

AM I PRETTY?

THE INFLUENCE OF MAINSTREAM MEDIA ON BEAUTY IDEALS

by

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Author's Declaration

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Abstract

Why is a specific, narrow, and stereotypical standard of beauty typically perceived as more valuable, more worthy, and more desirable than others? Commercial and mainstream media play a significant role in carefully crafting societal expectations of beauty standards and ideals. This research project analyzes well-known body-positive advertisements, campaigns, and popular mainstream media to identify trends and embedded messages that reinforce negative and stereotypical beauty ideals. This research takes a critical perspective on the ways in which commercial media can influence the way we view others and ourselves. This research suggests that unrealistic and narrow beauty ideals have been created and maintained through media with the ultimate goal of making a profit from consumers' insecurities. The overarching contradictions and communicated messages of the analyzed advertisements and literature are reflected and communicated through text and photography in a digital magazine format entitled "Am I Pretty?". This project utilizes messages and themes often communicated indirectly by commercial media and flips those messages back to the reader, encouraging deeper critical reflection about media messages of beauty we often passively internalize. "Am I Pretty?" is a critical reflection of beauty ideals embedded in mainstream media that we so blindly value and look up to.

Keywords:

Beauty Ideals | Advertising | Commercial Media | Mainstream Media | Visual Communication | Digital Magazine | Aesthetics | Cosmetic Ads

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Introduction

There have been significant research efforts made by scholars in the media and beauty industries throughout recent decades surrounding the impacts of commercial and mainstream media on body image and beauty ideals. Previous research dating back to the early 2000s has attempted to identify whether commercial media has direct and noticeable effects on audience body image, behaviour, and beauty ideals, drawing the ultimate conclusion that media has harmful and negative effects on audience body image and perceived beauty expectations and standards.

This topic remains important and relevant today, despite the seemingly positive efforts made by major beauty, media, and advertising companies to move toward a more body-positive and inclusive approach and ultimately attempting to re-shape the overall popular media climate. Through the analysis of recent popular media and advertising campaigns, “Am I Pretty?” communicates the problematic themes and messages that commercial media inherently instill in mass audiences, which shape and distort our perceptions of beauty ideals and expectations.

This MRP is a reflection of the messages portrayed repeatedly in media environments that shape our own perceptions of beauty and aesthetics. It aims to encourage readers to think critically about media messages and the beliefs we, as a society, have formed based on the messages we passively consume. It serves as a blatant and brutally honest collection of messages and meanings we typically consume without question. “Am I Pretty” outwardly conveys the messages and ideals that commercial and mainstream media have trained us, as consumers, to believe and to buy into. It communicates these messages in a recognizable and artistic format in hopes to gain greater attention and a larger audience as it can be shared through digital means to create a larger conversation around the topic.

This paper begins with a review of the existing literature that introduces relevant

background information and explores the ways that media and advertising have impacted beauty standards, expectations, and body image among various demographics and time frames. “Am I Pretty” is an investigation of my own experiences with beauty standards and a collection of my thoughts after analyzing those experiences alongside existing literature and popular media. I was drawn to investigate this topic when I came to the realization that the media I was consuming for enjoyment was severely negatively affecting my self-esteem through self-comparison. I struggled with my own body image as I strived to look like the characters on my favourite shows. That negative body image solidified when my peers began talking constantly about their own need to lose weight and their experimentation with diet products. The final straw for me was when I cut my hair short, and multiple peers told me that I should grow it long again because I looked “prettier” that way. These experiences led me to my research question: how do mainstream media contribute to the creation of beauty ideals?

Literature Review

A wide array of research and literature has been completed surrounding the influence of media on self-esteem, beauty ideals, and the overall negative impacts of media messages on people of all ages. This literature review dives into the existing body of research surrounding the various ways in which commercial and mainstream media have the power and potential to greatly influence societal beauty standards and ideals, and also the ways we as a society have internalized those expectations. This set of literature and research will be used to inform my MRP (major research project) in creating a digital magazine publication outlining the major takeaways of this research in a visual and easily digestible format. In reviewing the existing literature about media influence on beauty standards and ideals, I aimed to gain valuable insight into the overarching themes and direct effects that mainstream media have on the understanding of beauty ideals and the negative consequences of those internalized standards.

This review includes studies completed between the years 1994 and 2019, as the media landscape has changed drastically through the decades. In completing a review of the works created in such a wide timeframe, I discovered similarities among the effects and impact media has imposed on beauty standards and ideals throughout the years despite recent active attempts to reimagine and redefine beauty standards through the messages portrayed in mainstream media.

The existing body of literature surrounding the overall topic of media influence on beauty ideals and standards exhibit many repeated themes, concepts, and ideas that appear consistent throughout the existing research. The existing literature under review falls under the categories of tweens and the media, advertising methods, empowerment and “femvertising,” media and femininity, and the media and men’s beauty.

Tweens and Media

Youth are highly susceptible to the messages portrayed by media and are likely to internalize those messages. Research surrounding the impact of media on beauty ideals among teens and tweens suggest that media messages condition youth to believe that attractiveness is a trait to be valued by others (Trekels and Eggermont 2017), encouraging objectification and self- objectification. Popular youth media such as Disney Channel and Nickelodeon contain substantial amounts of implied messages that enforce and create appearance ideals (Trekels and Eggermont 2017). For many young girls, Disney celebrities dominated their relationship with media culture, leading to the internalization of the “just-right ideal” (McGladrey 2014).

