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Firm but Shapely, Fit but Sexy, Strong but Thin

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Most women know very well that appearance is perhaps the crucial way by which men form opinions of women. For this reason, feelings about self-image get mixed up with feelings about security and comfort. The way women look is vitally important: The success of social relationships hangs on being desirable, and being desirable is all about visual impact. Feminine appearance is shaped by the mass media, fashion, and related industries. Being feminine involves, among other things, a particular mode of consumption. A conventionally gendered appearance requires a good deal of grooming and, especially for women, beauty work. A feminine identity has to be worked at. This is work that most women are happy to do. It is an everyday aspect of women's lives and through doing it they can hope to establish for themselves acceptable social identities as women. In this view, women are not just turning themselves into "sex objects". They are actively involved in self-creation. When, women go shopping for clothes and cosmetics, they make decisions about how to feminize themselves. Femininity spans institutions, discursively organizing women's lives. Femininity is articulated in and through commercial and mass media discourses, especially in the magazine industry and in the fashion industries of clothing and cosmetics. But most of all, it is articulated on women's bodies, by women themselves.

Keywords: femininity, consumerism, feminine identity, popular culture, gender oppression, capitalism

In modern industrial societies, feminine identities are determined by capitalist social conditions and constructed in capitalist social relations. Women have a lifelong relationship with consumerism. As wives and mothers, women are very often responsible for most of the shopping for their families, if not all of it. Women are also caught up in something one can call "consumer femininity". This enters into women's daily lives in the material and visual resources that they draw upon to feminize themselves; that is, both the products they buy and the concepts, practical skills, and anything that they need to cultivate in order to use them. The knowledge for using products is acquired through talk with other women, or from magazines. So consumer femininity also enters women's daily lives in the social relationships they engage in.

Consumer femininity is, to a large extent, a construction of the mass media, but it is articulated on women's bodies. Women actively participate, spending on it their creative energies and time, as well as their money. Fashion and beauty standards are shaped by the manufacturing, advertising, fashion, and magazine industries, which offer a range of material and symbolic resources for creating femininity. In participating in consumer femininity, a woman constructs herself as an object requiring work, establishing a practical relation with herself as a thing. A woman will always think her body is imperfect and continuously needs fixing. Women's magazines are the ones that foster women's desire for perfection and consumerism.

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Women's periodicals are popular cultural forms where meanings about femininity are contested and made. They are culturally significant because they work at the intersection of different economies—of money, public discourse, and individual desire.

In order to understand women's magazines as popular culture text, it is necessary to consider what defines them as such. John Storey provides several definitions of popular culture which can be applied to women's magazines (Storey, 2001, pp. 5-13). Magazines are well-liked by many people, a quantitative element of definition. They are also mass-culture; that is commercialized and produced for mass consumption. Arguably, magazines originate from the people; the population of consumers actually determines the content and focus of the text by shaping social trends that are simply reflected by the magazine editors. The way that magazine producers edit their content in order to please the requests of readers, all the while reinforcing the dominant ideologies of femininity and consumerism are examples of this.

To a Marxist feminist, gender oppression is associated with class oppression. Capitalism is the economic system which preserves the system of oppression via encouragement of consumption. Producers gain at the expense of consumers, who are convinced via ingrained ideologies (and clever marketing) that they must purchase a product to satisfy some need. However, it bears note that needs as well as products are often manufactured by the producers. Ball sums it up nicely, "Ideas and ideals of mass culture producers are largely self-serving, and include capitalistic goals of expanding markets, maximizing profits, and reinforcing ideology" (Ball, quoted in Benz, 1993, p. 78). In this way, the economic system of capitalism works to perpetuate itself, to the benefit of the producers.

A magazine will only be successful in getting advertiser sponsors if they effectively market the products to readers. Those corporations in charge of the majority market have done an excellent job of creating a lifestyle of consumption for readers. By bombarding consumers with the idea that they need to purchase products in order to improve their lives (and themselves) to the point that it becomes an ingrained, unquestioned practice, women's magazines have created needs for existing products. Producers can sell their products to the market created by magazine publishers. This method of selling a feeling of satisfaction via consumption is central to the capitalist structure. Convincing the consumer that they need to purchase products in order to be happier and have better lives is done jointly by producers and magazine publishers, via advertising.

