

# **The Effects of the Thin Ideal in Magazines on Women**

Senior Thesis

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## Introduction

The consumer culture in the United States encourages Americans to draw a sense of self from the images featured in advertisements (Bower, 2001). These messages tell women that to be considered attractive they need to look naturally beautiful and be thin. Society tells women they will not be desired or loved by men unless they are physically similar to the typical fashion models. Yet, the typical fashion model has an unattainable body type and this universal thin ideal is likely to cause dissatisfaction and anxiety in the large number of women whose bodies do not and cannot match this standard.

The internalization of these images and expectations may result in social, physical, and emotional damage, such as eating disorders and low self-esteem. Individuals can become obsessed with the images portrayed in the media and desire to achieve this body type for themselves. As a woman who has overcome an eating disorder myself, this topic is of special interest to me. I would like my thesis to help contribute to the knowledge and understanding of the effects of mass media on body satisfaction, hopefully educating other women of the ramifications that such advertisements can have.

The purpose of this study is to examine the feminine ideal portrayed in typical women fashion magazines, such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour*, and *Vogue* in comparison to feminist magazines such as *Bitch* or *Fierce*. Also, I will examine whether readers of the typical women's magazines rate their bodies differently than readers of the feminist magazines in an attempt to understand how certain types of advertisements may affect women.

The primary goal of this project is to increase our knowledge of the role of print media in body image development. Second, I envision this thesis as a way to combine my women's

studies and communication education in a concise manner, which will assist in my preparation for a career in media and public relations.

## Literature Review

### **The Power of Media and Advertisements**

The media promotes and reflects the current mainstream standards of the ideal female body shape or size and the importance of beauty (Andersen & DiDomenico, 1992; Schlenker, Caron, Halteman, 1998; Silverstein, Petersen, & Perdue, 1986). Being overweight or obese is highly stigmatized in our society and thinness has become a standard for attractiveness (Rodin, Silberstein & Striegel-Moore, 1984). Also, the media links a thin body to prestige, popularity, happiness, love, and success for women. The average person is bombarded by 400 to 600 ads per day in magazines, on billboards, on television, and in newspapers. One in eleven has a direct message about beauty and many other transmit this view indirectly (Silverstein, Perdue, Peterson, & Kelly, 1986). Such repeated exposure to the thin ideal within various applications of media may lead to the internalization of this ideal and making these images seem achievable and real. However, this ideal body type is often unattainable and many women thus suffer from body dissatisfaction; this has caused the relentless pursuit of thinness to become a normative behavior among women.

A typical adult reads two magazines per month and as a result, advertising agencies conduct much of their marketing within these publications (Sumner, 2001). Many of these media images are targeted at women, especially in magazines devoted to fashion. The largest percentage of pages of popular women's fashion magazines is devoted to articles and advertisements about appearance (Andersen & DiDomenico, 1992; Schlenker, Caron, Halteman, 1998). Since the majority of women are dissatisfied with their bodies (Garner, 1997; Rodin, Silberstein & Striegel-Moore, 1984), many women will become incredibly concerned with their weight after viewing these images. "Women are particularly susceptible to public claims related

to appearance and weight because women themselves, as well as dominant culture, define women by their appearance” (Sobal and Maurer, 1999b, p 99).

An analysis of magazine advertising can reveal the demands placed on bodies by contemporary societies. Magazines are filled with images that present an ideal female body type and many women experience pressure to conform to this ideal (Dolan, 1994). The average size of the idealized woman, as portrayed by models, has become progressively thinner and is currently 23% below a healthy height to weight ratio. Models only represent the body type of 5% of American women (Thone, 1997; Cussins, 2001). Thus, when most women use models as a reference in evaluating their own bodies’ image, the thin ideal is likely to cause dissatisfaction and anxiety in the large number of women whose bodies do not match this ideal. In fact, women attribute their desire to be thin primarily to women’s magazines because the magazines provide one definition of ideal body that women become obsessed to achieve (Hesse-Biber, 1996).

Magazine advertisements are not the only form of media that can lead a woman to dissatisfaction about her perceived body image, but definitely the most prevalent. Female high school students report that magazines are their primary source of information regarding ideal body images, dieting, and health (Paxton, Wertheim, Gibbons, Szumukler, Hillier, & Petrovitch, 1991). Two-thirds of the girls in this study reported that being thinner would have a positive impact on their lives. The girls reported a higher level of body dissatisfaction than boys did on a variety of measures of this construct. Thus, magazines are helping to create a culture where thinness is valued and this influence seems to be much more powerful for young women than for young men.

Also, magazine advertisements emphasize a thin and trim physical appearance for women more than for men. Silverstein, Peterson, and Perdue (1986) reported the four most popular

women's magazines contained 63 advertisements in 48 issues for diet food. An equal number of issues of the four most popular magazines for men contained only one such ad. Anderson and DiDomenico (1992) examined the number of advertisements and articles related to weight loss in the ten most popular magazines commonly read by men as compared to the most frequently read by women. They found that women's magazines contained ten times more articles related to dieting and weight loss than the men's magazines. The media facilitates and feeds women's desires to become slimmer and fit with constant images portrayed in advertisements and articles. In fact, 43 percent of women who are dissatisfied with their bodies state that they compare themselves with models in fashion magazines, and 49 percent state very thin models make them feel insecure about themselves (Garner, 1997).

### **The Effects of Media on Women**

Studies have also found that exposure to idealized images lowered subjects' satisfaction with their own attractiveness. Stice and Shaw (1994) found that women exposed to pictures of thin models in magazines reported increased depression, stress, and body dissatisfaction. Another study compared how girls ages 14-18 evaluated their bodies after being exposed to two different representations of women: the typical images of thin models or altered images that were designed to make the models appear with a more realistic body type. Girls who viewed the images of the typical thin models evaluated themselves and their appearance more negatively than the girls who had viewed images of the more realistic shaped models (Crouch & Degelman, 1998).

Internalization of idealized images and expectations causes further damage. According to a study done by Cash, situations that emphasize physical discrepancies from the norm will precipitate emotions associated with negative body image, especially for people who are highly

psychologically invested in their physical appearance (Cash, 1996). Rather than experience distress, these individuals have several ways to cope with the situation. They may attempt to modify their body to match the ideal through diet, exercise, liposuction, etc. They may conceal their body with loose clothing or avoid the situation by avoiding sites where display of the body is accented, such as beaches or aerobic classes. These individuals may also compensate by pursuing more attainable ideals on other valued dimensions of appearance (e.g., getting a new haircut), personality (e.g., being more friendly), or competence (e.g., mastering stock market trading). While these various strategies serve to manage distress in the short term, they do little to produce body acceptance, which is the root of dissatisfaction in the first place. If anything, avoidance and concealment of the real issue simply reinforce one's sense of physical unacceptability (Sobal and Maurer, 1999a).

