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Body Image in the Media: Victoria's Secret Fashion Show

Ask yourself if you have recently gone a day without using or viewing the media through a phone, television, or computer. Most would admit that the media greatly influence their daily decisions and lives as a whole. This is not uncommon; the media have continuously been the main source of information and entertainment for society for the past few decades. As they portray the wants and desires of society, they can be a powerful way of persuading people in certain directions. Advertisements, television, and the media have always shown people what they desire, such as the newest phone, the best insurance, or the thinnest body. However, over the last couple decades, the media have started to show us images of bodies that are nearly unobtainable and extremely unhealthy. These media images have grown out of the individual's and society's desire to be perfect and satisfying to viewers. Over time, these portrayals grew out of hand and have spiraled from positive, healthy images into negative and unattainable images of what societal men and women should look like.

Compared to men, the objectification of women has more continuously been an issue, as men feel the need to have power over women. This stems from the belief that women are inferior and less capable overall, which in turn causes men to believe women should merely be a spectacle for sexual desire and nothing more. Some contemporary media attempt to fight this stigma, such as Dove commercials that show average women with healthy bodies. However, advertisers continue to create ads that carry the image of an unattainable body. The twisted yet

powerful media representations of a body that is beyond perfect have, over time, formed into an unhealthy and nearly impossibly thin structure ideal. Women are mainly targeted and criticized when their bodies are not ideal or thin, stemming from the belief that women must be dainty and petite, and that they should innocently bow down to the desires of men.

As my main research topic deals with the media, their distorted image of the ideal female body, and their effects on women, I will use a specific form of media to discuss and analyze in order to support my main focus. The *Victoria's Secret Fashion Show* presents many stigmas to society in one annual show. This show is a way to promote the new Victoria's Secret fashion line, which consists entirely of underwear barely covering the models' bodies. The women are unhealthily thin, yet they are displayed as the ideal for all women and as a model for what all women and girls should strive for. The extravagant costumes, props, and performances used on the show heighten the extremity of the popularity and give the show a sense of godliness in which the unnaturally thin models are seen as goddesses. As a member of Facebook, I am also able to see small-scale receptions to the show through the Isla Vista social network community that can be related to larger scale reactions. Through the models, props, performances, and editing, the *Victoria's Secret Fashion Show* creates an unhealthy and negative image of the female body, which society is forced to view as the ideal for all women. As this show heightens the popularity of unnaturally thin females, it causes women to feel the need to be unhealthy in order to look like the Victoria's Secret models.

With American obesity on the rise, many people may argue that these media representations create a healthy outlook on body image. Obesity is a serious health issue that has been greatly affecting America and its health for nearly a decade. In turn, this phenomenon increasingly affects the media that strive to decrease the extreme amounts of obesity. The WIN

website gives statistics about obesity, explaining that more than two-thirds of adults are considered to be overweight or obese. Among young people ages two to 19, about 31.8 percent are considered to be overweight or obese. With these stunning statistics in mind, some may think that throwing images at society that show an extremely thin—even unrealistic—body can help the obesity epidemic from growing further. However, most women in advertisements continue to be unrealistically thin and make women believe that the unobtainable body is ideal. Kacey Serdar, from Westminster College, agrees that “in recent years, women’s body sizes have grown larger, while societal standards of body shape have become much thinner.” This creates a societal contradiction that leaves women confused as they continue to strive for an ideal that becomes less and less attainable. Some people believe that our society needs reinforcement that obesity is unhealthy, but contemporary media, rather than improving the situation, seem to be creating an even more complicated stigma that gives women a distorted image of beauty.

Along with this contradiction of reality versus media ideals, there have been many studies that prove that most unrealistic body images that are shown in the media actually have negative health effects towards viewers. For example, Jacalyn Robert-McComb argues in her book *Eating Disorders in Women and Children: Prevention, Stress, Management, and Treatment* that “body image and body dissatisfaction play important roles in both eating disorders and disordered eating. These behaviors may stem from a distorted body image, that is, from not seeing the body as it truly appears” (180). The context from which I will conduct this research paper is through the views of authors such as Robert-McComb who believe that distorted media images play a major role in body dissatisfaction. Robert-McComb notices that “television promotes the idea of what is ideal, and as with print media, larger people typically represent the ‘before’ picture when it comes to pushing weight loss products or medications” (181). For

example, some “commercials support the use of laxatives for weight loss, with a slender woman reporting that taking the product just makes her ‘feel better’” (181). This shows that, as viewers, we are programmed to believe that being thinner makes us “feel better”, even when it is done in an unnatural way, such as using laxatives rather than exercise or healthy eating. Robert- Mc-Comb discusses the fact that the viewing of commercials or shows that promote unhealthy weight loss can eventually lead to eating disorders, such as anorexia, bulimia, and “the drive for thinness and perfectionism” (181).

