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Beautiful Women

What I already know: When I walk into Target to pick up toothpaste and toilet cleaner, I find myself lingering in the clothing section, holding up a pair of size 12 jeans only to put them back and look for the rare and coveted size 16-18 that will actually fit over my ample hips. I stalk cosmetics aisles, eyeing the dozens of anti-aging products which include eye creams, night serums, gel masks, and Olay-infused foundations that promise to sit on top of fine lines instead of settling into them. The neighboring aisle is the pharmacy with its obvious medical products, but much more appealing weight loss supplements, Slim-Fast nutrition bars, and women's One-A-Day weight loss formula multivitamins. All of these things are in the front of the store. It seems like a conspiracy to make us buy more. I guess it seems that way because it's true. Marketers know what women want: to look "good". Good is impossible because good is slender, curvy, and toned with statuesque symmetry. Good is big eyes, full lips, a slightly turned-up nose, and the complex combination of a tan without wrinkles, freckles, or sunspots.

When wrinkles are scarier than skin cancer when a woman gets too much sun, I think it's time to reevaluate. We worship the thin-yet-voluptuous Western woman that plagues the covers of fashion and domestic magazines with less than subtle "Get a Hot Bod" and "10 Sexy Tips to Get His Attention." L'Oreal ads tell us to dye our hair, put on make-up, and treat our skin because we're "worth it". This leads the reader to believe not only that the woman on the cover or in the ads already epitomizes these cover-text ideas but that no one else does – especially not the reader – so read, learn, buy.

After absorbing the absolutely necessary knowledge contained in the “advice” section and buying whatever it is we were told to, we move on to the celebrities and gossip. We see Tyra Banks looking positively average in her one-piece with full thighs, armpit cleavage, and something other than a six pack. We see Jennifer Love Hewitt with generously-sized hips and cellulite. Tyra is 5'10” and 161 pounds. Jennifer is a size 2 on a 5' 2” frame. They are both labeled as fat even though they are well below the proportional size of the average woman. They publicly lash out at the media, telling them women's bodies are too harshly scrutinized and that healthy curves on a woman are beautiful, then they pull a 180 and book numerous appearances displaying their new weights after dieting and exercising with their personal trainers and nutritionists. Tyra is back to her “normal” 130-140 pounds on her Amazon-like build. Jennifer lost 18 pounds from her already tiny body and is featured on the cover of Shape magazine for it. These are our warriors, our defenders, our idols; we stand by them in their hours of need and support their fight for the healthy body. Then we watch as they conform to the ideals of their enemies and predictably go along with it and say, “You should see Tyra/Jennifer now! She shaped up and she looks amazing!” with the utmost gusto and oblivious hypocrisy.

This is not a recent cultural phenomenon. The ideal body has, throughout the history of humanity, always been unobtainable by the average woman. When the majority of a populace was in poverty, large women were the physique du jour, as described in M. Gigi Durham's The Lolita Effect:

Think about the ideal feminine body in sixteenth-century paintings: the women portrayed were heavy and pale, often with sagging skin and double chins. Titian's *Venus of Urbino* has a puffy stomach and rolls of flesh at her knees. Ruben's *Leda and the Swan* depicts a flabby woman with heavy thighs and visible cellulite – the love interest of the god Jupiter. These were the beauty ideals of the time, and they would be viewed as repulsive today. (Durham 184)

Impossible ideals aren't just taught to us by society and the media. Body-loathing is passed down from our mothers, too. I remember as a child seeing my already thin mother poking and prodding at her size 4-6 frame, complaining about her wide hips and thunder-thighs. Turning to the side, she would suck in her stomach in the mirror to make her “pouch” (the lower section of a woman's abdomen that bulges

out slightly because it contains necessary estrogen for pregnancy) go away and make her 34A's look larger by comparison. I remember her plucking and dying grays with furrowed brows, and looking for make-up to make her look younger. Now she compares eye creams with the kind of focus and concern dedicated to a graduate thesis. Sometimes I catch myself doing the same thing at the ripe old age of 23. I know that my mother's influence isn't completely her fault because these kinds of unattainable standards were around long before her time. We are all products of our environment.