Girls who grew up watching Disney Channel and Nickelodeon often idolized celebrities such as Miley Cyrus, Selena Gomez, and Taylor Swift, to name a few. Tween girls have expressed the understanding that girls should have the “just right” shape, meaning not over or under weight, with emphasis placed on being “pretty” (McGladrey 2014). The thinner the Disney or

Nickelodeon character, the more positively that character was received by a tween audience (Trekels and Eggermont 2017). When asked why girls and women in media wear so much makeup, one youth participant in a study by McGladrey (2014) answered, “so they can have more people that like them,” “So they can be more popular and famous, because people think makeup is pretty”. When the majority of popular children’s media celebrities portray the same beauty ideals, paired with positive character traits, young girls are inherently taught that in order to be well-liked and popular just like the characters they idolize, they need to achieve that “just-right” ideal. Many girls in the completed studies equated social approval with greater happiness and self-esteem, insinuating that in order to achieve social approval one must meet that “just-right ideal” or standard of attractiveness. There are perceived social benefits associated with achieving the ideal, while there are very real social and physical penalties for failing to achieve it (McGladrey 2014).

The consumption of tween media is linked to higher levels of internalization of appearance ideals, relating to higher endorsement of dysfunctional appearance beliefs (Trekels and Eggermont 2017). Marketing the just-right ideal to tweens grooms them into becoming active purchasers of beauty products and practices as teens and adults (McGladrey 2017).

Overall, tween-specific media greatly impacts the beauty ideals internalized by tweens.

Consistent depictions of characters who match the ideal mold or just-right standard enforce the belief that beauty is good, that matching the ideal will inherently return positive social benefits for those who manage to achieve it. Girls are taught that in order to look like the Disney girls they idolize, they need to purchase makeup and other beauty products in order to achieve and maintain that ideal. In doing this, girls are strategically taught from a young age that in order to succeed and be well liked, their appearance needs to match that of the just-right ideal.

Advertising Methods

The standard traditional advertising approach typically attempts to convince the viewer that they have some sort of problem, then conveniently providing a solution that the viewer can purchase, subscribe to, or buy into (Nowosielska 2018). The problem, as communicated in many ads and campaigns, is that the female body is in some way inadequate, allowing the advertisement to propose a solution. Femininity then becomes defined by what cosmetic ads and commercial media deem as acceptable, as shown as the final product of using the cosmetics being sold. There is also consistent and substantial evidence that discursive construction of femininity in media is largely based on male expectations and the belief that women will always need to improve their bodies, that perfect is something to strive toward (Nowosielska 2018). Ads, in this sense, function as a means of socializing consumers into a narrow mindset about beauty and expectations (Englis et al. 1994).

Aesthetic decisions made by media producers play an important role in the encoding process of advertisements (Englis et al. 1994). Consequently, social comparison mediates the interaction between advertisement and viewer (Carper et al. 2010). Recurring images displayed in ads and the messages being communicated are often used as benchmarks for evaluating one's own appearance (Englis et al. 1994). In the process of strategically cultivating an unattainable ideal appearance through media images, the standard is set to be perceived as achievable only through the means of purchasing the necessary beauty products and practices (Frith 2005). Standards and expectations of beauty as well as the specific aspects of appearance that women feel insecure about differ across cultures, but one similarity in advertising across cultures is that advertisers intentionally exploit women's insecurities to make a profit (Frith 2005). Advertising companies aim to entice consumers to buy the products being advertised, taking advantage of insecurities, while the consumer ultimately aims to achieve the ideal being sold. In the process,

the consumer consequently internalizes the beauty standard being sold.

Empowerment and “Femvertising”

Historically, stereotypical and objectifying images of women have outwardly taken over the advertising and media landscape. There has been a recent surge of body-positive campaigns and advertisements, which attempt to break down the unrealistic beauty expectations and ideals portrayed in prior campaigns. This type of advertising can be categorized as “femvertising”. Companies historically known for their objectification of women, such as the advertising industry, are frequent adopters of this strategy (Couture et al. 2019). Many companies have started using strategies such as “femvertising” that encourage the empowerment of women and attempt to break harmful stereotypes that have been historically prevalent.

One of the most well known and most studied body positive campaigns is the Dove Real Beauty campaign of 2004. This seemingly progressive and inspiring campaign attempted to push women and society to begin to think differently about what is defined as beautiful (Murray 2013). This campaign used “average-sized” women and attempted a wider representation of models to show greater diversity, portraying a positive message that beauty comes in all shapes and sizes. Dove’s Campaign for Real Beauty aimed to foster brand identity and recognition for its positive message rather than its products, with the intent that women will become repeat customers due to their loyalty to the identity of the brand (Murray 2013). The controversy of this campaign comes into effect as Dove operates under the same parent company as Axe, a company that promotes a drastically different message than Dove’s empowerment ads (Millard 2009). While Dove promotes messages of empowerment, Axe has a known history for its horrific objectification of women in ads. This brings Dove’s motivation into question. Is the

intention of the Real Beauty campaign to make us feel good or is it to sell us something (Millard 2009)? While portraying positive and empowering messages, Dove's goal remains to sell beauty products, and taking advantage of their target market by altering their messages to match what they want to see is a strategy to gain visibility and boost sales.

