

## How Do Young Women Make Sense of Beauty and Body Image?

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This paper discusses the relationship between young females' reading of the portrayal of models and celebrities in advertising in everyday life and their interpretation of distorted images of female body shape, as well as pathogenic dieting practices. I argue that pathogenic dieting practices (eating disorders) among young women are relevant to the influence of the mass media. In addition, given that young women's striving to conform to the ever-increasing stringent standards of female beauty "ideals" results in females' body dissatisfaction and insecurity, I will point out that women's preoccupation with body dissatisfaction and insecurity socio-culturally constructed must be analyzed in a historical and political context. Moreover, eating disorders, once known as the "golden girl syndromes" which struck mainly rich, white, well-educated women, have spread to women of different economic and ethnic backgrounds. Hence, I believe it is of vital importance to pay close attention to a growing number of young Asian women who are under the impact of Western culture having the problems of eating disorders. Finally, the significance of feminist pedagogy and intervention in females' perceptions of body image for women's mental health is also discussed.

**Key words: eating disorders, body images, beauty standards**

## *Introduction*

It seems to be a global phenomenon that overwhelmingly more and more young women receive messages about beauty standards from the mass media, and thus pathologically interpret the notion of body image in relation to physical attractiveness. Today, young women, in order to conform to social norms of thinness and female beauty, pay a high price for the regulation of their bodies, spending plenty of money on diet products, cosmetics, and even plastic surgery, while psychologically embracing a negative body image, poor self-esteem, and depression, as well as physically risking health problems and lethal consequences.

Here in Taiwan, I have been struck by a lot of surprising news that young women trade off their health and even their lives for extreme thinness. Similarly, there have been an increasing number of young Japanese females who take risks to become skinny by taking potentially deadly diet pills, even though the average 20-year-old Japanese woman is 5ft 4in tall and weighs only around 115 pounds (Watts, 2002). In China, an article on a government website, titled “Cosmetic Advertising Expenditure Soared Last Year” (2002), says the advertising expenditure for female make-up reached 269 million yuan (US\$32.5 million) in the year 2001. Also, in South Korea many young women are turning to cosmetic surgery for artificial beauty. BBC news online (2001) reported the cosmetic surgery boom in South Korea in an illustration of how one petrol station’s customers increased by 20% after its promotion of plastic surgery as a contest prize. The owner of the petrol station, bragging about its top-class surgeons, told a reporter, “there is one plastic surgery clinic for every building in the neighborhood.”

Furthermore, the prevalence of eating disorders and dieting behaviors among Western women, young females in particular, has dramatically increased (Striegel-Moore, R.H., McAvay, L. R., & Rodin, 1986). Regarding thin figures as desirable, many women either restrict their meals or eliminate food through vomiting, laxatives, diuretic abuse, or excessive exercise in order to be thin. Nowadays, young women inexorably pursue thinness and are experiencing a great deal of misery, demonstrated by a variety of socially deviant behaviors involving food and weight control.

Garner et al. (1980) studied the heights and weights of Miss America Pageant

contestants and the heights, weights, and body measurements of Playboy Magazine centerfolds recorded in the period from 1959 to 1978. Their data indicate a significant trend toward a thinner standard. While the body weight of Miss America contestants was found to decrease significantly from 1959 to 1978 (winners have been the thinnest among contestants since 1970), the average weight of American women has increased (Striegel-moore, R.H., Mcavay, L.R., & Rodin, 1986). Moreover, along with the findings of stringent standards for female body weight, Garner (1980) and his associates also documented a significant increase in diet articles in six popular women's magazines during the same period.

Why is it a global situation that young women relentlessly regulate their bodies through self-discipline and self-surveillance? Why do young females almost everywhere restlessly pursue ultra-thinness and a "perfect" look? Based on research in the U.S., in this paper, first, I would like to discuss the relationship between advertising's depiction of models and celebrities and young women's distorted interpretation about beauty "ideals". Then I argue that young women's eating disorders result from their feelings of body dissatisfaction and insecurity, which is socio-culturally constructed. In addition, the discussion of female "ideal" body-image is analyzed within a historical-political context. What is also pointed out is that eating disorders, once occurred primarily among Western women, have spread to Asian women when they are under the influences of Western culture. Finally, feminist pedagogy and intervention in women's perception of female body-image is also explored.

