

Minority Women, Media, and Body Image¹

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Residing in a society where youth and thinness are the ideal may cause body image issues in many women, especially those who do not fit this mold. American criteria for beauty are based on standards that many women cannot attain, especially those from minority groups. Unfortunately, these minority women are being subjected to the same messages and judged on standards that are not based on their unique beauty. The media's influence on young women's self-perception is apparent in all cultures; however, the degree to which it affects women in minority communities is now a new focus area of research.

Internalization of the projected ideal can lead to:

- Lower self-esteem
- Decreased performance in school and other activities
- Psychological problems
- Depression
- Eating disorders
- Suicide (in some cases)

However, there are things that can be done to reduce the risk. This article will investigate the myriad effect of media on minority women's self-perception and body image, as well as provide tips on combating negative imagery so that young women may positively enhance their view of themselves.

History

Body image is the perception that one has about herself, which can be either positive or negative. Included into one's body image are weight, body shape, body size, hair and skin color, and facial features. In addition to self-perception, other influences on women's body image include family, peers, and the media. Although some research reports that minority women are protected from the adverse effects of media images, others highlight that the inferiority that many minority women internalize when compared to the majority can put them at risk.

Research suggests that direct exposure to negative media images does not necessarily lower one's self-esteem. However, when a woman who previously has low self-esteem is exposed to these images, there is an increased risk for issues with body image. We will examine the media's effects on three

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minority communities: African/Black-Americans, Hispanic/Latino-Americans, and Asian/Asian-Americans.

Effects on African/Black-American Women

Historically, African-American women have reported being comfortable with full figures and accepting a larger body type. Although, according to current research, this trend is reversing due to acceptance of influences from the mass media to become thin. Since slavery, members of the African-American community have been judged according to their physical appearances. Traits such as hair color and texture, and skin color are still used as the basis of grouping and identification. Some African-American women report the divide based on physical appearance still exists within their community. Many African-American women, in an attempt to alter their appearance to reach a goal they cannot attain, become dissatisfied with their physical appearance.

Effects on Hispanic/Latino-American Women

Similar to the effects on African-Americans, the media has perpetuated stereotypes about Latin-Americans, those of which differ from the typical non-Hispanic woman. These images are shown on television, which is heavily consumed by Latin-American women. Latin-American women on average watch four more hours of television daily than women in other ethnic groups. Due to this increase in exposure, Latin-American women are more susceptible to negative images, making comparisons to the media ideal more detrimental. As a result, Latin-Americans have a heavy loyalty to the health and beauty industry. The support that they give to this industry may be associated with the dissatisfaction felt when media ideals are used for comparison.

Effects on Asian-American Women

On average, Asian women typically have smaller frames and smaller bodies than other minorities. Also, within the Asian community both here and abroad, it

is suggested that a woman should possess a realistic body image. With that, the images given from the media are combated and conversations about beauty and body begin during childhood. Because of these factors, many assume that Asian women are immune to negative images in the media, but many Asian women now report that they are susceptible as well.

Research conducted in Singapore discovered that 84% of teens were not content with their bodies, and wished that they could change their physical appearances. Sixty percent of those teens were also battling issues with their weight and struggling to attain the "perfect look." As a result, many were indulging in unhealthy practices such as vomiting or drastically decreasing their caloric intake. Dieting among this group was the norm and it was often practiced by girls as young as 13. Additional research throughout Asia reports that teenage girls severely lack confidence and will take extreme measures to alter their appearance. Not so much concerned with body shape and size, these girls are dissatisfied with their facial features and some even resort to plastic surgery to alter their bodies.

What can be done?

A woman can attempt to alter her physical appearance to fit the standards for beauty, but most of these attempts prove futile. Instead of altering physical appearance, it is healthier to attempt to alter perception. Regardless of race or ethnicity, women can combat the negative effects of the media with the implementation of the following:

- Strive for a healthy body
- Focus on positive points
- Limit exposure to negative images in the environment
- Take notice of all the cool things the body can do
- Develop a positive social support system
- Devote time and energy towards helping yourself and others

Additionally, parents and friends can help combat the negativity by giving positive compliments on a regular basis. Compliments can include, but are not limited to, the following:

- "You're beautiful"
- "You're smart"
- "You're gifted"
- "I love you"
- "You're special"

Resources in Print

Frost, L. (2001). *Young women and the body: A feminist sociology*. St. Martin's Press. New York: NY.

McGee, R. & Elders, J. M. (2005). *Hungry for more: A keeping-it-real guide for Black women on weight and body image*. Seal Press, Emeryville: CA.

Molinary, R. (2007). *Hijas Americanas: Beauty, body image, and growing up Latina*. Seal Press, Emeryville: CA.

Online Resources

About-Face's *Making Changes*
<http://about-face.org/mc/>

Media Awareness Network's *Beauty and Body Image in the Media*
http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/issues/stereotyping/women_and_girls/women_beauty.cfm

National Eating Disorders Association's *Eating Disorders in Women of Color: Explanations and Implications*
http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/p.asp?WebPage_ID=286&Profile_ID=73571

PBS/Nova Online's *Minority Women: The Untold Story*
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/thin/minorities.html>

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