

# Messages from the Media

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Women are encouraged to be over-concerned with their appearance, to invest time and energy in how they look at the expense of other important goals. The media, fashion, and advertising industries have been accused of causing eating problems by their almost exclusive presentation of thin female actors and models. Recently, some representatives of these industries have been speaking out, denying that they are to blame for the prevalence of eating problems amongst women. Very thin models have themselves been saying publicly that they do not have eating disorders, but are naturally thin. Certainly it is true that the fashion, media, and advertising industries have not by themselves caused the increased incidence of eating problems, but they have contributed to generating and perpetuating it. They adversely affect women and men and contribute to the current prevalence of eating problems in four specific ways: by **normalizing what is actually abnormal**, by **lending truth to myths and falsehoods**, by **omission** and overall by **encouraging an atmosphere of weight preoccupation**.

## Marketing 'beauty' regardless of health

For over a hundred years, advertisers have been exploiting the vulnerability of women to messages about the negative consequences of deviations from "ideal" beauty, and directly or indirectly claiming that their products will make the ideal a reality for individual women, often implying that no sacrifice of health will result.

In the 1800s, advertisements for Dr. Scott's electric corset promised that it would stimulate blood circulation because of electrical wires that were sewn right into the corset. The suggestion seems to have been that a woman could wear a corset tight enough to cut off her blood circulation, but maintain circulation electrically. She could escape health hazards risked by meeting a beauty ideal.

Our current version of the electric corset is pictured in advertisements for electro-muscular stimulation. Showing slender and perfectly proportioned women, they suggest that a woman, of any proportions, can look like thin models by eating the "right" foods and wiring herself up to have her muscles electrically stimulated as a replacement for exercise. Glamorized photographs give the impression that spending hours each week wired up in this way is sexy, and "stimulating." The tedium and humiliation that are invariably part of any practice designed to "force a fit" are missing. It also denies the benefits and joy of movement, further alienating women from their bodies.

In an advertisement from 1933 offering a beer that will help women add "solid, healthy flesh," because it is fortified with yeast, a thin woman says, "I'm so lonely and unhappy."

Nobody likes a skinny girl.” Another woman, whose proportions today would incline her to dieting, exercising daily, and considering liposuction, replies, “There’s no need to be skinny now. I’ll tell you a quick way to gain.” The advertisement was selling beer by appealing to the desperation thin women felt about being “not enough,” and their wish to be rounder. Compare it with a more current advertisement for a calorie-deprived—a.k.a. “light”—beer. A very tall, slim, beautiful woman is pictured holding a bottle of Labatt’s Blue “light” beer. There is no text in the advertisement except for the name of the beer. The advertisement is selling beer by appealing to the desperation most women nowadays feel about being “too much” and their wish to be thinner.

## Lending reality to the false

These current advertisements *perpetuate the myth* that everyone can be thin, they *lend reality to what is false*. We are led to believe that if we would do all the right things, if we would eat right, exercise right, and think right, then we could all be thin. The fact is that genetic factors contribute to our having a variety of body types.

An advertisement by the makers of Evian bottled water is very explicit in its perpetuation of the myth that a particular body ideal is attainable by all. It reads: “If you could choose your own body, which body would you choose?” The small print then adds, “The fact is, you can choose your own body. The proper diet, the right amount of exercise and you can have, pretty much, any body you choose.” The idea that body type can be chosen is plainly false. What is really striking about the advertisement though, is that the bodies depicted in it are all the same size and shape (tall, slim, evenly-proportioned and muscular) and most of us simply do not genetically share their general shape. What the advertisement suggests is that there is only one **correct** choice in body shape and that is the one pictured. Since the advertisement has already claimed that we can control our body size and shape, the implication is that if our bodies don’t look like the ones in the advertisement, then we have either made a poor choice or we are failing to do what is necessary to look like the “right” choice. Along with perpetuating the myth of an attainable thinness for all, and encouraging weight preoccupation, this advertisement contributes to the self-blame many women feel when they do not “succeed” in making their bodies the “right” size and shape.

## Selling magic solutions for mythical problems

Almost as an admission that diet and exercise do not work, recent years have seen an increased interest in cosmetic surgery. Liposuction, breast enlargement or reduction and collagen implant to “enhance your physical appearance,” once used only by people who made their living through their appearance, have become more and more common among the general population. Advertisements for cosmetic surgery often imply that there is an “instant” way to look like the ideal and make no mention of the fact that a woman has to

look a lot like the models in the advertisements to begin with if she is going to look more like them after surgery! These surgeries have significant known risks, unknown long-term risks (e.g., breast implants) and generally trade scarring for “enhanced appearance.” Yet in the current atmosphere, these risks seem small to many women. Why?

