Impossible Standards:
A Closer Look at the Changing Perceptions of Beauty in American Society

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

Beauty among women has been defined in many ways throughout the centuries. In contemporary America, female beauty has come to be defined in an extremely narrow manner. The current ideals place great significance on the thin, tall woman. Previous decades have valued a range of ideals, although this thin ideal has always been important and prevailed. The media has played an important role in perpetuating these beauty ideals, as many women place value in the images they see. Women, and increasingly young girls, often attempt to embody these ideals as a means of fitting into society and making a way for themselves in a culture that values a certain kind of woman over others. This paper explores the beauty trends that have endured to the present decade, as well as the harm that has resulted from some of these trends.

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Introduction

"Beauty is in the eye of the beholder," as the famous saying goes. To what extent this is true in American society is still up for debate. There has been a shift toward a standardized, single ideal of beauty in this country. This paper will explore what is perceived as beautiful by our society, and how these widespread ideals could be harming society rather than helping it. We will examine the beauty trends of the past century, beginning with the 1910s, and work our way up to the present.

Definitions of Beauty

Beauty is generally thought of as something that pleases one to see, hear, or even experience. For the majority of the last century, Americans have mostly defined beauty in only one way. The ideals that were present during a specific moment in time were typically imposed upon the female members of society, and this became what was then considered beautiful. The predominant interpretation of beauty throughout the 1900s and into the present has been focused primarily on the physical aspects alone.

In "(Un)Changing Menopausal Bodies: How Women Think and Act in the Face of a Reproductive Transition and Gendered Beauty Ideals," Dillaway (2005) quotes Lee (2003:82) on why physical attributes seem to be so important in our culture. He states that the body acts as the "'text of culture; it is a symbolic form upon which the norms and practices of society are inscribed'" (Dillaway 4). This is often more the case for the female body than that of the male. Women want to be, not only accepted, but welcomed into mainstream society. Complying with the beauty standards of the day has been a way for women to gain this approval.
In order to achieve the ideal of the day, women employed a number of methods. In *The Feminine Ideal*, Thesander (1997) writes about these, including cosmetic surgery and injectables, which became more popular towards the later part of the century when they became more affordable, as well as the items that temporarily modify the body (14). These temporary methods involve items such as shapewear and corsets. Items like corsets and shapewear became desirable and more important as the preferred form of the female body changed from accentuated curves to a more streamlined, slim look, as discussed in “The Influence of Societal Factors on Female Body Image” by Monteath and McCabe (1997:710).

**Beauty Trends in the 1910s**

To begin, we will examine the beauty trends of the 1910s. In *Decades of Beauty* (1998), a book outlining the changes in beauty trends throughout the decades, Mulvey states that the ideal female body during this decade became “more girlish and young” (58). This meant that it was desirable for women to look less developed, as was demonstrated in the popular style of dress of the times. As discussed by Thesander (1997:107), this dress drew attention away from the hips, bust, and waist, which made the woman appear less curvy.

Another new trend was that it had become much more socially acceptable for women to wear pants (Mulvey 1998:52). Short hair, which was typically worn with some sort of headband, was also more acceptable (Mulvey 54). During this period, women felt more liberated; as they had never before had the ability to choose to wear pants or to cut their hair short and still be considered feminine.
Some of the icons of this decade were Lillian Gish, a “fragile beauty,” Mary Pickford, known as “America’s Sweetheart,” and Gloria Swanson, who “to millions...was glamour personified” (Mulvey 1998:48-49). Many women idolized and based their own beauty routines on what they observed of these icons. This is to be one of the ongoing trends throughout the decades in America, the admiration of the icons of the moment.

The ideals of beauty during the 1910s were not only seen through the silver screen or on the street. They fattened the wallets of beauty product producers. According to Beauty Imagined: A History of the Global Beauty Industry by Jones (2010), the manufacture of toiletries and cosmetics in the United States had reached $60 million by the end of the decade. The amount of retail sales the subsequent year reached close to $130 million (2010:98).

The popularity of beauty products was augmented by the availability of plastic surgery. In Decades of Beauty, the author references the issues that could be “fixed,” such as "scrawny necks, ugly noses and ears or lips, unhealthy complexions, saggy cheeks, even problematic scowls" (Mulvey 1998:57). Mulvey writes about Frederick Kolle, the author of one of the leading books on plastic surgery during the period, who recommended that anyone was able to perform their own cosmetic procedures:

Kolle guides the reader step by step through the various stages of injecting the face with paraffin to fill it out, or even worse procedures. It seems as though he expected anybody to have a try, and they probably did! Another often advertised treatment was electrical stimulation of the blood, for a whole variety of ailments. It, too, was presumably carried out by virtually anyone. [Mulvey 57]
One of the icons of the 1910s, Lillian Gish (Mulvey 1998:48)
Beauty Trends in the 1920s