Radical feminists are concerned with how women's status and roles are defined within society. Simone de Beauvoir said that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (Beauvoir, quoted in Currie, 1999, p. 3). The underlying question: Who defines femininity? Radical feminism is based on the notion that we exist within a patriarchal society, in which men control the means of production. Women's magazines are an example of a cultural text which defines and reinforces women's roles, status, and identities within the patriarchy. By defining the "weaker" sex as they do, men stand to gain money as women consume the products which they have produced and marketed. Men also gain/maintain power as women focus on their assigned identities and acting out their roles rather than challenging men for an equal share of economic capital and power.

Popular women's magazines are saturated with images of beautiful, thin, and tight models. These polished images are often accompanied with advice of how the reader can achieve a body that resembles these images. When the magazines motivate us to work toward the model look, they provide us with an opportunity for a positive change: to obtain our best body ever.

Many feminists, however, consider the glossy festival of feminine beauty damage to women. They point out that women's bodies come in a variety of shapes and weights. Paradoxically, media portrays only the thin

and tight models. Therefore, the feminists conclude this fashion ideal is oppressive precisely because of its singularity: If only slim and toned women are attractive, most women with normal figures are classified as unattractive. Consequently, to look attractive in this society, the majority of us have to engage in activities—like dressing, applying make-up, dieting, exercising, or most drastically, reconstructive surgery—to mask or alter our body shapes. Naomi Wolf analyzes in depth the feminine beauty myth and considers that "the sole purpose of these practices is to change their bodies to resemble the narrowly defined beauty ideal, many feminists deem them as vehicles of oppression" (Wolf, 1991, p. 15).

Regardless of the feminist opposition to such practices, many women still engage in these potentially degrading activities. For example, they continue to read women's magazines for beauty tips or exercise to lose weight.

Several writers have examined women's dieting in today's society. Pirko Markula examined their findings that suggest women in general are more obsessed with dieting, body weight, and slimness than men are and the women's ideal slenderness also seems to be more narrowly defined than men's (Arveda, 1991; Bordo, 1989; Markula, 1993, p. 237). Women diet to obtain the desired extremely slender body rather than accept the natural dimensions of their own bodies. Many women participate in aerobics because they are unhappy with their body shape and feel fat. Women who exercise excessively (six or more hours per weeks) view their bodies negatively although they are not heavier than the other participants. Markula (1993) inserts the questions: "Why women are required to be so thin? Why do they submit to rigid, constant dieting regime?" (p. 237).

Carol Spitzack examines women's dieting practices from a Foucaltian perspective. She locates women's body reduction within the net of disciplining discursive power. Her argument is that women accept the disciplining body control (diet) because it is market under promises of liberation (Spitzack, 1990, p. 37). In other words, women are persuaded to believe that after they lose weight their lives suddenly change and they can pursue new challenges, unobtainable earlier due to their excess of weight. However, as Spitzack (1990) proceeds, "this voice of liberation only masks a continuous control over women by the dominant patriarchal and capitalist powers" (p. 85). After realizing the problem, a woman is capable of improvement; now she is ready to lose weight. This change requires, thus, individual initiative and willingness to take control of one's life. For example, women keep constantly looking for the excess fat that needs to be eliminated. The female body has become a site of self-scrutiny. Therefore, instead of liberating their lives, dieting practices increase the body discipline required from women.

Dieting, thus, is an important part of the disciplinary practices designed to oppress women in this society. The desire to lose weight is maintained through the unobtainable female body ideal: Women are expected to be thin to be considered attractive and accepted in this society. Regarding Susan Bordo's book, Markula (1993) observes another component to this ideal: Now, it is not enough to eliminate this excess; we are also required to achieve an athletic, tight look as well (p. 238). Therefore, women must become more disciplines: In addition to dieting to lose weight, they must now exercise to build muscle.

This new requirement—the tight, athletic look—creates a paradoxical body ideal that oscillates "back and forth between a 'minimalist' look and a solid, muscular, athletic look" (Bordo, 1989, p. 90). Slenderness, Bordo suggests, can be associated reduced power and femininity, whereas masculinity symbolizes strength, control, willfulness, and masculinity.

Since the early days of aerobics, women's bodies seem to occupy a central space in the fitness discourse. In the 1970s and 1980s, women were increasingly urged to exercise to take care of their bodies. The ideal

feminine body was described a shapely, slender, and softly curvy. Markula (1993) states that "muscles did not fit with this image: Muscles bulk was seen as masculine and unsuitable for the 'proper' feminine look" (p. 240).