Why I want to know: I remember being introduced to Weight Watchers by my mother at the age of 14 because I was 5'2" and 145 lbs when I *could* be 5'2" and 125 lbs. At 16, I became the younger of the Atkins diet duo with her, testing my urine with litmus paper to check for the fatty consistency (the more the better) and later dry heaving after a single bowl of Cheerios. I remember a brush with bulimia after hearing my mother's cautionary anecdote about her own eating disorder in college. I have joined Weight Watchers as a team with my mother four different times and quit only to find my mother slimming down to her current size 6-8 and my body refusing to follow suit no matter how much I run, restrict calories, drink water, lift weights or eat "metabolism-boosting" foods (in other words no matter how miserable I make myself trying). I know my mother's intentions were good. She didn't want me to have to deal with weight issues as an adult so she wanted to nip it in the bud – the problem was that there was no bud to nip.

Wearing jeans that hover between sizes 16 and 18, I have been told directly and indirectly that my body is not good enough (except for my 38 DD's, I can keep those). I have a single crease on my forehead that was screeched at by a former friend (I believe the word was "gross") that had me moisturizing like there was no tomorrow. Even if my blood pressure is 108/69, I eat right and exercise, and always wear sunscreen, my body *is not good enough*. I am told that if I just try 'x' I can get down to 'y'. If I just cut out 'a' I'll lose 'b'. I will get 'z'% decrease in fine lines and wrinkles in six weeks if I use 'n' twice daily. All these tips might make me exhausted, ravenous, and miserable, but dammit I *will*

be hot! Not only am I, or more appropriately we, being lied to about the attainability of the results, we're being lied to about ourselves because we're being told that *we* are not good enough. We are not healthy. We are not sexy. We are not worth it.

The standards of Western beauty have reached far and wide. There are those who truly resist the pressure and those who capitalize on women's self-esteem issues. Covergirl took on Queen Latifah as their token plus-size model. The new Lifetime television series Drop Dead Diva utilizes the spirit of a skinny woman being transported into the body of a bigger woman and adapting to the size and social stigma. Another new show called Cougar Town (on ABC) features Courtney Cox playing a newly divorced mother in her forties getting back into dating. There is a sequence in which the camera focuses on different parts of Cox's body that are supposedly sagging and aging while she frowns and prods around looking for her lost youth. The differences in these women are supposed to be average but are put in the spotlight like some sort of handicap. There are few if any shows that star an older or plus-size woman without turning the woman into a charity case or inspiration rather than being just an average woman (those roles are saved for the curvy-slender twenty and thirty-somethings).

Story of the Search: In a group forum I hosted with seven of my female friends, I asked them to start by sharing their heights, weights, and sizes (with permission to record and use the information using initials) and discuss their views on women's body issues. Introductions go as follows:

Me: 5'5", 227 lbs, size 16/18.

K: 5'7", 190 lbs, size 16/18.

L: 5'6", 160 lbs, size 12.

E: 4'9", 115 lbs, size 12/14 in girls.

A: 5'2", 125 lbs, size 6.

C: 5'7", 140 lbs, size 8/10.

R: 5'6", 180 lbs, size 12.

D: 5'2", 145 lbs, size 10.

I begin by asking if any of the girls feel pressure to change their bodies and where that pressure, if any, is coming from. K reveals that her first body issues came from her father's joking comments about how she should go outside and run around before she got fat. A recent weight gain caused by an inability to commit to cardio exercise because of chronic joint injuries has also added to her insecurities. However, she said that she always feels better when she sees her body as capable rather than striving for something aesthetically pleasing. She admits that having a loving husband who believes she's sexy no matter what helps her self-esteem.

