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Why Don't I Look Like Her? The Impact of Social Media on Female Body Image

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CLAREMONT MCKENNA COLLEGE

WHY DON'T I LOOK LIKE HER?

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON FEMALE BODY IMAGE

SUBMITTED TO

Professor Jay Conger

BY

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For

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to understand and criticize the role of social media in the development and/or encouragement of eating disorders, disordered eating, and body dissatisfaction in college-aged women. College women are exceptionally vulnerable to the impact that social media can have on their body image as they develop an outlook on their bodies and accept the developmental changes that occurred during puberty. This paper provides evidence that there is a relationship between the recent surge in disordered eating and high consumption of social media. I examine the ways in which traditional advertising has portrayed women throughout history, as well as analyze the ways in which this depiction of the female ideal has helped shaped society's perspectives about beauty and increased the rate of disordered eating among college aged females. Further, this analysis assesses the ways in which the thin ideal as portrayed in advertising encourages women to look a certain, unrealistic way. I also consider various social psychological theories to explain how women in society form their perceptions with a combination of what they see in the media as well as what they see in their friends and family. I demonstrate that social networking sites (SNS) have similar effects on young women as advertising and other forms of mass media do. Therefore, I will argue that SNS, as a combination of real life and a personalized form of advertising, can potentially have the same, yet amplified, consequences. Indeed, I argue that the ubiquitous and enduring nature of social media websites result perhaps in a wider and more detrimental impact to the body image concerns of college aged women than advertising or the media generally.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	5
Preface.....	6
Chapter 1: The Rise of Unsatisfied Women.....	15
Chapter 2: The Shrinking Ideal.....	28
Chapter 3: The Era of Social Media.....	47
Chapter 4: Psychology Plays a Role.....	65
Conclusion.....	82
Appendix A.....	91
Appendix 1a.....	115
Works Cited.....	118

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PREFACE

I have not bought a magazine since the summer of 2011. Not a fashion magazine, not a cooking magazine, not a fitness magazine, not even a technology magazine. I refuse. Trust me – this choice is not always easy. It’s hard not to stop at the kiosks at the airport and buy the newest issue of Cosmopolitan or Us. It’s hard not to bring a bag full of magazines with me on a train or a plane or anywhere I could possibly get bored. It’s even hard not to stock my bathroom with tabloids to keep up on the daily gossip. It is a constant challenge to resist. But resist I must.

“Flatten your abs Fast!”

“7 Yummy Fat Melting Foods”

“Sexiest. Body. Ever. 4 Steps. 6 Minutes a day.”

That’s why.

Nearly every magazine I see boasts various headlines promising fat blasting secrets or daily weight loss tips. There are infomercials on nearly every channel that try to convince me to take weight loss pills. My Pinterest and Instagram news feeds are full of daily exercise routines. My friends’ Facebook profiles are full of pictures of girls on the beach or at the gym. It feels inescapable. It is rare to see ads with average sized women. Instead, models have olive complexion, are extremely skinny, yet big breasted, and have perfect skin. It is rare to see imperfect women with disproportionate curves, unwarranted flaws, or even excessive freckles. And it is those unrealistic images that we see in the media that contribute to our desire to be skinny and perfectly toned – to eventually develop a self-destructive sense of self. There is always something wrong with how *we* look, but never anything wrong in our friends or the celebrities whom we admire.

I am no exception. I stress about the length of my hair, the bump in my nose, the size of my stomach – mostly in comparison to what I see on my social media news feeds, on TV, and on magazine covers. But like I said, I no longer buy magazines. It has been almost three years.