The whole concept of a muscular woman was redefined when Jane Fonda published in Jane Fonda's Workout Book in 1981. Jane Fonda aimed for a fit, trim, and muscular body and a new ideal stepped into an aerobics movement. If the idea of woman having muscles was "just abhorrent" earlier, muscles now become acceptable, even a desired part of the ideal female body (Markula, 1993, p. 242). Starting from the 1980s, "fashion magazines were abuzz with the news that muscles were chic" (Markula, 1993, p. 242). Muscles are still a feature of the ideal female body. The only way to obtain the desired trim muscles is to exercise. Therefore, the magazines sensed a need for exercise advice.

Although a "good female body" is a muscular body, the magazines discourage extreme muscularity. Exercise articles primarily promote a toned and shapely look. Magazines workouts, thus, aim to tone one's muscles, not to build muscles. Women do not want to look masculine.

Well-tones legs are sought after because men notice them. Women do not urgently shape their arms because men do not care about seeing them. Obviously, arms are not as vital a part of an attractive woman as legs are. Women are exposed to a gaze that sets the standards of the desirable female form. Women shape their bodies to please that gaze.

It is with this idea of beauty that women stop looking for their authentic selves; and instead they focus their gaze and judge themselves with the eyes of a man. Women are no longer dressing for themselves or a set purpose like church, a job interview, or grocery shopping; women feel they have to conform to a male-standard of judgment. They are making personal appearance decisions based on what they think a man would like—thus women are using the male gaze rather than their own gaze to live life.

Do Women's Magazines Affect Body Image?

Women magazines contain lots of images of women either insufficiently dressed or nude. The women in the pictures are looked after by professionals who plaster make-up on them and style their hair, whilst the set-crew set up their lighting equipment to show the models in their best light. Then there is the dear-old airbrush that can eliminate any blemishes and flaws which the make-up and lighting fails to. This is hardly a realistic set up, and does not portray natural beauty.

However, it is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that such perfection is easy to achieve, and so it may not be surprising that so many men think that women should be slim, big-breasted, with a perfect complexion and be perfectly coiffed and that this can be achieved with little effort. Maybe this is unfair to men, many claim to prefer their women to have a bit of meat on them and are aware that they are being manipulated into thinking a certain look is sexy, when in reality variety is the spice of life.

Even this kind of positive attitude may not prevent women from putting pressure on themselves to look a particular way. One only have to look at the popularity of breast enhancement surgery to recognize that women have their own expectations of what constitutes the perfect body, perhaps influenced by the presence of glamour magazines and the growing acceptance of plastic surgery as a way to address a person's physical flaws.

In her study *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*, Naomi Wolf has provided us with a very thoughtful and well-researched treatise on the feminine experience. It is full of studies and statistics to back up her claims, which makes her message hard to deny. The issue she is bringing to our attention needs to be addressed by both sexes, for women are not the only ones being manipulated by the media

into feeling insecure and unhappy with themselves. This book discusses and researches how our culture cultivates the stereotypes of women as sex objects and men as success objects, to the detriment of all of us.

Wolf's basic thesis states that there is a relationship between female liberation and female beauty:

> The more legal and material hindrances women have broken through, the more strictly and heavily and cruelly images of female beauty have come to weigh upon us... During the past decade, women breached the power structure; meanwhile, eating disorders rose exponentially and cosmetic surgery became the fastest-growing specialty... pornography became the main media category, ahead of legitimate films and records combined, and thirty-three thousand American women told researchers that they would rather lose ten to fifteen pounds than achieve any other goal... More women have more money and power and scope and legal recognition than we have ever had before; but in terms of how we feel about ourselves physically, we may actually be worse off than our unliberated grandmothers. (Wolf, 1991, p. 10)

Wolf's research shows that there is a cultural backlash against feminism that uses images of female beauty to keep women in their place. Wolf shows that, throughout the years, there have been forces in culture that attempted to punish women who seek more control over their lives and their environment.

The Beauty Myth is the last (and most dangerous) of a long line of lies concerning the rules of feminine attributes and behavior. It is the most dangerous because it has succeeded in effecting women's internal sense of themselves. It has created a standard of femininity that is impossible to attain, and women are reacting with increasingly obsessive behavior in their attempts to measure up. Energy that might be used to further positive goals is turned inward instead—dissipated in guilt, shame, and unhappiness at one's physical faults.