L shares her two-year battle with anorexia in high school. She says it was a control issue – she could control how thin she was and often got praise for it so she kept on going with it. It was never media or family pressure, but approval from her peers that affected how she saw herself. Now, she says, it helps to not give a damn what she looks like because she has the same kind of support K has in her boyfriend.

E brings with her a thought on an article she read last year about real women's bodies. She shows us the worn picture she printed from the article which depicts a blonde, nude, thirty-something woman who looks to be a size 6 or 8 with a skin crease in the middle of her back, extra fat on her upper arms, soft thighs, the dreaded lower abdomen pouch, smallish breasts, freckles, and a huge smile on her face. We all agree that this woman is beautiful. E tells us that she looks at this picture whenever she begins to believe the myths of airbrushing. “Once,” she says, “I showed this picture to Tony (her boyfriend) and asked him what he noticed first... and I told him to be brutally honest.” E stays silent for a moment to build suspense and then grins, “He said the smile.” She admits that she would like to lose some weight, but mostly for reasons of feeling healthier rather than prettier. Yet again, we all see another instance of a supportive male in the mix.

A (my younger sister) shrugs and blushes a bit saying that she's never really felt pressure to be

thin from anyone. Most of the women scoff and say it's probably because she has a perfect body. A shrugs again and says that it's from being around our dad more than our mom. However, A reveals that she really hates having a large chest (34DD) on her smaller frame because she believes it garners unwanted attention from boys and interferes with her soccer. I notice one of the women roll her eyes and point out that it is reactions like these that reinforce the standards. We believe that A's is the perfect body (not to say there is anything wrong with it) so we want to see it everywhere, no matter how much we hate it. We are the ones who buy the media products that sell her body type. K pipes in by asking if we would honestly buy it if the woman on front was a size 20. Now the women in the group sit and think for a bit. We would all like to say that we would support healthy body image, but we know how we've been influenced and what we believe is beautiful. After a short moment to think, we continue on to C.

C is the shy one of the group. Raised on a farm, C's ideas of baring legs is cut-offs or athletic shorts for bailing hay in 90-degree heat. She never wears a stitch of make up or keeps up with her weight (the latter of which I asked her to do for this forum). C says that it has only been since she started college two years ago and began living around more girls that she even really pondered her body image. She doesn't like or read magazines and never looks at another woman with jealousy or haughtiness because, "That's not how I was raised." C says that she and her sisters were brought up the same way her brothers were with hard work, good grades, and a respectful attitude being the core of their lives.

R is ready to burst by the time we reach her in the discussion. She recalls standing in dressing rooms with her mother being told, "It's okay, a few crunches will get rid of that," when a shirt was too tight. R believes she has it worse than any other woman present because, unlike the rest of us, she has an apple shape. She bemoans her shape for making buying pants harder and for forcing her to define her waist with optical illusions in proportion and pattern. R keeps up on all the "How to Dress Your

Body” articles and tells us all of her secrets. I ask her if her mother does the same thing and she says that her mother is even worse and laughs.

D shares a similar horror story about mothers and dressing rooms. She talks about when she was overweight to an unhealthy extent and how her mother's way of motivating her to lose weight was to make her get clothes that were too small so she'd have to drop pounds. She says that she would have rather heard that it was dangerous for her health, but that playing off of a girl's looks seemed to be a more direct approach. D is now at a healthy weight, but she attributes her love of her body to her fiance calling her beautiful every day.

I finish by talking about my experiences with my mother and how I'm just getting over how I'll never be a size 6. I also credit a male influence on my life for helping me be more accepting of my body – my soon-to-be-husband, Josh. I point out that we all have positive male influences in our lives but didn't really touch on positive female influences and ask why.

