

THIN SOCIETY.COM

It's My Body, Not Yours.

What does it mean to live in a society where thin is how you are supposed to look? How does a person begin to fit in to our "thin society" where we are measured by what's on the outside and not what's on the inside?

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Keeping your body healthy is an expression of gratitude to the whole cosmos – the trees, the clouds, everything. *Thich Nhat Hanh*

Introduction

The human body does not exist and is not understandable apart from the “social construction of reality”. Our bodies and our perception of them constitute an important part of our socio-cultural history. They are not simply objects, which we inherit at birth, but are socialized throughout life and this process of collectively sanctioned bodily modification may serve as an important instrument for our socialization in a more general sense. That is, in learning to have a body, we also begin to learn about our “social body” – our society (Polhemus, 1978).

Here is how we are socialized and our bodies no longer become our own, but societies. On any given day in our society an astonishing 48 million Americans are dieting. Americans spend over \$40 Billion dollars each year on diet related products and dieting. Fifty percent of 9-year-old girls have dieted while 80% of 10-year-old girls have dieted. We idolize super models that are thinner than 98% of American women and 80% of the women in our society are dissatisfied with their body image. What is more startling than those statistics? It is estimated that in the U.S. alone, 150,000 women will die from eating disorders this year. The number of people with eating disorders and borderline conditions is triple the number of people living with AIDS (664,921 people are living with AIDS). The average caloric intake for adults is 2400-3000 calories per day. The average caloric intake in most commercial weight loss programs ranges from 945 to 1200 calories per day. The World Health Organization defines starvation at 900 calories or less per day. What about the role models we use in our society? If Barbie were a real woman she'd have to walk on all fours due to her proportions. If shop mannequins were real, they'd be too thin to menstruate. Marilyn Monroe would be considered overweight by today's standards. She fluctuated between a size 14 and 18. These sizes are now only sold

in the plus-size section of stores. She was a healthy woman who did not appear fat to anybody.

How Average Women Compare to Barbie and Store Mannequins

	Average Woman	Barbie	Store Mannequin
Height	5'4"	6'0"	6'0"
Weight	145 lbs.	101	
Dress Size	11-14	4	6
Bust	36-37"	39"	34"
Waist	29-31"	19"	23"
Hips	40-42"	33"	34"

We as a society are dissatisfied with our bodies. “The Social Psychology of Dieting” (Dwyer, 1970) states that as expected, females have the highest dissatisfaction with their bodies and a greater desire to diet. Females were noted as having a higher disadvantage in society if they were overweight.

The concept of “dieting” as defined as weight loss has only been present in our society for a short time. In 1656 dieting meant a way of living or thinking. Later the definition was altered to mean a day’s journey, but it did not mean food intake or lack thereof. (Beck, 2003). Our society changed rapidly after the industrial revolution. The general consensus during the 1800’s was that a plump body was a beautiful body. The Industrial Revolution and the rise of consumerism changed that perception. People did not do the physical labor that they had once done and their bodies showed the results of that. A larger body meant that you didn’t work and a thin body meant you reaped the rewards of a fast paced lifestyle. Levinson et al, (1986) says that research indicates that pretty and thin people enjoy an edge or advantage over heavier unattractive people due to their appearance. Killian (1994) also agrees that in our society the notion of success is equated with thinness and beauty. As history progressed and consumerism rose, people could now look in store windows and fantasize what it would be like to wear the apparel in those windows. Also, our society never snacked, but rather just ate solid square meals. The Nabisco Company changed that as well by introducing the first commercialized snack food. Soon a measuring tool was put in to play to monitor our ever-growing bodies. Thanks to Butterick dress patterns in the 1866 women finally had a number attached to

