Body image is more than about size

Body image is a hot topic, and in our image focussed culture, it's not going to go away anytime soon.

Women's Forum Australia

On one side of the issue is the persistent media promotion of a thin, idealised, glamorous woman.

On the other side is the growing levels of body image dissatisfaction. And it's not just limited to women. Body image dissatisfaction is a serious health problem, particular for young Australians. The Mission Australia 2009 National Youth Survey again highlighted that body image was the third highest ranked issue for our youth, with over 25% of respondents indicating that it was a major concern – more concerning than family conflict, personal safety and sexual abuse.

In late 2009, the Federal government released a proposed National Strategy on Body Image and a Voluntary Code of Conduct for the advertising, media and fashion industries in a welcomed move to do something about the issue. Before this policy can be assessed, it's important to take a few steps back and see the broader issue.

Despite the focus on dress size and whether or not a size 0 is fashionable let alone healthy, body image dissatisfaction is not limited to dissatisfaction about body size alone. It involves unhappiness with many aspects of appearance: the firmness and luminance of skin, the tautness of arms, the shape of knees, whether we're deemed sexy by our peers etc. But where do the standards against which we compare and despair of ourselves come from? International and Australian research strongly suggests that many of the causes of body image dissatisfaction can be linked to a broader cultural phenomenon: the objectification and sexualisation of women in media and advertising.

Objectification and Sexualisation Defined

Objectification can be defined as the "object-like character of an image that connotes passivity, vulnerability, property, and, in its most extreme form, victimization." Objectification occurs "when a woman's body, parts of her body, or sexual capabilities are seen as her whole self, ignoring other attributes."
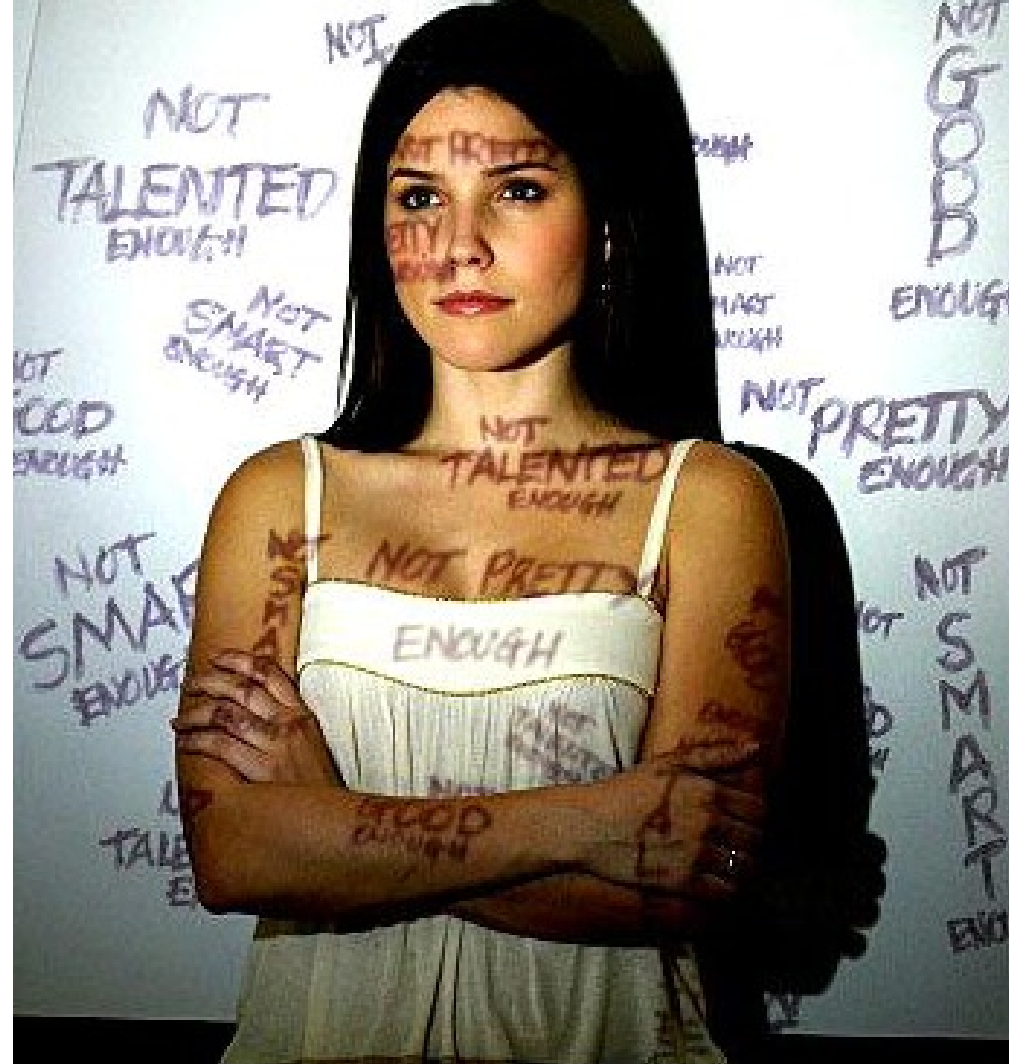
In their ground breaking research, the American Psychological Association (APA) research defines sexualisation having several components including:

- a person's value comes *only* from his or her sexual appeal or behaviour, to the exclusion of other characteristics;
- a person is held to a standard that equates attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy; and
- a person is sexually *objectified*—that is, made into a thing for others' sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making.

