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## Mirror, Mirror on the Wall

*The paper examines the idea of the “ideal” body image that women strive to achieve, covering the time period of the 1920s – 1990s. The analysis is primarily of narrative texts that debate body types of women that have emerged over the time periods. My research question, Can women ever officially achieve the “ideal” body image? confirms that women cannot fully present distorted social readings of body image, but they can access resources and outlets to discover that there is more to women’s identity and value than her body alone. As this paper explains, this realization is structured by a complex web of cultural influences.*

Letting the voices of my Women and Gender peers be heard...

### **My body is...**

Beautiful, I love me, for me; Dysfunctional; Strong, flexible, balanced and in need of overall fitness & weight reducing exercises; A work in progress; Fucking temple; Dismantling; A blanket, a shield, a muscular yet soft representation of my history and a tool for love; Sacred; Powerful and beautiful; Beautiful- My instrument to express myself; Little, but strong; Unique; Like a tea bag... you don’t know how strong it is till you put it in hot water (E. Roosevelt); Everything and nothing, adorned and disrobed, imperfectly beautiful.

## Introduction

Throughout so many projects, trials, college courses, and open discussions, body image has been the one thing that I haven't been able to figure out and completely understand. Where do you begin even slightly to cover the topic? I will primarily focus on shifts in the "ideal" feminine body image between the 1920s and 1990s. I studied body types and the choices women were making about their bodies, across decades. Yet, depictions of women's bodies were constantly changing. This paper includes an analysis of the social forces that impacted shifts in body "ideals" over time. I then focus more specifically on contemporary women, and the myriad causes and consequences of beauty ideals and body dissatisfaction. My research question, Can woman ever officially achieve the "ideal" body image?, confirms that women cannot fully prevent distorted social readings of body image, but they can access resources and outlets to discover that there is more to women's identity and value than her body alone. And yet, as I will explain, this realization is structured by a complex web of cultural influences.

### Mirror, Mirror

There are a diversity of influences that affect a person's body image and satisfaction such as gender, sex, age groups, and even the atmosphere you

were raised. My research seeks to find an answer as to why there is such an extreme emphasis on body image among women. Body image is a reflection of how you feel your body fulfills or fails to fulfill cultural aesthetic standards like how attractive you perceive yourself to be. Our understandings of beauty, however, do not grow on trees: they are a part of the societies and cultures in which we live. The distorted mentality of what is "perfect" can haunt us and comes from everywhere: magazines, television, friends, family, advertisements and articles. These messages are internalized such that we become our own biggest critics.

..We take for granted that looking good for ourselves will make us feel good. And yet there is a subtle tracery of outside urgings which works on us, creating a new and often dissatisfied relationship with our bodies (Orbach, 2009, p.2).

Our Western culture has put such an extreme emphasis on beauty which has become the focus of our daily lives. But what we regard as society's standards is not always how we would like to portray our own bodies, but we still live by them.

Certainly, given that negative body image is now a normative experience for many young women worldwide,

there is a need for more serious and knowledge-based efforts by popular culture to promote positive body image (Swami & Smith, 2012, p. 165).

While I research this topic, I struggle to find a way to help women feel comfortable in their own skin and feel beautiful.

Media -- whether it is in print, television, or film, plays a large role in portraying what is an increasingly narrow construction of "beauty." As consumers, women absorb these messages which impacts body image.

The media, of course, urged us to be pliant, cute, sexually available, thin, and blond, pore less, wrinkle-free, and deferential to men. But it is easy to forget that the media also suggested we could be rebellious, tough, enterprising, and shrewd (Douglas, 1995, p. 9).

It keeps us up to date on what is "right and wrong," while judging those who do not have those physical features. Our friends and family are a large part of our everyday life. Their opinions can easily influence how we perceive our own selves. We are taught in society that body image is what makes you a woman, such as having breasts, being "beautiful," or having a certain body type. I think that women are oppressed in many ways because of our gender;

how society views women influences our body image perceptions.

Examining historical shifts in the "ideal" feminine body is appalling. Generally speaking, the trend has been toward changing women's bodies for others' viewing, rather than for pure health reasons or self-care.