Studies such as Julie M. Sparhawk’s *Body Image and the Media: The Media’s Influence on the Body Image* support the theory that there is a relationship between the media and the body image by using the Body Image States Scales as the testing instrument. This study showed the experimental group a certain amount of contemporary media having to do with body image, and then asked the individuals how they felt about their body. The study was able to prove that there is a direct correlation between the everyday media that are shown to us through television, movies, magazines, etc., and body image feelings, as the experimental group expressed dissatisfaction with their body after viewing the everyday media.

The effects of this dissatisfaction can be seen in articles such as Laura Bates’ “Ugly Girl: The Negative Messages We Send to Our Daughters.” A fifteen year-old-girl is quoted from the Everyday Sexism Project as a very real and striking example of how many girls are tortured by their “imperfect” looks. She wrote, “I always feel like if I don’t look a certain way, if boys don’t think I’m ‘sexy’ or ‘hot’ then I’ve failed.” The article continues to give examples of young and middle-aged women who have daily struggles with their body image due to media portrayals. Bates explains that the advertising industry’s narrow ideal of female beauty, articles that deconstruct the outfits of female politicians, and programs that teach girls how to nip, tuck,

change, and disguise their bodies all put enormous amounts of pressure on women and young girls to conform to these media stereotypes. This leads us back to an attempt at discovering the roots of these issues, lying in certain media outlets that reinforce these harmful ideals.

Deconstructing the *Victoria's Secret Fashion Show*

As a popular topic of discussion that many scholars have debated, body image portrayals in the media must be narrowed down to a particular representation in order to deconstruct the strategies media use to represent the ideal female body. Held annually, the *Victoria's Secret Fashion Show* is the epitome of society-created, ideal women, as the show features the most stereotypically thin-bodied and perfectly featured models that America has. Having grown from 2 million viewers when it first broadcasted in 1999 to nearly 10 million viewers last year, the show is at the height of media popularity. However, it is also the center for dissatisfaction in women who view the show and immediately feel as if they must conform to the models that are idealized and viewed as goddesses. The models are on the catwalk to show off their lingerie, strutting out with nothing but underwear and an elaborate set of wings, their bodies fully exposed to the viewing audience. This puts the bodies in the spotlight for the world to critique and admire, presenting what this show and the media believe to be the standard for body image and beauty.

1. The Models

As the lingerie models enter the stage, it is clear that they are underweight and barely have any fat or muscles on them. At first glance, these models appear to have been starving for months. In a November 2011 interview with *Telegraph*, Adriana Lima, veteran VS Angel, revealed the diet she follows to maintain the model body. Nine days before the show, Lima drinks only protein shakes made with powdered egg, she told *Telegraph*—avoiding solid foods

altogether. Samantha Cressman, in her article discussing the show, reveals that “the typical model body is expressed by three numbers: 34”-24”-34”. . . A woman’s body with those measurements would look like this: a B-cup bust, a 00-0 pant size and hip line that is ten inches wider around than the waist.” The models are also an average height of five feet and nine inches. The average weight for a woman this height is around 145 pounds, where the average VS model is 110 pounds. According to the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders, this body type that is portrayed in the media is only possible naturally by five percent of American females. This evidence is clear and factual, giving us scientific understanding of the body that shows that 95 percent of female Americans don’t even have the physical capacity to be as small and unhealthy as the Victoria’s Secret models. This can also give us an understanding of how unreasonable it is for society to portray these models as ideal, considering how unattainable it truly is.

The process to become a Victoria’s Secret model is very elite and vigorous. Many aspects are taken into account, including age, occupation, size, and even personal life. Interviews of the models are shown on television in between the runway scenes, where the models talk about their experiences. Many chat about how lucky they feel to be a part of the VS model team, due to the high demand for the position. This shows that there is a very high competition for the elite status of a Victoria’s Secret model. This highlights the way that the media wishes to portray these models: as elite figures who, after rigorous dieting and training, made their way to the high societal position. The models are also referred to as “angels”, which also puts the models on a god-like pedestal. The way that the interviews and media portray these women as angelic figures represents society’s expectations that all women should strive for the position of an “angel.”

These expectations are based 100% on looks and body size, which shows us, as media viewers, what our society sees as acceptable: a tiny, “perfect” body.

2. The Props and Costumes

The elaborate stage and costumes during the *Victoria's Secret Fashion Show* are yet another way of idolizing the models and their bodies, portraying the way media see a perfect woman. The costumes that the models are required to wear include minimum lingerie and angel wings. The angel wings, once again, accentuate the way the show wishes to portray these models as angelic and ideal. The wings and lingerie are continually dressed up and bedazzled with jewels, frills, flowers, or anything else that may accentuate the sexuality and femininity of these models. In addition, they wear very tall high heels that add to the extreme sexuality that is put into the models' outfits. The high heels also make the models look thinner and taller, as the heels give an effect of stretching out the bodies and making them look even smaller than they actually are. The extreme sexuality and femininity shown through the lingerie, wings, and heels is broadcasted by the media and gives the world a distorted image of what women's bodies should look like.

