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Modeling Careers Impact Mental Health

American society has placed an emphasis on body size and appearance over the past couple decades. Young adults, females in particular, have had to learn how to appropriately treat their body even with the constant media screaming thinness and beauty at the minds and hearts of these individuals. It takes strong will-power and love for oneself to not be persuaded by the cultural standard of thinness equaling popularity and self-worth. Due to the existence of female models, an ideal body image has developed for young women that can be detrimental to their mental health. Body image theorists have examined the psychological aspects of how one views oneself and others, which has been greatly impacted by the increase of media in today’s culture.

Fashion models have had a long history and fascinating evolution since their development in the mid-1800s. The first appearance of models began simply due to fashion designers needing women to try on their newly developed clothing. According to Caroline Evans, the author of the scholarly article “Fashion Models,” the fashion industry was officially institutionalized by a woman named Marie Worth when she created a bureautic structure in a couture house. Models increased in popularity after this highly recognized advancement, and the expectations and standards of the women models were also greatly influenced. Attractive appearances and specific body sizes started to emerge as a critical component of being a model due to the public wanting beautiful women representing their country. Evans claims that model behavior and appearance began to drastically change in the 1960s. Photogenic beauty and showgirl instincts, such as being a natural in front of a camera, became prerequisites for models. The media also started to flourish during this time, with model images taking over television. Described in “Fashion Models,” slighter frames and quirkier looks became popular in the 1990s that have continued to dominate the model industry today (Evans). Models have become a source of entertainment for the public as they appear in magazines, advertisements, and television. In a society that believes being thin and beautiful leads to successfulness, the body size and level of attractiveness of models are constantly shaped to fulfill the American standards.

The concept of mental health is crucial when analyzing the numerous appearances of models in the media and their body size. Guy Faulkner and George Mammen, the composers of the article “Mental Health,” state that mental health “is the emotional and spiritual resilience that enables people to enjoy life and to survive pain, disappointment, and sadness.” It is characterized by changes in one’s thoughts, mood, and behavior, and although there are several components of mental health, Faulkner and Mammen provide four main factors: self-esteem, cognitive functioning, stress, and sleep. When these elements are at their appropriate levels, high self-esteem, high cognitive functioning, low amounts of stress, and adequate amounts of sleep, a mentally and physically healthy individual results. It is known that a change in one of these factors, such as low self-esteem, can cause poor mental health and eventually form a mental illness. When an individual is not confident with his or her body and overall physique, confidence issues will arise that cause negative feelings towards the body. In their article “Images of Thin Fashion Models Play a Role in Eating Disorders,” Treasure, Roberts, and Wack conclude that the most common illnesses with relation to the media and the body are depression, anxiety, and eating disorders, which often overlap and cause a very sick individual. Mental health is a sensitive component of an individual that can easily be influenced by outside factors if not in perspective of what is healthy for a person to function at his or her best. If taken too far, the concept of health will diminish in importance as the ideal of being thin and appealing to society gains priority in one’s life.

Body image has become increasingly troublesome to young females today. The definition of body image is very broad and takes on several different meanings. In the scholarly entry “Body Size and Image, Female Attitudes and Perceptions About,” body image is described as an idealized image of what one’s body is and what one believes it should be, which is often misconceived in mental disorders such as anorexia nervosa (Silverman). It is the subjective picture of one own’s physical appearance established both by self-observation and the reactions of others. These definitions hint at the significance of an ideal image, the influence of others on how one perceives his or her body, and the result of poor mental health with distorted body image. As declared in “Images of Thin Fashion Models Play a Role in Eating Disorders,” anorexia nervosa is a common eating disorder that involves the starvation of oneself due to the intense fear of gaining weight and a strong desire to be thin (Treasure, Roberts, and Wack). Sufferers of anorexia are often very displeased with their bodies no matter how much they weigh, and their bodies, along with their minds, reach a very unhealthy state due to inadequate amounts of nutrition. Impaired cognitive thinking is a huge mental defect of this disease, and it often takes numerous therapy sessions to reverse the effects that have been made due to the illness taking over the brain.