In addition to Dove's campaign for real beauty, Under Armour's "I Will What I Want" is another example of a company whose advertising similarly promotes messages of empowerment and self-acceptance. The commercial features professional ballet dancer Misty Copeland and includes a spoken narrative of triumph over setbacks and adversity, meanwhile visual images still contain framing in line with traditional critiques of objectification (Couture et al. 2019). The dancer's body appears first, and it is not until much later in the advertisement that her face becomes visible. The dancer in the commercial has an athletic body type that is highly unattainable for many, which may cause instances of self-comparison in viewers. Despite the spoken messages of empowerment, this advertisement is problematic as it maintains objectifying visual messages, which reinforce traditional stereotypes of beauty (Couture et al 2019).

Empowerment themed advertisements often bypass critical reflection of audience members due to the inherent assumption that these types of ads and messages are progressive and beneficial to women. At the root of "femvertisement" and empowerment campaigns are the engrained traditional beauty stereotypes and ideals that created the push for empowerment-themed advertising in the first place. They are controversial in the sense that "femVERTISEMENTS" send messages of empowerment, meanwhile attempting to sell a product and create a construct of beauty. Empowerment themed ads are a step in the right direction as they create a larger conversation around beauty ideals and standards, but they aren't enough. Advertisements and other forms of mainstream media need to refocus the beauty narrative to a

more neutral perspective. Empowerment themed ads should no longer stand out among the current media landscape. All ads should have positive connotations through diverse representations, intentionally neutralizing beauty standards overall.

Media and Femininity

Objectification theory outlines the idea that women's lived experiences are greatly affected by cultural representations of the body (Couture et al. 2019). Femininity is largely constructed by the images and messages depicted through commercial and mainstream media (Lin and Yeh, 2009). Recent studies have shown that exposure to thinness-depicting and thinness-promoting media is related to greater body dissatisfaction, lower body self-esteem, and self-objectification (Bissell and Rask 2010). Objectified bodies are depicted as existing solely for consumption by others, therefore shifting agency from the subject to the viewer (Couture et al. 2019) and encouraging self-objectification. Studies have shown that media images are a significant predictor of disordered eating behaviors among male and female college students (Fernandez and Pritchard 2012). Internalized messages of beauty ideals greatly impact one's own self-esteem through self-comparison, often leading to negative behaviors (Fernandez and Pritchard 2012). The thin ideal has historically been valued as the ideal feminine standard and has consequently been internalized through consistent exposure to media images and messages.

Diet culture is pervasive through media messages and encourages women to accomplish the ideal body image through whatever means necessary (Fernandez and Prichard 2012). Women often self-compare to media images, which depict the highly unattainable beauty ideal, sparking negative self-esteem and encouraging viewers to buy the products and services needed to achieve that ideal, even resulting in unhealthy behaviors if necessary. Appearance comparison is the

underlying process by which media can increase body dissatisfaction (Hargreaves and Tiggmann 2004). Many women simultaneously strive to meet beauty standards while wishing for them to disappear (Millard 2009).

Cosmetics have been consistently marketed in such a way that they are understood as necessary in order to achieve a feminine appearance. Vocabulary used in cosmetics advertising has become more inventive and skincare products are now marketed as complementary to cosmetic products (Searig and Zeilig 2017). Media and advertising encourage women to maintain a youthful look through cosmetics in order to appear attractive and therefore appear feminine. Studies show that women undergo beauty treatments such as cosmetic surgeries to look more attractive to others and to look younger, fighting against the ageing process as much as possible as signs of aging have been deemed unattractive by societal expectations (Searing and Zeilig 2017). Ads aim to frame femininity through anti-aging, constructing the idea that ageing is reversible and repairable, that by buying the products and procedures advertised consumers can maintain a youthful and therefore ideal feminine appearance (Searing and Zeilig 2017). Cosmetic procedures used to be something reserved only for the rich and famous but are now marketed to the wider population as complimentary to skincare.

Media and Men's Beauty Ideals

Although majority of the existing research surrounding body image, beauty ideals, and media influence have mostly focused on women, men are also subject to the consequences of media messages about appearance and beauty standards. In mainstream media and advertising, men typically have been depicted as having broad shoulders and a lean, muscular body type (Carper et al. 2010). One of the most important aspects of male body image is the drive for muscularity (Daniel and Bridges 2010). There is a significant emphasis on the portrayal of

muscularity and bulkiness for men, which is highly unattainable for many, creating a significant discrepancy between the actual and ideal body (Carper et al. 2010). Men hold these images as the standard and aim to achieve that masculine ideal in the same sense that women aim to achieve the feminine standard for beauty. Men, similar to women, make conclusions about their own appearance by evaluating themselves in relation to others. Self-objectification and self-comparison can lead to negative impacts for men such as increased self-consciousness and monitoring one's appearance, body shame, and eating disorder symptoms (Daniel and Bridges 2010).

Idealized media messages and images also play an important role in shaping the way adolescent boys think about their own appearance (Hargreaves and Tiggemann 2004). Dissatisfaction with appearance and negative body image caused by self-comparison to media images has been directly linked to negative consequences such as development of dieting, excessive exercise, and low self-esteem (Hargreaves and Tiggemann 2004). Although research suggests that the media's immediate impact on body image is stronger and more normative for girls than boys, it is difficult to accurately decipher the amount to which adolescent boys are influenced by media messages of masculinity and beauty standards as boys feel less comfortable discussing the topic (Hargreaves and Tiggemann 2004).