Those who had previously paid little heed to fashion or health now find themselves caught up in attempts to make the best of them and to take responsibility for their health and well-being. The individual is now deemed accountable for his or her body and judged by it. Looking after oneself is a moral value. The body is becoming akin to a worthy personal project (Orbach, 2009, p. 5).

This statement is a perfect example of how women are increasingly treating their bodies like assignments. Bodies are progressively becoming understood as women's responsibility to discipline through things like diet, exercise, and display.

### **Bodies across Decades**

My research on body image begins in the 1920s, around the time of World War I, where many fluctuations outside of body image were changing. Great deals of social transformations were underway during this period. Industrialization was beginning to take hold which had

dramatic and immediate impacts on the household. Indeed, this is part of the period during which the “cult of domesticity” emerged. It was around this time, for instance, that we began associating women with “the home” and men with “the work place.” During this stage, women drastically changed from the stereotypical curvy woman to the “Flapper,” a woman with short haircut, very thin, boyish style, flattened breasts and a small waist line. These women went to bars, smoked, and began to partake in activities that were considered “masculine” at the time. These women were not considered feminine based on their dress. Yet, they did not lack a sexual identity; indeed, they were in the process of redefining a femininity better suited to their interests and desires (Walker). When compared to the 1920s, ideal bodies in the 1930s took a quick turn and went in the complete opposite direction of what women strived to achieve a decade earlier. Images of the small waist and flattened breasts were diminishing. The idea of fuller breasts and a slender waist was the culturally exalted feminine body image during this decade. For instance, shortly after WWII, women’s magazines started to promote the “New Look” of Christian Dior, which required women to have an incredibly thin waist, and to achieve this look, use corsets, girdles,

and diets (Walker, 1998). Knowing that women went to these extreme is disappointing but speaks to the power of cultural ideals in affecting not only body ideals, but what people do in search of obtaining those ideals. As a woman myself, seeing others go through these painful processes to even feel beautiful or anywhere near the “ideal” is overwhelming. Images from this decade depict women making physical alterations to their body to become something they are not, a phenomenon that continues to this day (Walker).

Once the 1940s and 1950s came around, the image of fuller breasted women and a thin waist remained a cultural ideal emblematic of this period. The use of girdles and push-up bras were still being used to increase breast size (Walker). Even more so, during these years, women began to use anything and everything to be exactly what they were not. Whether this was through the clothing they were wearing or their hair dyes and makeup, changing the appearance of a woman’s body was accepted and arguably subtly demanded as long as it was to become the “ideal.” A perfect example of a woman that fit every standard during this period is the well-known Marilyn Monroe. Perhaps the most iconic model in history, Monroe defined feminine beauty during her age. She had curvy hips, a tiny waist,

and larger breasts. In looking at photographs of women in magazines throughout the fifties to the present, it is easy to see that women have gone back to this desired body image. Monroe was not only famous for her body but how she displayed it as well. She was a woman that walked with confidence, strength, and power and she showed what women should give themselves credit for!

The 1960s introduced a British model that everyone called “Twiggy.” She did not have to keep up with exercising and diets to stay thin or wear any necessary garments to achieve her look. Seen in magazines and advertisements, Twiggy was the skinniest model that had ever been seen, weighing eighty nine pounds. Her weight was far from healthy for any woman at 5’6, but Twiggy set a standard for models that few women could achieve. Other models tried to attain the same look, but Twiggy helped perpetuate ultra-thin feminine bodies as an ideal. The 1960s marked a time period during which women were beginning to be exploited because of their body parts and looked at as objects to others.

Throughout American history, many decades were characterized by a more voluptuous feminine ideal body. But Twiggy helped to alter the cultural standard for what was considered

skinny. Her thinness took a typical average woman’s body and made it look overweight.

Psychopathologies that develop within a culture, far from being anomalies, or aberrations, to be characteristic expressions of that culture; to be, indeed, the crystallization of much that is wrong with it (Bordo, 1985, p. 229).

This feminine aesthetic established unhealthy and harmful norms of female beauty and body image, making eating disorders acceptable at younger and younger ages. A fuller, healthy looking woman rapidly came back in the seventies, but women were told to keep the same thin look, while creating the best of both worlds; fuller breasts and thin waist.