Noted by Amanda Holmstrom in the scholarly article “The Effects of the Media on Body Image: A Meta-Analysis,” there are three main scientific theories on body image that have been established by credible scientists that continue to prove true over time. The Festinger’s Social Comparison Theory states that people evaluate themselves through the comparison with others, specifically with those who are attractive and well-liked (Holmstrom). This leads to a discrepancy between the actual self and the ideal self, which causes negative emotions, such as low confidence and general sadness. By a female comparing herself with others who she praises as gorgeous and alluring, she is diminishing her own self-worth and beauty as a unique individual. If this comparison is taken too far, mental disorders are likely to develop due to the impossibility of ever looking like someone else. Along with the comparison theory, Gerbner’s Cultivation Theory expresses that the more television a person watches, the more common it is for the individual to believe what he or she is viewing is real instead of material produced to please an audience (Holmstrom). This theory reasons how essential it is to limit the amount of media one is consuming throughout the day, for it could easily cause distressed thoughts and darkened moods that stem from the idea that people on television are happy and have a perfect life because they are thin. To have a life like those portrayed in the media, one may take extreme measures, such as losing excessive amounts of weight, that often develop into negative thinking patterns. The last body image theory, Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory, illustrates that people learn and model their behaviors off attractive others (Holmstrom). Society has placed high importance on appearance and believe it is those who are most praised as attractive that are the best role models. This usually turns out to be a disaster, for the behaviors and personality of an individual is what one should seek in someone worth being called a role model. Too many people base the level of worthiness and praise for a person on appearance, which leads to those who are claimed as the most attractive as the most powerful in society.

The Victoria’s Secret Angels have been praised in society as the most ideal females due to their extreme thinness and magnificent appearance. Nicole Elphick, a writer and editor for the famous *Sydney Morning Herald* newspaper, describes that these supermodels began to appear in 1997, with Tyra Banks being most popular, and have evolved to presently include fourteen women with unbelievable bodies. Elphick claims that Victoria’s Secret famous Fashion Show sparks interest in young females around the world, with over 9.1 million viewers in 2015. Many individuals believe that the models’ bodies are the only acceptable appearance in society. The bodies of these models are not just a combination of genes, but extreme dieting, exercising, and constant pressure to look a certain way. Many of these models suffer from distorted thinking and believe that they are less beautiful and worthy compared to their fellow models, which accurately demonstrates the Festinger’s Social Comparison Theory. Although this company claims they are seriously trying to tackle the body image problem society faces, this will not be accomplished until they diversify their Angels and their openness to different body sizes.

The perception of one’s body is greatly influenced by psychological aspects of the self and others. Acknowledged by Catherine Reed, the author of the scholarly encyclopedia entry “Body Perception,” the viewing of oneself is caused by the detection and recognition of the animate body and its postures from a scientific standpoint. The way one views the human body is distinctive from the examination of most other objects, which signifies the importance the body has in its existence. The presence of others also influences the decisions one makes with his or her body, such as knowing what actions are and are not appropriate in certain situations, what body size is accepted as ideal, and how to treat the body. It is true that one would not be who he or she is today without the people that he or she chooses to surround themselves with. Mental health can be greatly impacted by the perception of oneself due to the self-esteem issues that can arise if one is not satisfied with his or her body before interacting with others.

Along with the people one confronts in day to day life, the models and celebrities viewed in the media, such as the Victoria’s Secret Angels, can also greatly impact body perception. Robyn Silverman argues in her article “Body Size and Image, Female Attitudes and Perceptions About” that women perceive and judge their bodies based on the impact of society and feedback to body size and attractiveness. The media has created an ideal body image of what a young female should look like. Silverman reports that the average American woman weighs 142 pounds and is 5 feet 4 inches tall. The average model depicted in the media weighs 110 pounds and is 5 feet 9 inches. These numbers result in a discrepancy of models being 5 inches taller and 23% thinner than the average American woman. The internalization of this thin image portrayed in the media frequently occurs when young females look up to these models and believe their body weight is healthy and achievable. This often leads to young females adopting the model thinness as a standard for physical beauty. Feelings of self-shame, guilt, and sadness are of no surprise due to the comparison process occurring when females disappointedly compare their body to what is portrayed in the media. If not in the proper state of mind, a female could easily be persuaded to change her body weight to meet the ideal images shown in the models. These images can also trigger pre-existing discrepancies between the ideal image and the actual self that presides in a female’s mind. Because of the emphasis appearance has in society, young females have made beauty their principal project in life. With an increase in media available to young females, it can be concluded that mental health will easily be swayed by the images that constantly appear. The focus society places on the media and their models is jeopardizing the mental health of many due to the ideal image being so extreme that it is unreachable in a working, healthy body. Thus, it is even more important for an individual to have a healthy perspective of her body and possess positive thoughts and emotions.

Females are constantly being driven by the ideal of being thin due to the portrayal of extremely slim models in the media. This powerful drive has led to an increase in many mental illnesses, with eating disorders, anxiety, and depression being most prevalent in this generation. It is important for one to be mentally strong and reason through the myths in the media while appreciating the gift of having a functioning body. Some fashion and media industries are beginning to make changes in the appearances of their models to show the importance of being confident in one’s own skin and the beauty of any body size. Dove, a personal care brand, describes on their homepage that beauty is not defined by shape, size, or color, but is rather feeling the best version of oneself. Their commercials and advertisements include real women without any standard size or level of attractiveness (*Dove*). This company is positively influencing young females by demonstrating that it is not what one looks like that truly matters, but how one chooses to live and impact those around them. As society begins to accept this concept, females can worry less about their appearance and more on who they are as an individual.

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