Moving into the 1920s, the feminine ideal changed only slightly from that of the previous decade. The move away from curves continued as well as the emphasis on appearing young. According to Derenne and Beresin (2006) in “Body Image, Media, and Eating Disorders,” it was popular at the time to appear thin, angular, and, child-like (258). The attention moved away from the body, the torso in particular, and focused much more on the legs and the face (Thesander 1997:118). In her book, Thesander quotes Andre Duzaine Hansen, who stated “‘flat-chested, narrow-hipped and no waist, that’s what the ideal woman of the 1920s looked like – not attractive...’” (117). Although this was a matter of opinion, the decade was full of new beauty trends that were never before acceptable for women to take part in. This decade was in fact quite radical in regards to the way women were allowed to act and dress.

The majority of these trends are seen in the stereotypical flapper. Flappers were the hallmark female image of this period, with short skirts and short hair (Mulvey 1998:64). This look showed more skin than ever before, and the use of makeup became much more widespread (Mulvey 74-75). In fact, according to Jones, “by the end of the 1920s, three thousand different face powders and several hundred rouges alone were being sold on the American market” (2010:102).

During this decade, women had a newfound control to do what they chose to do with their own bodies. The ideal body was, as stated before, thin and tall. Upkeep of this type however required many hours of exercise, as well as strict diets. Many women even starved themselves to maintain what was perceived at the time as beautiful
(Mulvey 1998:76). In the United States, the pressure to appear thinner was increasing significantly, especially in regards to women (Jones 2010:99).

Plastic surgery became even more popular after World War I. First developed mostly as a means of correcting grisly injuries sustained during the war, plastic surgery became more acceptable to fix cosmetic issues in the 1920s. The surgeons thought of themselves as providing a public service to those who could afford it, by making their customers, mostly women, more confident in their own skin (Jones 2010:98-99).

The media played a large role in the distribution of these beauty ideals. Many publications, such as Harper’s Bazaar and Vogue which were distributed across the nation, provided beauty companies with easy ways to reach millions of American women (Jones 2010:98). Celebrities during this period also helped to spread these ideals of beauty. Some of these icons during this period were Josephine Baker and Louise Brooks, “whose regular features, impeccable bone structure and boyish bob heralded a new criteria for beauty,” (Mulvey 1998:66) as well as Clara Bow, proclaimed as the ‘It’ girl of the decade. Bow was perhaps the best example of the decade’s flapper, with her short hair and cupid bow lips, which also represented the period ideal of beauty (Mulvey 1998:67).
One of the icons of the 1920s, Clara Bow (Mulvey 1998:67)
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**Beauty Trends in the 1930s**

The 1930s in America marked a change in the ideals of beauty. It was no longer preferred for women to be thin and flat, but to once again possess some curves (Mulvey 1998:94). While the 1920s were distinguished by different experiences and body types, this decade was a “time of serious sex appeal” (Mulvey 95). The women again wanted to be comfortable in their own skin, while still being desired as women. The look of the 30s was supposed to appear much more natural than that of the previous decade, although much artfulness was used in making one appear as such (Thesander 1997:132). Exercising and dieting were also still popular ways of keeping up with the ideals of the period.

The media was once again utilized as a means of shaping the ideals of beauty. Movie stars continued to personify the preferred look of the day and were admired for it. This was true for the 30s, perhaps more so than any other period before. Some of the icons of this decade were Greta Garbo, Vivien Leigh, and Marlene Dietrich. As Mulvey states, the “style of the 30s was magical and painted with a light touch” (1998:88). The media, along with the new style of dress, allowed women to display that they were indeed women, in this era’s terms, making it acceptable to show their inner strength.

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One of the icons of the 1930s, Greta Garbo (Mulvey 1998:84)
Beauty Trends in the 1940s

The 1940s were a period during which women experienced a vast array of feminine ideals. During World War II, women were expected to pick up the slack while the men went to fight. Thus, it was acceptable for female Americans to emanate a more masculine persona. According to Mulvey, a fresher style came about, one that was seemingly more natural. The ideal women of the 1940s had narrow hips and wide shoulders. The casual look of jeans and T-shirts became more popular for women during this time as well (1998:114). When the rare moments came for women to dress up, which usually only occurred for the well-to-do, there was a distinct desire for “good tailoring and monumental, gravity-defying strapless evening dresses” (Mulvey 106).

Some of the better known icons of this era include Lauren Bacall, Ingrid Bergman, and Lena Horne. Each of these women represented the ideal of a strong woman. They served as role models for many, most likely acting as sources of strength for the entire country during the war. American society put major emphasis on this strength for all women, as well as praising the physically able and competent (Derenne and Beresin 2006:258).