The 1980s and 1990s created a modeling world that included new age variables such as ethnicities and accomplishments. Diversity in culture and race were more accepted and included in society. But the ideal body was still very slim and large breasted. This time period also marks the beginning of the self-help revolution, providing solutions for every “imperfection” in women’s bodies. These years were all about advertising to women who did not “have it all,” selling solutions through products and business services. Beauty ideals began to be

bought and sold in a way not seen before. Media highlighted every nuance of women's bodies, including small things about women that were considered wrong, while simultaneously offering a "solution" to the beauty "problem."

In fact we are excited to engage with and reframe the problem: there is something wrong with me that with effort -- exercise, cash and vigilance -- I can repair. I can make my offending body part(s) right" (Orbach, 2009, p. 113).

This taught women to pick out every little part of their bodies that they could improve upon, perpetuating the notion that you can always change, and that you are never good enough.

The now famous Dove®evolution (2006) commercial is a perfect example of how our society portrays body image. The commercial starts out by showing a beautiful woman without any makeup and without her hair done. Quickly, it displays a time lapse of the model getting a make-over for a professional photo shoot, adding ridiculous amounts of makeup and having her hair professionally done. After the photo shoot, the commercial includes the digital alterations made to her image that raise her eyebrows, enlarge her eyes, remove beauty marks, lengthen her

neck, plump her lips, and completely change her face entirely. The commercial concludes with the final photo-shopped image that is depicted on a billboard as an advertisement.

The point behind the instructive reframing of this Dove® commercial is to show men and women that the body images we are looking up to are often re-touched and changed. Men and women of all ages are comparing themselves to these fake pictures. In the Dove® commercial, they took a beautiful woman and made her what we call "perfect." If this "ideal" beauty is not real, might that mean that this kind of beauty is unachievable? And yet, we are encouraged to compare ourselves to images like these. Orbach (2009) believes we are doing this to children also, as she states:

Our bodies are increasingly being experienced as objects to be honed and worked on. Men are targeted with steroids, sexual aids and specific masculine-oriented diet products. Children's bodies, too. Photographers now offer digitally enhanced baby and child photos- correcting smiles, putting in or removing gaps between the teeth, straightening out wobbly knees, turning little girls into facsimiles of china dolls. The web addresses of these conjurers show no sense of irony, since they

believe that enhancing photos is version of natural beauty, the real thing (p. 3).

Not only are we doing this to men and women of older ages, but this lifestyle and mental framework is beginning to affect our younger generations.

The Dove® Campaign for Real Beauty, created in 2004, is a brand rooted in listening to women. This campaign quickly grew, starting a conversation about what women define as beautiful. These findings ended up proving

...the definition of beauty had become limiting and unattainable. Among the study's findings was the statistic that only 2% of women around the world would describe themselves as beautiful" (Dove®, 2013).

My research shows that women still compare themselves with these models and the unrealistic information they hold. The knowledge and research that Dove® advertises seems to be a resource to women but a reassurance to how unsatisfied women are with their bodies (Dove®). This suggests that the real problem might not be that women are unable to recognize these body ideals as unobtainable, but rather, that recognition of them as unobtainable has not necessarily stopped women from trying to achieve these manufactured ideals.

Victoria's Secret is another retailer that took on body image in advertisement. In 1986, there was a franchise of 167 stores with a volume of 112 million dollars. These numbers rose over the years. Victoria Secret's underwear, bras and lingerie reveal more of women's skin than most brands. The clothing and the advertisements to sell them are clearly sexualized, but is it making women actually feel sexy or empowered? Looking at the women they advertise wearing their products only makes me feel unattractive and as if I need to change myself, whether by losing weight, wearing more makeup, or never showing off my body and skin (Workman, 1996).

In "From Victorian to Victoria's Secret", Workman argues,

The blatant commercialism contributes to the victimization of women because it reinforces gender stereotyping and the overall sexual powerlessness of women. While merchandising itself is liberating, it actually reinscribes the idea that women are essentially more 'primitive' than men." (p. 62).