The answer may be found in an article on liposuction that appeared in the *Toronto Star* several years ago, called “Sculpting Down To Size.” In the body of the article, liposuction was touted as a solution for something called the “violin deformity,” which was said to affect 75 per cent of women. This so-called deformity was actually the slight indentation that exists between the hips and thighs of most women. Calling this indentation a deformity is to say that a natural female body shape is a deformity. Presumably an un-deformed female body has a straight line between hips and thighs. Here the media is taking a female shape that is statistically unusual and making it the ideal, while describing what is usual (and has at other historical times been admired) as something ugly. Clearly, what is being communicated here is that girls whose bodies are going through the natural changes that mark womanhood, are becoming unacceptable or deformed. Can we really wonder why so many young girls diet and develop the disparagement of their bodies that is so prevalent today? The media may not have originated this idea, and certainly could not perpetuate it in a context of social disapproval, but by publishing it they perpetuated and lent credibility to a false and very destructive idea.

## Normalizing the abnormal

Most women have learned to dislike their bodies, and many have also learned to distrust their appetites. In an advertisement for a Jello sugar-free pudding, picturing a woman, the text reads, “Dessert? It’s always on the tip of my tongue. Really, I mean, if I’m not eating dessert, I’m talking about it. If I’m not talking about it, I’m eating it. And I’m always thinking about it...” What the advertisement is doing is **normalizing something that is abnormal**. The woman in the advertisement is preoccupied with food and this is a symptom of starvation. The advertisement seems to suggest that being in a starvation state is something that is to be expected, and to be dealt with by eating copious amounts of diet foods. What it does not say is that this kind of preoccupation with food is an indication that something is wrong—most probably that the woman is not eating enough non-diet food. This sort of advertising suggests that women should distrust their appetites and trust diet instructions. The advertisers have normalized what is really abnormal, and in this way contributed to the current prevalence of eating problems. Imagine an advertisement in *Esquire* magazine telling average sized men who are hungry that they should eat calorie-deprived pudding!

Recipes in popular women’s magazines often promote unrealistic eating behaviour. They picture very colourful and attractively arranged foods with recipes attached. It is not until we read the recipes that we realize that the pleasant appearance of the food diverted our

attention from the fact that there is very little food on the plate. One particularly absurd example showed a salad in which the recipe asked for one mushroom, one carrot curl, one broccoli floret, a pimento slice and one tablespoon of low-calorie dressing. The text read, “Serves one.” A person who eats in a non-dieting way would certainly not find this an adequate serving, even as a side salad. A person who is trying to lose weight would be reassured by this recipe that she had eaten enough and would have no right to be hungry or to eat more. Again, we see the **abnormal being normalized**. It is no wonder that women, 80 per cent of whom diet regularly, have no idea of their real nutritional needs.

## Representation is very limited

An advertisement for Diet Coke soft drink pictures a slim black woman and her daughter looking lovingly at one another. It reads, “If she can look up to you, she’ll never look down on herself.” What can this mean? Does it mean that by controlling her body weight, this mother can control the effects of racial prejudice on her daughter’s self-esteem? Is it suggesting that by meeting white standards of beauty, women of colour will erase the causes and effects of racism? The idea that as women, we can control our self-esteem and our social value by controlling our appearance is common in the media and advertising.

Until now, the levels of body dissatisfaction shown by women of colour have been lower than those of white women. Certainly with this kind of advertising, we can expect these levels to increase significantly as more and more women of colour accept and try to meet white standards of beauty regarding body size and shape. We can also expect to see an increase in eating problems amongst women of colour. There are increasingly fewer places in the world that are not affected by Western mass media and the standards of beauty represented in them.

One has to look far and wide to find advertisements that represent women who do not fit the culture’s ideal size and shape. There are a few specialty magazines, like *Radiance*, that cater to women who are larger. The illustrations in most magazines represent the body size and shape of only a very small percentage of women. The media, advertising and fashion industries have omitted **representation of most women** and in this way have contributed to the idea that there is something wrong with women who don’t fit the narrow ideal. Fashion magazines could include photographs of women who are various ages, colours, ethnic backgrounds, various sizes, some pregnant, some wearing glasses, and so on. Omitting these natural variations is part of the contribution these industries have made to generating and perpetuating the current prevalence of body image and eating problems.