### *The Dynamic of Advertising's Portrayal of the "Ideal" Female Body*

In the United States (where I have stayed for a number of years), when we are at the check-out counter in a supermarket, it is easy to glimpse the beauty and fashion magazines (e.g., *People*) sitting on the shelves next to the cashier. The magazine covers always show a super-thin actress or model, and next to the picture is usually a bold-faced title proclaiming to help the reader drop 10 pounds in two weeks. On US college campuses, it is also easy to spot the flyers on student bulletin boards giving information about losing weight in a short time.

Advertising has been bombarding female readers with messages that their weight and figures, their facial wrinkles, or their lifeless hair should be taken care of. From

fashion magazines to movies and television shows, the media define the meaning of the “perfect” body and convey the message of women’s body-image dissatisfaction. Moreover, shows like *Ally McBeal* and *Friends* with female actresses in tight dresses help to reinforce the notion that thin equals beauty, success, and power. Young women incessantly see these bombarding messages about “ideal” beauty. In consequence, they develop unhealthy attitudes towards food, as well as misperceptions of body image, while striving to attain the standard of bodily attractiveness and to make meaning of their behavior.

Indieke (1999) points out that fashion magazines that target teenage girls, such as *Teen*, *Seventeen*, *Cosmopolitan*, *YM*, *Teen People*, and *Mademoiselle*, always display pictures of stick-thin models with almost unattainable figures. Recent circulation figures reported by the Standard Rate and Data Service indicate that more than 6.5 million adolescent females read *Seventeen*, *Teen*, and *YM* each month (Thomsen, Weber, Michelle, & Brown, 2002). Teenage girls are interested in reading these fashion/beauty magazines because they want to know how those young models and Hollywood celebrities lose weight and maintain “perfect” body size. Another reason that these magazines attract teenage girls’ attention is the implication of thinness bringing success, power, and fame that they see and read about every day in models and celebrities. As Kilbourne (1979) states, the mass media are selling “body insecurity” to women. Women are dissatisfied with their bodies because they are not like the thin and perfect bodies portrayed in the media and, therefore, obsess extreme thinness by means of different pathogenic dieting methods to lose weight and to attract another’s gaze.

According to Myers and Biocca (1992), one’s body image perception is more likely to change upon exposure to advertising and programming that stress the pursuit of the “ideal” body. In a cross-cultural study of women’s perception of their body image, Huber & Fuccella (1995) claim that their participants, Georgian and Hungarian women, adopted the White American ultra-thin ideal through brief exposure to American culture. Similarly, *Time Asia* (2003) on its website has a very interesting article about the surge in plastic surgery in Asia. One of the more interesting aspects of all this surgery is that people are trying to look more Caucasian:

The culturally loaded issue today is the number of Asians looking to remake themselves to look more Caucasian. It’s a charge many

deny, although few would argue that under the relentless bombardment of Hollywood, satellite TV, and Madison Avenue, Asia's aesthetic ideal has changed drastically.....Asians are increasingly asking their surgeons for wider eyes, longer noses and fuller breasts—features not typically of the race.....The No. 1 procedure by far in Asia is a form of blepharoplasty, in which a crease is created above the eye by scalpel or by needle and thread.....Westerners use botox, or botulinum toxin, to diminish wrinkles—while in Korea, Japan and Taiwan, botox is injected into wide cheeks so the muscle will atrophy and the cheeks will shrink.

Women are under intense pressure when society puts a woman's worth on her body size and her looks. As Germov & Williams (1996) said, "The sensitivity to weight and body image sets women up for a cycle of 'yo-yo' dieting or weight cycling" (p. 631). However, women relentlessly pursue the "perfect" size and a "perfect" look for their bodies because they believe in the rewards of beauty, success, and power. Silverstein, Perdue, Peterson, and Kelly (1986) examined both print and electronic media and maintain that the standard of bodily attractiveness for women portrayed, promoted, and reinforced in the media is slimmer and less curvaceous than it was in the past. And these researchers believe that the sexist treatment of women may lead to eating disorders.