Summary of Literature

In reviewing the existing body of literature and research surrounding the influence of media on beauty standards and ideals, significant recurring themes emerged. Research suggests that all media messages are intentional and play an important role in the construction of femininity, masculinity, beauty ideals and standards of attractiveness. Through advertising, commercial and mainstream media, standards for beauty are set in place by attaching certain

social benefits to meeting that ideal and also negative stigmas to those who fail to meet it. Media companies intentionally set the standard to a naturally unattainable ideal, encouraging consumers to buy the necessary products, services, and procedures deemed necessary to achieve that unrealistic ideal. When consumers consistently fail to meet those unattainable expectations, they continue to buy the products or subscribe to the services necessary in hopes of making progress toward the ideal.

Youth are socialized to understand that beauty standards and expectations exist as a reflection of positive social benefits, therefore the only acceptable appearance is the perceived beauty standard. In training youth to accept these standards as objective truths, they are groomed to become ideal consumers as adults who buy into beauty products and practices being sold by advertisers and media through strategic imagery and messages.

There have been noticeable significant improvements in mainstream media and advertising campaigns in recent attempts to challenge traditional stereotypes and beauty standards. Advertisements and campaigns that promote positive and empowering messages appear to be a step in the right direction but there are intentional ulterior motives that should be considered more critically by readers before accepting and internalizing the messages they promote. Although empowerment themed ads seem to promote positive messages about beauty, their main purpose is to sell a product and to take advantage of the target market to gain brand recognition. Beauty standards are so engrained in our society that despite attempts to challenge those ideals, they remain at the heart of the need to create ads and media that challenge them in the first place.

Researchers have been studying the impact and influence of media on beauty standards and ideals for decades. Throughout the existing research and literature available, it is evident that there has been a significant increase in consumer media literacy in recent years and there has

been a greater attempt to challenge traditional beauty ideals and unattainable standards. People are media-literate enough to understand that there is a problem with the way beauty has traditionally been marketed. Despite attempts to break traditional beauty standards down, attitudes and ideals haven't changed significantly. Existing literature shows that media has always influenced the way we view others and ourselves, and it will continue to do so. Media messages have and will continue to influence what we, as a society, value as beautiful. The existing literature serves as a starting point of reflection for this MRP. "Am I Pretty?" incorporates the themes and conclusions of the literature to my own experiences with beauty standards. It addresses the question of what problematic gaps exist in the beauty narrative portrayed in mainstream media?

Methodology

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a qualitative method of research that I found essential in the creation of "Am I Pretty". The practice of autoethnography includes the process of retrospectively and selectively analyzing personal experiences within a particular culture or cultural identity (Ellis et al. 2010). It is the analysis of personal experiences and the connection of those experiences to larger cultural phenomena. It also includes comparing personal experiences to existing research. This method largely impacted and influenced the style, voice, artistic vision, and overall narrative communicated through this MRP.

In the creation of "Am I Pretty?" I reflected on my own experiences and challenges in relation to media images, beauty standards, and overall appearance culture as supported by literature and studies previously conducted by various researchers in different years. The existing literature and studies surrounding beauty standards and media affirmed my own experiences and

allowed me to reflect upon and analyze those experiences from a larger cultural perspective. This form of qualitative analysis resulted in the unravelling of underlying cultural meanings and messages in popular media regarding beauty ideals and expectations allowing the creation of a narrative-style collection of personal yet informed epiphanies in “Am I Pretty?”. My project aims to address problematic gaps in the beauty narrative through critical reflection of some of my favourite popular media at different points in my life.

Social Comparison Theory

Social Comparison theory is based on the idea that we make judgments about ourselves in relation to others (Cherry 2020). Upward social comparison takes place when we compare ourselves with those who we believe are somehow better than us (Cherry 2010). Downward social comparison takes the opposite angle, as we compare ourselves to those who seem to be somehow beneath us, or worse off than us (Cherry 2010). Downward social comparison plays an important role in defining what is not considered beautiful or acceptable when it comes to appearances. In other words, upward social comparison gives us something to strive toward, while downward social comparison provides something to stay away from. Social comparison is at the centre of all appearance ideals and appearance-related stigmas and has greatly informed the content of “Am I Pretty?”.

Examples

The first step I took in the process of creating this MRP was to read the existing body of literature and studies supporting the idea that commercial media and popular media significantly impact the way women view themselves and each other and the ways in which media create lasting negative repercussions on women’s self-esteem and body image. I then reflected using autoethnographic methods on body-positive ads that I had been personally impacted by and often

looked up to as positive forces of change, as well I also considered the messages portrayed within popular shows and movies that I greatly enjoyed as a tween and teen. It became apparent that popular tween and teen television, and widely accepted and applauded body-positive campaigns and advertisements, often reinforce traditional stereotypes and appearance expectations.

Dove Real Beauty Campaign

When the Dove Real Beauty campaign made its first appearance in 2004 it was a central topic of public discussion. When the campaign first began, I was too young to make my own purchasing choices or judgments about the integrity of the campaign. I grew up with the campaign, which continues to thrive in 2020. I supported the campaign because it was so highly praised by my family. It was the first widespread campaign that seemed to really challenge traditional advertising stereotypes. In 2013 Dove produced the Real Beauty Sketches short video to promote the campaign; while writing this MRP, I re-watched this video.