Their attempt to modify their bodies to match the ideal body images portrayed in the media can lead to the development of eating disorders. The British Medical Association (BMA) published a report criticizing the widening gap between the shapes of real women and models, saying that waif-like models are fueling an epidemic of eating disorders (Cussins, 2001). Stice and his associates (1994) has also found a direct relationship between media exposure to body dissatisfaction and eating disorder symptoms. They found that women that had a greater exposure to media images of models exemplifying the thin ideal had an increased acceptance of this ideal and a higher rate of body dissatisfaction. Stice also concluded that the internalization of the thin ideal had a positive correlation in the development of various eating disorders.

The most recognized eating disorders are anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa. Anorexia is characterized by self starvation; "a woman is suffering from anorexia nervosa in the clinical sense when her weight has fallen to 15% below normal and she has not menstruated for

at least three months” (Harvard, 1996, p 67). The individual will also have an intense fear of gaining weight and a distorted body image where she may in actuality look emaciated but she is convinced that she is overweight. Bulimia is characterized by eating large amounts of food over a short period of time followed by purging to control weight. “Bulimia implies two or more episodes of binge eating (rapid consumption of a large amount of food) each week for at least three months” (Harvard, 1996, p 67). The purging of the food from the body is often done by vomiting, enemas, laxatives, diuretics, and/or compulsive exercise.

Ninety to ninety-five percent of patients with anorexia or bulimia are women. Depression and low self-esteem is also more prevalent in women than in men, and coincidentally, low self-esteem has been proven to directly correlate to body dissatisfaction and eating disorders (Wolf, 1990). This is a vicious cycle perpetuated by the images in the media. Lucas, Beard, O'Fallon, and Kurland (1991) did a study that reviewed the incidents of anorexia nervosa during a 50- year period and found that the incidence of anorexia nervosa among 10-19 year-old girls paralleled the change of fashion and its idealized body image. The thin ideal preceded the times when the rates of anorexia nervosa were highest. The unrelenting pursuit of thinness, which is a major characteristic of the eating disorder anorexia, seems in part to have its origins in the culture’s standards of a thin beauty ideal. “... [Eating] disorders seem to have become more common among younger females during the latter half of the twentieth century, during a period when icons of American beauty (Miss America’s contestants and *Playboy* centerfolds) have become thinner and women’s magazines have published significantly more articles on methods for weight loss” (Keel, 2003, p 747). Thus, self-destructive eating disorders are socially supported.

## **The Function of Advertisements and Solutions to Their Negative Effects**

Typical women's magazines reinforce the idea that a 'healthy' weight is one that is as low as possible. Recent decades have witnessed the growth of the commercialization of the thin image through the proliferation of media messages to promote exacting standards of physical attractiveness (Sobal and Maurer, 1999a). These images continue to be typically portrayed in spite of our increasing awareness of the physical, psychological, and emotional problems stemming from this form of media. "These advertising distortions are 'deliberate' as the ads need to sell a desirable image since their primary purpose is to sell products" (Thone, 1997, p 180). Our culture heralds "women who are tall and very thin with small hips and waists, large breasts, European facial features, and wrinkle-free skin" as being the beautiful and desirable body ideal, thus this image 'sells' (Sobal and Maurer, 1999a, p 212). When a model of this body type is used in an advertisement, the product receives a favorable response from the public and product sales increase dramatically (mediaweek.com). It becomes a cycle where the advertisements are created by society standards of beauty, yet also reinforce these standards.

There are several possible ways of producing change in the way media and society portray the ideal female body and the consequences of this standard. First, the media has a large influence on women's self- and body- image; hence the simplest answer would be to change the images and messages that the media present. "Rather than doing away with the slim models altogether, it would be more valuable for the media to use a much wider range of models of different sizes and shapes. This change would discourage the idealization of the unattainable form, and would encourage readers and viewers to see a wide range of body types as acceptable" (Dolan, 1994, p 51). The occasional representation of curvaceousness as the ideal female figure would unlikely spark change in the society's view on beauty standards. The modified ideal

would have to happen in a widespread fashion, but it is unlikely to be accepted as a new standard. Unfortunately, the advertising corporations would unlikely agree voluntarily to produce a picture of the world as it is. Therefore, the media are likely to maintain their current advertising strategies, and the best course will be to attempt to change on the individual and society level first.

A second way in which the media effects can change is to develop ways to inoculate society from their impact. Education may be the best approach to reducing the media's impact on an individual's self image perception. "In particular, it could encourage individuals to question the validity of accepting the messages that they receive from the media" (Dolan, 1994, p 52). The individual needs to change the female beauty standards that are intensified by the media on a personal level; she needs to accept and love her body and realize the 'ideal' female is often an unhealthy standard and unattainable. If our culture can not change the environment to modify the norms of dieting and thinness, an individual can set her own personal standards. Just because the media portrays one standard of beauty for an entire society, our culture does not need to accept it as the only form of attractiveness.

Another solution may be for women to be more selective of the media they choose to read, such as magazines. A number of feminist magazines designed to counteract the negative repercussions of female fashion magazines are now available. Two popular feminist magazines are *Bitch* and *Fierce*. Both contain diverse articles and advertisements that depict a variety of women, unlike magazines like *Cosmopolitan* or *Vogue*. The mission statements of both *Bitch* and *Fierce* address issues of body image and gender roles perpetuated in the fashion magazines. As *Bitch's* website states, "[Media] demonstrates that most people still think what a woman is wearing is more important than what she's thinking. Magazines [tell women], both implicitly and

explicitly, that female sexual urges are deviant, while reminding us that maintaining our sex appeal is the only way to wring commitment out of a man, without which [women's] lives will be sad and incomplete in spite of dazzling careers and intense friendships... *Bitch* was founded on the impulse to give a voice to the vast numbers of [women] who know in [their] hearts that these images are false, and want something to replace them" (bitchmagazine.com).

*Fierce* magazine also addresses these issues on their own website in their mission statement. It states: "We believe young women are smart, curious and opinionated about more than "How to Get Slimmer Thighs" or "Ten Ways to Satisfy Your Man in Bed." We're also for fat girls and skinny girls... We do not discriminate. We welcome you in your glorious individuality" (fiercemag.com). *Bitch* and *Fierce* are great examples of media that dares to venture beyond the stereotypical definitions of women and their assigned societal gender roles and body types. These magazines push the boundaries and help give women a place that supports difference and individuality; these are positive publications for women.

These magazines directly confront and critique "traditional" media advertising. In some *Bitch* magazines, a section is dedicated to explaining the negative images found in various catalogs and fashion magazines. The May 2000 edition of *Bitch* contained an article discussing the negative body images found in a teen fashion catalog. The author suggests the teen magazine, *Delia's*, should reconsider the way it treats women's bodies especially its advertising. The article raises questions as "How long can *Delia's* and other companies hide behind the false notion that the majority of women (who as we know come in all shapes and sizes) want to be forced to compare themselves with the much smaller minority of model-size people?" and "If you're gonna sell clothes for girls of all sizes... then how about including some of them as models?" (Mead, 16). This type of feminist analysis can help instigate change in advertising and mass

media. But, more importantly, it educates women and increases their awareness of corporate beauty standards and understanding that model-sized women are a minority and should not standardize body sizes for all women.