Once the war had ended, women experienced a strong shift in feminine ideals. There was a push back to conventional gender roles, as well as more emphasis on the family as the center of the woman’s world (Derenne and Beresin 2006:258). American women, who had just been wearing pants and enjoying more freedoms, went back to wearing mostly skirts and dresses. The beginning or continuation of families became
extremely important, which meant that biology and curves once again came into fashion (Derenne and Beresin 258).

The idea of females returning to focusing all their attention on the family and the home did not sit well with all women. Some of them had enjoyed the freedoms and did not want to give them up. As discussed by Matelski (2011) in “The Color(s) of Perfection: The Feminine Body, Beauty Ideals, and Identity in Postwar America”, this resentment led to the ‘Sweater Girl’ ideal, “a busty, curvaceous figure more sexual than maternal” (1). However, this particular ideal did not last long in America.
One of the icons of the 1940s, Lauren Bacall (Mulvey 1998:102)
The 1950s continued this emphasis on traditional gender roles and the family. Women during this period still tried to appear curvy, although it was preferred that they be muscular as well (Mulvey 1998:130). The women were also to be feminine and refined. This was echoed in the fashion of the day. Stiletto heels, hats, and elegant clothes were all the rage, usually incorporating a great deal of bright colors (Mulvey 130).

Still, the major emphasis of the decade was on the family. The nuclear family unit, a new family idea, started to replace the previous extended family (Mulvey 1998:118). The ideal situation for women during this time, according to Mulvey, was to “get married, have children and live in a nice house ‘happily ever after’ with the same man for the rest of one’s life” (118). As the 1950s was an overtly conservative era, anything too far from this norm was unimaginable for the average woman (Mulvey 118).

That is, except for the ‘Career Woman.’ This was a new idea of a glamorous and confident woman who focused more on her career than a family. In the media, this type of woman was portrayed as beautiful yet cold, even frigid. As discussed in Decades of Beauty, “it was understood that she’d give it all up for the right man,” (Mulvey 1998:118) which again brings the emphasis of the decade back to the family.

Some of the icons of the 1950s include Marilyn Monroe, one of the most adored women of all time, Elizabeth Taylor, and Audrey Hepburn, who was the ultimate representative of the style of the decade. Hepburn, however, set an impossible standard for women to strive for, with her “impossibly perfect features” (Mulvey 120).
One of the icons of the 1950s, Marilyn Monroe (Mulvey 1998:120)
Beauty Trends in the 1960s

Drastic shifts in society and culture occurred between the 1950s and 1960s. The 60s, according to Thesander, were the start of the "cult of extreme youth" (1997:156). The impossible standards set in the 1950s by icons like Audrey Hepburn, while their terms changed, became even more unattainable (Matelski 2011:7). The ideals of beauty during this time were similar to those of the 1920s, consisting of thin, childlike types who looked as if they had yet to develop and mature into women (Thesander 179). This look was achieved in a number of ways. Some women used the same techniques used in the 20s, unsafe diets and starvation, as well as makeup. The models of this era went from looking like the curvy women of the 1950s to appearing to be lanky, prepubescent girls. The ideal for women during this period seemed to be one of innocence that came across in, and was reinforced by, the media (Mulvey 1998:148).

The use of cosmetics was very popular during this decade. The preferred style of this time was to appear young, so makeup was used much differently than in the previous decade:

In stark contrast to the ultra-sophisticated faces of the 50s, the 60s look put the accent on looking young, childlike even, with the eyes almost permanently agog. Huge wide painted eyes, pale skin and big pale lips were the ideal, and the use of false eyelashes and color – and strange frosted colors – was especially encouraged. [Mulvey 1998:146]
Aside from the popularity of cosmetics, one other item epitomizes the 1960s: the miniskirt (Mulvey 142). This new fashion trend played into the young girl attitude of the decade and continues even today.

Some of the icons of this era include Julie Christie, who was the “personification of the 60s woman,” and probably the most well-known, Twiggy, who was considered by many to be “the face of the decade” (Mulvey 1998:138). Mulvey suggests that Twiggy’s “wide-eyed elfin features and slight build – hence her nickname – set a new girl-in-the-street standard for fashion models, and created almost overnight the look of the era” (138). Every girl wanted to look like Twiggy, no matter the cost. According to Matelski (2011), a cult-like status surrounded Twiggy, who had a “31-inch bust and 32-inch hips” (2). The average girl cannot achieve this naturally. This is where the drastic measures taken by women came into play.

Just as in the previous decades, women once again enjoyed the freedom to control and fashion their own bodies. They could look however they chose and this would be, in most cases, what at the time was socially acceptable. Many women began wearing wigs as a means of changing their personalities (Mulvey 1998:144). Short hair was again fashionable, another result of how Twiggy influenced fashion. Long, straight hair was also fashionable in the 1960s. For the first time, these styles were appropriate for both women and for young girls alike (Mulvey 144-145).
One of the icons of the 1960s, Twiggy (Mulvey 1998:138)
Beauty Trends in the 1970s

In beauty trends of the 1970s, the thin ideal of the 1960s persisted. Mulvey states that "whereas the 60s silhouette had been quite childlike with rounded limbs, the 70s woman was elongated and stick-like" (1998:166). Women during this decade were feeling the pressure perhaps harder than ever before to be skinny. The dangerous diets and starvation of the previous decade continued to persist. There were many who came very close to death in order to maintain the beauty ideal of the 70s. Due to this, anorexia began to gain attention (Mulvey 166).