Workman continues to state throughout the article that their clothing and advertisements emphasize traditional sex roles. My research helped me see that the advertising of women's bodies and sexualizing them does not make a woman feel beautiful. Comparing these

two campaigns (Dove® and Victoria's Secret), it is easy to see the constant changes in the "ideal" and why women have issues defining what is beautiful while believing it for their own self-worth.

The Dove® evolution commercial is a powerful way of conveying the point that anything that we don't see in real life could be altered, touched up, and fixed. So what is real anymore? Are we trying to achieve something that doesn't exist? These are the constant questions I hear and that I can never quite answer for anyone. As a person close to this topic, I wonder how much worse this is going to continue to get and what this might tell us about our culture.

"Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: Peer Competition, Television Influences, and Body Image Dissatisfaction," (Ferguson, Munoz, Contreras & Velasquez, 2011) helps answer some of the questions about the causes and consequences of body dissatisfaction among women. The authors address two different studies within the article. Both studies ultimately found that the media is not the largest cause of body dissatisfaction; peer interactions were found to play a much more critical role. Both studies within the article primarily addressed Hispanic women with similar outcomes. Both found that the largest impact of body dissatisfaction was caused by peer

interaction. Yet this article failed to cover different points of view among different racial and ethnic groups to find out more detailed information. (Ferguson et al)

Another study I found, "How *Not* to Feel Good Naked? The Effects of Television Programs that use 'Real Women' on Female Viewers' Body Image and Mood," (Swami & Smith, 2012), looks at body-focused anxiety, body weight, thin ideal, mood, attitudes, and demographics. This article caught my attention mostly because it compared "real women" to "thin models," as if both of these categories are not real women. This study showed a decrease in mood and food intake when they termed real women, meaning curvy and average weight women were modeling, versus thin women models. This meant that women in their study felt more comfortable looking at thin models, because they knew it was something unachievable. When looking at "real women," they more so compared themselves to these women and it made them look negatively towards their bodies. This article showed the exact opposite cause of body dissatisfaction: instead of peer interaction; it is caused by the exposition of television. Yet, it may also account for some of the findings from the Ferguson et. al. (2011) research as well.

Haraway's (1988) cyborg theory offers a useful framework to see and understand how we construct bodies. The idea of the cyborg, a blending of human with machine, deconstructs binaries of control and lack of control over the body, object and subject, nature and culture, in ways that are central to postmodern feminist thought. Haraway uses the metaphor of cyborg identity to expose ways that things considered natural, like human bodies, are not. Rather, she illustrates the intricate ways in which bodies are constructed by our ideas about them. This has particular relevance to feminism, since Haraway believes women are often discussed or treated in ways that reduce them to only bodies. I think we as people reduce our bodies down to objects on a daily basis because we speak about our bodies in a degrading manner, rather than humans, and more importantly, as women.

Bordo (1985) refers to body construction and objectification as crystallization of culture, where culture in this case, is contextualized to mean western culture. Like Haraway (1998), Bordo denaturalizes the binaries that uphold the mythological ideal body image. She focuses on the interrelatedness of the ways women's bodies are policed via the reproduction of patriarchy throughout history. Instead of merely looking at the changing

images of the ideal female body, Bordo invites us to think about how these changes connect to changes in women's oppression as they enter public spaces and become empowered in various ways. Both Bordo and Haraway (1998) look at eating disorders as a gendered *cultural* pathology instead of an individualized pathology.

Coming from a woman's point of view, I am disappointed. Not only in myself, for trying to keep these flawed beauty standards, not at the society for making expectations, not the media for portraying distorted images, and not our peers for the constant judgment, but because of all of us for not trying to make a change.

It is far more serious than we first take it to be and it is only because it is now so ordinary to be distressed about our bodies or body parts that we dismiss the gravity of body problems, which constitute a hidden public health emergency- showing up only obliquely in the statistics on self-harm, obesity and anorexia- the most visible and obvious signs of a far wider-ranging body disease (Orbach, 2009, p. 15).

We often think about individual anxieties in terms of dominant discourses. In the case of eating disorders and obesity, the dominant voices on the subject in western culture are psychology and science. However, as

I mentioned earlier, Bordo (1985) shifts our focus from physicality as it would exist in a vacuum to thinking about the body as part of a broader system of power. These ideas lead to questions that I cannot seem to answer: How can I bring people into this world at some point in my life, whether that means having my own children, or helping others in the counseling field, when there are few answers to these presenting body image issues?