In the same May 2000 issue of *Bitch*, a page devoted to advertisements is relatively blank with an explanation to why there is no advertisement printed. As the editor of *Bitch* explains, “There was supposed to be an ad on this page. It was advertising a record, and it featured a photo of two bodacious blondes sprawled on a heart-shaped bed, drinkin’ and smokin’, one with her black lace encased breasts on display and the other with her mouth open just so” (Miya-Jervis, 91). The article continues to explain that whether the advertisement was meant as satire or not, an ad that uses the body language of porn and the sexualization of women to speak to readers is promoting an unhealthy message to women. Therefore *Bitch* pulled the ad. *Bitch* is a magazine about promoting powerful, women-in-charge subtext and articles or advertisements that detract from this statement will not be tolerated.

Such magazines are still rare in the mass media market. News magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek* had an average circulation of 3,626,332 issues in a six-month period for the year 2003 while fashion magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour*, and *Vogue* had an average circulation of 2,130,941 for the same time period. These five magazines were all in the total top 75 magazines with the largest readership (magazine.org). In contrast *Bitch*, an alternative, women’s magazine had an average circulation of 280,000 issues in a six-month period in 2003 (bitchmagazine.com). Thus, the more mainstream and typical magazines such as fashion magazines reach over eight times as many readers as feminist magazines.

Although feminist magazines provide images of a healthier body ideal and diverse articles, we know little about their effectiveness in improving women’s body satisfaction. As a

first step toward such understanding this current study assess body satisfaction of women who regularly read traditional women's magazines and those of women who read feminist magazines. Although images that promote a thin female body can be found in many areas of popular culture such as television and films, I feel magazine advertisements are the most prevalent and influential to women, causing many women to experience pressure to conform to this ideal. I hypothesize that women who do not read typical fashion magazines such as *Glamour*, *Vogue*, or *Cosmopolitan* will have less body dissatisfaction as those women who do read such magazines. I also predict that the women who read feminist magazines will be less likely to diet, endorse surgical weight loss techniques and/or believe that weight loss will result in positive changes in their self-image and social life when compared to the women who read the fashion magazines. I believe that the images used in fashion magazines typically portray women in a thin ideal and causes women to experience lower self-esteem and internalized body dissatisfaction.

## **Methods**

### **Subjects**

The sample for this study was made up of women ranging in age from 18 to over 50 years. The population of women who took my survey was very diverse, especially in educational level and choice of college majors. I targeted this group of people for a variety of reasons. I wanted to look at women only, because although men can be and are affected by the images in the media, for research purposes I needed to narrow my focus on just women. Also, the women needed to be over the age of 18 for legal and Human Subjects issues. Finally, I wanted a diverse group of women to get a better sample of the population. For example, I felt I could not ask only Women Studies majors to take the survey as most of these women usually are aware of the negative images in the media and read more feminist literature, which in turn could skew my results.

I recruited these women by sending an email asking for volunteers with a link to the online consent form and WebQ survey (see a copy of the recruitment email in Appendix A). I sent this email out to an email list through the Women Studies department at the University of Washington, to my relatives, friends, and so forth. I also asked the recipients to forward information about my survey to their relatives, friends, etc. so even more women could be included.

### **Procedure**

The respondents were linked to an online consent form and, if they consented, to an online survey (see a copy of the consent form and survey in Appendix B). The questionnaire took approximately 10 minutes to complete. The survey consisted of twenty questions about the individual's specific dieting habits, how she feels about her body, and how often she reads

certain magazines. Other examples of questions are: “What is your ideal dress size?” “Do you often feel guilty after eating a hearty meal?” and “How often do you diet?” The magazines I listed were selected for their high circulation rates within their genre (*Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour*, and *Vogue* are a few of the top circulated fashion magazines; *Time* and *Newsweek* are the top circulated news magazines and *Bitch* and *Fierce* have high readership for feminist magazines).

Individuals who took the survey had to have access to a computer and the Internet. The survey was made available on January 30, 2004 until April 27, 2004. During this time, people could access this survey 24 hours a day and 7 days a week.

### **Analysis**

Most of survey questions were multiple choice (see Appendix C for survey). The only open ended question asked the participants to indicate their academics if they were currently enrolled in a college or university. There were two parts to the survey: the first asking questions about the type and frequency of magazines individuals read and the second asking questions about how individuals feel about their own body type and weight.

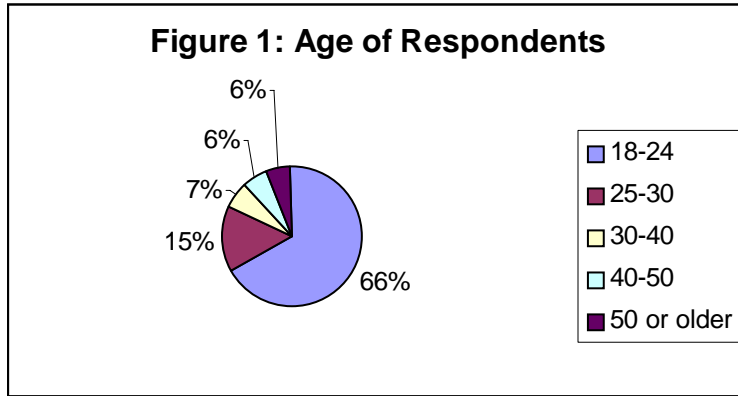
I divided the women into two groups according to the magazines they read: the women who read Positive Portrayal magazines (*Bitch* and *Fierce*) and the women who read the Negative and Neutral magazines (*Cosmopolitan*, *Vogue*, *Glamour*, *Newsweek* and *Time*). The reason I chose to combine both the Negative and Neutral magazines is that although the neutral magazines are directed at men as well as women, they do contain advertisements depicting women according to the culturally mandated thin ideal. While the content of the articles within the neutral magazines are less often about fashion, beauty, and tactics to attract men, the women depicted in the advertisements are still held to the rigid thin standards set in the negative magazines.

Women who read Negative/Neutral magazines were compared to those who read Positive magazines in terms of body image, dieting habits, and likelihood to undergo surgical procedures for weight loss. Any woman who reported reading any Positive Portrayal magazine was included in the positive group even if she also read Negative/Neutral magazines. After comparing all women in the positive magazine group to all women in the Negative/Neutral group, I will examine the effects of a woman reading both types of material, and how this in turn effects her body dissatisfaction. I believe that a woman reading both types of magazines will have a better sense of body satisfaction and a healthier body ideal than the women who read only the fashion magazines, but not as much as the women who only read the feminist magazines.

## Results

### Demographics

One hundred and four women responded to the survey. They ranged in age from 18 to 50



or older with most being in the 18 to 24 age group (66%) (Figure 1).

Most participants (74%) were currently enrolled at a college or university. The majority of these participants (21%) were Women's

Studies majors, followed by Psychology majors (10%) and then both Education and Business majors (each 8%).