In the video, women describe themselves to a sketch artist who then draws them based on the description they give. Then, the same women are drawn based off the description that someone else provides of them. The sketches are then shown side-by-side and the women believe that the drawing provided by the description that someone else gave is more attractive in each case. On a surface level, this seems like a heartwarming message that we are often harder on ourselves than others, and that we are more beautiful than we think. But on a deeper level, there is internalized fatphobia present in the video as one woman describes the drawing based on her self-description as being fatter than the drawing based on a stranger's description. In promoting some of the sketches as more attractive than others, the video inherently reinforces dominant beauty ideals, which contradicts its attempt to challenge those same ideals.

The campaign did not influence my purchasing decisions. At the height of the campaign,

when it was most popular and a central point of discussion, I was too young to make purchasing decisions. The campaign died down throughout the years and became less publicly discussed, leaving no influence on my purchasing decisions of Dove products.

Fenty Beauty

Fenty Beauty by Rihanna similarly attempts to challenge traditional advertising stereotypes by promoting diversity as the company's focus. Fenty was created with a promise of inclusion for all women as their slogan states "beauty for all". In their ads it is apparent that Fenty creates makeup products in a large range of shades for a wide variety of skin tones, eliminating barriers for matching makeup to each individual's own skin tone, allowing more women to buy the products and wear makeup. Fenty campaigns promote diversity of skin tone but fail to promote diversity in body type. All models used for Fenty campaigns fit the thin ideal, promoting the idea that to be beautiful skin tone does not matter but body type remains selective.

Fenty Beauty's "Beauty for All" campaign features 50 models, a model for each shade of foundation that Fenty offers. Each shirtless model is photographed against a white background from the shoulders up. The models used in this campaign are all young and thin. The models are arranged from lightest foundation shade to darkest, to show the range of shades that the company offers. The ad is inclusive of women of various skin tones, but excludes women of various shapes and ages.

In positioning this campaign through messages of diversity, it promotes a limited narrative of diversity. In promoting the message of "beauty for all" while displaying images of a limited form of diversity, implied messages of beauty standards are communicated. By excluding various ages and body types, "beauty for all" insinuates that women who are not

represented in the campaign do not fall under the brand's version of beautiful. The Beauty for All campaign insinuates that makeup is the defining factor that makes women beautiful, further insinuating that makeup is meant for women exclusively.

Gossip Girl

One of the earliest memories I recall of a show geared toward tweens is Gossip Girl. This show had a significant negative impact on my own body image and self-esteem. The show ran for six seasons from 2007 to 2012. Gossip Girl focuses on an upper-class high school cohort in Manhattan's Upper East Side. Overall, Gossip Girl promotes the attractive equals good and attractive equals successful narrative.

In season one episode one, the main character Blair Waldorf (played by Leighton Meester), daughter of a multi-millionaire and fashion designer, is introduced as the Upper East Side's beautiful and popular "Queen Bee" or "Queen of Constance", the name of the private school she attended. The other girls at Constance intentionally attempt to dress and act like Blair, communicating that her appearance and social status was something to strive toward. In season one episode nine entitled, "Blair Waldorf Must Pie" Blair struggles through an eating disorder during Thanksgiving. This episode is only the first-time viewers become aware of her eating disorder, as it becomes apparent throughout all six seasons of the show. On multiple occasions, Blair and other cast members are seen sitting around a dining table filled with platters of extravagant foods, of which none of them are eating. The portrayal of Blair Waldorf as having an eating disorder gave the impression that striving to meet strict and unrealistic beauty expectations creates harsh negative impact on women of all circumstances, even those who appear to meet the ideal themselves.

The popular show promotes a very strict appearance ideal that is nearly impossible to

meet. In season one episode four, Blair's best friend Serena Van der Woodsen (played by Blake Lively) is chosen to model for Blair's mother's fashion line instead of Blair. Serena Van der Woodsen is wealthy, tall, thin, blonde, and portrayed as being more desirable than Blair due to her outgoing personality. Serena represents the stereotypical ideal appearance that we so often strive toward but struggle to meet. Her ability to model reflects traditional ideals of beauty and promotes a narrow and unattainable standard.

Gossip Girl affected my self-esteem as a tween, as I aspired to be just like Blair and Serena. I re-watched the series in 2019 and experienced the same negative effects on my own body image. At that time, I realized that I was actively comparing my appearance to that of Blair and Serena. I became hyper-aware of my weight, my clothes, and my eating habits. The show promotes Blair and Serena as popular and beautiful characters that are desirable and successful. It communicates the idea that wealth is an essential factor in being attractive, and these two factors combined create a free pass into the world of acceptance. It reinforces that in order to be attractive, you need to have money, but to have money, you also need to be attractive.

Hannah Montana

Hannah Montana was another one of my favourite shows as a tween. The show ran for four seasons from 2006 to 2011. The show tells the story of Miley (played by Miley Cyrus), a tween girl living a double life as a pop star by the name "Hannah Montana". Her best friend, Lily (played by Emily Osment), also creates an alter ego by the name of "Lola" in order to remain unrecognized by the public. The series overall contributed to and enhanced unrealistic beauty standards and ideals for young girls. Miley and Lily are the protagonists on the show, and both measure up to traditional aesthetic ideals as they are white, wealthy, thin, straight, and are always shown wearing makeup even if the viewer is made to think they are not. Lily's alter

ego “Lola” is portrayed as eccentric or peculiar because of her more unique sense of style and coloured wigs. Miley simply puts on a long blonde wig and she becomes her alter ego “Hannah Montana”, maintaining traditional appearance ideals. This sends the message to young viewers that there is a correct way to dress and look, and if they stray away from those ideals that people may judge you as peculiar or strange. As a tween, I remember believing that Lola was strange and eccentric because of her outfit choices and her colourful hair. After re-watching the series, I now see how problematic the portrayal of Hannah’s appearance as “normal” and Lola’s as “strange” was in reinforcing a narrative about beauty and fitting in.