3. The Guest Performances

There are many ways to get a larger audience to view a show with the use of incentives. The *Victoria's Secret Fashion Show* uses guest celebrity performances to attract a certain audience. In the 2012 *Victoria's Secret Fashion Show*, Justin Bieber, Rihanna, and Bruno Mars were featured. This gives the show celebrity authority by featuring the latest and most popular stars who can easily have influence over large audiences. By advertising these celebrities far ahead of time, the media were able to get the attention of a particular audience, who were then enticed to watch the fashion show with the models. These celebrities have the “authority” to

endorse this unhealthy, thin look that is perpetuated on the show. Justin Bieber also particularly attracts young women. Therefore, by featuring him on the show, young girls were more tempted to watch the whole show on television, leaving them at a high risk of feeling self-conscious and dissatisfied after seeing the models. The way that Justin Bieber performed also conveyed that he worshiped the models. His staring at the models' bodies in an obvious manner showed the young female viewers that they should be staring also. The other guest star, Rihanna, also wore a small outfit that exposed her body in a way that continued to express the media's desire to idealize a small and perfect body. By using these popular celebrities to bring a larger audience to view the show, the media were purposefully, continuously exposing young girls to dissatisfaction with their bodies after seeing idolized and impossibly thin models.

4. The Editing

The editing of shows that happen in real life says a lot about how the particular media wish to portray what actually happened. For example, the *Victoria's Secret Fashion Show* is held in New York City at the high-profile venue, the Lexington Avenue Armory, which allows a couple hundred people to view it live. The show is taped and then edited through multiple processes in order to give it the most attractive feel that can sell easily to audiences on television. The editing also highlights certain aspects of the show and cuts out parts that might be negative. For example, if a model was to trip slightly, it would be edited out so the television world would never see it. This allows for the show to portray only the absolute perfect moments, with no mistakes or hints of imperfection, which also gives the audience the sense that the models and the show as a whole is "perfect." While watching the show, the cameras also zoom in on the models' bodies and faces, accentuating their skinny legs, tiny waists, and breasts. The lingering of the camera on the models' bodies is a way of keeping the viewers' attention on the thin bodies

that are seen as ideal, yet nearly unattainable. The editing of the show also includes interviews from people who create the costumes and choose the models that are featured in the fashion show. The only interviews that are shared on television are where the models are talked about in a way that makes them seem flawless in every way. The interviewees tend to constantly use the words “perfect” and “beautiful”, which shows society that even other media representatives believe that these models are ideal. The way that viewers see these models and the *Victoria's Secret Fashion Show* is only through the media's eyes, as they highlight certain areas and delete others.

The Aftermath

As many viewers may see the *Victoria's Secret Fashion Show* as a mere form of entertainment and marketing strategy, the effects of the widespread broadcast are detrimental. Last year, the show airing on CBS brought in 9.48 million viewers worldwide. Being a member of a very social community, I am personally able to see the short-term effects of viewing the fashion show. Nearly all of UCSB students chat about the popular show, even days before it airs. My entire sorority gathers in our small TV room to gawk over the incredibly thin bodies and sexy lingerie. Comments heard throughout the viewing include: “They are literally perfect”, “Why can't I be like them”, and “I'm never eating again.” Social networks such as Facebook also reflect the attitude towards the show, as statuses during and after the show are a perfect example of how society reacts to the models' performances. My whole status feed is crammed with comments from girls reading, “Okay, now I'm going to starve myself”, “I would do anything to be as perfect as them”, “I look like a whale compared to those models”, and “Makeover time!” The comments from boys on my Facebook feed reflect the heightened sexuality of the show: “I'm drooling!”, “Why can't all girls be that hot?”, and “Nothing gets

better than those VS angels.” Even in my own small social circle, it is plain to see the mass effects that the *Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show* has on our entire society.

These small-scale communal reactions ripple into large-scale issues that all relate back to the unattainable images that this show and other shows convey to society. Jacalyn Robert-McComb’s book about eating disorders in women and children discusses how the media might negatively impact developing body awareness. She mentions how the media exploit the ideal body image by bombarding consumers with messages that to achieve this ideal body shape is to be in control, happy, attractive, intelligent, wealthy and successful. Robert-McComb states, “to try to conform to this unrealistic idea of thinness, 80% of females are or have been actively dieting” (180). Even television cartoons are impacted by the ideal body image for females. Many Disney characters, such as Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* and Snow White from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, ask who is the “fairest of them all”, and in turn receive the prize of the handsome prince. Robert-McComb states that “the idea of social standards can be related to body-image disturbance and eating dysfunction” (181). Even though Robert-McComb did not clearly describe a correlation between media and eating disorders, she thoroughly proved that the media negatively influence the body image, which in turn can lead to eating disorders. These types of scholarly articles prove even further how vastly the negative effect from media such as *Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show* can span.