In that and sexualises-women, women are portrayed as physical objects that can be looked at and acted upon-- and fail to portray women as subjective beings with thoughts, histories, and emotions. The objectification of women sends a cultural message that a women's worth is *exclusively* to the level of her physical and/or sexual appeal.

Self-objectification and Eating Disorders

One component of a well-developed self includes "owning one's body and being at peace with it". Does popular culture help women to be at peace with their bodies? It seems not. Scrutinising and comparing our bodies with others, especially when we constantly see images of thin, unblemished, sexualised women, is likely to make women dissatisfied and ashamed. This is even more likely when we believe the ideals presented to us.

Tylka and Hill found some evidence for the link between women's belief in beauty ideals, and being ashamed of their bodies. They surveyed 460 U.S. college women and found that women who believed that they were being pressured by the culture to be thin were more likely to subject their bodies to surveillance. Body surveillance, in turn, was related to the experience of body shame. Tylka and Hill concluded that the link between eating disorders and sexual objectification was body surveillance and shame. This research was reinforced by others who found lower body satisfaction among teenagers was associated with unhealthy weight-control methods, binge-eating, and less physical activity.

A key issue is the *role* that media messaging and images play – do they only reflect our culture, or do they shape it, at least in part? In the case of young women's magazines, do they affect women, or can women affect magazines? For body image, do magazines reflect real women and beauty, or do they create and shape the notion of cultural beauty?

Obviously women don't read magazines unless they choose to. However in 2004, a study that examined objectification and the link to disordered eating suggested that women who do choose to read a magazine are more likely to objectify themselves

Caption for the above image

(self-objectification) and subject their bodies to constant surveillance. These women are more likely to feel disgusted, ashamed or anxious about their own bodies, and have lower self esteem (a critical factor in body image).

Academic research on self objectification found the following impacts:

- Self-objectification can cause women to perform worse in intellectual tasks, and to waste mental energy on self-consciousness and anxiety.
- Women are less likely to be physically active, and to benefit from the exercise they do, if motivated by self-objectification and concern about their appearance.
- Self-objectification also encourages women to objectify other women.
- Some researchers think that self-objectification even contributes to the risk of self-harm, especially cutting.

Idealised' Thin, Glamorous Women

When it comes to pictures of thin, 'beautiful' bodies, there is now evidence about how these pictures affect us. A study involving 118 female college students found that women were more depressed and angry after seeing picture of thin models, than after seeing pictures of inanimate objects.

Images of thin women are not always appealing. Women who are thin because they're homeless, hungry, or addicted to drugs don't make other women feel bad about being bigger. Recently, researchers have used more specific terms such as 'thin, *idealised* women' or 'thin, *glamorous* women', rather than just thin women. It is the 'thin, *glamorous* women' that is causing negative body image for women.

Let's briefly examine what this imaginary woman looks like. She probably needs to have wrinkle free, firm, flawless skin, large breasts (but not too large), a symmetric face with fine features, perfect and fashionable hair and nails and makeup, a flat stomach, a small bottom (but not too small) and so on. There's no hope if you've had lots of children, are indigenous, ethnic or have a disability.

A thin, glamorous woman is portrayed as an easy ideal to achieve. But in actuality it is causing women to seek cosmetic procedures to achieve the unrealistic ideal. Henderson-King and Brooks have concluded that "in a culture that idealizes thinness, women who **consider** themselves to be overweight may be especially susceptible to the risks of a variety of relatively extreme body modification techniques, including cosmetic surgery." In the year 2007, women made up approximately 90% of all cosmetic surgery patients in the United States and were thus much more likely than men to face the health risks associated with any surgical procedure.

Women's attitudes toward their own bodies are worse after looking at thin media images. In young teenage girls, Durkin and Paxton's research found that looking at pictures of thin, idealised models is likely to cause lowered satisfaction with their body and a higher state of depression than before looking at the images In adult women, depression, anxiety and anger are short-term effects of looking at such pictures of women's bodies.

Sexualised Images, Magazines and the Link to Body Image

Sexualised images in magazines have become increasingly prevalent and are not restricted to teen or adult women's magazines. Girls' magazines give their readers mixed messages. Developmentally appropriate content which would be helpful to girls is drowned out by the emphasis on being fashion and body conscious.