### *Eating Disorders Afflict Mainly Female Adolescents*

The most frequently cited time period for the onset of severe eating disorders is early adolescence. Recent studies propose that around two-thirds of all high school females are either on a diet or planning to start one (French, Perry, Leon, & Fulkerson, 1995; Gordon, 2000). Thomsen et al. (2002) cited findings from Grigg et al. (1996) and Lowe et al. (1996) that suggest teenage girls who diet "are more likely to engage in health-compromising behaviors and are more likely to develop an eating disorder, such as anorexia nervosa or bulimia nervosa, than are nondieters" (p. 2). Thomsen & Weber also cited evidence from a 1989 national study of female students in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, in conjunction with the Public Health Services, the Office of Disease Prevention and Health

Promotion, the Centers for Disease Control, and the National Institute on Drug Use, that 45.2% of the respondents said they skipped meals, 11.3% said they used diet pills, and 7.6% said they had made themselves vomit.

Likewise, French, Perry, Leon, and Fulkerson (1995) found that among 1015 female high school students 11.6% of their respondents skipped meals, 5.4% used diet pills, and 4.4% made themselves vomit. Moreover, similar findings were generated from the study of 231 high school females conducted by Nichter et al. (1995) that 3% of their respondents had made themselves vomit for weight control purposes and 4% had used diet pills. Additionally, from their study, Stein and Reichert (1990) claim that eating disorders and dieting behaviors may begin as early as the fifth and sixth grades, especially among female students. In line with the findings above, a study by Iggers (1996), discussed in Wilson & Blackhurst (1999), reported that in the U.S. nearly 8 million girls and women are affected by eating disturbances, such as anorexia or bulimia, and 40 to 50 billion dollars of revenues are recorded each year by diet and weight-loss businesses. Also, the number of girls and women with anorexia, bulimia, and binge eating disorders is estimated at 60,000 by the British Medical Association or 90,000 by the Eating Disorders Association at any time in Britain (Cussins, 2001).

### *Eating Disorders in Asia Are on the Rise*

Eating disorders have traditionally been described as a typically Western illness. Cases that occur outside Western countries are often regarded as atypical. However, disordered eating behaviors are being found more often now in Asian countries. In a comparison of 171 Japanese college women with 144 US college women, Mukai et al. (1999) stated that, while having no more eating disorders than US college women, Japanese college women expressed a greater dissatisfaction with their bodies compared to their Western counterparts.

From interviews with several doctors in Asian countries, reporter Sonni Efron summarized in a *Los Angeles Times* article (1997) that anorexia, once called “golden girl syndromes” because of its occurrence in primarily rich, white, well-educated young Western women, currently troubles one in 100 young Japanese women. It was also reported that, according to Asian psychiatrists, cases of eating disorders have spread among women of all socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds in Seoul, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taipei, Beijing, and Shanghai, who will try anything, from diet

powders and pills, cellulite creams, weight-loss teas, to other herbal concoctions, to become thinner (Efron, 1997).

Less than three decades ago, being slightly overweight was viewed by Taiwanese people as a sign of wealth and prosperity. Yet, body weight reduction at present becomes a big industry in Taiwan. Although there are only a few cases of eating disorders reported each year in Taiwan, and the actual prevalence is unknown, in his recent survey-study of 1,057 Taiwanese female students regarding their concerns and behaviors related to body weight, knowledge of symptoms of eating disorders, and proper eating behaviors, Wong (1999) and his associate found that 51.4% of the students expressed their dissatisfaction with their body weight, regardless of their weight categories. A good deal of Wong's subjects indicated that they were either on a diet or exercised to lose weight including those who fell in the severely-underweight and underweight categories. In 2000, Wong and his associates conducted another similar survey-study among 843 schoolgirls, age 10 to 14, and concluded that dissatisfaction with body weight occurs in women in all weight categories. Thirty-eight percent of their subjects had intentionally tried to lose weight. The researchers also pointed out that body dissatisfaction and insecurity are risk factors leading to eating disorders and the actual statistics of young women living with eating disorders is substantially high. Therefore, they appealed to physicians, psychologist, dieticians and educators for paying much attention to the existing and potential problem of eating disorders in Taiwan.

*The Relationship between the Media's Portrayal of  
Ever-increasing Standards of Female Thin-ideal Images and the  
Prevalent Pathogenic Dieting Practices among Women*

It has long been argued that the media's portrayal of unattainable standards of thinness and female beauty activates women's concerns and insecurities about their bodies and thereby increases body dissatisfaction. The mass media, especially women's beauty/fashion magazines, may play a role in communicating societal ideals of attractiveness and in turn trigger women's disordered eating cognition and behaviors (Hamilton & Waller, 1993; Thomsen, Weber, & Brown, 2002). Harrison & Cantor (1997), however, have found that there is a significant difference between reading fashion magazines and body dissatisfaction, as well as between reading health

and fitness magazines and a drive for thinness. In a study of several popular women's magazines, Wiseman, Gray, Mosimann, & Ahrens (1992) maintain that the extreme-thin Western ideal has been congruent with an increase in dieting and a decrease of body size among women in the U.S.