The common ideals of beauty of this decade were reinforced as in previous decades by beauty pageants. The women who took part in these contests were often seen as perfect examples of what average women were striving toward. The contestants perpetuated these almost unattainable ideals and became role models for young girls (Mulvey 1998:167).

Some icons of the 1970s included Catherine Deneuve, Iman, and Lauren Hutton. Farrah Fawcett Majors was also an influential icon, as she possessed the hair that every woman wanted at the time (Mulvey 1998:162-163). Her style, as well as the 'California look,' of glowing tans and bright lips, was perhaps the most popular of the day. For women with careers, this look was accompanied by nail polish and clear lip gloss (Mulvey 165). Last seen in the war years, jeans and T-shirts came back into style for women during this era.
One of the icons of the 1970s, Lauren Hutton (Mulvey 1998:157)
Beauty Trends in the 1980s

For women in the United States, the 1980s were characterized again by the fit, young body. Exercise became more popular than ever before in maintaining this beauty ideal. Fitness and diet were the methods relied on to keep one in shape, with less reliance in this era on artificial beauty aids (Thesander 1997:201). The ideal woman was young, tan, and fit, and had “firm, rather full breasts, a slim waist and narrow hips,” according to Thesander (201). The beauty ideals of the 1980s combined those of previous decades, favoring a woman who was both thin and curvy – a difficult standard for most women to live up to.

The style of this era involved two predominant types of dress: “stylish, classic citywear and relaxed, sporty leisurewear” (Thesander 1997:201). These fashions were combined with big hair, which is the most remembered trend of the 80s. The punk fashion also came in as a means of rebelling against what was considered fashion ideals of the period. However, as punk became popular, it lost its edge as an anti-fashion statement.

Two of the icons of the 1980s were Madonna, who “was the ultimate fashion chameleon, recreating herself in a variety of roles,” and Princess Diana (Mulvey 1998:174). Even though Princess Diana was not an American, she was the “celebrity clothes horse of the decade” (Mulvey 175). Each of these women influenced what was considered fashionable at time: women drew inspiration from both Madonna’s unique and ever changing fashions and Princess Diana’s classic style.
One of the icons of the 1980s, Princess Diana (Mulvey 1998:175)
Beauty Trends in the 1990s

With the onset of the 1990s a new range of what was considered fashionable emerged. Everyone had the opportunity, seemingly for the first time, to wear whatever they wanted and have it accepted (Mulvey 1998:196). Although this freedom to express one's individuality was novel, the ideal body type of the period continued to be the ideal of the slim woman. As Thesander writes, the ideal woman was "tall, slim and supple with long, well-shaped but not muscular legs" (1997:203).

This ideal of what was thought of as beautiful can be seen in some of the icons of the decade. These included Sharon Stone, Uma Thurman, Jemima Khan, and most of all Kate Moss. Moss was the prime example of the ideal 1990s woman. She had, as stated in Decades of Beauty, "a waiflike image that combined an unfashionably skinny 5-foot-7-inch frame with a stunning beauty, which – with or without makeup – came to personify the times" (Mulvey 1998:193). Derenne and Beresin, quite accurately, identified this look as "heroin chic" (2006:258). This look harkened back to similar ones of the 1920s and 1960s, making popular once again both the dangerous methods and accompanying aura to attempt to reach and express the unattainable ideals of beauty.

During this decade, there was some backlash in response to these ideals. As discussed by Mulvey, the "fat' lobby" was fighting against the thought that only those who were stick thin were beautiful (1998:195). There was also increasing attention paid to the issue of ageism in American society, questioning the role that youth had played in defining fashion. Both are issues that would continue to be felt in the fashion world as we entered the new millennium.
One of the icons of the 1990s, Kate Moss (Mulvey 1998:193)
Beauty Trends in the 2000s

In the 2000s, the beauty trends seem to have become more and more unattainable. The use of aids like Botox has become a much more socially acceptable way of appearing younger longer. As Botox requires less time and money than plastic surgery, more people are willing and able to use it. As discussed by Lewis (2009) in “The Changing Face of Beauty,” the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery reports that “in the handful of years since receiving approval from the Food and Drug Administration, Botox cosmetic treatments have increased 238%. [In 2008] alone, more than 3,000,000 treatments took place” (64).