A content analysis of a sample edition of Barbie Magazine, Total Girl and Disney Girl demonstrates that in the case of the latter two, approximately **half of the content** is sexualising material, and in the case of Barbie Magazine, fully **three quarters** of the content is sexualising material. There exists pressure on children to adopt sexualised appearance and behaviour at a young age.

The APA research showed that premature sexualisation is linked with serious mental health problems like eating disorders, low self-esteem and depression. It notes previous studies of magazines that find that:

"...attracting the attention of boys by looking hot and sexy is the point of many of the articles, text, cover lines, ads, and photographs. ...Even articles on physical fitness analysed...centered on the need for girls to increase their sexual desirability through exercise rather than on improving their health or well-being."

It's not a matter of just easily avoiding these images, or turning your eyes away.

Objectified and sexualised images of women are pervasive and have become normalised. And Tiggeman and Kuring state "recurring feelings of body shame and anxiety cannot readily be overcome, since the societally prescribed thin ideal of beauty is virtually impossible for most women to achieve. Such uncontrollability is a cornerstone of the learned helplessness theory of depression."

National Strategy on Body Image

In mid 2009, the Federal Government called for public contribution into a National Body Image Strategy and Code of Conduct for the advertising, fashion and media industries. The proposed National Strategy on Body Image released in October was a positive step forward in drawing attention to the significance of this issue. The strategy adopts a broad approach that recognises the important role of schools, tertiary institutions, families and community organisations in addressing body image dissatisfaction.

But from the outset, the National Advisory Group was only focussed on working in positive partnership with industry in a voluntary arrangement with a limited scope. The terms of reference made it clear that deeper, more foundational issues such as the regulation of advertising were not going to be covered by the Body Image Strategy.

At the heart of the proposed strategy is an Industry Voluntary Code of Conduct with guidance on the responsible portrayal of body image. The code articulates some

worthy principles: broadening our cultural ideals of beauty to include models of different ethnicities and sizes; communicating the holistic value of people; and the importance of being healthy above body shape.

The problem with any voluntary code is that it's, well, voluntary and body angst is good for business. Corporate social responsibility is an important ethical issue and definitely requires recognition and reward. However there is a glaring contradiction in asking industries that capitalise on insecurities about physical appearance, sexual attractiveness and an idealised lifestyle to self-regulate their portrayal of ''positive'' and ''realistic'' body images.

On billboards, in magazines and popular media objectified and sexualised images of women in particular send a pervasive message that a person's worth comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behaviour. Women with a particular ''look'' are displayed as the most valuable kind of woman. So even if the code helps industry to get serious about presenting more realistically sized women, the expectation to be ''hot'' and ''sexy'' will remain. And industry will have the right product and the latest look we need to help achieve this false ideal.

The Body Image Advisory Group's recommendation that the Australian Government monitor support for the code across industries to determine its effectiveness is welcomed. But the code highlights the broader failures of Australia's system of self-regulation of the advertising and media industries.

Australia's current advertising and regulatory system is very complex, with numerous bodies overseeing different aspects of media and advertising. mechanisms are unwieldy and difficult to understand and access by ordinary members of the public and are overly reliant on motivated members of the public successfully negotiating the myriad codes and standards that exist to make a complaint.

If a consumer wanted to make a complaint about poor body image philosophies being promoted by a company in an billboard advertising campaign, or complain about a magazine's consistent use of unrealistic images, there is no 'one stop shop' which would assist the consumer through the complaints process.

This is because a range of bodies are responsible for handling complaints about advertising, media and marketing. Each body is currently accessed through different complaints making and complaints hearing processes and accountability mechanisms are inconsistent. It takes much too long to get a determination. Often the time taken to review any complaint made is initiated towards the end of an advertising campaign, thus the advertiser has the ability to still run an unhealthy campaign and end it before any investigation is completed, before any finding is made.

But more importantly, because the code is voluntary there is little outside of community pressure that can be used to stop or dissuade unhealthy advertising or media campaigns. And in its desire to ''promote the positive'' and encourage corporate social responsibility, the advisory committee has adopted the ''carrot'' approach to self-regulation. Businesses who demonstrate leadership in tackling body image issues will be publicly rewarded. But a robust regulatory system needs the ''sticks'' as well. What about those businesses who don't adhere to the code? There are no penalties so there are no disincentives to producing harmful material.

There is not one simple answer to addressing body dissatisfaction problems. The causes of and issues surrounding negative body image are complex and numerous but hold the common ground of being potentially devastating for the healthy future of women and many young Australians. The development of a National Strategy and Code of Conduct is a positive step forward, but more is needed to stop the ''compare and despair'' game. The strategy foreshadows that if there is broad industry failure to comply with positive body image practices, government should reconsider the voluntary nature of the code. This could prove too little too late for those most at risk.