Harvard researchers studied 543 fifth- through twelfth-grade girls and reported that 67% of frequent readers of fashion magazines were more likely to diet to lose weight, although only 29% were overweight, and that 60% of the girls said that the media influenced their attitudes about body shape (Imdieke, 1999). In general, attacks of anorexia or bulimia usually occur during early adolescence or early adulthood among females when they read information from the mass media and then attempt to conform to cultural pressure for thinness (Levine, Smolak, & Hayden, 1994; Steel & Brown, 1995; Arnett, 1995; Arnett, Larson, & Offer, 1995).

In a two-year study, Hargreaves and Tiggemann (2003) found that high school girls briefly exposed to thin-ideal media messages were more likely to have small changes in body dissatisfaction and, later, reactive "episodes" of dissatisfaction that accumulated over time, leading to the development of longer-term body image disturbances related to the development of self-regulatory weight-control behaviors and subjective feelings of dissatisfaction.

While women's magazines promote the notion that to be thin is to be happier, sexier, and more lovable, they also convey conflicting messages by placing weight loss prescriptions next to recipes and pictures of food that are extremely high in fat content (Malkin, Wornian, & Chrisler, 1999). Accordingly, in order to attain the "ideal" of thinness and enjoy great food they read about in the magazines, young women make every effort to lose weight. Therefore, Wadden et al. (1991) have suggested that the consequences of striving for these unrealistic ideals may explain an increasing number of women engaging in pathogenic dieting practices.

### *The Underlying Rationale of Women's Body-Image Dissatisfaction and Eating Disorder Problem*

#### *Situating Socio-cultural Construct of the Female Body in a Historical and Political Context*

Eating disorders (a result of body dissatisfaction/ insecurity and a desire to reach the stringent standards of female beauty "ideals" socio-culturally constructed) are not



just instances of individual psychopathology. Instead, they are rooted in social pressures experienced by women (Silverstein, Peterson, & Perdue, 1986). Nevertheless, Blum (2002) argues that it is insufficient when we discuss female body-image limited by a socio-cultural context because “without discussion of the historical context or of historical change in cultural categories, we do not know why such body troubles arise and proliferate now. . . , how they are different from and the same as in other eras and cultures, and how, then, they are truly social constructs” (p. 306).

In response to the book *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity* written by Sarah Banet-Weiser (1999), Blum (2002) affirmed Banet-Weiser’s argument that “beauty is not innate biology but political contingency—and the body has a history, with women’s bodies a key site of historically specific national, racial, class, and gender conflicts” (p. 310). Giving an example of the Miss America Pageant, Blum reminds us that it is, as what Banet-Weiser (1999) described, “‘a civic ritual,’ ‘a mass-mediated spectacle,’ and ‘a highly visible performance of gender, where the disciplinary practices that construct women as feminine are palpable, on display, and positioned as unproblematically desirable. And, it is a profoundly political arena” (p. 3). The mechanisms exercised in the Pageant that individuals can make dreams come true by working hard need to be scrutinized. In reality, capitalist standards of feminine beauty are actually unrealistic and unattainable by most women. In essence, Miss America Pageant contestants have become the token of the ruling class, white supremacist capitalist heterosexual patriarchal elites. I argue that the Miss America Pageant is not a trivial or neutral event; instead, it echoes both white elites’ attempts to privatize social agents and their moral panic over national identity after feminist, gay, and multiracial movements. Despite the fact that there have been non-white participants in Pageants, however, as long as these women conform themselves to social norms, they become the model of good citizens who is one of the members in maintaining social order.

Hesse-Biber (1991) also asserts that the outburst of eating disorders among women is “one of the many ways women’s bodies have been transformed historically” and “women’s bodies can be considered cultural artifacts, defined and redefined over time as a result of broad cultural/historical transformations aimed at physical and symbolic subordination” (p. 174). Of importance is that we must acknowledge how women, through history and across cultures, have been socialized

to be subordinated to the male authority and how their bodies are confined and exploited. To reiterate, only if we have an in-depth understanding of how patriarchal and capitalist systems attempt to control women's bodies within a historical context, can we explain women's contemporary roles (consumer, as well as object-commodity), their body-image dissatisfaction, and the currently prevalent epidemic of eating disorders.

