

No Longer Just a Pretty Face: Fashion Magazines' Depictions of Ideal Female Beauty from 1959 to 1999

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Abstract: **Objective:** *The print media's depiction of the ideal of feminine beauty as presented to American women was examined for the years 1959–1999.* **Method:** *Trends were investigated through an analysis of cover models appearing on the four most popular American fashion magazines.* **Results:** *Body size for fashion models decreased significantly during the 1980s and 1990s. There was also a dramatic increase in the frequency with which the media depicted the entire bodies of the models from the 1960s to the 1990s.* **Discussion:** *Both the increasingly thin images and the striking increase in full-body portrayals suggest an increase in the value placed by American society on a thin ideal for women, a change that is concurrent with the increase in disturbed eating patterns among American women.* © 2004 by Wiley Periodicals, Inc. *Int J Eat Disord* 36: 342–347, 2004.

Key words: *female ideal beauty; fashion magazines; body size; thin images*

INTRODUCTION

Many researchers and theorists have implicated the media in contributing to the development and maintenance of body image disturbance and eating dysfunction in women through the conveyance of thinness-oriented norms and values (Garner, Garfinkel, Schwartz, & Thompson, 1980; Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). Women are theorized to internalize the thin ideal portrayed in the media through repeated exposure to such depictions, leading to increased body dissatisfaction and often, ultimately, to eating pathology, as the more dissatisfied a woman is with her body, the more likely she will engage in drastic means to lose weight (Stice, Schupak-Neuberg, Shaw, & Stein, 1994). The media's transmission of the ideal of thinness as a measure of women's beauty, as well as a corresponding stigmatization of obesity, is asserted to create excessive pressure for women to achieve a body weight and size that

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are very difficult to achieve, contributing to the development of eating disorders in many women (Levine & Smolak, 1996).

The apparent increase in eating disorders over the last several decades (Hoek, 1993) has coincided with a decrease in the media's portrayal of women's ideal body weight (Wiseman, Gray, Mosimann, & Ahrens, 1992). Indeed, historical trends are often referenced as partial substantiation for the claim that media images of thinness may help foster and/or reinforce a social climate in which thinness is considered essential for female beauty. Previous studies have demonstrated such a trend towards thinness through examining the manner in which Playboy magazine centerfolds and Miss America Pageant contestants have changed over time. In the first of these studies, the women involved with both organizations became increasingly thinner from 1959 to 1978 (Garner et al., 1980). In the second study, the trend appeared to continue for the years 1979–1988, as the Miss America contestants continued to decrease in body size while the Playboy centerfolds reached a plateau at an extremely low body weight (Wiseman et al., 1992).

As repeated exposure is an essential component of the internalization process (Heinberg & Thompson, 1995), in seeking to examine the influence of the media, it is important to consider stimuli to which women are frequently exposed. Although women are not likely to be frequently presented with Playboy centerfolds, or even with Miss America contestants, evidence suggests that girls and women do have high rates of repeated exposure to print media. For each year between 1950 and 1999, an average of more than 5,500,000 women have subscribed to the top four fashion magazines (Standard Periodical Dictionary, 1959–1999). A far greater number of women may be exposed to such magazines through friends or office access, and an indeterminate number are exposed to the covers of these magazines in places such as supermarket checkout lines. Given the large number of women likely exposed to print media through a number of these sources, it is important to examine the portrayal of ideal female beauty in these magazines as it is likely to have a significant effect on body image dissatisfaction.

The current study was undertaken to examine the manner in which fashion magazines have portrayed the ideal of female beauty over the last 40 years. An investigation was conducted to determine if any trends exist in terms of the thinness of the figures being presented as ideal and in the proportion of full-body depictions on the covers of the magazines. Because repeated exposure to thin images has been implicated as a mechanism through which the thin ideal is internalized (Stice et al., 1994) and as the presentation of the entire bodies of the fashion models, rather than solely their faces or faces and upper torsos, impacts upon the extent to which women are exposed to these thin ideal images, the proportion of full-body portrayals may mediate the effects of the magazines and is, therefore, important to determine.

METHOD

To determine if any recent trends exist for women's ideals of female beauty, overall body size ratings were obtained from female models from the past 40 years. As female fashion models are employed to entice women into purchasing merchandise due to their desire to identify with the image set before them, such models should represent a fair index of how many women perceive ideal female beauty. The models selected were those appearing on the covers of the most popular women's magazines in a given year. The determination of which magazines were to be included in this analysis was quantified through the selection, among the women's fashion magazines, of the four that were in

existence from 1959 to 1999 and had the greatest circulation according to the Standard Periodical Dictionary for each year. The magazines analyzed were *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour*, *Mademoiselle*, and *Vogue*.

The overall body size of the models was determined through rating the cover models on the nine female figure drawings from the Contour Drawing Rating Scale (Thompson & Gray, 1995). In this scale, each detailed body shape is rated with a number from 1 to 9, with a rating of 1 representing the thinnest figure, a rating of 9 representing the heaviest figure, and with increments between the pictured shapes designated by a half step in the ratings (e.g., 1.5). Rating the models on such a scale rather than estimating their body mass index (BMI) values directly provided a reliable method through which to assess their figures, as it allows direct comparisons with the images in the scale. The raters employed in the current study examined the figures depicted on the scale and then attempted to assess which image most closely resembled each cover model. The raters were blind to the hypotheses of the investigation.