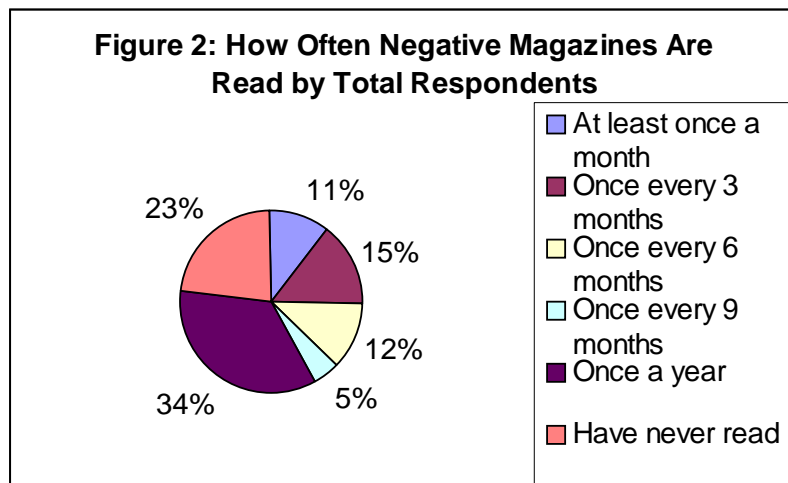
### Data on the Frequency of Magazine Reading

Overall, no type of magazine was read more than any other. The magazines that portray women negatively were not

read as often as anticipated (Figure 2). *Cosmopolitan*

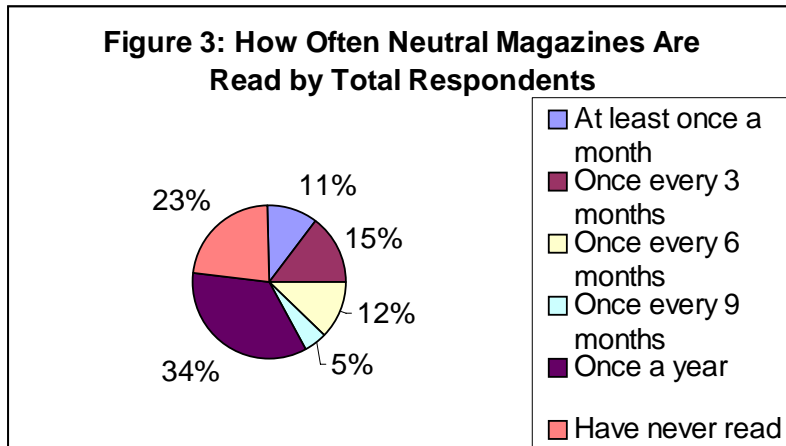
and *Vogue* were most often read only once a year (each by 38% of participants).

Many participants (28%) had never read *Glamour*.

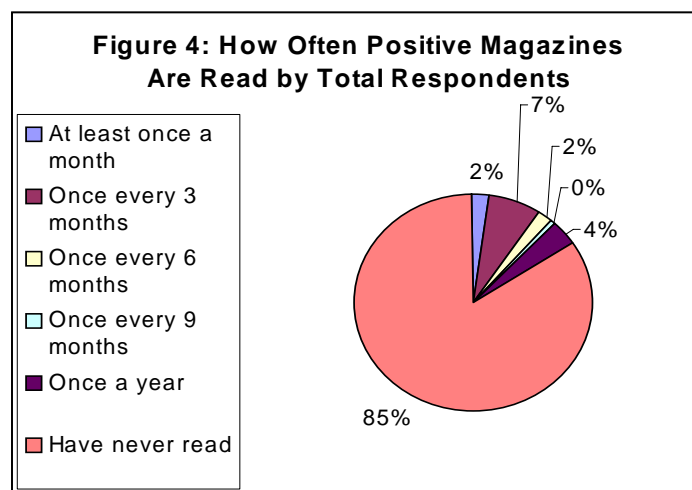


The neutral magazines were not as frequently read as I originally thought either (Figure 3).

Participants reported that they read *Newsweek* and *Time* only once a year, *Newsweek* by 35% and *Time* by 31% of participants.



The feminist magazines, *Bitch* and *Fierce*, were read even less often (Figure 4). Out of the 104 respondents, 74 women (71%) had never read *Bitch* magazine and 97 women (93%) had never read *Fierce* magazine. These results were not totally surprising since, as discussed in the literature review, the circulation rates for these magazines are lower than those of the negative and neutral magazines.



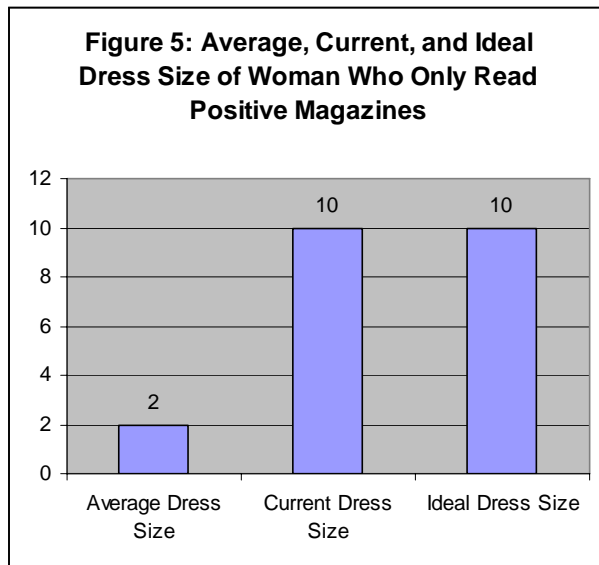
At this point I put the neutral and negative magazine statistics together under the label Negative Magazines. The articles in *Time* and *Newsweek* are much less likely to be about fashion, beauty, and men than those in *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour*, and *Vogue*, but the women

depicted in the advertisements in the apparently neutral magazines are still held to the rigid thin standards depicted in the negative magazines.

For this analysis, the participants were divided into five groups: 1. Women who read *All Positive Magazines*, 2. Women who read *More Positive than Negative Magazines*, 3. Women who read the *Same Number of Both Positive and Negative Magazines*, 4. Women who read *More Negative than Positive Magazines*, and 5. Women who read *All Negative Magazines*. These categories take into account the degree to which the participants were exposed to both positive and negative images of women.

### **Women who read *All Positive Magazines***

Out of the 104 respondents, only one woman read only positive magazines and none of the negative magazines. She was in the 25-30-age year bracket; she was enrolled in school, and a



Women Studies major. Surprisingly, this individual reported that the ideal woman of average height should wear a dress size of 2 or less. However, the ideal dress size for her own self was 10, which was also her current dress size (Figure 5).