*Femininity as Discipline within Modern Capitalist/Patriarchal Society*

Foucault (1977) argues that when societies progress from traditional political-economic systems to modern systems, power moves from control of a central authority, such as monarch, state, and army, to a more diffuse system of power among diverse institutions. As he theorizes in his book *Discipline and Punishment* (1977), in modern days, institutions discursively censor the individual and strategically urge the individual's self-surveillance in order to attain their goals of social control. In the account by Foucault, social standards articulated in hegemonic discourses are prescribed for the male but, more insistently, the female body. Modern systems exercise diffuse and informal mechanisms of authority over bodies to gain power and control, as well as maintaining the bourgeois order through normalization of discursive social practices and through discipline of society members. As Dreyfus and Rabinow (1983) put it, "Without the insertion of disciplined, orderly individuals into the machinery of production, the new demands of capitalism would have been stymied" (p.135).

Walby (1990) proposed that in modern society there are two forms of patriarchy: private and public. Private patriarchy situates itself in the house, with a patriarch controlling women individually and directly in the home. On the other hand, public patriarchy situates itself in diverse institutions, with a patriarch controlling society members through discursive social practices. Walby argued, as women's roles changed from dependent to independent, the site of patriarchy shifted from private towards public. Therefore, Hesse-Biber (1991) noted that women's situation in the contemporary society encounters a two-fold oppression generated from "disciplinary" and "patriarchal" power.

Hesse-Biber went on to point out that a diffuse modernized system of disciplinary control over body merges very well into a capitalist political-economic system to make capitalism operate efficiently and profitably. A patriarchal system,

which intentionally confines women within the domestic sphere to be responsible wives as well as caring mothers, and a capitalist system, which avariciously creates ever-increasing profits generated from women's beauty products and household devices, together define women's roles as object-commodity and consumer.

The mass media, advertising in particular, play a crucial role in developing a consumer market centered on the regulation of women's bodies. As we have seen, capitalist investors in the cosmetic and fashion industry put their enormous money behind the mass-media campaigns. The mechanisms employed in advertising are to trigger women's endless body-image dissatisfaction and body insecurity in order to profit from sales of female beauty products that women use to satisfy their preoccupation with body imperfection. Women, especially young females, are exposed to the bombarding messages of beauty "ideals" communicated in the mass media; in return, they dislike their looks and perceive that the portrayal of beautiful looks of models and Hollywood celebrities is unproblematically desirable. Many women then enthusiastically seek help in the consumer market in order to pursue the "perfect" look and "perfect" body that they believe has rewards of power, success, and fame.

Given that selling the notion of body imperfection means high profits for business, it is not so difficult to imagine why the investors of the US underwear company *Victoria's Secret* employ a large amount of money just in preparing one annual new product exhibition night, or why a Hollywood actress receives several million dollars annually just for being a cosmetic representative. Therefore, cosmetics shops, underwear stores, beauty parlors, fitness centers, and weight-control programs have become arenas where women carry out their frequent adventures.

It is especially worth noting that, as the mass media transform into a form of global conglomerates, advertising goes everywhere simultaneously on Earth. Obviously, along with the new cultural image of women's extreme-thinness, there are billions of dollars of profit for a variety of businesses around the world. In order to increase profits, industries invest even more money for global advertising. Consequently, advertising increasingly communicates messages about female body dissatisfaction and insecurity, and industries make much more money centered on women consumers across nations. This may explain why pursuing "ideal" beauty or having eating disorder diseases are no longer the patent rights of white upper- and middle-class women. It has become a prevalent phenomenon in every ethnicity and every nation. But, why are women so consciously or unconsciously entrenched in the

war on their bodies? And why do women need discipline to conform to an unrealistic and unattainable socio-cultural standard of an ideal body?

*Women Are Coercively Induced by Socio-cultural Pressure to Conform to Stereotypes of Femininity*

Capitalism has led to the separation of home and work, with women being confined to the former. According to Walkerdine (1998), from the 19th century and continuing until the 1950s, there had been a trend that upper- and middle-class women stayed home and had to reproduce to save the race from the lower orders. (We might want to believe that it was those women who were the vanguard of being both object-commodity and consumer in the capitalist/patriarchal society.) Even today when women move from the private sphere (e.g., home) to the public sphere (e.g., work force, school, and etc.), they are nevertheless expected to take such jobs (with characteristics of nurturing and subordinating) as teachers, secretaries, or supermarket clerks, despite the fact that there are some women lawyers, soldiers, doctors, or engineers—careers assumedly characterized by reasoning that are thought of as men's nature.