Botox is not the only newly prominent means of altering one’s appearance. With the media still a dominant method of spreading beauty ideals, digitally altering images to be more ‘attractive’ has become commonplace. One well-known actress, Jamie Lee Curtis, publicly opposed the use of this method when she allowed herself to be photographed and digitally altered, as well as to be photographed as she naturally looks in her shorts and sports bra. As discussed by Derenne and Beresin (2006), Curtis wanted all women to know that the famous people they see in the media do not always appear the same in real life (258). Celebrities and those wealthy enough are able to invest quite a bit of money into their appearance, with people to help them with their diets and exercise, as well as stylists to ensure that they always look their best (Derenne and Beresin 258).

It is not just the average woman who feels the pressure to be thin; those in the public eye are also affected. There are countless celebrities who are suspected of
having eating disorders, especially anorexia. People are 'concerned' for these celebrities and by extension themselves, as Derenne and Beresin (2006) explain, because women should not be taking these drastic measures to fit in. However, women in popular culture who do not personify the ideal of beauty are often criticized in the media as well (Derenne and Beresin 259).

The 2000s and even today have been full of no win situations when it comes to the ideals of beauty. Derenne and Beresin (2006) state that the average model used to be only 8% skinnier than the common woman (259). Models are now, on average, 23% thinner than the average woman (Derenne and Beresin 259). Young girls turn to these models as the ideal of what they should strive to look like. There are many magazines which promote healthy living, but most represent and reinforce impossible standards of beauty with their photographs of stick thin models (Derenne and Beresin 259). All these contradictions make women feel as if they are not, and can never be, good enough.

Trends That Have Endured

In examining the decades ranging from the 1910s to the present, it is not difficult to pick out trends that have endured throughout the years. In this section, we will take a closer look at the beauty ideals that are still relevant today. The most prominent of these ideals is, of course, the thin woman.

The Thin Ideal

In the United States, there has been a push towards what is not only perceived as beautiful, but towards perfection. The current dominant beauty ideal for females in this country, according to Dillaway, consists of “slenderness/thinness, youth, Whiteness,
upper-class status (in that one must be able to spend considerable amounts to adhere to beauty standards), and 'no noticeable physical imperfections or disabilities'" (2005:4). This ideal occurs "naturally" in only a small percentage of the women in the United States. The thin ideal is typically only attainable for those with the money to spend. These impossible ideals set the standard for what women feel they should aspire to, and have prompted dangerous, and often painful, methods and behaviors (Derenne and Beresin 2006:259).

In looking at beauty across cultures, it appears that the American thin ideal does not occur as widely as is portrayed outside North America or Western Europe. In her article, Lewis cites a cultural and medical historian, who states that there are only a few ideals of beauty that occur constantly across the world. These consistent ideals include symmetry and balance, full contours, and radiant skin (Lewis 2009:64).

The Use of Beauty Aids

Another of the enduring trends over the past century has been the use of beauty aids. This term refers to things like corsets and shapewear, as well as makeup and perfume. Etcoff, Orbach, Scott, and D'Agostino (2004), in their article "The Real Truth About Beauty: A Global Report: Findings of the Global Study on Women, Beauty and Well-Being," talk about the most commonly used beauty products among women. Deodorant is used far more than any other item. After deodorant, hair products, body moisturizer, facial care items, and perfume are the most utilized. In order to make themselves feel beautiful, young women turn to makeup, while older women turn to hair dyes (Etcoff et al. 2004:31). By examining the items both younger and older women
turn to, it is clear to see that these are products used to obtain and maintain the modern beauty ideal, that of being young and flawless.

Most women though still seem to be hesitant about another beauty aid. Plastic surgery, as we talked about, was being used throughout the whole of the last century, even though the methods have now become somewhat safer. However, as Etcoff et al. (2004) write, "only one in four women [have] ever consider[ed] cosmetic surgery and only 3% admitt[ed] to ever having cosmetic surgery performed on them" (32). These statistics would change if the surgery was perceived as safer and not as expensive. If this were the case, four in ten women would be willing to give cosmetic surgery a try (Etcoff et al. 32).

The Importance of the Media

Another trend that has endured is the way that common ideals of beauty have been communicated and legitimatized. As discussed by Stiman, Leavy, and Garland, in their article "Heterosexual Female and Male Body Image and Body Concept in the Context of Attraction Ideals," the media strongly influences what is considered masculine or feminine. They write that "according to the media, normative femininity is directly linked to physical size, with particular emphasis on thinness" (2009). Not only does the mass media perpetuate the thin ideal, but also a particular ideal of youth (Thesander 1997:212).

These ideals of beauty are strongly reinforced through celebrity culture. In the United States today, it is very common for young women to have role models who are Hollywood stars. It is rare to encounter today an actress who does not embody the thin,
young, and flawless ideal of the period. With the availability of televisions, the internet, movie theatres, and magazines like *Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan*, young girls are bombarded with these idealized images more often than any time in the past (Jones 2010:152).