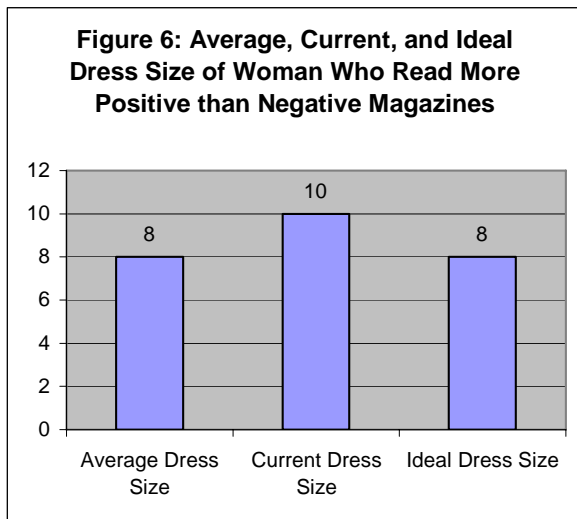
This individual would definitely not undergo surgery to lose weight, even if it was

available without cost and felt guilty after eating a hearty meal only sometimes. She rarely diets and was not currently on a diet. She thought that if she lost weight, she would feel more attractive but her life would stay the same.

Finally, when asked about the magazines she reads, she reported that the magazines definitely did not cause her to be less satisfied with her body; in fact, she felt the magazines definitely caused her to be more satisfied with her body.

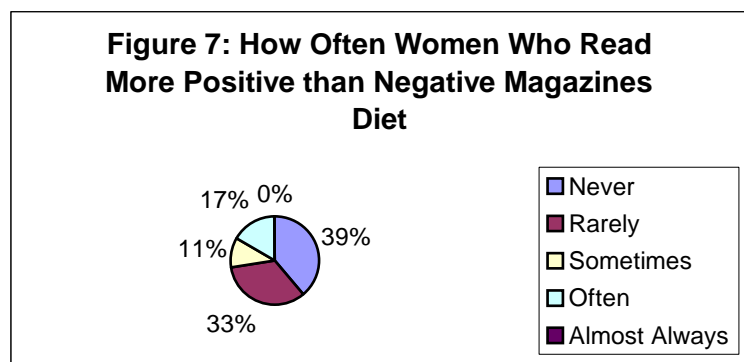
**Women who read *More Positive than Negative Magazines***

Out of the 104 respondents, 19 women read both Positive and Negative Magazines, but



read more of the Positive Magazines. Most of these women were in the 18-24 years age bracket, in school, and Women Studies majors. On average, this group reported that the ideal dress size for a woman of average height was an 8. The average current dress size for women in this group was a size 10 and their average ideal dress size was an 8 (Figure 6).

The majority of the women in this group (74%) would definitely not undergo surgery to lose weight and 53% reported that they rarely felt guilty after eating a hearty meal. Thirty-seven percent of these women had dieted to lose weight or to maintain their current weight, but 79% were not currently on a diet (Figure 7).



When asked what would happen if she lost weight, 79% of women in this group said that they would feel more attractive, 5% said they would be more successful, and 32% said they

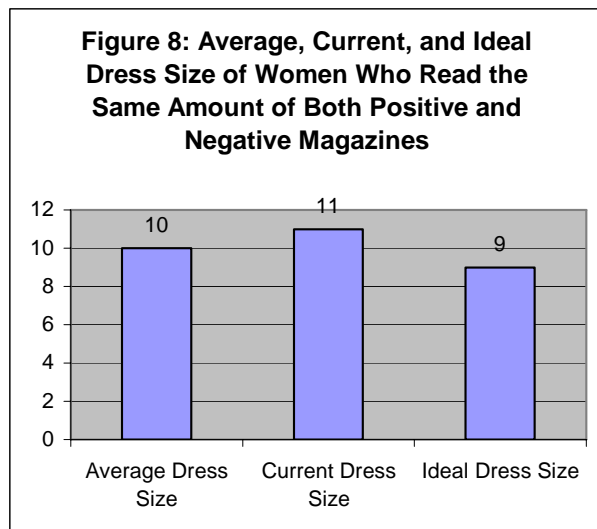
would be happier<sup>1</sup>. Thirty-seven percent of these women thought their lives would stay the same, regardless of weight loss. Interestingly, 5% of these women felt they would be both less attractive and less successful if they lost weight; 11% of women felt they would not be happy if they lost weight.

The women in this group felt that the magazines they read caused them to be somewhat less satisfied with their bodies.

**Women who read the *Same Number of Both Positive and Negative Magazines***

Out of 104 respondents, only two women read the same amount of both Negative and

Positive Magazines. One woman was 25-30 years old and the other was 30-40 years old. They were both in school. One is a Social Work major and the other a Nursing major. They both thought the ideal dress size for a woman of average height was a size 10. The first woman’s current dress size was 10 and her ideal dress size



was an 8. The other woman’s current dress size was 12 and her ideal dress size was a 10 (Figure 8).

Both women would definitely not undergo surgery to lose weight and rarely felt guilty after eating a hearty meal. The first woman rarely dieted and was not currently on a diet. The

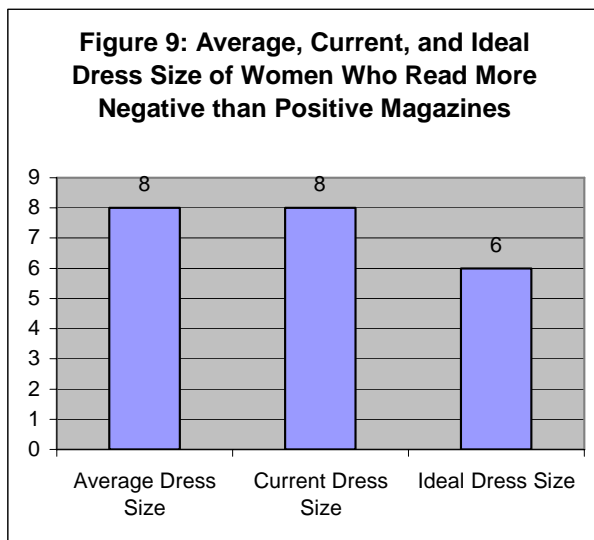
<sup>1</sup> Some totals for question 18 (“Which of the following would result if you lost weight?”) may be more than 100%. This is due to the fact that participants were given the opportunity to check as many answers as applied. All answers were coded and counted.

other woman sometimes dieted and was currently on a diet to lose or maintain her current weight.

When asked what would result if she were to lose weight, both women said they would feel more attractive. One woman felt she would be happier. Both women felt the magazines they read did not cause them to be less satisfied with their body. Both women felt the magazines they read definitely did cause them to be more satisfied with their body.