Women have been taught since early childhood that they belong to the domestic sphere (in homes and in home corners of the elementary school). As a result of a gendered dichotomy of space and the gendered division of labor, women are taken for granted to stay mainly in the private sphere, and men, the public one (Dowler, 1998). What is also thought of as natural and traditional is that women are described as "fragile" and "immobile," as well as "the object of another's gaze" (Davies, 2003, p. 31). Moreover, women receive the message of being extremely slim in everyday life from a young age. Yet, more often than not they perceive their own bodies as imperfect and, therefore, are dissatisfied with their physical appearance.

Also, women have been taught that they are in need of self-discipline and self-surveillance over their bodies. In Chinese history, the practice of women's footbinding during the Ming dynasty and lasting until the early twentieth century is a clear example of the regulation of the female body. Another obvious example of how young girls' bodies are shaped and disciplined and how patriarchal and capitalist interests manipulate control over female bodies is the mass production, promotion, and sale of a product from Mattel Toy Company--Barbie dolls--which have accompanied many girls growing up and have imparted an ultra-slim female body standard ever since their manufacture started 43 years ago (Hesse-Biber, 1991). As

Stewart (1989) reported, if one were to line up all Barbie dolls ever made from head to toe, the dolls could circle the earth 3.5 times. If we were to take the same measurement now as Stewart did, the outcome would be even greater.

As Lavine et al. (1999) postulated, “One highly pervasive and naturalistic environmental context within which gender stereotypes may be formed, strengthened, and activated is television advertisements” and “one of the most pervasive criticisms of sexist advertising is that it produces distorted body images by setting unrealistic standards of female beauty and thinness” (p. 1049). Television advertising for Barbie dolls has been successful. Barbie dolls have been sold in every city of every nation in the world. Nevertheless, the distorted female body image with its emphasis on a slender physique the industry has produced should be carefully scrutinized.

Women, however, are easily coerced into conforming to taken-for-granted socio-cultural standards of unattainable ultra-thinness (sometimes tubelike as a fashion). They perceive the unrealistic standards of the female body unproblematic and seek pathogenic dieting practices for their resolution. This might be the explanation, along with increasing pressure placed on women to attain ultra-slim figures, for the increasing rate of eating disorders among them (Silverstein, Peterson, & Perdue, 1986).

Obviously, gender stereotypical views of men and women have been prevalent and have not changed much. In their findings, Stake and Lauer (1987) reported the condition of being overweight had a more negative effect on women than on men. They went on to point out that a large percentage of the average-weight women in their study were dissatisfied with their body and relied on medication rather than exercise to control weight. They posited that these findings are congruent with the traditional description of the stereotypical role of women as passive and as finding help for problems outside themselves. It is also interesting to note that college women’s preferences for extreme thin figures are the reverse of college men’s preference for large physiques (Cohn & Adler, 1992). College men consider that the stalwart body symbolizes power and the role of protector of the weak (e.g., women and children).

Furthermore, Spitzer et al. (1999) stated, as socio-cultural standards expect an ever-decreasing body size for women, the body size and shape of average young adult North American females have increased significantly, which is far different from the portrayal of the female ideal body in the media. This discrepancy might be an indication of the augmentation of eating disorders among contemporary young

women in North America. Another noteworthy difference found by Spitzer et al. is that the body size for men promoted by the media has increased. Hesse-Biber (1991) suggested that thinness denotes a state of femininity, whereas greater weight implies a state of masculinity--a strong, powerful image. Even though muscularity is assumedly one of the factors improving men's high self-esteem, men emphasize the importance of achievement as a primary determinant of self image. Interestingly enough, women who feel sexually attractive enjoy a sense of confidence. Indeed, as Bar-Tal and Saze (1976) argued, women are socialized to rely on their natural resources (beauty, charm, nurturance) to share men's resources. It may be fair to assert that women invest a great amount of time, energy, and money in consuming diet products or beauty items just to become objects of men's attentions.