Wolf traces the historical path of these lies:

> A century ago, normal female activity, especially the kind that would lead women into power, was classified as ugly and sick. If a woman read too much, her uterus would "atrophy". If she kept on reading, her reproductive system would collapse and, according to the medical commentary of the day, "we should have before us a repulsive and useless hybrid"... Participation in modernity, education and employment was portrayed as making Victorian women ill... Victorians protested women's higher education by fervidly imagining the damage it would do to their reproductive organs...and it was taken for granted that "the education of women would sterilize them" and make them sexually unattractive: "When a women displays scientific interest, then there is something out of order in her sexuality". (Wolf, 1991, p. 225)

The attitudes toward women at that time are pretty obvious: Women were seen as walking wombs, and anything they did to expand their usefulness in the world was attacked as a threat to this reality. That women could have had more to offer society beyond the children they bore was not conceivable or allowed.

The advent of the two world wars changed the rules. It now became important to society for women to leave their homes and work for the war effort. Advertising in women's magazines jumped on the bandwagon:

> A Pond's cold cream ad of the time read: "We like to feel we look feminine even though we are doing a man-sized job...so we tuck flowers and ribbons in our hair and try to keep our faces looking pretty as you please". A cosmetics ad "admitted that while the war could not be won by lipstick, 'it symbolized one of the reasons why we are fighting...the precious right of women to be feminine and lovely'". The propaganda in women's magazines of that day emphasized that it was okay to work in the factory, live on your own and earn your own salary, so long as you stayed feminine. And, of course, the goal of all women's magazines was to be the sole source on how to be feminine. "Women's magazines needed to ensure that their readers would not liberate themselves out of their interest in women's magazines". (Wolf, 1991, p. 63)

After each war, the propaganda in women's magazines took a drastic turn in emphasis. Forces in culture were concerned about finding work for the returning soldiers and fueling the consumer economy. It was important to put pressure on working women to get them back into their homes again, buying household products. How to do this?

> The marketers' reports described how to manipulate housewives into becoming insecure consumers of household products: "A transfer of guilt must be achieved...capitalize on guilt over hidden dirt...stress the therapeutic value of baking, they suggested...make housework a matter of knowledge and skill, rather than a matter of brawn and dull, unremitting effort...identify your products with spiritual rewards...for objects with added psychological value, the price itself hardly matters". (Wolf, 1991, p. 65)

The ramifications of this social propaganda were reflected in the television shows of the day: *Ozzie and Harriet*, *Leave it to Beaver*, *Make Room for Daddy*, *the Donna Reed Show*, *Father Knows Best*, etc. In these shows we saw the image of the happy housewife, who did not seem to do anything but waltz around her beautiful home in her pretty dress, immaculately made-up, looking after her family. We rarely saw her visiting with friends, we never saw her involved in school, civic or other cultural activities. She was blissfully serene in her safe, clean suburban bungalow full of modern appliances.

During the 1960s, the second wave of feminism began to make itself felt. New avenues for women outside the home emerged, and women left in droves.

> The women's movement nearly succeeded in toppling the economics of the magazines' version of femininity... As women abandoned their role as consuming housewives and entered the work force, their engagement with the issues of the outer world could forseeably lead them to lose interest altogether in women's magazines' separate feminine reality...and the magazines' authority was undermined still further with the fashion upheavals that began in the late 1960s, the end of haute couture and the beginning of what fashion historians call "style for all". (Wolf, 1991, p. 67)

In 1969, Vogue made the breakthrough that has evolved into the cast-iron Beauty Myth of today.

> Vogue began to focus on the body as much as on the clothes, in part because there was little they could dictate with the anarchic styles... In a stunning move, an entire replacement culture was developed by naming a "problem" where it had scarcely existed before, centering it on the women's natural state, and elevating it to the existential female dilemma... The number of diet-related articles rose 70 percent from 1968 to 1972... The lucrative "transfer of guilt" was resurrected just in time. (Wolf, 1991, p. 67)

Today, we are bombarded with images of the "perfect" woman. She is usually a gorgeous blonde, although sultry brunettes, redheads, and exotic women of color are also shown. She is tall and willowy, weighing at least 20% less than what her height requires. She rarely looks older than 25, has no visible flaws on her skin, and her hair and clothes are always immaculate. One perfect woman looks pretty much like the next; she is essentially not human, interchangeable and disposable. In fact, quite often she is presented in bits and pieces like a mannequin—a torso, some legs, a shapely fanny—completing the assembly-line metaphor.

Our culture judges women, and women judge themselves, against this standard. We forget that "beauty pornography", as Wolf calls it, pictures underweight models that are usually between 15–20 years old. We never see a picture of a woman who is not wearing makeup applied by an artist, hair professionally coiffed, clothes professionally designed or chosen. Any natural flaws or wrinkles in her skin are airbrushed out. Unsightly lumps or anomalies in her body are also airbrushed out. Even when we see a photo of an older actress we know must have character lines on her face, they are never shown—the focus is fuzzed or the airbrusher strikes again to remove them. These are the pictures they show us of the average woman.