### **Women who read *More Negative than Positive Magazines***

Out of the 104 respondents, 8 women read both Positive and Negative Magazines, but read more of the Negative Magazines. The average age bracket for this group was 18-24. Most of these women are in school and are Women Studies majors. This group indicated that the ideal dress size for a woman of average height was an 8. The average current dress size for women in



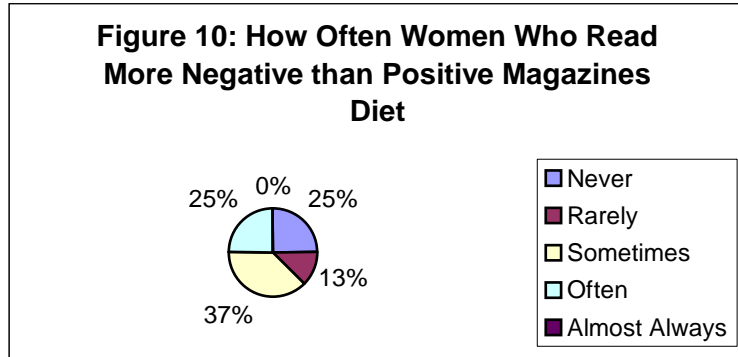
this group was a size 8 and their average ideal dress size was a 6 (Figure 9).

The majority of women in this group (63%) would not undergo surgery to lose weight and approximately half were unlikely to feel guilty after eating a hearty meal (25% rarely did, 25% never did). Thirty-eight percent of the women sometimes dieted to

either lose weight or maintain their current weight, and most of these women (88%) were not currently on a diet (Figure 10).

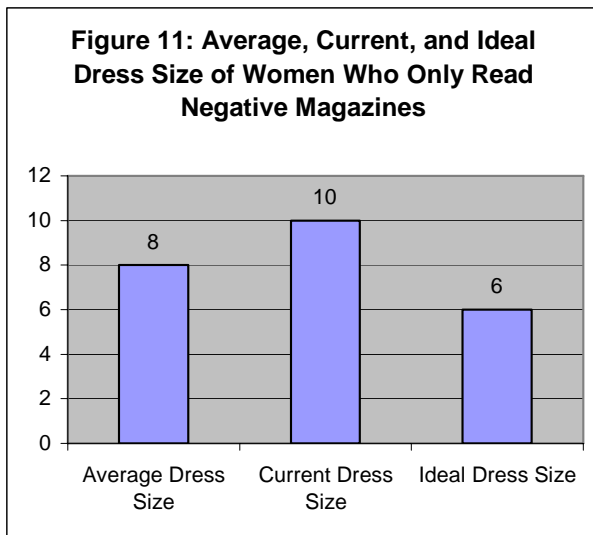
Eighty-eight percent of these women said they would feel more attractive, 13% of women said they would have more friends, and 50% said they would be happier if they lost weight. Half

of these of women thought their life would stay the same following weight loss. Finally, the women in this group felt the magazines they read caused them to be somewhat less satisfied with their bodies.



### Women who read *All Negative Magazines*

Out of the 104 respondents, 74 women read only the negative magazines and none of the positive magazines. Most of these women were 18-24 years old and enrolled in school. Most (11%) are Women Studies majors. The next most common major is Psychology (8%). The ideal dress size for a woman of average height according to this group of women was an 8. The

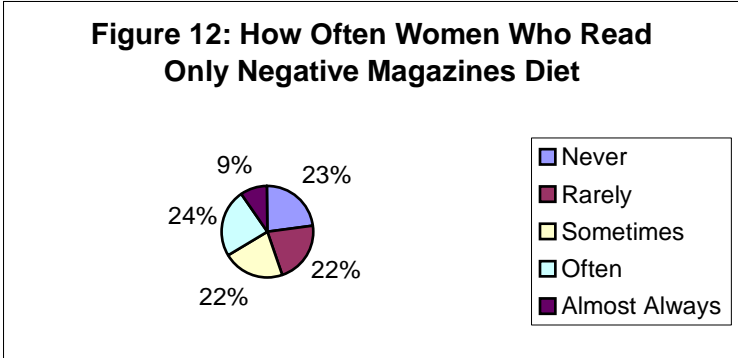


average current dress size for this group was a size 10 and their average ideal dress size was a 6 (Figure 11).

Most of the women in this group (64%) would not undergo surgery to lose weight and 37% sometimes feel guilty after eating a hearty meal. Twenty-four percent of the women often diet to either lose weight or

maintain their current weight, and 53% were currently on a diet (Figure 12).

Most of the women (76%) said they would feel more attractive, 1% said they would have more friends, 7% said they would be more successful, and 47% said they would be happier if they lost weight. Thirty-one percent of women thought their life would stay the same following weight loss. On the other hand, 4% of these women felt they would be less attractive and 3% felt they would not be happy if they lost weight.



The women in this group felt the magazines they read definitely caused them to be not satisfied with their bodies.

## Discussion

This study surveyed women reading feminist (Positive) and typical fashion (Negative) magazines to assess whether reading such magazines affected women's body satisfaction, dieting habits, endorsement of surgical weight loss techniques, and/or the belief that weight loss will result in positive changes in their self-image and social life.

As expected, the women who read more negative than positive magazines had a higher rate of body dissatisfaction. Only one woman read only feminist magazines and she thought her current dress size was also her ideal dress size, suggesting little or no body dissatisfaction. All the other women read at least one negative magazine once in a while. No matter how large or small the proportion of negative to positive magazines, groups who read negative magazines reported that their ideal dress size was at least one size lower than their current dress size and the group's ideal dress size decreased lower as the proportion of negative magazines increased. The largest discrepancy between current dress size and ideal dress size was reported by the group of women who read only negative magazines. Their ideal dress size was two sizes lower than their current size. These findings support the hypothesis that women who read magazines containing unrealistic advertisements of women internalize these images, show greater dissatisfaction with their bodies, and desire to be thinner.

Another interesting aspect of the dress size data from this study is that women who read more negative magazines reported that their ideal dress size for themselves is the same or smaller than their ideal for the average women. The women who read more positive than negative magazines and the women who read the same number of positive and negative magazines reported that the ideal dress size for themselves was the same as that for the average size of women. Again it seems that women who read negative magazines internalize the ideal that

women need to be smaller and thinner. Women who read more negative magazines want to be even smaller than the average woman is. Being average is almost seen as being too large and these women prefer an even thinner body.

One puzzling finding came from the woman who read only positive magazines. This woman reported that the ideal dress size for an average woman was much smaller than her own ideal dress size and much smaller than the ideal average woman described by the other groups. Since only one woman fit this groups reading pattern, its is impossible to asses the meaning of this finding. Indeed, it may have simply resulted from a typographical error when completing the questionnaire.

Happily, most of the respondents reported that they would not undergo surgery to lose weight even if the procedure was free. Looking past the averages and analyzing all responses more closely reveals the more interesting results. Only one woman who read more positive than negative magazines would undergo a free surgical procedure to lose weight. Similarly, no women who read the same amount of both positive and negative magazines would consider undergoing such surgery. But over one third (38%) of the women who read more negative than positive magazines and over one fourth (28%) of the women who only read negative magazines reported that they would consider or definitely undergo a free surgical procedure to lose weight. Thus while the majority of women in every group rejected the idea of surgery for weight loss, a large number of women who read more negative magazines were open to considering surgery as an option for weight loss.