Many researchers have even made the direct correlation between the *Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show* and negative outcomes for the female audience. Samantha Cressman, a staff writer on *The Daily Collegian* wrote that “no matter what, the *Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show* always attracts a large amount of viewers, but experts say a distinction must be made between the model in the fantasy and the average woman [...] and then we can take fashion shows for just

what they are—entertaining fluff.” Cressman is one of few that are aware of the negativity that girls subconsciously receive from this show, as she attempts to convey this through her article online. However, the effects seem to spread further every year, as a surprising “69 percent of girls in grades five through 12” are influenced by the media, believing that the body portrayed in shows such as the *Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show* is the perfect body type. Critics on media websites also noticed a connection between the show and the distorted illusion it might convey to female viewers. KC Kelly, a writer on *examiner.com*, says about the guest star singer on the show, “With Bieber’s fans mostly being young girls, many not even in their teen year yet, is watching their favorite pop star singing on stage surrounded by scantily clad women in ‘studded lingerie’ and ‘circus themed undies’ setting a good example for them?” This reflects my analysis earlier as I discussed the possible effect that this show might have on young Justin Bieber fans. Countless websites featuring articles that discuss this issue also represent the widespread, global impacts that the *Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show* has on the viewers and their view of themselves.

The Opposition

Despite the multiple ways that the *Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show* contributes to females creating a distorted view of the ideal body, millions around the world continue to rave about the success of the show and the possibility that it might lead to healthier lifestyles. After the 2012 show, reviews from the *Huffington Post*, CNN, and *Business Insider* all had nothing but raving compliments about the show and its reactions. Ashley Lutz and Daniel Goodman from *Business Insider* posted photos from the event, including comments that complimented the models’ bodies, outfits, and performance. The *Huffington Post* posted an article on their website, stating that “the *Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show* is one of those shows that really likes to one up itself.” Articles such as these popular reviews are media that accentuate the already strong ideals coming

from the original media of the *Victoria's Secret Fashion Show*. Because the show is such a large form of popular media, the articles written about it seem to ingrain these body image ideals into viewers' and readers' minds even more, creating an even larger negative widespread effect. Another positive outlook on the show may be that since the show creates so much attention, provides jobs for those working on the show, and brings people together to watch something entertaining, it can be considered to have a positive effect on society. Some may even argue that the *Victoria's Secret Fashion Show*, though featuring unattainably thin models, can motivate women and girls to stay healthy or to not sway into an unhealthy lifestyle.

However, I believe this is a stretch. Even though the models are given multitudes of attention and props to accentuate their so-called perfection, women and girls are continuously led to believe that they can only be desirable if they truly become as thin and glamorous as the Victoria's Secret Angels. Many tend to look past the implicit effects that can occur after millions of people view this popular show. The negative connotations remain, as these models reflect the standardized desirable body, yet do not reflect the attainably healthy body that society should be striving for.

In Conclusion

The *Victoria's Secret Fashion Show* poses as an appropriate example of how the media convey the ideal female body image to society. Through the models themselves, props, guest performers, and editing, the *Victoria's Secret Fashion Show* can truly be recognized as the epitome of young girls' and women's body dissatisfaction, as the elaborateness continues to feminize and idealize the models. However, this show is merely a piece to the large media puzzle that attempts to throw their own body ideals at females worldwide, in order to shape their ideas

of beauty. This, in turn, gives viewers the idea that they must conform to these standardized, societal ideals in order to fit in and become desirable as a female.

Due to media output, women are being forced to believe that they need to change their view of themselves and their body in order to fit the unattainable media body mold. In order to remedy this, the issue and its dangerous effects on women must become better known to the world. The quick and obvious solution may be to attempt at giving models a healthier look and rather than one so terribly thin. Robert-McComb's article mentioned that researchers at the University of Utah supported the idea of using realistic images in portraying attractiveness. These researchers found that exposure to realistic attractiveness is less likely to increase concern about weight, a finding in direct opposition to the attitudes fostered by exposure to unrealistic images. Possibly even a message at the beginning of the *Victoria's Secret Fashion Show*, or any other show that has similar ideals, stating that the models are one of a kind and cannot be re-created in any way. A more reasonable and reachable goal may be to bring women together and create an organization, a website, a show, or any sort of popular media platform in order to spread the knowledge and take action to stop the false illusions that today's society continues to create. If females do not stand up to the media creations that are hurting us every day, the issue of non-realistic body image in the media will continue to grow.

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