The Beauty Myth standard of the perfect weight is especially interesting to explore. Women and girls shown in the hottest, cutting-edge movies of the 1950s and 1960s actually have hips and a fanny! They actually look like real women! Judged by today's standards, we look at these movies and think that the women in them look a little fat. It is striking to notice that the beautiful women shown in movies and TV these days never have

round, feminine, bottoms and thighs. We have all been trained to believe that this boyish silhouette is the way healthy women should look, but the reality is that healthy women rarely, if ever, look this way.

The attitude portrayed by the media in the 1980s and 1990s "includes and aspirational, individualist, can-do tone that says that you should be your best and nothing should get in your way" (Wolf, 1991, p. 69). This attitude contributes to women's guilt about their bodies by saying that if you do not look perfect you have only yourself to blame: If you do not look as skinny as the fashion models, then you should starve or exercise to get that way; if you have lines on your face, you should have them cut or burned off; if your breasts are small, inject them with chemicals; if your thighs are round, have a doctor stick a vacuum cleaner under your skin and suck the fat out. In other words, the culture of today puts incredible pressure on all people, and women in particular, to look beautiful, whatever that really means. And it maintains that if you do not look perfect, there must be something wrong with your willpower, because if you really wanted to you could.

Although most obviously fueled by advertisers, Wolf states that there are political and economic forces that act to maintain this standard:

> In drawing attention to the physical characteristics of women leaders, they can be dismissed as either too pretty or too ugly. The net effect is to prevent women's identification with the issues. If the public women are stigmatized as too "pretty", she's a threat, a rival—or simply not serious; if derided as too "ugly", one risks tarring oneself with the same brush by identifying oneself with her agenda. (Wolf, 1991, p. 69)

Wolf carefully walks us through the various realms of life in which *The Beauty Myth* has taken its toll. In the workplace, a woman has no clear legal recourse—her beauty, or lack of it, can be used against her: In one 1986 case, a woman lost a sexual harassment claim because she dressed "too beautifully" (Wolf, 1991, p. 69). In another, a woman was denied partnership in a top ten accounting firm "because she needed to learn to walk, talk and dress more femininely" (Wolf, 1991, p. 69). In another case, the judge ruled that the woman rightfully lost her job because it was "inappropriate for a supervisor of women to dress like a woman" (Wolf, 1991, p. 69). Over and over, Wolf supplies precedent law in which the woman is judged to be too beautiful, too ugly, too old, too fat, dressed too nice, not dressed nice enough. In other words, it is legal for a woman to be hired or fired generally on the basis of her physical appearance.

The Beauty Myth has made its most serious impact in the realm of women's health. 90 to 95 percent of anorexics and bulimics are women:

> "The American Anorexia and Bulimia Association states that anorexia and bulimia strike a million American women every year... Each year 150,000 American women die of anorexia". It is estimated that one woman student in five is anorexic. Cosmetic surgeons are having a field day, with women seeking out the knife for every conceivable flaw. The Beauty Myth preaches that normal, round, healthy women's bodies are too fat; that cushy, soft women's flesh is really cellulite; that women with small breasts aren't sexy; that women lacking the "perfect" face aren't attractive; that a woman over 30 who shows signs of life on her face is ugly. No wonder women are either not asking, or disregarding the dangers of cosmetic surgery in their quest for this holy grail of "beauty". (Wolf, 1991, p. 181)

The power of Wolf's observations leads one to hope that someone will do similar research concerning the media's impact on men. Our culture teaches women they cannot be happy unless they are beautiful, but it also teaches men they cannot be happy unless they are rich and/or powerful. Men have gotten off somewhat easy so far because there is no generic rich and powerful look to portray in the media—rich and powerful men come in all shapes, sizes, and ages. The only way to portray it is to put a man in rich and powerful-looking surroundings and hope the connection is made. However, now that the baby-boom generation is growing into middle age, we

shall see men being targeted more and more to look a certain way. We are already seeing ads for men's hair coloring and hair replacement.

The Feminine Beauty Ideal—Women's Magazines Celebration of a "Beauty ideal"

The feminine beauty ideal can be understood as the socially constructed notion that physical attractiveness is one of women's important assets, and something all women strive to achieve and maintain.

