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The Media's Portrayal of the Human Body and the Affects on Adolescents

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Due to technological advancement, people have a greater access to media today than ever before. As a result of such availability, the influence that the media can have on anyone is significant. Despite the reality that the media can make an impression on everyone, one group of people that is seemingly affected the most are adolescents. During adolescence, young people often struggle to figure out who they are and observe external sources in order to find such identity. This vulnerability creates an easy target for the creators of communication to impose their beliefs upon. One belief that these outlets try to portray is the ideal body. Whether such images are portrayed through television or magazines, they often generate the “accepted” body appearance that one should have. On the basis of these two themes, I would like to determine how adolescents are affected by the media’s portrayal of the human body.

Through my research I expect to find that the media’s portrayal of the human body has a negative impact on adolescents. In other words, the content that young people view on television, in magazines, and through other platforms, creates unhealthy behaviors and thoughts among them. Examples of detrimental behaviors can include the development of eating disorders or the use of drugs such as steroids. Furthermore, some unhealthy thoughts that can develop among oneself may be a lower self-esteem and feelings of worthlessness. In class, we have discussed the tendency for teens to be influenced by the media. Social scientist, Simon Philo, compares the media to a puppet master as such content has provided social “scripts” (Philo, 2004, p. 155) that many follow. For that reason, this research is important because the media has the potential to have a negative impact on adolescent behavior.

In order to demonstrate how the media can influence adolescents, the exposure of media upon youths must be revealed. This information is imperative because it can show how there is a major potential for teens and tweens to be shaped by these sources. Data found by Deanne Jade

(2012) reports on the usage rates of various forms of media. According to the study, 95% of people own a television and tune in to watch for an average of three to four hours a day (Jade, para. 2, 2012). Evidently, the media plays a major part in today's culture and can give adolescents a source to discover new ideas. Jade also shows how adolescents turn to written forms of media in addition to television. Notably, the article shares that fifty percent of girls between the ages of eleven and fifteen read beauty magazines regularly (Jade, para. 17, 2012). This information shows that adolescents are subjected to the pictures of models shown by magazines even at such a young and impressionable age.

Since adolescents have been shown to be exposed to various forms of media at great lengths, there is a reason to examine the types of images that these communication outlets produce. Haughney (2012) discloses such information in her article. She shares how a group of teenagers decided to lobby Seventeen Magazine for portraying unrealistic images in their magazines. Haughney suggests that people are trying to make a push to change the practices of magazines and how they edit their published images. These petitions were encouraged by a blog post made by a fourteen-year old who shared how, "many girls in her ballet class were complaining that they were fat" (Haughney, para. 6, 2012). This article demonstrates that the images of the human body that the media publishes are a real concern to some people due to the fact that they do not depict the average human body.

A reason why the concerning works published by the media, as described by Haughney, have been highly talked about is because of the recent trends found among adolescents. This is explained through the tendency for adolescents to develop eating disorders. Eating disorders are common in people who are insecure about their body. Through statistics, a study published by the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders (2015) shows the

prevalence of such disorders in America. One staggering number reveals that 95% of the population of those with eating disorders falls under the adolescent age group (National, 2015).

Overall, the reviewed literature, when combined, lays the groundwork for this study. Clearly, Haughey (2012) and Jade (2012) are able to show that adolescents are exposed to the controversial work presented by the media. Though, they do not provide a direct link to observed detrimental behaviors among adolescents such as those described by the National Association of Anorexia and Associated Disorders (2015). This gap provides the reason to research the topic further and eventually answer the question at hand.

To examine how adolescents are affected by the media's portrayal of the human body, a survey was conducted. The survey was taken out on 28 individuals who fall under the adolescent age range of twelve to twenty-five years old. Only those who were of this age range were interviewed in pursuance of collecting data on the firsthand thoughts and experiences of adolescents (the group being examined). To obtain responses, the survey was sent out by message to people of differing age ranges. Three different age ranges were created to encourage a variety of perspectives among participants. There were nine participants who fell under first age group of twelve to seventeen years. These individuals were all high schoolers who go to school in Delaware and were reached through a mutual friend. The next group consisted of twelve adolescents aged between eighteen and twenty-one. Those among this group were all students at Temple University and were all members of the ninth floor of the Johnson dormitory. Lastly, the third set of people surveyed were seven people aged between the age of twenty-two and twenty-five. Most of these individuals had graduated from college and were just in the beginning of their careers. Participants of this group were also contacted through a mutual friend.