I recently subscribed to Disney Plus, a streaming platform for viewing Disney content, and I re-watched the entire Hannah Montana series because I remembered how much I loved it as a tween. As I re-watched the series, Season four, episode 12 of Hannah Montana entitled, “I Am Mamaw, Hear Me Roar!” stood out to me. In this episode, Miley’s brother Jackson (played by Jason Earles), explains that he would not be into his supermodel girlfriend, Siena (played by Tammin Sursok), if she had short hair. At the end of the episode, Siena appears at his doorstep with short hair and is a mess in appearance with makeup running down her face. She claims that she cut her hair out of anger for what he said, and as he apologizes and says he loves her no matter what, she reveals that the short hair was a wig and that her long hair was underneath the whole time. Jackson appears relieved to find that she had not cut her hair. This episode promotes the idea that women should have long, tamed hair in order to be attractive to men. It further encourages this narrative of beauty ideals as the supermodel is portrayed as ugly when she has the short wig on.

As a woman with short hair, I related to this episode. There have been countless times that men have told me that I look better with long hair, that I should grow it out, or that they simply are not attracted to women with short hair. Many of my close friends have also

expressed that they would feel uncomfortable cutting their hair due to their partner's preference for long hair. Media such as Hannah Montana teaches tweens that long hair is an identifier of femininity and beauty.

Friends

Another show I have watched from beginning to end many times is the iconic show, Friends. This sitcom ran from 1994 to 2004 through 10 seasons and is available for streaming on Netflix. This sitcom tells the story of six friends living in Manhattan. I recently re-watched the series and could see how this popular sitcom reinforces and encourages the thin ideal and other traditional appearance-related expectations of femininity.

Friends' main female characters – Monica, Rachel, and Phoebe (played by – Courtney Cox, Jennifer Aniston, and Lisa Kudrow) all reinforce beauty narratives about thinness as an ideal. The thin ideal is most obvious in season five episode eight when Monica is referred to as “fat Monica” in a flashback years before she lost a significant amount of weight. Monica overhears Chandler (played by Matthew Perry), talking to Ross (played by David Schwimmer), Monica's brother, saying that he did not want to be stuck there all night with Ross's fat sister, which is the turning point that encourages Monica's weight loss. Monica's weight is portrayed as a problem of the past, as something that had been fixed by losing weight to become the thinner and therefore better version of Monica in the present. This episode portrays thin women as more attractive and desirable, as Chandler finds Monica attractive only after she loses the weight.

The exclusive portrayal of thin characters as attractive and desirable played a significant role in my own self-esteem. Friends originally aired in the early 1990's before I was born, yet the appearance ideals communicated in this show greatly impacted my own beliefs even as I streamed the series years later. I first watched the series during my first year of university when

I was at my heaviest weight. Friends made me feel like I would be perceived as more attractive if I became smaller. It encouraged me to work out and to lose weight as a result of negative self-comparison. I have re-watched the series multiple times since, and the thin ideal continues to instill a sense of self-comparison each time.

In a 2019 interview in Marc Maron's podcast, Lisa Kudrow, the actress cast as Phoebe, explained that she felt like a "mountain of a woman" next to co-stars Jennifer Aniston and Courtney Cox, further admitting her issues with body image during filming (Vivinetto 2019). As I watch Friends, I resonate with the way that Lisa Kudrow felt next to Jennifer Aniston and Courtney Cox. I felt a sense of upward comparison to Monica and Rachel, as both characters were petite and portrayed as desirable and attractive. I noticed this sense of comparison translated into my daily life, as I began to compare myself to my petite friends. I became much more aware of my size when I was around them, feeling less attractive because I was significantly taller in comparison. Although I have experienced negative body image while watching Friends, I now realize the harm that self-comparison can cause and I can now enjoy the show much more as I actively work to ignore my inner dialogue of comparison.

Victoria's Secret Fashion Show

The Victoria's Secret (VS) Fashion show was a promotional event that aired yearly on CBS and ABC from 1995 to 2018. For just over two decades, the VS Fashion Show was a staple for showing off over-the-top, expensive, bedazzled lingerie (Collie, Hensley 2019). The yearly fashion show was a major marketing strategy to bring attention to the brand, spending upwards of \$20M on the show itself each year (Yee 2017). Towards the show's end in 2018 it had faced significant scrutiny for its narrow portrayal of beauty ideals (Krause 2019). Victoria's Secret outwardly promoted the thin ideal by exclusively using tall, thin, high profile models to walk the

runway in VS lingerie.

In a 2018 interview with Chief Marketer Ed Razek, he explained that the use of models who fit the ideal was intentional. When asked why the annual VS Fashion Show did not include plus size or transgender models, he stated that trans and plus size women do not exemplify the “fantasy” that Victoria’s Secret is trying to sell (Real 2018). Razek further explained that the VS marketing team had previously considered casting plus size and transgender models in the fashion show but had deliberately decided against doing so to maintain the fantasy and its reputation as an entertainment special (Real 2018).