their size. A year after the pattern was created weight scales were put in doctor's offices. The first fad diet hit the scene during the 1800's. Remember hearing the saying "chew your food a hundred times for proper nutrition"? Horace Fletcher became the most famous of diet guru's by convincing millions of people to chew their food as many times as it took until it lacked in flavor. By the 1920's women won the right to vote and the right to weight themselves in the privacy of their own home. Another measuring tool hit our society in the late 1920's, the bra. In 1928, a Russian immigrant named Ida Rosenthal founded Maidenform. Ida was responsible for grouping women into bust-size categories (cup sizes). Society also granted women their very own brand of cigarette, the Lucky Strike that encouraged women to stay thin by striking up a lucky instead of eating a sweet. By 1950 we had our American Role mode in Barbie, petite, blonde and unrealistically proportioned and by the 1960's it was officially unacceptable to be overweight. Levinson also brought up an interesting fact about how women and men are promoted differently in the area of diet and fitness. He points out that health clubs constantly advertise that women should thin down and men should bulk up.

The issue of eating disorders is a fairly new concept. Until the early 1970's when singer Karen Carpenter died of Anorexia, there was little media attention on the issue of eating disorders. Eating disorders are very culturally bound and not found in many cultures around the world and typically, industrialized countries have the highest eating disorder rates (Costin, 1999). There is no true history of eating disorders, but it has been documented that individuals would partake in long periods of fasting for either purification or religious reasons. Others who were unable to eat typically had some type of medical condition that prevented them from doing so. Hysteria was a very common cause of lack of appetite. There have also been documented incidence of forced fasting. These were periods of time such as wars and great depressions, in which food was scarce and individuals had no choice but to fast (Bemporad, 1997). According to Bemporad, the modern individual with an eating disorder is nothing more than a copycat of individuals who have eating disorders in the past. Women who had eating disorders were often strong-willed and highly ambitious. Today's woman with an eating disorder is just a

carbon copy, a mimic of the symptoms, an individual who copies the phenomena. There are several theories as to why eating disorders begin. There are relationship theories, one in particular, the mother/daughter relationship theory. Stresses and expectations put upon a daughter by her mother can lead to eating disorders. The mothers of anorexics describe their daughters as concentration camp victims; the daughters see death in their mothers' faces. At the moment the girl needs to separate from the older woman, and leave her behind, she finds herself taking on a gray, pale cast, her body losing flesh as if she were aging. She is withering when she could be blossoming. In the full fledge of youth she is becoming middle-aged. She has made herself over into an exaggerated reflecting mirror in which everyone can behold all those qualities of devastation that are sometimes implicit, sometimes evident in her mother's life (Chernin, 1985). Chernin also sees eating disorders as an effective way for women to stop their movement into the world. A woman separates herself from society and the pressures it puts upon her. Chernin feels that eating disorders are viewed as the most widespread form of alienation from our own bodies. According to MacSween (1993) Anorexia is treated as an extended example of how women both resist and are constrained by the cultural concept of the female body. Anorexia is seen as the strategy of resistance, which ultimately becomes its own prison. The issue of being thin is referenced to being underpowered and when we pick up calorie reduced items at a store or support a diet product, we are conforming to the idea that we will not grow too large or powerful for our society. For women, they need to be small and feminine and not be large and unattractive in order to fit into society (Chernin, 1994).

Other theories explored as possible causes of eating disorders includes, trauma, stress, peer pressure and societal pressure. There are also less significant stresses such as everyday challenges. Gordan (2000) feels that events that trigger eating disorders in adolescents can be any event that challenges their sense of independence and power, for example, a first relationship, loss of a friendship, loss of a family member, etc., rather than the typical stereotypical life altering events such as sexual or physical abuse. Gordon explains that without question there is also a societal pressure put upon individuals and

most people are affected directly by the assault of commercial imagery promoting thinness.

