Influence Of Media On Body Image Essay, Research Paper

The influence of the media on the proliferation of eating disorders cannot be refuted. From an early age we are bombarded with images and messages that reinforce the idea that to be happy and successful we must be thin. Today, you cannot read a magazine or newspaper, turn on the television, listen to the radio, or shop at the mall without being assaulted with the message that fat is bad. The most frightening part is that this destructive message is reaching kids. Adolescents often feel fatally flawed if their weight, hips, and breasts don?t match up to those of models and actors. Today even elementary school aged children are obsessed with their weight. The media?s obsession with thinness and perfection has increased adolescent dissatisfaction with their bodies. The statistics and facts that document how obsessed we are as a society with the pursuit of thinness are sad reminders of the power the media has in how our society evaluates self-worth.

Eating disorders are complex conditions that arise from a variety of factors, including psychological, interpersonal, and social issues. Media images that help to create cultural definitions of beauty and attractiveness are often acknowledged as being among those factors contributing to the risk of eating disorders. Media messages screaming ?thin is in? may not directly cause eating disorders, but they help to create the context within which people learn to place a value on the size and shape of their body. To the extent that media messages like advertising and celebrity spotlights help our culture define what is beautiful and what is ?good,? the media?s power over our development of self-esteem and body image can be incredibly strong.

Media such as television, movies, and magazines are considered to be among the most influential promoters of the thin standard, given their popularity and increase to the American people. Importantly, this effect has the potential to increase given continuing advances in technology and the increasing popularity and accessibility of computers and the Internet. American culture is not only affecting its own youth. For example, following the introduction of Western television in Fiji there was a dramatic increase in the rate of eating disorders. This is a tragic occurrence that is only destined to continue if the media does not relent in perpetuating harmful messages about attractiveness.

Furthermore, the images that society receives through the media are merely images. The viewer does not see the imperfections of the models before they are airbrushed to achieve the ideal look that is so impossibly appealing to many young girls. I recall watching a television interview where an actress unveiled the hoax behind the scene of fashion shoots. She talked in detail about how every inch of a magazine picture is touched up to the point of virtual indistinction between the actual model herself and the finished photo. The finished photo, however is what a young adolescent will see and compare their own body to. While only one out of ten high school girls are overweight, one out of ten high school juniors and seniors diet. They are dieting to achieve some ethereal shape created by a computer, actually defying reality.

Ironically in our ?thinness? obsessed society, overweight is undeniably a problem. As many Americans struggle to maintain a healthy weight, we are losing realistic perception of what a healthy weight is supposed to be while the discrepancy between the average model and the average adult continues to increase, which further deepens our obsessive preoccupation with weight and body image issues. The media tells people that being overweight is undesirable and that they should conform to certain ideal body images. Today?s lean but muscular version of perfection is a very demanding standard for both women and men to meet. People may become dissatisfied and concerned about their inability to achieve these ideals. For some, especially the adolescent population, their self-concept changes and their self-esteem declines. Growing older lessens, but does not eliminate, this dissatisfaction.

The media cannot be entirely blamed for society?s issues with body image as there are many individuals with eating disorders and weight problems or other such self- dissatisfaction stemming from causes unrelated to the media such as medical, psychological, emotional or genetic reasons. The media is part of our popular culture that defines a part of who we are. Critical consumers of the media will be able to recognize and dismiss harmful advertising and remain unaffected. Photography, planning and organizing ideas through story boards, writing scripts and performing in front of a camera, designing web pages, or reporting news stories are effective means of communication that can be used to promote positive messages. The power of the media can also be used as a means for creative expression, critical inquiry, and self-reflection.

The solution may be to educate adolescents about the media?s negative influence and manipulative techniques used to persuade consumers. Education would therefore influence teens to make informed decisions based on facts rather than the ideas promoted by the media. Parents can also play an important influencing role in how young people respond to the media by controlling children?s access to popular culture by not allowing it in their home.

Students do not want to be thought of as helpless victims of media influence who need to be rescued from the evil excesses of their interest in popular culture. If we focus on the problematic aspects of the media, we neglect young people?s emotional involvement with the media. Educating that the media is the cause of all immorality will take away from the pleasure teens receive from popular culture. We cannot therefore ignore the media and its influence or its ability to cause distress among adolescents.

The fact remains that in our society it is virtually impossible to entirely remove oneself from the influence of the media. Unless of course we were to isolate ourselves from the rest of the world with no telephone, computer, outside contact with society whatsoever, etc. The media is undeniably all around us whether we like it or not. If someone should chose to ignore it and maintain a weight or style that is unacceptable then they also face the possibility of ridicule by those who value conformity. Everyone wants to feel accepted and the media has the power to influence what is normal. Unless the media changes its messages, society will not change and neither will the increasing presence of eating disorders as a result of body image dissatisfaction.