Ratings and number of viewers plummeted in the last years of the VS fashion show. Coincidentally, the annual event was cancelled in 2019 to “evolve the messaging” that Victoria’s Secret sends to customers, as described by Stuart Burgdoerfer, CFO of Victoria’s Secret’s parent company, L Brands (Krause 2019). As marketing evolved to a more body positive media landscape, the fantasy of the VS Fashion Show became less appealing to audiences (Krause 2019).

I watched the VS Fashion Show for three consecutive years from 2014-2017. I remember watching with my friends, feeling unrepresented and disconnected from the show based on the narrow beauty narrative it conveyed. I was not inclined to purchase VS’ products because based on the models shown in the fashion show, I was unable to visualize how or if any of the VS lingerie would various body types including my own. It gave the impression that VS’ lingerie was only created for those who fit the thin ideal and therefore fit the fantasy that they tried to convey. Since I felt disconnected from the fashion show, it felt exactly like an unattainable and unrealistic fantasy. As I watched, I felt very self-conscious due to self-comparison. Typically, the first few days post-VS Fashion Show each year, the show becomes a central topic of discussion in my social circles. My friends and I used to discuss what pieces we liked best and which

models we thought were the prettiest. These conversations heightened my self-comparison and negative body image, as the discussions solidified my thoughts that the fantasy Victoria's Secret was selling was something desirable and attractive. I never purchased Victoria's Secret products because I was intimidated by the body ideal they portrayed in the extravagant VS Fashion Show. However, there are other retailers, such as Aerie, with body-neutral marketing strategies that I now feel more inclined to purchase from.

Analysis

Self-comparison

If watching VS Fashion Shows made me feel self-conscious, why did I continue watching? If watching Gossip Girl made me feel inadequate, why did I continue watching? (Over and over, I might add). Although I felt bad about myself, it motivated me to put on makeup, it motivated me to work out, it motivated me to eat healthier or even eat less in hopes of looking a little bit more like the characters and models I saw on the screen. The sitcoms I have always enjoyed have undertones of appearance bias, which encourage a narrow and uniform perception of beauty and acceptable appearances. This feeling of inadequacy that comes from constant highly unrealistic and unattainable imagery encourages consumers to buy products and services in hopes to achieve a look that more closely resembles the models or characters they look up to. Upward comparison keeps millennials and generation z women like me buying products and keeps us looking up to those we see on screens.

Aerie's Resistance

Although mainstream media have contributed significantly to a normative beauty ideal, there have been cases of pushback and resistance. An example can be found in the marketing

strategies used by Aerie, a direct competitor to Victoria's Secret that encourages body-positivity through branding. The loungewear and lingerie brand is an extension of clothing retailer American Eagle, founded in 2004. It became a standout body-neutral competitor to Victoria's Secret in 2014 with the Aerie Real campaign. The campaign used a variety of models of all shapes and sizes, but unlike most other body-positive campaigns, Aerie refused to airbrush their models (Yi 2016). Unretouched images of diverse women provide greater representation of the consumers who buy the products, which spiked sales when Aerie first began using raw and un-airbrushed images (Yi 2016). The campaign included participation through the use of the hashtag #AerieReal where shoppers could share their own images of themselves in Aerie products, further marketing the brand as inclusive and authentic. The hashtag remains active today and is featured on the Aerie website.

Aerie was successful in creating an inclusive brand that is representative of all body shapes and sizes. Aerie does not separate plus size clothing into its own category in their ads or their website, bridging the divide between clothing sizes and beauty ideals. The removal of plus size as a term to describe clothing sizes creates a more body neutral and inclusive experience for viewers and shoppers. The term 'plus size' inherently has negative associated connotations. The concept of plus size itself assumes that the person who wears these sizes is plus something, insinuating that the person is somehow additional to other, smaller sizes. Even if a media piece shows plus size models or characters that are larger than us, we as a demographic of millennials or generation z immersed in consumer culture, experience a sense of downward comparison as we strive to be better than those images due to the connotations associated with plus sizes.

Weight Stigma

Popular media has communicated that weight is something to be lost, that to be liked and to

be attractive we should strive to be smaller. Fat has become stigmatized and fatphobia has become internalized. Campaigns such as Pennington's #iwontcompromise campaign and the Special K "Real Women" campaign have addressed these issues directly. The #iwontcompromise campaign was an interactive campaign that women could take part in and tell their own stories through the use of the hashtag #iwontcompromise. The campaign attempted to challenge beauty ideals by promoting size acceptance. Pennington's #iwontcompromise initiative took to Toronto's Union Station in 2017 in support of its line of plus size clothing, as women of various shapes and sizes in jeans and bras walked through Union Station holding signs promoting the initiative. Some of the signs read, "Insta this to fight for body diversity. #iwontcompromise" and "Snap this to break the stigma. #iwontcompromise". The campaign promoted a positive message and the approach was successful by combining physical and digital means of advertising.

Even body-positive campaigns come with their own set of issues and repercussions. Body-positive campaigns maintain the possibility to reflect dominant problematic beauty ideals. Special K's "Real Women" advertisement in 2012 similarly attempted to challenge weight stigma. The ad displayed women of a variety of shapes and sizes stepping onto scales, and rather than displaying their weight as a number, the scales gave compliments such as "amazing" or "gorgeous". The ad took the focus away from appearance-based ideals and it attempted to refocus the narrative to encourage women to feel confident in their own body. Although the ad promoted body positivity, it maintained an underlying fatphobic connotation as it read, "What will you gain when you lose?". The body-positive message in Special K cereal's "Real Women" ad was contradicted by undertones of pervasive diet culture. Special K intentionally only used women of "normal" and "overweight" BMI status for the ad, sending the problematic message that "real" women should strive to lose weight. This campaign was a seemingly proactive attempt to rethink weight stigma but ultimately failed by contradicting its own intent through the

promotion of weight loss.