The survey used in this research was created through SurveyMonkey. SurveyMonkey is an online program that allows people to create surveys to obtain information from others (SurveyMonkey, 2015). This program provides different formats for researchers to ask questions of others. For example, one may set up a multiple choice question for quantitative data or provide the survey taker with a response box to collect a qualitative response. In regards to this survey, there were nine questions in total, all of which were quantitatively based. A quantitative approach was taken because this type of data tends to be more reliable. In other words, quantitative data is easy to measure and analyze consistently. As a result, the data received from the surveys was able to provide the percentage at which the adolescents have specific thoughts towards the media and exhibited certain behaviors through the media's influence.

With the intention of creating a survey that would hopefully provide answers to the research question, specific questions were chosen. First and foremost, basic questions were asked to help determine the age, gender, and race of the participant. A specific question from the survey was, "What is your gender?" This information is important to identify any trends in thoughts and behaviors of the various categories of people who took the survey. Next, there were a group of questions that were used to examine the participant's exposure to various forms of media. Understandably, those who are highly exposed to media may tend to be influenced to a greater degree than those who are not. To collect this data, a rating scale was used to see how often the students watched TV, read magazines, and read online articles. The subsequent set of questions were designed to understand the participant's ability to recognize the content that the media often includes in their publications and programs. In the survey, two pictures of a female model and a male model were displayed. Students were then asked if such a portrayal of the human body was common and if the pictures were accurate depictions of the average human

body. Controversially, the images that media outlets have included in their work have become a concern to many (Haughney, 2012). These questions aim to test such concerns. Finally, the last couple of questions seek to reveal how the media has actually affected the participants.

Evidently, this was the part of the survey that actually shows the behaviors and thoughts that this group of adolescents had because of the content they viewed in the media. The major question in this last section asked those who took the survey to check off any actions they have taken to change themselves after being exposed to media. This unearthed any dietary choices and changes to appearance that they implemented after seeing how the human body was portrayed in media.

Results from the survey show that the adolescents who participated, have all been subjected to the media on a regular basis through some form or another. In fact, 89% of respondents frequently watch television while 89% often read online articles. This data is important because it means that those who were tested have been exposed to media and were appropriate subjects for this survey. In terms of the impact that the media can have on people, all but one participant responded by saying that they agreed that the media can have a major influence on people. The idea that the media can alter the behaviors and mindsets of adolescents is similar to the ideas of nurture described in the chapter, “Nature, Nurture, and None of the Above” of Judith Harris’ novel, *The Nurture Assumption: Why Children Turn Out the Way They Do* (2009). Essentially, the nurture argument is based around the notion that one’s environment is responsible for their behavior or character than genetics. In many cases, one could consider the media to be a part of one’s environment. After viewing the pictures of the extremely skinny female model and the highly muscular male model provided in the survey, 89% agreed that similar images were the ones that the media uses to portray the human body while 85% disagreed that the images depicted the average human body. These results are parallel to the report by

Haughney (2012) who shared that magazines have come under criticism for including inaccurate images in their publications. Finally, all but three participants reported to change some aspect of their appearance or behavior because of something or someone they saw in the media. More specifically, three respondents reported to have developed an eating disorder, fifteen participants changed their diet, and seventeen participants confessed to have increased exercise. As one can see, the media has influenced this group of adolescents to change their body as they decided to either increase or decrease their weight. The fact that three participants reported to have developed an eating disorder echoes the ideas described by the National Association of Anorexia and Associated Disorders (2015), who shared that eating disorders are prevalent among the adolescent age group. Interestingly, all three participants who developed eating disorders happened to be females while all three participants who reported to have never changed themselves because of something they saw in the media, were males. With this trend, one may conclude that females feel a greater pressure to conform to the norms relayed by media outlets.