R responds that it's because girls are competitive and mean. We all nod in agreement. She elaborates that we don't want to admit when another girl is pretty because it feels like losing or like we need to live up to something. D adds that most women she knows are more comfortable around men because it feels like less of a competition. I ask them where mothers tie in and K comments on how daughters are like mini-me's for moms. A daughter winning is like the mom winning, too. We conclude that oftentimes, girls' attitudes are reinforced by words that focus on looks (like “pretty”) whereas boys are called handsome less often than smart or strong. It is the way we have been molded for generations to attract men and make other women like us out of admiration or hate us out of jealousy.

After this discussion, I see my topic with new eyes. I can't just focus on the injustices and unattainable standards. I need to find positive examples of women and society moving against them. An online article in the health section of the UK's [Daily Mail](#) cites a study by evolutionary biologist Dr.

Stephen Stearns of Yale University that finds women are growing shorter, fatter, and healthier for fertility reasons. The size 0-4 we are striving for is not only unlikely, but unhealthy.

More evidence that women need to start loving themselves and each other (other than the obvious harmonious reasons) is the negative impact on psychological health that affects wellness. This evidence comes from The Federal Government Source for Women's Health Information. They cite the same reasons for body image issues in women by saying the following:

Women are constantly bombarded with "Barbie Doll-like" images. By presenting an ideal that is so difficult to achieve and maintain, the cosmetic and diet product industries are assured of growth and profits. It's no accident that youth is increasingly promoted, along with thinness, as an essential criterion of beauty. The message we're hearing is either "all women need to lose weight" or that the natural aging process is a "disastrous" fate. (Body Image)

While this is valuable information from a credible source, not many women subscribe to federal government web sites for their beauty queries. This is why I looked for popular positive media influences on body image.

I have always enjoyed a monthly feature in Marie Claire that asks women in different cities 'What I Love About Me'. For the September issue, they visited Louisville, Kentucky and found a variety of women (not just curvy-skinny blondes) to interview. Tammy Jih quips, "In spite of my mom wanting me to hide them, I love my freckles – they're my little way of rebelling"(Dunlap 232). Kate Magliaro says, "I've been in the army for the past three years and love challenging myself physically, even if I'm just carrying heavy bags" (Dunlap 233). Each woman interviewed finds what they love and smile proudly because of it.

Dove has what they call their "Campaign for Real Beauty." Instead of making a single difference the focus of their ads (growing older, being larger), they encourage the idea that everyone is different and that it's not an issue to work through or something to overcome, but something to be comfortable with from the start. They not only run commercials with this mission statement in mind but also sponsor self-esteem programs for young girls in which the children are encouraged to define

beauty in their own words. Alex from Connecticut says her cartwheels are beautiful. Candice from New Jersey says her smile is beautiful. If only all little girls could find that in themselves.

What I Learned: I found a ray of hope amidst my anger at the industry. There are people working to help little girls grow into women who love themselves. There are women out there who support one another instead of secretly hating other women for their looks. There are media outlets that celebrate women rather than exploiting them. When I started this paper I felt like a harpy and a hypocrite for reproaching beauty standards with one hand and applying mascara with the other. I found relief from my guilt for being conscious of my appearance. Tracking my nutrition and exercise, wearing make up, and looking for flattering clothing is not damaging so long as I do it for myself rather than others.

I discovered more about a cycle of media and mothers than I care to admit. Mothers (being products of the media and their own mothers) may hurt their daughters more than help by using aesthetic praises more than those addressing intellect or character. The little nudges to shape up, put down the fork, or get the smaller size may seem encouraging but usually end up being fodder for venting or therapy sessions. This kind of negative female impact tied in with the competitiveness of other women drives us to men for a self-esteem boost.

That is something I wish I could have gotten more information on: the dependence of women on male attention. Would the women in my forum have been as happy without that close bond with the men in their lives and that constant reassurance? Would I? Well, I'm not about to leave the love of my life to find that out. I suppose it will have to suffice for me to take the size 12 jeans off of my closet door and hope against hope that Kohl's has an unlimited return policy for unworn items with the original tags still attached.

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Group Forum that I Conducted

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