I would argue that the most influential and prominent cause of eating disorders in our society is society itself. Stress, trauma, peer pressure, etc. are certainly causes for eating disorders, but the constant bombarding of “be thin” by our society is a more influential factor by far. To explore the stress and peer pressure factor more in depth a longitudinal study was done among college-aged women. The results showed that young women arrive at college in a perfectly healthy condition and then fall victim to eating disorders. The pressures of attending school, family pressures on performance and academics as well as blending into a new environment were all viewed as contributing factors. College women who participated in the study had their eating habits compared throughout their college careers to see which points in their schooling they struggled the most with their eating problems. The results found that college aged women came to college perfectly healthy without any signs of an eating disorder but as their college career progressed so did the symptoms of eating disorders (Hess-Biber, et al., 1999). According to Hess-Biber, et al., eating disorders are seen as a result of the pressure that is put on young women to conform to socially constructed female gender roles. Eating disorders can also be seen as coping mechanisms to deal with significant traumas such as physical or sexual abuse (Wangsgaard-Thompson, 1992).

The societal theory is more extensive than any of the other possible theories. The advertising and media industry plays such a large role in the profit that is made from women’s bodies and the American food industry and the diet industry benefits daily in their quest for profit (Hess-Biber, 1996). As a culture we have a warped sense of equating beauty with good and ugliness with bad. Attractive and thin people are viewed as more successful, happier and benefit from a higher and better quality of life. We have developed a “cult of thinness” in our society that is rapidly spreading to young adolescents of all races and backgrounds. A study was done on the types of media viewing done by adolescents. The thin idea in the media was shown to play a role in producing distorted body images as well as created harm, vulnerability to excessive

dieting, and eating disorders. The study showed that girls seek certain types of media to watch and magazines to read that directly address beauty, thinness, etc. A cycle was noted that watching media increased the symptoms of eating disorders and as those symptoms increased so did the need to view more media, thus creating a vicious circle. Magazines were viewed as emotional investments, requiring larger amounts of time for viewing, thus having a greater influence over adolescents. Television viewing was seen as more of a form of entertainment and the image are seen more quickly, leaving less of an impact (Vaughan & Fouts, 2003). Costin also believed that our culture is so obsessed with thinness that it is indeed a leading cause of eating disorders. Media and advertisements reflect and shape our perceptions and standards of beauty. The contemporary feminine idea is physically fit, and thin and once again thinness equating into success, power and independence.

Milke (1999) concurred that magazines proved to be quite influential over young girls. Young girls also spoke of how young men talk about the women in those magazines as being the “ideal” woman, such as supermodels and movie stars. Young women begin to feel that this is the way they should look. For young girls, their bodies are a consuming project. Joan Jacobs-Brumberg (1997) calls it the “Body Consuming” project. These body-consuming projects provide an important means of self-definition and a way for a young girl to announce to the world who she is. The modern girl lives in a “Century of Svelte” and is constantly worried about her weight. She is forever on constant guard against her own body and weight.

Process

As a survivor of an eating disorder I relished in the opportunity to share my knowledge on this issue as well as the ability to compile already existing information. I put on my creative thinking hat and with help from a talented web-design team, I developed a site with information regarding eating disorders, www.thinsociety.com. The home page shows the dramatic images of both men and women who are struggling with eating disorders. From the home page you can choose one of the sub categories including: my critique and analysis of MSN.com web page and 10 popular fashion

magazines, the history of body image, diet and body image statistics, signs and symptoms of eating disorders (from the National Eating Disorders Association), saying less is doing more, advice for friends and loved ones as well as a testimonial of my own history with and eating disorder, links to resources and help and finally an option for a discussion board.

The research component of the project consisted of utilizing 20 resources including books and journal articles. I did extensive research on the Internet using only credible treatment program and facilities information. In addition, I had the opportunity to be part of a panel discussion at Eureka High School that focused around body image and eating disorders. Over 50 students from the high school participated in this hour-long presentation, which included survivors of eating disorders, counselors and nutritionists. The information gathered from this panel was very useful. In addition, I led a young women's group discussion about body image with students from Fortuna High School. Participants spent several minutes creating and drawing what they saw to be their ideal "diet". The diet had to consist of things that only made them happy. The diet did not have to consist of food but rather could be any source of enjoyment. I started the workshop off by asking individuals to give me the first word that popped into their minds when I said the word diet. Each response had a negative undertone. Some of the responses included, calorie restriction, hunger, sad, emotional, Slimfast, Fat Flush, boring, and hard. I had only one individual give a positive food related response which was fast food and one other individual said she felt a diet meant what you eat not what you don't eat. She said her diet consisted of good thing and anything she wants to eat. Each participant shared their ideal "diets" the things that make them happy and as we worked our way around the room the mood and consensus changed about dieting once we explored the historical meaning of the word. At the end of April I conducted part two of the body image workshop. The second part of the workshop consisted of continuing on with creating a diet filled with more than just food. Each student was give a set of ten descriptor words in which they had to fill in a response word, picture or phrase that best described the word presented. The concept of doing this came from the *Joy Diet* by Martha Beck. Martha