Cosmetics ideals and Acne Stigma

In defining what appearances are good or desirable also defines what types of appearances are undesirable and unattractive. Makeup and cosmetic ads inherently define faces that wear makeup as beautiful, encouraging consumers to purchase makeup and other personal beauty products. For example, *Glamour* online beauty blog functions as an online beauty magazine providing makeup tips and tricks, promoting specific makeup products and looks. *Glamour*'s blog post entitled, "The Best No-Makeup Makeup Products for a Natural Look" (Clark and Gonzalez 2019) promotes makeup products that can be combined to craft a "natural" makeup look.

The "no makeup, makeup look" has become a popular way to describe a way of wearing makeup to enhance one's features in a subtle way that is supposed to appear natural (Roden 2020). This "natural" makeup ideal communicates that to look natural, makeup is required. Connotations of makeup as natural further define acne as problematic and unnatural. *Glamour*'s blog states, "We all have issues – pores, dark under-eye circles, blemishes, etc – so of course we all need a good concealer, nude lip, or perfect eyebrow pencil" (Clark and Gonzalez 2019).

On the other hand, *Glamour* published a blog post in 2018 entitled "The Acne Positivity Movement is Taking Back the Shame from Breakouts" (Prinzivalli 2018). The movement took place on Instagram as women posted selfies without covering their acne, embracing their truly natural skin. The intent of the movement was to challenge anti-acne and pro-makeup beauty ideals. Celebrities such as Chrissy Teigen and Lili Reinhart took part in the conversation to normalize acne by debunking the clear skin ideal. Chrissy Teigen shared a photo of her "period skin" with red splotches on Instagram while Lili Reinhart stated that her secret skincare

ingredient was movie magic (Prinzivalli 2018). Although there has been resistance against cosmetics and clear skin ideals, makeup has been normalized and continues to be marketed as a solution to acne.

Body Positivity is Not Enough

Body positivity implies that appearance matters and holds precedence to one's experiences. A move toward body neutrality would eliminate the need for body positivity and would place more importance on self-confidence rather than self-comparison. Body-positive campaigns are applauded because they are not the norm. We should not applaud diversity and inclusivity; rather, they should be expected. The fact that body-positive campaigns are still relevant is an indication that appearance biases still exist within popular media. To move toward a body-neutral media landscape, we should no longer need to celebrate body positivity, as all ads should be body positive. If all mainstream media took a body-positive approach, the term body-positive itself would no longer hold any significance.

“Am I Pretty?” reflects these concepts through photography and text. It debunks the problematic messages we receive from various forms of media every day, many of which we have accepted without question. It encourages deeper critical thinking about the media we consume and how we interact with it, and it encourages readers to think about the ways they themselves have been impacted by media messages of beauty. The first step to creating change is recognizing the issue at hand, and “Am I Pretty?” emphasizes the real and problematic messages that often go unquestioned and even supported.

Conclusion

In conclusion, more work needs to be done by advertising and media companies to move

from body positivity as a praised high standard of advertising to the norm. Body positivity in advertising should no longer be something worthy of applause but should be expected. An entire cultural reworking of our own media literacy and consumption patterns needs to occur in order to recognize the problematic internalized beauty standards, ideals, and attitudes surrounding aesthetics to create a more inclusive and less harmful media landscape.

Greater representation of diverse women in media would discourage the idea that there is a correct and objective form of femininity to strive toward. If there is no obvious singular appearance ideal that is pushed to consumers through media, women might start to feel more comfortable in their own skin as they would feel less inclined to compare themselves to those who look nothing like them. A wider representation of women in media with different appearances, backgrounds, abilities, and positions can help to lessen or eliminate negative upward comparison by portraying images that women can relate to rather than strive to achieve. Through eliminating the need to applaud body positivity, women might not feel the need to fit into any specific category.

This is a difficult task to move toward the normalcy of body neutrality in media representations, as our striving to achieve appearance ideals is what generates profit for beauty and media companies. Change can only occur when the problem at hand is recognized and challenged. In order to push for change in media representations of beauty ideals, we need to move from awareness to action to change the normalized beauty discourse to a narrative of neutrality. This MRP attempts to take that first step towards bringing awareness to the issue by addressing the current gaps and contradictions in beauty ideal connotations that we often passively consume.

Summary

“Am I Pretty?” reiterates the contradictory and often unattainable appearance ideals and expectations that are conveyed through popular and commercial media that we often unknowingly internalize and contribute to. This MRP brings those repeated problematic messages to the forefront and encourages critical thinking about the narrow and uniform appearance standards that have been carefully crafted through popular and commercial media to generate profit. This topic was best presented in the form of a digital magazine as it has the potential to reach a wider audience and to capture the attention of a wider demographic. It is an artistic summary and reflection of my own experiences of beauty ideals as a woman and a media consumer. It is a creative collection of informed critical thoughts about beauty standards and expectations. The purpose of this MRP is to bring awareness to the problematic media messages we have culturally internalized. Through photography and text, “Am I Pretty?” aims to inspire recognition of the problematic beauty ideals we have internalized through consumption of mainstream media.

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