowledged is that the consequence of so much advertising is the increase in product consumption. Advertising is surely a cause of why nearly 90% of high school seniors have tried alcohol and most abuse tobacco products beginning at the young age of 16 (American 2).

Cigarette smoking and other tobacco consumption is the cause of over 4000,000 deaths per year in the United States. Teenagers spent \$1.26 billion on cigarettes and smokeless tobacco in 1988. It is estimated that 2 million teenagers begin smoking cigarettes each year. Cigarette advertisements can be found on logos, billboards, and banners in televised sports events, which has made it more famous than ever before. E recent study concluded that one-third of 3 year-olds and almost all children over 6 years old could easily recognize the Old Joe Camel logo. By age 6 children can identify the Camel logo as quickly as they can identify Mickey Mouse (American 2).

Alcohol advertisements are becoming a major concern when it comes to teenagers' safety and well-being. American children see about 2000 beer and wine commercials per year on television. 3137 youth ages 16-24 died in alcohol-related car accidents in 1993. Alcohol is also sadly related to one-fourth of teenage suicides and killings. Alcohol advertisers to get the attention of teens use hypothetical advantages. Alcohol consumption will supposedly make you have more friends, more fun, greater popularity, and a larger sex appeal (American 3). Teenagers should feel self confident without the use of alcohol.

Teenagers are an advertiser's best investment says Selena McIntyre author of an article entitled, "Are Ads That Appeal to Youths a Waste of Time?" It is common for sales men to ignore teens. But why wouldn't they want to get these young adults to use their products at age 16, and then continue to use it for the rest of their lives? Some think that advertising to young children is a waste of time and money. But it is becoming more common today for even a 6-year-old child to own and purchase toys, clothes, food,

computer games, DVD movies, pagers, CD's, four-wheelers, and even stereo systems (McIntyre 1).

There are times of hardship when entertaining advertisements are appreciated. There is always room for humorous advertisements in commercials. When one feels melancholy about their life it is refreshing to laugh out loud at a shockingly funny commercial. These ads are sometimes needed to help keep us sane. We trust that ad industries will be regulated and we expect cautious advertisers to avoid negative press (Hatfield 2). We have an unspoken desire to see advertising continue so that we have something that is normal and routine in our unpredictable lives

Humans come in different sizes, shapes, personalities, and colors. The society we live in today needs to realize the harm it is causing when we allow advertising industries to distort our sense of body image. Young children should not feel like they are "fat" and need to go on a diet. The pressures of being thin and accepted are becoming dangerous for humans today. We need to find ways to help those suffering with eating disorders and make them feel proud of their bodies. It is true that some cosmetic enhancement surgery is available to those who are overwhelmingly disgusted with a certain body part. This is not a cure though. Advertising is not always meant to send negative messages, yet the pressures are put intensely on our youth. Young men and women are stripped of their self-worth when all around them are images of young, fit, firm, beautiful bodies that are in reality only 5 percent of the national average. We need to regain our self-esteem and learn how to live our lives happily and confidently regardless of the messages that advertisers send to us.

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