The criteria for determining the suitability of rating the models were developed in a previous study (Cusumano & Thompson, 1997). The criteria were designed to select only those images from which an accurate body size could be determined. Models for whom an insufficient amount of their bodies was visible were not rated. Tallies of the number of ratable images from each magazine per year, as well as the number of images designated as "un-ratable," were also recorded to determine whether the number of full-body depictions changed over time. Of 1,920 total covers, 552 images were originally coded as ratable and 547 were similarly coded by a second rater, for an agreement rate of 99%. Only those images deemed ratable by both coders were included in these analyses. Reliability between the raters of the fashion models was established. There was a strong correlation between the raters for the overall body size of the images in each of the magazines, with an overall correlation between raters of .81 ($p < .01$).

RESULTS

The first goal of the current study was to examine how the overall body size of models on the covers of the most popular fashion magazines has changed over time. It was not possible to examine the overall body size of the fashion models for all four decades as, during the 1960s and 1970s, many of the models were not depicted in a manner that was possible for the raters to quantify. That is, the majority of the covers during that time period did not display full-figure views of the models. Instead, they presented images of solely the models' faces or the models' faces and their upper torsos. Consequently, statistical analyses using the body size ratings for the fashion models were only conducted for the 1980s and 1990s. In terms of overall body size during these decades, for three of the magazines, the models for whom there were full-figure depictions became significantly smaller as time progressed (*Vogue*, $r = -.36$; *Cosmopolitan*, $r = -.26$; and *Mademoiselle*, $r = -.36$, all $ps < .01$). One of the magazines, *Glamour*, did not show such a relationship ($r = -.14$, $p > .05$). However, its trend was in the same direction. Therefore, it appears that there was a decrease in the overall body size of the fashion models depicted during these two decades.

It is likely that the frequency with which the covers of the magazines portray the entire bodies of fashion models, as opposed to merely depicting the models' faces or their faces and upper torsos, could mediate their effects on women. Therefore, an investigation of the proportion of full-body depictions throughout the 40 years was also conducted.

A series of binary logistic regression analyses were performed to determine whether the amount of full-body depictions varied over time. Logistic regression was utilized, as the dependent variable (whether or not a cover contained a full body shot) was dichotomous, not continuous as is assumed by linear regression. The number of full-figure shots (those that depict the models' full torsos, including their hips) on the covers of the magazines increased significantly throughout the 40 years examined (Wald χ^2 : Cosmopolitan, 56.48 ; Glamour, 80.38; Mademoiselle, 56.34 ; Vogue, 43.21 ; all magazines, 57.90, all $ps < .01$). Although there was an initial decrease in the number of full-body portrayals for three of the magazines, all four magazines showed dramatically more full body shots of the models as the years progressed, even though the number of total covers remained constant (Figure 1). For instance, Glamour presented nine full-body depictions between 1959 and 1960, did not present another until 1988, and then featured 84 full-body shots in the subsequent 12 years.

To determine whether other differences exist in the images depicted by the fashion magazines that might also mediate the impact of the covers on women, the images of one of the magazines (Vogue) were rated for the first and last 5 years of the study (1959–1963 and 1994–1999, respectively) in terms of the women's age (younger or older than 25) and in terms of the revealing nature of their clothing (whether the women were wearing tight or loose fitting outfits). There was a strong correlation between the raters for each of these analyses (for age, $r = .66, p < .01$; for revealingness, $r = .81, p < .01$). Although there was no difference found between the ages of the women in the earlier and more recent time