Talking about body image in popular women's magazines marks a discursive shift in the way women's bodies/subjectivities have been problematized, and the subjectifying practices within which women are addressed and located. Carol Spitzack discusses one of the earliest ways of problematizing women's bodies/subjectivities within the context of women's magazines via a discourse of "body reduction" (p. 37). Body reduction discourse produced women's bodies as "excess" (Spitzack, 1990, p. 37). Dieting was presented as an acceptable and necessary feminine practice and a "natural" lifelong preoccupation for women. Common sense held that women wanted/needed to decrease their body size (a rhetoric of self-improvement) and that it was possible to do so. Women engaged in disciplinary practices, including monitoring of body weight, calorie counting, and exercise to correct the "problem" of excess weight.

Later discourses which problematized women's bodies/subjectivities included an anti-diet rhetoric, which emerged, ostensibly, in opposition to weight-loss discourse Sylvia Blood (2005) observed that anti-diet articles became a regular feature in women's magazines that still appear today (p. 84). Women were now castigated for dieting. Anti-diet discourse highlighted the harmful effects of dieting. Reducing calorie intake resulted in a slowed metabolic rate, leading to weight gain. Dieting could make one fat. Ironically, anti-diet articles and books (excerpts of which were published in women's magazines) almost uniformly began with a disclaimer about diets not working only to be followed by guidelines or regimes for healthy eating. The anti-diet approach gained the reputation, at least amongst critics, as "the anti-diet diet" (Spitzack, 1990, p. 42).

In her study, Sylvia Blood states that the publication of diets in women's magazines waned during the late 1980s and early 1990s (p. 84). However, a discourse of body-reduction (e.g., "look good—feel good" and "slim equals healthy") remained an implicit—and often explicit—message in women's magazines. A recent and more powerful problematic discourse appearing in popular women's magazines is "experimental psychology's body image discourse" (Blood, 2005, p. 84). Body image discourse marks a discursive shift from body reduction discourse and anti-diet rhetoric. Women's bodily "excess" is not the problem. Rather, within a discourse of "body image", seeing our bodies as "excess" and wanting to reduce the size of our bodies becomes problematic—a sign of individual pathology (Blood, 2005, p. 84). "*Body obsessions! Why we think we're fat*" is the headline for *Cosmopolitan* magazine's September 1997 issue and the headline, "*the BIG issue—Why body image is a national obsession, why we're ruining our health to be thin, how to love your body, our cover girl Esme leads the way*", sums up *New Woman* magazine's take on body image problems (April, 1997). This discursive shift marks a change in the ways women are understood and how they understand and act upon themselves—from being women with a problem of excess weight to women with a psychological problem of body image dissatisfaction and/or body image disturbance.

Within body image discourse in popular women's magazines, women come to think of and act upon themselves as women with body image problems. Within a discourse of body image, embedded in the broader discursive field of popular women's magazines, women's concern with their bodies is read as a body image

problem. The meanings men and women give to women's bodies and their explanations and justifications for women's concern about their physical appearance are highly contradictory.

By the use of popular magazines, a discourse of women's body image "problems" is woven into the fabric of our everyday experience: *The bad news about body image: How many of us really like our bodies?* The Psychology Today 1997 Body Image Survey, drawing on data collected over two decades, confirms that "we are more dissatisfied than ever" (*New Woman*, April, 1997). Magazine survey results show that readers suffer from "Body obsessions! The shocking results of our survey on food, fat and the female body… one in two women hate their bodies" (*Cosmopolitan*, September, 1997). Public confessions from "real" women, about their bodily flaws, are a central feature of body image articles: "I hate the fact that even when I lose weight my stomach and thighs are still flabby" (*New Weekly*, September, 1994). Body image problems are affecting our sexual relationships: "Not tonight honey… I've got cellulite: how your body image affects your sex life" (*Cosmopolitan*, February, 1998).

Women we are told "…are more dissatisfied with our bodies than ever". We "distort our body size", and "we have a distorted body ideal—what we think of as an ideal body is far too thin" (*More*, 1994). If we think that we have a good body image "we are kidding ourselves" (*More*, 1994). "One in two women hate their bodies", women "suffer from body obsessions and think we are fat" (*Cosmopolitan*, September, 1997). "Australian women are in the midst of a body image crisis" (*New Woman*, April, 1997). "Our self-esteem is at risk" and "We are at risk of developing eating disorders" (*Cosmopolitan*, September, 1997). "We have a population of women who are unduly concerned about their weight and shape" while magazine survey results show that "body dissatisfaction is universal among women in Western society" (*New Woman*, April, 1997). Women are told that "True confidence means accepting—and loving—your body the way it is" (*She & More*, November, 1998).