One of the most influential events in disseminating beauty ideals, according to Jones, is beauty pageants on television (2010:152). These competitions feature women contending for the title of the most beautiful woman. Yet the contestants tend to represent one ideal of beauty, the prevailing thin, tall, and young woman. Those watching these pageants on television, especially women and girls, are inundated with one impossible ideal to strive for.

**Harm That Can Come From These Trends**

These enduring trends can have adverse effects on women in our society. In this section, we will look at some of the problems caused by attempting to fit into the impossible ideals of beauty. The most prevalent of these trends is the thin ideal, which is the first we will examine.

**Thin is In**

In the United States, the ideal woman is thin, toned, and tall. She also tends to have large breasts, but a slender athletic frame. This often unattainable ideal figure makes many women feel as if they are not good enough, undesirable, and inadequate. This can have adverse effects, as Stiman et al. note:
The emphasis placed on females' physical attributes leaves them feeling as if their [self-worth] is connected to the way in which men view their bodies. Female participants have been socialized to understand that their self-worth is linked to their body type/size/features and, more specifically, the way in which men view their body type/size/features. [2009]

This emphasis placed on women's bodies by men can cause a number of psychological and emotional issues, which we will discuss later on.

Women often begin to feel as if they will never be able to achieve the preferred look. Gail, Chen, Liao, and Shao (2005) write in “Body Image, Relationships, and Time” that men and women alike believe this. Women want to be skinnier than they think themselves to be. The ideal held by most women about thinness tends to actually be smaller than what men perceive as the “right thinness.” Thesander (1997) articulated the impossibility of our current beauty ideals this way: “since human beings can never achieve perfection, only mannequins could represent the ideal – the perfect woman in moulded plastic” (202).

The Stigma against the Overweight

As we have mentioned, the thin body is the preferred look of the day for women. With all the pressure to be fit and skinny comes the stigma towards those who are not. Monteath and McCabe (1997) suggest that there is an unfavorable stereotype of those who are overweight (711). These women are typically thought of as lazy, unattractive, and unable to exercise self-control (Thesander 1997:211). According to Matelski (2011), women are sometimes thought of as “violating expectations” when they do not
fit into the thin ideal (3). This opens these women up to discrimination and stigmatization (Matelski 3).

Even in moments when thinness is not considered healthy, such as pregnancy, there is increasing pressure to be thin. Stiman et al. cite a study by Dworkin and Wachs (2004) in which the researchers found "that even women's bodies pre, post and during pregnancy are now judged based on the appearance of 'fitness'" (2009). This type of thinking can lead to issues such as eating disorders. In their article "Body Image of Anorexic, Obese, and Normal Females," Bell, Kirkpatrick, and Rinn (1986) discuss how anorexics fear becoming fat. They suggest that some of these girls with anorexia view themselves as either still too overweight or just about thin enough. The reality in each case is that these girls are dangerously underweight (Bell et al. 431).

Dangerous Measures

The measures that women are willing to take in order to achieve the beauty ideal can be dangerous. Those that involve the use of common beauty products, such as makeup and perfume, are not the major issue. The more dangerous methods of attempting to embody the common beauty ideals involve the use of surgery, over-exercise, and possibly harmful diets or starvation (Stiman et al. 2009).

Women are seemingly willing to risk their lives in order to become the idealized version of themselves. Lewis explains that "aesthetic improvement and the preservation of youthfulness and vitality" are what women often want, because these are the things that society values most (2009:64). Women are not happy with the way they naturally appear, so they are willing to try whatever it takes to achieve the
impossible. Thesander (1997) sums this up: "why live with dissatisfaction if the breasts
nature gave you are too small or have sagged after childbirth, or if your stomach has
become flabbier, when you can buy youth and firmness and re-create your body so that
it is acceptable again?" (212). The availability of plastic surgery makes women feel that
if they can have some perceived problem corrected, this will make them attractive and
happy.

Psychological Issues

One of the most common psychological problems that occurs in relation to the
ideal standards of beauty is distorted body image. Guinn, Semper, Jorgensen, and
Skaggs (1997) in "Body Image Perception in Female Mexican-American Adolescents"
define this as "perceiving oneself to weigh more or to be larger than actual
measurements" (112). Girls and women alike can develop a distorted body image when
they are unable to meet the impossible standards set by society. The result is that
females tend to feel dissatisfied with the way they look, as they think themselves larger
than they actually are (Monteath and McCabe 1997:708). They find themselves, as a
result, constantly comparing their own bodies to others and telling themselves that they
are not good enough or can never measure up to what they see.