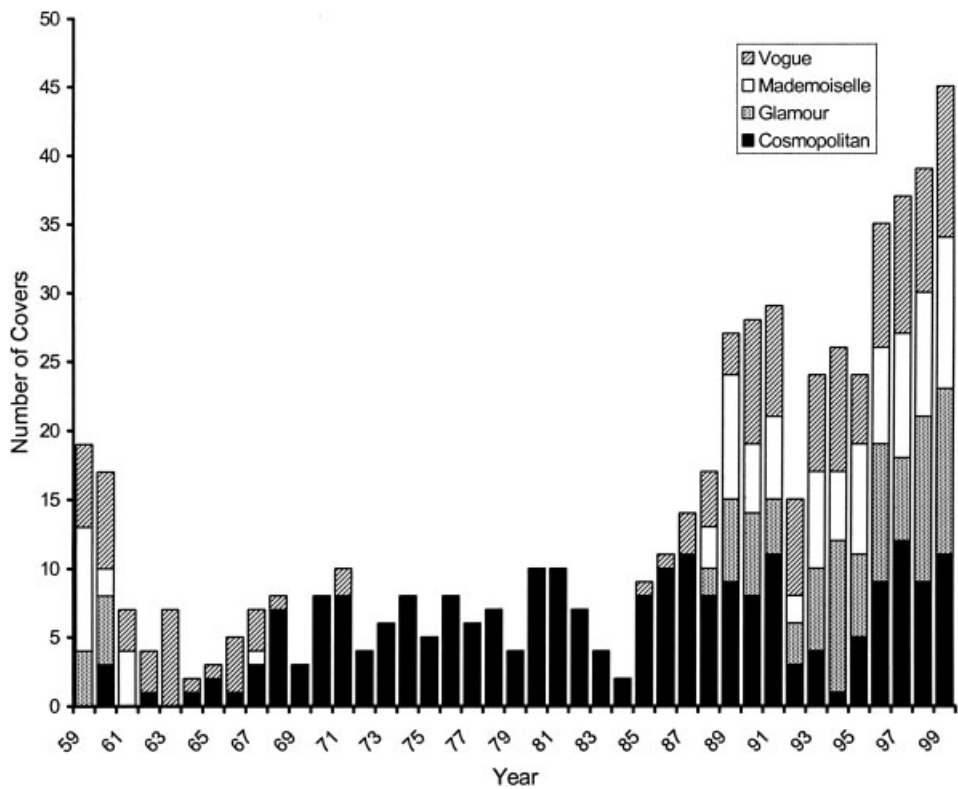


Figure 1. Number of magazine covers depicting full-body shots as a function of time.

periods (Fisher's exact test, $p > .10$), there was a significant difference in terms of the degree to which the women's clothing revealed their bodies (Fisher's exact test, $p < .01$). The proportion of younger women was roughly equivalent in the earlier (54%) and more recent (61%) time periods, whereas the proportion of women wearing revealing clothes was much greater in the later time period (55%) than in the earlier period (0%).

DISCUSSION

An attempt was made to detect trends in the media's depiction of the ideal of feminine beauty presented to women for the years 1959–1999. Fashion models were found to become increasingly thin during the 1980s and 1990s, a shift that was significant for three of the four magazines examined. This trend towards increasing thinness is consistent with previous research examining the media's depiction of ideal female images in recent decades (Garner et al., 1980; Wiseman et al., 1992), but is especially noteworthy given the large number of women exposed to print media.

Particularly striking is the finding that not only are the models becoming thinner, but that the public has also been increasingly exposed to depictions of their bodies. Indeed, the number of full-figure portrayals on the covers of the magazines has changed dramatically throughout the 40 years examined. Although there were a number of full-body depictions in the earliest years, the 1960s witnessed a sharp decline in such portrayals among three of the four magazines, the exception being *Cosmopolitan*. During the 1970s and early 1980s, the same three magazines presented no full-body images. In contrast, the depictions in *Cosmopolitan* increased. Finally, in the late 1980s, all four magazines converged in displaying a large proportion of full-body images. For the three magazines that had been not been depicting such full-body presentations, this was a striking alteration of the earlier trend. *Cosmopolitan*, in contrast, displayed a relatively steady increase in such full-body presentations throughout time. As circulation figures indicate that *Cosmopolitan* has been the most popular fashion magazine since 1972, perhaps the recent increase in full-body depictions by the other magazines represents an attempt to increase their market share.

Regardless, the recent increase in exposure, as the other three magazines joined *Cosmopolitan* in displaying full-body portrayals, may mediate the effects of the magazines on women. As fashion models are substantially thinner than the average American woman, a key aspect of the media's impact on women may be not simply how thin the models depicted appear to be, but also how frequently women are presented with such images. As circulation figures for all four magazines have increased over the 40 years examined (Standard Periodical Dictionary, 1959–1999), and as their covers have displayed proportionally more full-body depictions as the years progressed, American women seem to have been increasingly presented with thin ideal images.

This impact is likely compounded by the fact that, as was revealed in the post-hoc comparison, the women in the five most recent years (1995–1999) were found to be wearing significantly more revealing outfits than were the women in the five earliest years (1959–1963). Thus, not only has the proportion of full-body shots increased with time, but so too has the extent to which the bodies of the models are revealed in these depictions. One strong message communicated by the print media over the last 40 years regarding female beauty seems to have changed from one espousing the importance of a pretty face to one that additionally emphasized an extremely thin figure, as women have been increasingly exposed to models' bodies and as these bodies have become progressively thinner. Such a

message may contribute to the objectification of women, creating additional physical requirements that must be satisfied to merit depiction on a magazine and communicating to American women an increasingly thin feminine ideal.

In conclusion, the current study documents a trend towards a smaller body size for fashion models during the 1980s and 1990s, as well as a significant increase in the frequency with which the media have depicted the entire bodies of these models from the 1960s to the 1990s. As stated earlier, it has been hypothesized that the recent increase in eating disorders may be related, at least in part, to social pressures on women to be slim and on the internalization of the thin ideal through repeated exposure to such images (Thompson et al., 1999). Thus, both the increasingly thinner images and the dramatic increase in full-body depictions suggest an increase in the valuing in American society of a thin ideal shape for women, and may contribute to the increase in disturbed eating patterns among American women.

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