Cosmopolitan psychiatrist Dr. Raj Persaud has devised this unique body image evaluator so "you can find out how you see yourself, then discover the confidence-boosting tricks to make you really shine" (*Cosmopolitan*, January, 2004). Women are positioned in relation to the "expert", within a discourse of body image, as needing advice and help with their body image problems. Psychologist Thomas Cash addresses women magazine readers as a concerned professional:

> "Unlearn" negative feelings and behaviour. Every day look at yourself in a full length mirror, both fully clothed and naked. But don't concentrate just on the parts you don't like (women with a negative body image tend to focus on their "faults"). (*Cosmopolitan*, January, 1998)

Sylvia Blood (2005) discusses "self-scrutiny, confessions and public revelations of women's bodies/subjectivities which are actively encouraged in body image articles" (p. 86). For example, "Body Haters: Even supermodels…complain about their bodies. What's wrong with YOUR body?" asks *New Weekly* (September, 1994). Similar articles include: "Naked bottoms: ten women bare all" (*Cleo*, September, 1997), "Which of these women likes her body?" (*NZ Woman's Weekly*, June, 1995), "What I really think about my body: real women strip bare to share their most personal feelings" (*She & More*, February, 1998), "Does size matter? Women talk about their body image" (*She & More*, November, 1998). "Topless and bottomless—women talk about their lives" (*Cleo*, January, 1998). "Love it, loathe it or just live with it. Real women rate their bodies" (*Marie Claire*, March, 2001).

The magazine reader survey is a central tool in the production of women as suffering from "body image problems". Surveys elicit knowledge about body image from readers via psychometric questionnaires similar to those published in *Psychology Today*. At the same time, magazines reproduce "facts" about women's body image problems from other surveys. *New Woman* also published its own survey, "Survey—Tell us what you think… *New Woman* wants to know your views on body image"—consisting of 10 questions with multiple-choice answers about women's feelings and beliefs about body size/shape, height and weight, dieting practices, levels of satisfaction/dissatisfaction with their weight as well as age, marital and employment status (*New Woman*, April, 1997).

The magazine survey is itself a discursive practice. As Blood (2005) puts it, "it serves a rhetorical function of presenting the 'truth' about body image in a persuasive, compelling and plausible manner" (p. 90). Surveys demand that women develop a relation to themselves of self-inspection and self-disclosure within the discursive frame of "body image problems". Simultaneously, other possibilities for making sense of women's experiences of embodiment are suppressed (e.g., women's anxiety about their bodies as the product of social power relations, rather than individual pathology).

Blood (2005) observed that an Australian publication of *Marie Claire* magazine follows an article on body image with its own "body image survey" (p. 91). Telling readers that if they complete the survey, they will go into a draw to win $1,000, the magazine addresses its readers: "In the story, 'How do you rate your body?', we asked women to discuss their shapes. How do you feel about your body? How would you rate your looks? *Marie Claire* is keen to know your thoughts" (*Marie Claire*, March, 2001). Women are asked to think about "your overall body image" and "score your body on a scale from 1 to 10. A score of 1 would mean you have a negative body image while a score of 10 would mean you have a positive image" (*Marie Claire*, March, 2001).

Magazine surveys are designed to elicit responses that frame women's experiences in a discourse of body image problems. For instance, New Woman Body Image Survey asks readers to answer: "How satisfied are you with your weight?" and "How do you describe your own body?". Possible responses to the first questionnaire limited to the degree of satisfaction/dissatisfaction women feel with their weight, and the latter question can only be answered from a range of responses from "overweight" to "underweight" (*New Woman*, April, 1997). Women's responses are "read" as evidence of "body image problems", therefore erasing or discounting real or potential alternatives.

The magazine reader survey is embedded in a text which provides readers with information about "body image"—what it is, why we have "body image" problems and how we can rectify these problems. Women are encouraged to learn about body image, to learn about themselves; for instance, "Body image: how do you shape up?" asks Australian magazine *Marie Claire* (March, 1997). Women are positioned through these body image surveys and articles as "naïve" and in need of authoritative information and expert advice about body image. At the same time, presenting information about body image to women as something all women "have", as something that can be identified and measured according to scientific "norms" and as something women should know and be concerned about, encourages women to develop a relation of the "educated" subject (of body image knowledge) to herself.