An unexpected finding from this survey is that the majority of the women rarely felt guilty after eating a hearty meal, no matter what type or combination of magazines they read. At the same time, the women who read more negative magazines were more likely to diet often, and

were more likely to be currently on a diet. On the other hand, women who read more positive magazines were rarely or never dieted and were not currently dieting. These statistics directly correlate to the material the women are reading: if a woman is reading a magazine promoting an unrealistic thin body ideal, she is more likely to diet. However if a woman is reading a magazine where the body size of a woman is less important, she is less likely to diet and be more satisfied with her body.

No matter how a group of women rated their body size or dieting habits, every group of women reported that weight loss would have positive consequences. Even women who read more positive magazines said that they would feel more attractive, be more successful, and be happier if they lost weight even though they rarely dieted and were not currently on a diet. Although these statistics look contradictory, I believe they reflect the positive effects of the positive magazines. Even though these women believe that weight loss could have positive results in their life, they are not currently trying to lose weight. Apparently, the potential benefits from weight loss are not worth considering to these women – they are satisfied with their life and weight as they are.

Another fascinating finding is that the women who read more negative than positive magazines felt that if they lost weight, their lives would stay the same or even have negative ramifications, and yet most of these women are currently on a diet. This result could have occurred for a couple of reasons. First, the dieting question asked if the individual was currently on a diet to lose or maintain their current weight. These women may now be on a diet to maintain their current weight and feel that if they lose weight they would feel too skinny and unattractive. Second, these women maybe experience peer pressure and may be dieting because their friends are. Thus they may not really want to lose weight and if they did, their lives would simply stay

the same. Dieting to them may be just a form of blending in to the normative behavior of their peers.

Finally, the survey asked the women how the magazines they read affected their body satisfaction. As expected, the women who read more positive magazines felt the magazines they read caused them to be more satisfied with their body. Women who read more negative magazines reported less positive effects on their body image. One interesting aberration in these findings came from the women who read more positive magazines than negative. These women reported that the magazines they read led them to be less satisfied with their bodies. This could be because these women more clearly understood the negative impact of the thin ideal from their exposure to positive magazines or other factors, such as friends or peers and more readily reported the negative impact of the cultural ideal in this survey.

While the women who read more negative magazines feel that the magazines they read cause them to be less satisfied with their bodies, they continue to read them. The reason for this is unclear. It could be that women read such magazines because their peers do or because such magazines are advertised as women's literature, implying that women who do not read them are less than ideal women. Or, these women may simply be unaware of more positive but poorly advertised alternatives. Finally, these women may continue to purchase these magazines because they truly believe that the unrealistic women portrayed in these magazines are truly an ideal to be desired. Thus, the women buy the magazines full well knowing they will feel less attractive after reading it, but the advertised images provide motivation to the women to become thinner.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations to this study. The first is that the survey was only given to women over the age of 18 years old. Women and girls are consistently taught from an early age

that their self-worth is based largely on how they look making puberty and the development of an adult female body a difficult adjustment period. By the age of 18, most women are well aware of the beauty standards of the culture and their body dissatisfaction is well established.

The second limitation is that most of the participants (74%) were currently enrolled at a college or university. Almost one third of the respondents were in academic majors that are known for discussing and dealing with women's images in media advertisements (Women Studies, Psychology, and Communications). These women might have been more aware of the results I would be expecting, such that negative magazines negatively affect women's perception of themselves, thus influencing their answers.

Another limitation that needs to be considered is that the magazines surveyed, although quite popular in society as determined by their circulation rates, were not read often by the women who responded to the survey. Thus, most of my conclusions are based on the responses of a small population of women. Also, while the women I surveyed are not reading any of these magazines, either positive or negative with any frequency, they were, no doubt being influenced by other forms of media, such as billboards, television, and newspapers which are not taken into consideration for this specific study.

Finally, the use of a survey in the form of a questionnaire with multiple choices limits the participants' ability to respond to each issue more in depth. If this research involved interviewing women or if the survey had spaces allowing for women to write their own answers, other themes may have developed and levels of analysis deepened. Interviews would have allowed for a better discussion on how exactly women felt the magazines they read influenced their body dissatisfaction, dieting habits, endorsement of surgical weight loss techniques, and/or the belief that weight loss will result in positive changes in their self-image and social life. It would have

also provided an opportunity to discuss any previous knowledge the women might have had about this topic, either from prior health education, advertising, media, and/or psychology classes or from external resources such as news stories, books, friends, family, etc.

### **Future Study**

An in depth study of puberty aged girls is needed to fully assess the negative ramifications young women and girls can endure while reading typical fashion magazines. When compared to the data reported here, a study of younger girls could help determine whether young girls are more influenced by the images they see in magazines than older women are. Such findings could also be useful in developing tools to educate young girls about the images put forward by the media, helping these individuals to become more informed. The more children are educated on these important topics, the less likely they are to misinterpret the images they see in magazine advertisements.

It may also be useful to do this study again with individuals who were recruited because they were women who read specific magazines. This method would provide a better assessment of the effects of reading positive and negative magazines on women's body dissatisfaction, dieting habits, endorsement of surgical weight loss techniques, and/or the belief that weight loss will result in positive changes in their self-image and social life.

## Conclusion

This study shows the important role images in typical fashion magazines, such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour*, and *Vogue*, play towards a woman's body dissatisfaction, dieting habits, endorsement of surgical weight loss techniques, and/or the belief that weight loss will result in positive changes in her self-image and social life. When one takes a close look at the portrayal of women in mass media, especially in magazine advertisements, it is easy to understand why the majority of women view their own bodies in a negative light.

The women commonly portrayed in typical fashion magazines have their image sell the idea that they are the norm and thus sends an unrealistic message of a virtually unattainable ideal to girls and women throughout the culture. This survey revealed that women who read common fashion magazines are more likely to label a smaller dress size as ideal, to diet, to consider extreme measures such as surgery to lose weight, and even to feel they would have a better, more successful life if thinner.

These images need to be countered. Both men and women must commit to educating youth about body image so that their ideas of what is beautiful and what is normal are not formed solely by the advertisements they see in magazines. Consumers might begin this process by refusing to purchase magazines that have offensive advertisements and by purchasing magazines with more realistic advertisements, such as feminist magazines, thus funding further production of these types of publications. If negative magazines lose income, they would have no choice but to fill their pages with more realistic and less offensive advertisements. Going one step further, consumers could label what specific material and pictures they find offensive and clarify their objectives in a letter sent to the editors of negative magazines. This would draw attention to the specific advertisements the editors should pull from their magazine.

Furthermore, programs on topics such as the unrealistic nature of images the mass media produces should be included in the curriculum of middle and high schools. The more young adults, especially young girls, are educated on these important topics, the less likely they are to internalize the images they see in magazine advertisements. Ultimately, it is hoped that individuals will be able to understand advertisements are impractical ideals for women and realize that it is perfectly normal to be completely different from the image portrayed in the media and that success in life is not dependent on one's dress size.