This distortion in how one views their own body can lead to a number of other
harmful issues. In "Psychosocial Differences Associated with Body Weight Among
Female Adolescents: the Importance of Body Image," Pesa, Syre, and Jones (2000)
write that a relationship has been observed between a warped body image and
psychological distress like low self-esteem. Another suggested side-effect of a negative
body image is depression, which can affect women of all ages (Pesa et al. 335). Overweight females can be affected by distorted body image as well, which makes them feel less connected to the outside world, like with their families and schoolmates (Pesa et al. 336).

The prominent thin ideal leads often young girls to resort to the dangerous methods involved with anorexia and bulimia, such as starvation or forced vomiting. Eating disorders tend to occur more frequently in those who have some sort of distorted body image, as they view these “remedies” as the only possible solution to shrink the perceived space between what they believe themselves to look like and how they want to look (Gail et al. 2005:458). The occurrence of eating disorders is sometimes also correlated with abuse of diet pills and over-exercising, as discussed by Liechty and Yarnal (2010:1198) in “Older Women’s Body Image: A Lifecourse Perspective.”

An adverse effect of a standardized beauty ideal is warped thinking when it comes to one’s own qualities. Women are often quick to classify themselves as average or natural rather than beautiful or gorgeous, as Etcoff et al. (2004) found. Their study discovered that “by an overwhelming majority, women around the world are most comfortable using the words natural (31%) or average (29%) to describe their looks” (Etcoff et al. 9). In the United States, only 3% of American women were comfortable calling themselves beautiful (Etcoff et al. 11).

It seems that women do not appreciate themselves for who they are when it comes to beauty. Etcoff et al. (2004) write that nearly half of all women involved in their study, when asked about the statement ‘When I feel less beautiful, I feel worse about
myself in general,' strongly agreed (18). When women were also asked about their facial and physical beauty, the majority responded that they were only somewhat satisfied with them.

Media Influence

The media has perpetuated the modern ideals of beauty. As we discussed above, the media is one of the main ways in which viewers understand what is considered beautiful in society; and these viewers use media images to compare themselves to what they believe is beautiful. Stiman et al. argue that these impossible ideals can cause significant harm when women internalize them. As the authors state, "women more regularly engage with appearance magazines, report more appearance conversations, endorse greater internalization of appearance ideals, and are more dissatisfied with their bodies than males" (2009). The media that women are bombarded with is a constant reminder that they are not good enough because they do not fit in with the beauty ideal.

It is not only the prevalence of the thin ideal, but women's exposure to it that can cause some of the psychological issues discussed above. The exposure to movies, music videos, and soap operas has also been correlated with distorted body image and dissatisfaction (Derenne and Beresin 2006:259). Even though media is not the cause of the problem, the images women encounter there still have an important impact on their thinking.
Alarming Stereotypes

Monteath and McCabe (1997) explore the stereotype that those who are considered beautiful are better. Monteath and McCabe cite Dion, Berscheid, and Walsters’ research (1972) where participants assessed pictures of people who were considered unattractive, neutral, or attractive. The participants suggested that the more attractive pictures captured people who had positive personality traits and happier lives (Monteath and McCabe 711). As Etcoff et al. (2004) write, “45% of all women strongly agree that ‘women who are more beautiful have greater opportunities in life’” (25). This idea is supported by Matelski (2011) as well. She notes that women are taught early in their lives that “their future – economic, social, and reproductive opportunities – hinges on their personal appearance” (Matelski, 2-3). This leads women to believe that if they do not match up with the beauty ideals of the day, they will have fewer opportunities in all aspects of their lives.

Men often reinforce this ideal type. Etcoff et al. (2004) explain that almost 60% of the women interviewed believed that those women who are more physically attractive, or fit in with the prevalent beauty ideals, were valued higher by males than those who do not fit in with the current ideals (25). Given the importance many women attribute to being involved in a romantic relationship, the occurrence of warped thinking about one’s self and one’s chances in life not only increases but becomes common (Etcoff et al. 25).
Recent Awakening of the Dangers of Modern Beauty Trends

Recently, more and more people are beginning to realize how ridiculous it is to attempt to fit all women into one skinny mold. Women are built differently and people are seeing that no amount of plastic surgery, extreme dieting, or over-exercising can or should change nature.

Movement Away from the Prevailing Thin Ideal

In the United States, women are seemingly becoming more comfortable in their own skin. They are realizing, along with everyone else, that they may not be able to achieve the ideal look of the period. This is not to say that these women have completely given up trying to better themselves, they are simply striving for more reasonable goals (Lewis 2009:66).

This can be spurred by the media. For example, Bailey (2008) writes in *Black America, Body Beautiful: How the African American Image is Changing Fashion, Fitness, and Other Industries* that *The Tyra Banks Show* ran a two part special show called ‘Bodyville I and II’ in 2007, which looked into “America's obsession with certain body images and body types” (4). For so long, the media has been the main source of communicating beauty ideals that had negative impact, yet it appears that they too wish to perpetuate new ideals of beauty. Still Etcoff et al. (2004) found that “authentic beauty is a concept lodged in women’s hearts and minds and seldom articulated in popular culture or affirmed in the mass media” (47).