Body image discourse also encourages a particular relation of the self to the body. In order not to have a body image problem, women are encouraged to develop a particular relationship to their bodies—women must like their bodies, accept their bodies, nurture their bodies and, most importantly, learn to see their bodies "as

they really are". Readers with "body image problems" are addressed in the magazines by "experts" in a therapist-patient relation. The "therapist" is inevitably an "expert" (most often a psychologist), a figure of "authority", who is accorded the capacity to speak the truth about human beings and their problems. The psychologist/therapist "talks" to women/patients about their body image problems, offering corrective advice to help women change their thoughts and behaviours (which the "experts" have identified as problematic). In this relation, women are subordinated to a therapeutic authority.

Blood (2005) ponders on the fact that the majority of experts take the position of reassuring women about their "normal" preoccupation with body weight and size (p. 96). They also suggest that women should "accept" their bodies, or at least change the negative ways they think about them. According to psychologist Judith Rodin, quoted in *Cleo* magazine:

> Many women feel silly about their preoccupation with appearance, eating and weight and think they should hide it if they want to be taken seriously. But those are not silly little complaints, they are personal and often painful concerns that deserve attention. All women share them to some extent. Whether we want to value, accept or change our bodies, we need first to change our minds. (*Cleo*, February, 1993)

Rodin reassures women that their preoccupation with "appearance, eating and weight" is normal—"all women share [it] to some extent"—that is, it is normal to have a body image problem.

Next Rodin offers us solutions to the problem. We, you, and me, need to "change our minds" and "treat our bodies with respect". This solution, formulated within a discourse of 'body image' problems, centers on change at the level of the individual. It is each woman reader who needs to change her mind (*Cleo*, February, 1993).

This emphasis on individual change is at the heart of Dr. Thomas Cash's eight step cognitive intervention programme for women called "Private Body Talk". Cash advises women/patients to accept their bodies "as they really are" (*New Woman*, January, 1997). In the introduction to Cash's work below, one must note the slippage between "negative body image" and the even more pejorative term "appearance obsession":

"Private Body Talk" is a term coined by psychologist Dr. Tom Cash. Based on his studies of negative body image, Dr. Cash developed an eight-step program to help people overcome appearance obsession. Private Body Talk is a big first step in helping you to accept who you really are (*New Woman*, January, 1997).

That Dr. Cash is able to provide this "8-step plan" is due in large part to the separation of "women with body image problems" from "society"—he views these two as fundamentally separate and separable things. "Challenge society's beliefs about beauty. You don't have to be a perfect size 10 to be loved, successful and happy". An assumption that "body image" problems and solutions lie in the information processing of individuals means that individual explanations are privileged over social/cultural ones. "Learn to compliment yourself. Replace negative body talk with positive comments" (*New Woman*, January, 1997).

In the same article, Cash goes on to tell women "...discover what distresses you about your appearance" and "practise getting comfortable with your body—relax and look in the mirror while focusing on your assets". Using the word "assets" in relation to women's bodies/subjectivities evokes sexualized images of particular body parts (large breasts, long legs, small waist) that will enable a woman to attract/keep a man. To speak of a woman's body in terms of "assets" (re)produces women's bodies as commodities whose value in the marketplace depends on their "quality" or, as the dominant message in women's magazines runs, on how we can best display and preserve them. Instructing women to scrutinize themselves in front of the mirror and focus

on their "assets" implies that women also have liabilities that must not be focused on. Cash encourages, under the guise of libratory practices, the very self-scrutiny he and his colleagues frame as pathological in women.

Media images have an enormous impact on how people view their own bodies. It would obviously be better if unhealthily skinny models were not promoted as icons of beauty by fashion magazines. However, media images are definitely not the main cause of extreme conditions such as anorexia or bulimia. These are potentially grave illnesses which should be taken seriously. Audiences view the culture of "ideal bodies" critically, and say that they would like to see more diversity. However, the industry notes that, regardless of what readers say, images of thin models are "popular" and will sell magazines.

Conclusion

This paper focused on the female's body image, a part of a complex use of power over women in postmodern consumer society. Popular women's magazines are saturated with images of beautiful, thin, and tight models. These polished images are often accompanied with advice of how the reader can achieve a body that resembles these images. Studies have demonstrated that women are more obsessed with dieting, body weight and slimness than men are and the women's ideal slenderness also seems to be more narrowly defined than men's. Dieting, thus, is an important part of the disciplinary practices designed to oppress women in this society. The desire to lose weight is maintained through the unobtainable female body ideal: Women are expected to be thin to be considered attractive and accepted in this society.

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