Hesse-Biber (1991) remarked, "To attain the ultra-slender ideal requires women to consume diet products and spend enormous time and emotional energy. These activities drain economic and emotional capital away from other investments women might make in, for example, political activity, education, and career advancement—activities which would promote empowerment" (p.185). In actuality, the gendered bipolar pairing of masculinity/femininity, reason/emotion, strength/weakness, autonomy/dependence, protector/the protected, front/home, public/private, and the like, which articulated in everyday life, has long limited women to subordinated roles to men. What seems obvious is that, as Lewis (1990) noted, "Any woman who displays autonomy and independent personhood is seen as a threat to male power" (p. 484) and "women's education becomes a site of desire and threat" (p. 474). As Goldstein (2002) precisely points out, "masculinity often depends on an 'other' constructed as feminine" (p.251). Accordingly, to abject the "other" is to justify the supremacy of the "self". The male-female/self-other binary in gender relations translates biologically sexual differences into the reality of men's domination, superiority and women's subordination, inferiority, despite the fact that women today have more freedom within their homes as well as at work force. Yet, there is still greater space for making efforts to transform gender relations.

### *Feminist Pedagogy and Women's Mental Health*

Hesse-Biber's analysis (1991) suggested, "To address the specific nature of eating disorders among women, then, requires a critical examination and boycott of

the current structural features of capitalism and patriarchy—the diet, cosmetic, beauty, and health and toy industries that oppress women through a variety of social practices” (p.185). It is also unavoidable to counteract and challenge the pernicious effects in advertising of unrealistically thin, ideal images of womanhood continually perpetrated by consumerism. And, bell hook (2000) reminded us, “To critique sexist images without offering alternatives is an incomplete intervention” (p. 35) and “All the positive changes in the medical establishment’s attitudes towards the female body, towards female health care, are the direct outcome of feminist struggle” (p. 33).

Young women need to be encouraged to engage in positive perceptions about their own body images, to accept themselves for who they are, and to explore their strengths instead of dwelling on their weaknesses. Feminist pedagogy is an effective alternative for girls encountering ever-increasingly stringent and unattainable socio-cultural standards of female beauty ideals. Classrooms, offices, and clinics are arenas for educators, parents, and social workers to help young females develop healthy self-esteem and to explore and resolve their negative feelings about their bodies and weight.

Direct action is the method for refusing sexist standards of female body-image. For example, a group of women have written to the Department for Women in the UK to express their preferences for seeing a greater variation of sizes and shapes in models as a true reflection of their own bodies (Cussins, 2001). Moreover, feminists in the Fat Liberation Movement have enthusiastically and successfully participated in peer education and television talk shows. As well, organized groups, such as Ample Opportunity and the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA), advocate for appreciation of people who are overweight (Chrisler, 1996). Piran (2001) in triumph conducted a participatory action research project with her participants aged 10 to 18 who actively implemented constructive changes at their school to counteract socio-cultural pressure for female ultra-thinness. She states,

Feminism has a special role in supporting young women’s voicing of problematic experiences in the body domain, contextualizing it socially and politically, reinforcing peer- and multi-generational connections in exploring these experiences, and using these newly forged connections for the sake of social transformation and change. In turn, young women carry a special

contributory role in enriching feminist theory development and guiding social transformation and change (p. 172).

### *Conclusions*

The mass media play an important role in affecting women's obsession with beauty "ideals". What draws our attention is that eating disorders, once primarily struck young Western upper-class women, have spread to women of different economic and ethnic backgrounds in Asia as else where. Everywhere in the world, women conform to the ever-increasing stringent standards of body perfection after reading fashion/beauty magazines or watching movies and TV shows in everyday life with portrayals of models and celebrities. In consequence, women, especially female adolescents, pay a high price for regulating their own bodies. Eating disorders, such as anorexia and bulimia, among young females therefore have become prevalent. Yet, it is impossible to understand why women, especially young females, regulate their bodies through self-discipline and self-surveillance if we do not closely examine the political and historical accounts of women's subordination to the male authority. It is of necessity to disrupt the traditional assumption that women are the weak/the protected and belong to the domestic sphere. Women will hardly live better in or with their bodies without rupturing the social norms within patriarchal and capitalist society. Feminist pedagogy therefore plays an important role in educating young women to raise awareness of eating disorders as problematic and to build up high self-esteem. Obviously, it is important to teach young females to have a better understanding of healthy attitudes towards their bodies and of how contemporary social-cultural construction of female body-image has historically and politically evolved.

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