To summarize my results, the adolescents who took my survey identified that the images the media often publishes are not comparable to the typical human. The adolescents saw the media as a major influence and made many changes to their behaviors because of the media. I feel that my hypothesis, that the adolescents would be negatively affected by the media's portrayal of the human body, was supported by my results to an extent. The most telling result was that three of the respondents reported to have acquired an eating disorder because of something they viewed from the media. Obviously, an eating disorder would be an example of destructive behavior. This evidence shows that there is a potential for adolescents to be negatively impacted by the media's portrayal of the human body. Despite this particular figure, not all of the behaviors developed by the adolescents can be considered negatively. Usually,

increasing exercise is seen as positive behavior and such an increase in activeness was reported by seventeen of the respondents.

If I were to redo this survey, I would have asked the respondents to answer more questions related to mindset. In other words, I would ask the adolescents to share how the media's portrayal of the human body has specifically impacted them mentally. Such reports could reveal how the images portrayed by the media made them feel and if the images created a pressure upon the adolescents. Additionally, to gain further insight, an additional survey on individuals who responded to be severely impacted by the media could be conducted to reveal some telling information. With this follow up, one would be able to find out why these tweens and teens felt compelled to adhere to the "accepted" body that is portrayed by the media.

On the whole, this research reflects many of the questions concerning adolescent development. In terms of Marcia's identity status', adolescents who are influenced by the media's portrayal of the human body seem to be going through the moratorium status. The Moratorium status describes someone who has actively explored an identity, but has not made a commitment to one (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006). Those who have yet to find an identity, can look to the media and try to mimic the figures displayed in an attempt to find an identity. This realization shows that teens are not pre-programmed to end up in any specific way because of their genetic make-up. Rather, people develop their identity over time because of the influences around them, such as the media.

Undoubtedly, the media does play a role and can have negative effects on adolescent development. Whether they have a desire to lose weight or make other alterations to their appearance, adolescents often try to shape themselves in ways that is thought to be acceptable to society. The technology that is currently present allows for constant and suffocating reminders of



the “accepted” body. To halt the detrimental behavior and thoughts developed by adolescents, the media should focus on displaying the healthy human body in addition to various body types. Such a portrayal of the human body would create a message that there is not one acceptable body type and that being of good health should be the biggest concern that one should have about their body.

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Appendix

1. What is your gender?

 SurveyMonkey Certified

- Female
- Male

2. Age

- 12-17
- 18 - 21
- 22 - 25

3. How often do you...

	Never	Almost Never	Slightly Often	Very Often
Watch TV	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Read Magazines	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Read online articles	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

4. What form of media do you use the most?

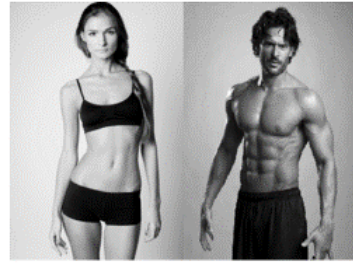
- Television/Film
- Internet (online articles and social media sites)
- Written forms (magazines, newspapers, journals, books)

5. The media can have a major influence on individuals

- Agree
- Disagree
- Neither

6. Models in magazines and other forms of media accurately portray the average human body

- Agree
- Disagree
- Neither



7. Answer the following questions based on the pictures above

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The images above accurately depict the normal human body	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The human body is often portrayed similarly to the images above by various media outlets	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Images in the media such as these can lead people to develop eating disorders and other detrimental behaviors	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

8. Do you compare yourself to men/women in the media?

- Yes
- No

9. Have you ever changed yourself because of something/someone you saw/ read about in the media? (Check all that apply)

- No
- Changed my hairstyle
- Changed my clothing style
- Changed my diet
- Took pills/supplements to increase muscle mass
- Developed an eating disorder
- Bought more makeup
- Increased exercise