### **Conclusion**

Why do we set beauty standards that are unachievable? Why are we doing this to each other when people are rarely satisfied with themselves? But most importantly, as said before, where do we find the answers to these questions and a lifetime of concern? Through Haraway's (1988) construction of bodies in the cyborg theory and Swami & Smith (2012) findings of the difference between "real women" and thin women, the research must continue and grow. Ferguson et al (2011) state that body dissatisfaction comes from peer interaction and the influences of our media. In Dove® and Victoria's Secret, our society and construction of bodies continue to stay the same. In my efforts to consider potential solutions and to offer a voice to our bodies, I have accepted and created poems from my

colleagues and my own personal stories and thoughts as a reflection of the ways body image is experienced by others. This has become my way of helping and supporting my peers find voice and a light in what we call body image today.

## **How to be Naked**

*Skin doesn't have roots,  
It peels away easy as paper.*

My eyes chafe through fleshy maps  
Painted from the Disney World palette  
For its 3D effect,  
Praying to expose the legends  
Beneath my own disorientating canvas

Her fingers unravel from the steering wheel  
To tether like roots forming the heart shape  
Of the spinal cord,  
And I know that she's trying to teach me,  
But I only want to play the instruments  
She's made from her wrists

Against my thighs  
Her anatomy textbook is outstretched  
Under my hands,  
A generous survey of bloodless  
Cadavers tapering outward across the spine

Flaying is torture

With chary fingers,  
She sweetly builds the imaginary  
Map of my interior  
Until I breathe,  
Feel those branches pushing back  
Inside my lungs,  
The tectonic plates  
In my skull shifting silently

Flaying is freedom

She teaches me how my body began as a tube,  
A symmetry forming separately,  
Folding in on itself at the mid-line

But I find my birth-marked casing  
In the shape of the book itself,  
In the fragility of our cores  
The cogs of punctuation where  
Blood becomes poison  
Where oxygen flees into indented white space

She is driving while she explains  
That the stress of a birth  
Of moving through the woman's body  
Closes the holes  
Of the novel heart

And as she shadow puppets the folding  
Of the primitive heart tube onto my palms  
I fold embryonic in the passenger seat  
The cold weightless release of my thighs  
As two chapters collide

I will never forget the flurry  
Of her eyes on me then  
Shifted from the road to break  
Me gently back into my hide  
A glitch in the binary  
Echoing the beat of a pulse

*Skin doesn't have roots.*

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-Anonymous

## **Falling from the stars**

When did the rain become a storm?  
Even when I'm "perfect", I cry.  
Do I need to keep this form during  
My everyday life?  
I grow, I change, I become  
A woman I am not, but why?  
I think it is for me,  
But the water from my tears  
Does not help me grow.  
Hair, makeup, clothing galore  
Doing this to be the norm  
But is this what I really want?  
Teased and picked on is my everyday life,  
Losing the battles I chose to fight.

My physical body is not all of me,  
So why do you keep telling me how to be?  
First impressions and fitting in  
Making me spin like a tornado,  
Back into my old mentality  
But I think I can be beautiful, being me.  
My body is too big or too small,  
I am never the ideal  
People asking if I am eating enough,  
Calling to my parents  
Anorexia, Bulimia, eating disorders-  
All to change me  
Eating too much and gaining weight,  
Staring in the mirror.  
Who am I?

The stars all look the same,  
But I am different,  
Making me feel all too visible  
So I change myself for a compliment,

This is not right, but  
Who am I supposed to blame?  
Society, family, friends and myself  
Giving the media all of my wealth  
To achieve the norm, is to change what I am,  
Staying awake every night

Questions of concern flew in my direction,  
With all good intention  
I quickly stopped myself,  
Going out of my way to stop these signs,  
From clothing, to food, to restroom breaks,  
Trying to not make this look all too fake  
Spinning in circles, day after day  
I am falling

These people, this life, this mentality,  
The theories, beliefs and concerns  
I can't seem to ever be right  
I am up, I am down  
Changing, not growing  
Realizing what has become reality  
Am I just another, or am I unique  
Falling from the stars

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