## Creating an atmosphere of insecurity

Altogether, the images, texts, and practices described here contribute to the **encouragement of an atmosphere of weight preoccupation amongst women**. The numbers of weight-loss advertisements and articles in women's magazines have partly created this atmosphere. Fashion, the media and advertising wield a great deal of power in our culture. This is evidenced by the extraordinary amounts of money corporations spend on advertising in fashion magazines and in newspapers, on the drive to appear on television or in newspapers by anyone who wants to say or sell anything. Unfortunately, the use that has been made of this power in the area of ideal beauty for women has contributed to widespread body dissatisfaction, useless dieting and dangerous eating problems amongst women.

## **Some trends in the media portrayal of women and girls**

Courtesy of MediaWatch ([www.mediawatch.ca](http://www.mediawatch.ca))

**Superiority and domination:** The media tells us that women should be passive, weak and sexually available. Poses, camera angles and other techniques reinforce the idea that it is natural for men to dominate women and the world. These portrayals deny women equality and perpetuate the attitude that women are men's property and can thus be treated as men see fit. In this context, violence can seem acceptable.

**Dismemberment:** Advertising often markets the separate parts of a woman's body: a pair of slender legs, large breasts, and firm buttocks. The cumulative effect of equating women's bodies with products bought and sold is the perception that women are not whole human beings but simply sexualized parts.

**Clowning and exaggeration:** Women in the media are frequently shown in extremely unnatural or unrealistic positions that make them look silly or childish. In contrast, men are usually portrayed as serious, powerful, strong and often introspective. This promotes the view that only men can be strong and powerful, and that women are weak and passive.

**Coy behaviour:** Self-assured women are often misrepresented as being aggressive and pushy instead of assertive and confident. Representations of women blushing, looking away, and covering their faces reinforce the cultural attitude that women should be coy.

**Male approval:** The notion that male approval is the most important measure of women's achievement is extremely limiting, especially as men in the media appear to approve only of sexually attractive and available women. Very few women will ever conform to the standards of attractiveness that the media project. A healthy self-image depends on many more variables than physical appearance.

**Voice-over of authority:** Men's lower pitched voices are more often used in dramatic narration and commercial voice-overs because advertisers consider them to be more

authoritative. Women are equally capable of assuming authority and voice-overs need to reflect this.

**Irrelevant sexualization of women and girls:** No matter what the product, “sex sells.” Alcohol, soft drink and jeans advertisements often market women’s bodies as well as the actual product. When sex is relevant to the product being sold, the advertisement should treat sexuality with sensitivity and should respect all individuals. The sexualization of children is never appropriate and is highly objectionable.

**Diversity:** The media should reflect the full spectrum of diversity and experiences of contemporary Canadians. Women of all shapes, sizes, races, ethnicities, ages, expressions of sexuality and ranges of physical capability exist and should be represented in non-stereotypical, non-racist media portrayals. A broad range of occupations, roles, activities and life-styles for women should also be presented.

## 13 Steps to an effective comment letter

Courtesy of MediaWatch ([www.mediawatch.ca](http://www.mediawatch.ca))

1. **Write as soon as possible:** The information will be fresh in your mind, as will the initial reaction you had. Encourage others to also write.
2. **Direct the letter to the appropriate contact:** The producer, the editor, the director, etc.
3. **Identify yourself:** Name, address, city, province, postal code, telephone number.
4. **Identify the medium and format:** e.g., for a TV commercial: when you saw it, on which station; or for an article: which publication, issue, journalist and page.
5. **Write persuasively:** Think of your letter as an opportunity to sway the reader to listen to your point of view. Ultimately, you want the reader to respect your view and take action.
6. **Criticize constructively:** Focus criticism on the issue, not the organization or individual. Be specific about what you find offensive and why.
7. **Give praise where it is due:** The reader is more likely to be receptive to criticism if something positive can be included about their service or presentation.
8. **Be clear:** Explain your position in a clear and concise way. Do not assume that the reader will see the same negative aspects that you have. Handwritten letters are as acceptable as typed ones.
9. **Suggest alternatives:** If you can think of an alternative image or reference, describe it. Some media producers are genuinely ignorant of the issues with which we deal, and appreciate positive and specific suggestions.

10. **Remind the recipient of what is at stake:** You, your family and friends are an important market for the product that the advertiser or media want to reach. If you are considering a boycott of the station or product involved, mention it in your letter.
11. **Ask for a response:** Follow up with another letter or phone call if necessary.
12. **Copy and circulate:** In addition to sending a copy to the advertiser, station or magazine, send copies to Media Watch, and other interested groups, e.g., school boards, healthcare professionals, trade unions, your MP or MLA and community groups.
13. **Pat yourself on the back:** You have taken a pro-active step in curtailing negative images of women and girls in the media.

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