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## Appendix A: Recruitment Email

### **Survey on the Effect of the Feminine Ideal in Magazines**

Researcher: Adrienne Blair, UW Women Studies.  
[ablair8@u.washington.edu](mailto:ablair8@u.washington.edu)

I am looking for women to answer questions on the frequency and type of magazines they read to determine the effect of advertisements on women. Questions will also address issues of their self-perceived image, dieting habits, and ideal weight. This survey will only take approximately 10 minutes. If you are over the age of 18 and interested in taking this survey, please visit the website below.

<http://students.washington.edu/ablair8/generic.html>

**Also, please feel free to pass this email on to your friends, family, and peers who you think may be interested in completing the survey. I need numerous participants, so in fact, I would appreciate it!** Thank you for your time and please email me with any questions you may have.

## **APPENDIX B: Consent Form**

### **UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON CONSENT FORM Survey on the Effect of the Feminine Ideal in Magazines**

#### **Page contents:**

[Researcher's Statement](#)

[Purpose and Benefits](#)

[Procedures](#)

[Risks, Stress, or Discomfort](#)

[Other Information](#)

[Subject's Statement](#)

#### **Researcher: Adrienne Blair, UW Women Studies**

**email: [ablair8@u.washington.edu](mailto:ablair8@u.washington.edu)**

#### **Researcher's Statement**

I am a senior in the Women Studies Department at the University of Washington conducting my senior thesis on the effects of the feminine ideal in magazines. I am looking for women over the age of 18 to answer questions on the frequency and type of magazines they read. Questions will also address issues of their self-perceived image, dieting habits, and ideal weight. If you are over the age of 18 and interested in taking this survey, please continue on.

I am asking you to be in a research study. The purpose of this consent form is to give you the information you will need to help you decide whether to participate or not. Please read the form carefully. If you have questions before you begin the survey, please feel free to send an anonymous email contact at [UMail](mailto:UMail) . If you choose to utilize UMail, the answer to any question you submit will be posted on [this website](#) .

#### **Purpose and Benefits**

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects, if any, that magazines have on a woman's body image and dieting habits. There will be no direct benefit to anyone who takes part in this survey.

#### **Procedures**

This survey will take approximately 10 minutes and will consist of a two-part questionnaire. The first part of questions will ask about the frequency and the type of magazines you read. The second part will ask questions regarding your attitudes towards your own body and dieting habits. For example, I will ask "How often do you diet?" and "What is your current dress size?" Thus, some of the questions asked may be of a personal nature; you may refuse to answer any questions at any time.

## **Risks, Stress, or Discomfort**

Since many questions in this survey may be considered of a personal nature, you may be uncomfortable answering some of the questions. You do not have to answer all of the questions and you can stop at any time. Taking part in this study is voluntary. The survey asks for no information that can be used to identify you and all responses are totally anonymous.

## **Other Information**

Let me emphasize that all information is treated in the strictest confidence and your anonymity is totally assured. The survey asks no information that can be used to identify you and all responses are totally anonymous. The researcher will have no way of identifying participants.

If you have any questions about this survey, please feel free to contact Adrienne Blair at [ablair8@u.washington.edu](mailto:ablair8@u.washington.edu). As mentioned before, if you prefer to send a question anonymously, please use [UMail](#) . If you choose to use UMail, the answer to any question you submit will be posted on [this website](#) .

## **Subject's Statement**

This study has been explained to me and I have been informed of the purpose of this survey. I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time or I may skip answering any uncomfortable questions. I also understand that I am at no risk of suffering any adverse effects as a result of completing the questionnaire. I have had a chance to ask questions, and if I have questions later about the research, I can ask the researcher listed above. If I have any questions about my rights as a research subject, I can call the Human Subjects Division at 206-543-0098. By clicking on the following link that will take me to the survey page, I have knowingly consented to taking part in this research. [Take the survey on the Effect of the Feminine Ideal in Magazines NOW](#)

*Send mail to: [ablair8@u.washington.edu](mailto:ablair8@u.washington.edu)  
Last modified: 1/26/2004 6:55 pm*

**Appendix C: Survey**

## The Effect of the Feminine Ideal in Magazines

**Question 1.** How old are you?

- 18-24
- 25-30
- 30-40
- 40-50
- 50 or older

**Question 2.** Are you currently a student at a college or university?

**Question 3.** If you answered 'yes' to question number 2, please list your major(s) in the space provided.

**Question 4.** How often do you read Cosmopolitan?

- At least once a month
- Once every 3 months
- Once every 6 months
- Once every 9 months
- Once a year
- I have never read this magazine.

**Question 5.** How often do you read Newsweek?

- At least once a month
- Once every 3 months
- Once every 6 months
- Once every 9 months
- Once a year
- I have never read this magazine.

**Question 6.** How often do you read Vogue?

- At least once a month
- Once every 3 months
- Once every 6 months
- Once every 9 months
- Once a year
- I have never read this magazine.

**Question 7.** How often do you read Bitch?

- At least once a month
- Once every 3 months
- Once every 6 months
- Once every 9 months
- Once a year
- I have never read this magazine.

**Question 8.** How often do you read Time?

- At least once a month
- Once every 3 months
- Once every 6 months
- Once every 9 months
- Once a year
- I have never read this magazine.

**Question 9.** How often do you read Glamour?

- At least once a month
- Once every 3 months
- Once every 6 months
- Once every 9 months
- Once a year
- I have never read this magazine.

**Question 10.** How often do you read Fierce?

- At least once a month
- Once every 3 months
- Once every 6 months
- Once every 9 months
- Once a year
- I have never read this magazine.

**Question 11.** What is the ideal dress size for a woman of average height?

- 2 or less
- 4

- 6
- 8
- 10
- 12
- 14
- 16
- 18 or more

**Question 12.** What is your current dress size?

- 2 or less
- 4
- 6
- 8
- 10
- 12
- 14
- 16
- 18 or more

**Question 13.** What is your ideal dress size?

- 2 or less
- 4
- 6
- 8
- 10
- 12

- 14
- 16
- 18 or more

**Question 14.** If it were free of charge, would you undergo surgery to lose weight?

- Definitely Yes
- Somewhat Yes
- Undecided
- Somewhat No
- Definitely No

**Question 15.** Do you often feel guilty after eating a hearty meal?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Almost Always

**Question 16.** How often do you diet?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Almost Always

**Question 17.** Are you currently on a diet to lose weight or to maintain your

current weight?

**Question 18.** Which of the following would result if you lost weight? (Check as many statements that apply)

- I would feel more attractive.
- I would have more friends.
- I would be more successful.
- I would be happier.
- My life would stay the same.
- I would feel less attractive.
- I would lose friends.
- I would be less successful.
- I would not be happy.

**Question 19.** Do you think that the magazines you read cause you to be less satisfied with your body?

- Definitely Yes
- Somewhat Yes
- Undecided
- Somewhat No
- Definitely No

**Question 20.** Do you think the magazines you read cause you to be more satisfied with your body?

- Definitely Yes
- Somewhat Yes

- Undecided
- Somewhat No
- Definitely No

Thank you for completing the survey!