Even with the recent shift away from the thin ideal, there is still a heavy emphasis placed on youth in modern American culture. Liechty and Yarnal write about a study by
Webster and Tiggermann which found that as women got older, they placed less importance on their own physical appearance (2010:1199). This may be because older women are not considered to be beautiful by modern standards. Still, the majority of these changes in thinking seem to have occurred during specific events in women's lives, such as pregnancy or menopause (Liechty and Yarnal 1214). The authors found that some of the other changes in thinking were due to environmental factors, especially the environment that women were raised in, and "the influence of historical events and contexts, such as changes in fashion or in societal views of women's roles" (Liechty and Yarnal 1214-1215).

Other Ideals of Beauty

More women are beginning to understand that, as Etcoff et al. (2004) wrote, authentic beauty is not about what is on the surface. Women are more willing today to accept a definition of beauty that involves more than just physical characteristics. Etcoff et al. argue that women can differentiate between beauty and physical attractiveness and this "indicates that women have the capacity and desire to think about and experience beauty in complex and dimensionalized ways—even though they may shy away from openly claiming it for themselves" (Etcoff et al. 35).

Numerous qualities are being recognized as significant in women of all ages. Some of these include "happiness, kindness, confidence, dignity, and humor" (Etcoff et al. 2004:36). It is beginning to be realized that women today consist of more than their physical appearance. In the study carried out by Etcoff et al., women were asked about
several statements dealing with the perception of beauty. These women responded in
the following manner:

Not only do a majority of women believe that 'beauty includes much more of who
a person is,' but also that beauty is something that can be found in many different
types of women. Thus, they strongly agree that: 'A woman can be beautiful at
any age' (89%); 'Every woman has something about her that is beautiful' (85%);
and, 'Beauty can be achieved through attitude, spirit and other attributes that
have nothing to do with physical appearance' (77%). [Etcoff et al. 2004:40]

These responses show what may be a significant shift away from the prevailing ideals
of beauty in our society. Women are beginning to understand that the narrow definition
of beauty that prevails has excluded some of the most important aspects of beauty: the
inner qualities.

For example, happiness seems to play a key role in how beautiful women feel.
Etcoff et al. (2004) write that women often state that happiness is the main reason they
feel beautiful, with 86% of the women interviewed responding that this holds true in their
own lives (40). Personal experiences, which can help to determine how happy a
woman feels, also appear to play a large role in making women feel more beautiful.
Some of the more important experiences include self-realization, self-care, and loving
relationships, as well as being involved in things one loves (Etcoff et al. 29). This
means that the perception of beauty, at least for some, has finally opened up to include
not only physical traits, but internal ones as well.
Preoccupation

In contemporary American culture, women and young girls especially are constantly inundated with the ideal look in the media. This can cause women and girls to develop a sort of preoccupation with becoming that ideal. This can lead to women becoming distracted from other important issues in their lives, and may also lead to the psychological issues we discussed earlier (Pesa et al. 2000:335).

Still, Monteath and McCabe found that those women who have managed to obtain the ideal look of the period are less likely to possess a negative image of themselves (1997:711). This suggests that those who do not line up with the ideals are more prone to these feelings of inadequacy, which can, in turn, lead to this preoccupation with appearance. This basing one’s self worth on just one measure can be damaging, both for the women and girls affected and for the larger society.

Educational Effects

One of the most dangerous side effects of this idea occurs among young women and girls, especially those in schools. Pesa et al. (2000) explain that things like academic performance could be affected by this preoccupation with beauty ideals. The authors write that there is evidence that suggests “a relationship among eating concerns, eating disorder risk, dieting, and academic problems” (Pesa et al. 336).

Women and girls who are overly concerned with achieving the ideal body are at risk for the psychological issues that were previously discussed. Pesa et al. write that “it is also imperative that the...individual recognize her strengths in other areas of her life as opposed to deriving her sense of self entirely from her appearance” (2000:336). If
these issues are not addressed early on, especially in relation to academic
performance, they will continue to play a significant role in these women’s lives.

Conclusion

We have explored here the various ideals of beauty that were prevalent in the
decades ranging from the 1910s to the present. Some of these ideals have continued
into today and have caused many women to undertake drastic measures in order to
become the perfect woman. Luckily, we have come to realize that these ideals are
nearly impossible to live up to for most women.

It is my hope that any women who read this paper take away from it that, no
matter the current trend, physical appearance does not equal beauty and worth. Beauty
is a much more complex thing, encompassing the internal qualities, such as happiness
and kindness, not simply one’s outward appearance. It is important that all women can
learn to feel beautiful in their own skin. Only through such an appreciation of oneself
will we be able to diminish the impact such narrow ideals of beauty and gender have on
ourselves and our society.
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