beck is a regular columnist in Oprah's magazine and has also written several books. The young women enjoyed creating a diet that was rich in rewards that were not food related. As a result of my group work and my panel participation I was asked by the school nurse at Fortuna High School to help design a panel discussion and workshop similar to Eureka High Schools for the Fortuna High School District.

Web Page Process:

Prior to starting the web page, I had to register and purchase my domain name. For a nominal fee I have the name for a year and can choose to renew it when it expires. The creation of the web page took place over several meetings and hours of extensive design and research. I worked closely with two web-designers. I did mock pages using a word processing program and then submitted my "vision" to my designers. From that point they were able to bring life to my ideas. Each week I did "check ins" with my designers. I provided them with a written list of needs and wants as well as an outline of what pieces I was gathering information on. I kept an organizational content binder with all my information in it. This information includes project requirements, annotated bibliography and project time line, materials gathered for the web page, requests and documents for the web design team, research and documentation on the content analysis of popular magazines and web pages as well as materials created, used, and gathered for my workshop presentations to the young women's groups.

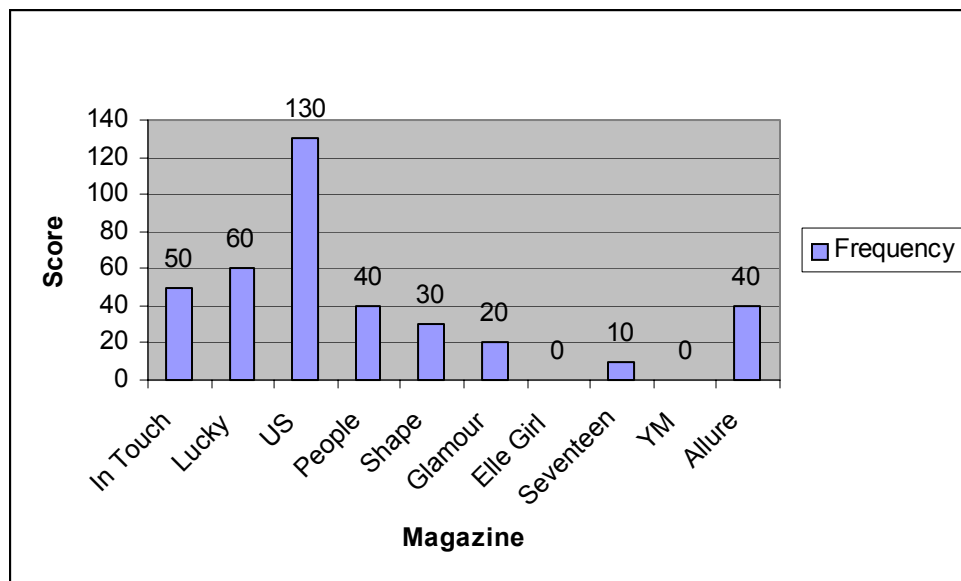
As the web page design phase concludes I want to be able to promote the site to students and individuals throughout the county. In order to do so I designed a brochure that briefly outlines the content of the web page and also encourages individuals to use the site as a resource and tool. The brochure can also be accessed and printed from the web-page. *(See attached pages of website and brochure)*

Content Analysis on Magazines and Web Page:

What you see is what you get. It has been said that magazines and printed material have a more profound effect over the viewer's interpretations and retention of material. Statistics show that television is viewed as a source of entertainment therefore it is not taken as seriously as magazines and other printed material. Images on television are quick

and do not require a lot of studying of a particular item or piece. Magazines can be looked at over and over again reinforcing negative feelings and emotions. I thought it would be interesting to see how often advertisers place body and diet related propaganda in written material such as magazines and web pages. I critiqued ten top selling fashion magazines that young people purchase. I devised a set of frequency categories that included: 1) Diet products, 2) Negative Body Image Promotion, 3) Positive Body Image Promotion, 4) Negative makeovers, 5) Positive makeovers, 6) Non-diet food items, 7) Diet food items, 8) Non-food items, i.e.: alcohol, cigarettes, etc. and 9) Beauty products. Negative items were given points and positive items were not issued points. Of the ten magazines the highest ranking in negative body image promotion were US magazine, InTouch magazine and Lucky. The best magazines for best body image promotion were Elle Girl, YM and Glamour. The other's fell in between doing a poor to fair job promoting positive body image. Chart #1 shows the frequency of negative body image that each magazine portrayed. The higher the score the higher the negative body image frequency.

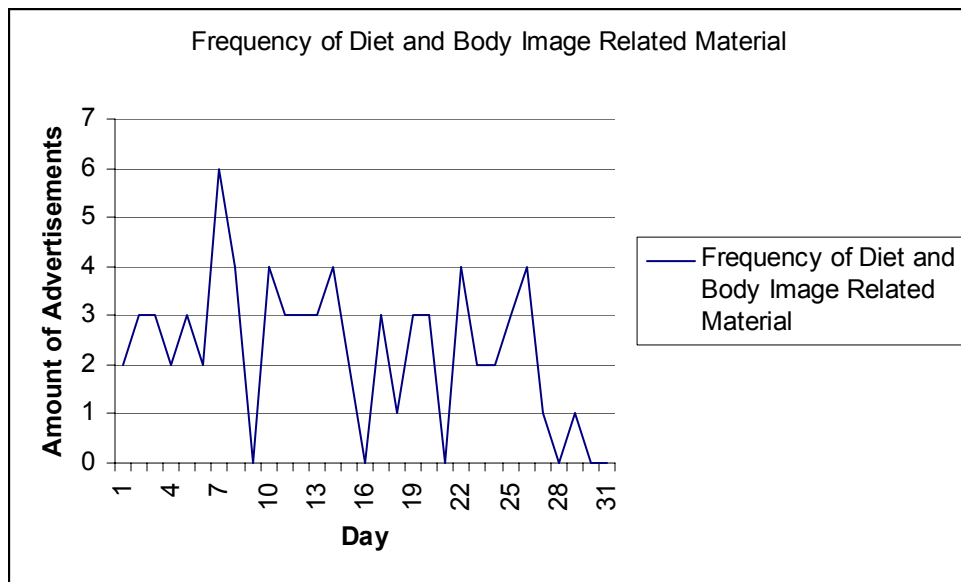
Chart # 1 Negative Body Image in Magazines



The second content analysis I did was on web pages. Web pages are becoming another popular media viewing source. Each day for 31 days I printed out the home page for

www.msn.com (which is primarily news from around the world) and logged how many diet advertisement, low calorie food products, exercise, and body image or body makeovers (including fashion and makeup) appeared on the home page. I printed out the individual article when relevant for further documentation. For 31 days there was a total of 71 body image related advertisements for an average of 2.29 advertisements per day. The highest amount of advertisements was 6 and the low was none. There was a total of 6 days that did not have any body image related content. It was interesting to see that 3 of the 6 days with no content occurred within my last 4 days of logging the web page, two of those days were consecutive. Chart # 2 shows the frequency of negative body image over the 31-day period.

Chart # 2 Negative Body Image on Web Pages



Conclusion and Presentation:

With the web page fully functional I wanted to be able to share all the knowledge that I have gained from this project. I invited friends, family and co-workers to an unveiling of the ThinSociety.com. I was able to present my web page and information plus gain “practice” experience before my official presentation to my department and peers. It was an extremely rewarding experience.

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