Ideal Women Essay, Research Paper

Ideal Women

The American women of today can never be too thin or too pretty. In most cases thin equates beauty, so the present ideal is a thin, fit, radiantly healthy, young woman. In magazines stuffed with models and advertisements, billboards on the highway, and actresses on TV, the message of what women should look like is everywhere. The inescapable presence of these images in effect shapes the image of women today.

It is very unfortunate that the media influences American society to the point that it defines the “ideal woman.” According to Naomi Wolf, author of the bestselling book, The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women, one reason media is so influential is “advertising is a 130 billion dollar a year industry. The average American watches 30 hours of TV a week and spends 110 hours a year reading magazines. That adds up to exposure to 1500 ads daily” (45). Advertising is a powerful educational force in our culture due to the simple fact of exposure. Economics is also a significant factor in the development of the ideal image. There is a wealth of businesses that depend upon the American desire for thinness to survive. Exercise and diet companies are an example. In order to create a market for their product, they attempt to make women feel inadequate about their own bodies through advertisement. According to Wolf, “the diet industry has tripled its income in the past 10 years from a $10 billion industry to a $33.3 billion industry” (47).

Other companies that cater to the current “large” population sell beauty, tactfully. As William Lutz points out in his article, “With these Words I can Sell You Anything,” girdles are called body shapers or control garments (158), and in Diane White s article, “Euphemisms for the Fat of the Land,” extra-extra large is changed to queen size (176). Either way, it is their diet, exercise, or control product that will get women on the way to the thinner, and better, more popular, sexy ideal.

Advertisers manipulate women into thinking their value is dependent on their physical appearance. They appeal to that basic human desire to be wanted, accepted, and sexually attractive, as Charles O Neill points out in his article, “The Language of Advertising”(163).

One reason this “ideal” has manipulated the American society in particular, is that it appeals to some basic American values. This country prizes things like individuality, self-help, hard work, success, and self-control. Women are given the message that if they just work hard enough at dieting and exercise, they can be thin, beautiful and happy. Women, especially, are told that their efforts in perfecting their bodies will be rewarded by success in both their professional and personal lives. If they fail at achieving the ideal, they are told to try harder. A fat person is seen as lazy or greedy or without self-control.

This manipulation of perception on what is “ideal” leads to concern in relation to the teenagers of this country. The television set has become one of the most influential technologies of all time, replacing real role models and teachers. The media teaches them what is attractive, what’s feminine, what’s cool, what’s sexy, what’s romantic. Melrose Place is not just a soap opera; it’s an instruction in how one should be. Once again, just by sheer exposure time, the TV has more effect on a child than his/her parents. Parents may provide verbal instruction and prohibition, but teenagers no longer learn primarily through verbal, but through pictures and images with a funky background beat like in the Pringles commercials.

The absurd thing is that the public is somewhat aware of this manipulation to no effect. They know that to be as thin as the women on TV is close to impossible, but yet they strive for it anyway. For example, if shop mannequins were real women they d be too thin to menstruate. “Only 8 out of every 3 million women actually look like supermodels. The models in the magazines are airbrushed; they aren t perfect. The average American woman weighs 144 lbs. and wears between a size 12 and 14″ (Wolf, 46). The public KNOWS that body types go in and out of fashion. Here s a brief history of popular body images in America s history:

1920s – the flapper look was in (boyish, thin, bound breasts)

1950s – Marilyn Monroe was the sex goddess (curvy and voluptuous) By current standards, she was fat.

1960s – Twiggy era (the beginning of the anorexic look) Twiggy was 5′8″ and 97 lbs.

1980s – Elle McPherson (typified the strong and lean look)

1990s Kate Moss?

“Studies have shown that while 25 years ago the average model weighed 8% less than the average American woman, today’s model weighs 23% below the national average” (Wolf, 50). The exclusion of so many women from representation is a denial of the wide range of bodies and appearances. Instead of marveling at the assortment of body shapes, women continually compare themselves to each other. For most women, staying thin and youthful is a competition. The cruel thing is that the social requirement that we achieve the “ideal weight” is based on the presumption that we can completely control our body size, which is not true.

In conclusion, what is the result of this endeavor for perfection? “One out of every 4 college aged women has an eating disorder. A psychological study in 1995 found that 3 minutes spent looking at models in a fashion magazine caused 70% of women to feel depressed, guilty and shameful. 50% of American women are dieting and 75% of “normal” weight women think they are too fat” (Wolf, 47). Finally, the question remains is this healthy? Is the current image for the “ideal woman” healthy for the women of America? Is it “ideal?”