During my freshmen year of college, I developed a parasite. I lost an extreme amount of weight in a short amount of time. Although I felt horrible and had intense stomach pain, I also began to feel more noticed. I did not realize at the time that I was being noticed for my scarily low weight; because in my head, I saw myself transforming into the skinny women I saw in magazines and on my Instagram. And I liked it. Then, as more girls started talking about the dreaded “Freshmen 15,” I began to count my calories. Instead of convincing myself to re-gain the weight and get healthy, I started to diet. I would look up the caloric content of everything that I ate and kept mental notes in my head. I refused to eat any dessert and instead focused on all of the healthier, more diet friendly foods in the dining hall. I looked up various ways to burn extra calories, and believed those silly blog posts and magazine articles that supposedly revealed secrets about “fat burning foods.” At the same time, I was exercising at least twice a day every day. I wanted to take control over what I was eating and how I was exercising. I wanted to be the one who didn’t gain the freshmen 15. Before I knew it, I was burning upwards of 1500 calories a day and probably eating half of that. I was not starving myself. No, I went to every meal in the dining hall and meticulously picked out the foods that I knew were low in calories. I was restricting my diet to protein and vegetables only – no carbs, no artificial sugar. Some would say my diet was healthy – that I had an immaculate and enviable willpower. It was not enviable.

What people didn't see was the girl who suffered from extreme self-consciousness – the girl who was embarrassed by what she looked like and spent a lot of time envying the bodies of peers and actresses. I spent hours looking at pictures of bodies online – Taylor Swift's legs, Jennifer Anniston's arms, and anyone's abs but my own. I suffered from EDNOS. EDNOS, or Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified, is a relatively new eating disorder (ED) that has been added to the spectrum along with Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa. I was not starving myself, nor was I bingeing and purging, yet I was going to unhealthy extremes to maintain a very low body weight. And although it was triggered by weight loss from an actual medical problem, I was suffering from an eating disorder. Today, eating disorders are more frequent than they used to be, and their symptoms are becoming more prevalent among youth. There is no longer a polarized sick or healthy option, but a spectrum in between healthy and unhealthy thoughts and feelings.

By the time sophomore year came around, I had lost so much weight that my clothes no longer fit and all of my bones were visible in a bathing suit. I distinctly remember sitting on my couch one afternoon, looking through Facebook and Instagram pictures of my friends and their friends whom I didn't even know, picking out which girls I wanted to look like, wondering how they got their bodies to look like that. How were they so perfect?

Then I had to snap out of it. That same day, I deleted my Facebook account. I no longer wanted to spend my time comparing myself to other people. I no longer wanted to waste my time in a virtual non-reality – a place where people pick and choose what

pictures define their online identities. I wanted to live in real life and understand myself in relation to those physically around me, not those who only existed online.

Next, I started seeing a therapist and nutritionist. There were two ways in particular that my therapist immensely contributed to my recovery. First, she encouraged me to buy the book, *8 Keys to Recovery from an Eating Disorder* by Carolyn Costin. My first assignment was to engage in the journal writing practices from the book in order to figure out the root of my problem. I recently opened that document and was reminded of all of the disordered and negative thoughts I had two years ago. One question that stands out to me now is one that asked me what I thought I needed to practice in order to reach full recovery. My answer:

“Thinking more highly of my personality. Stop looking in the mirror. Stop looking at other girls’ bodies. That’s a big one.”

Even during sophomore year of college when I was in a horrible mental state, I knew, rationally, that one of my biggest problems was comparing myself to those around me, whether I knew them or not. I knew that my negative body image and body dissatisfaction was heightened when I relied on comparisons in my own self-appraisal. I was suffering from the range of potential causes of eating disorders established by APA: “low self-esteem, feelings of helplessness, and intense dissatisfaction with the way [I] look[ed]” (APA).

My therapist advised me not to buy or pick up another magazine ever again. Although both traditional and digital advertising are hard to control, the decision to stop buying magazines was one that was completely within my control and could help me resist obsessing over society’s unattainable thin ideal. The day I stopped buying

magazines and decided to actively stop comparing myself to every female that came my way, was the day that I started to learn to accept my body. It was a first step toward recovery. Now it's still a difficult process, and I definitely have days when I find myself wondering about how a certain girl came to look a certain way or how to tone a particular part of my body, but I can honestly say that I have had a remarkable turnaround. I used to be fighting the same battle as millions of college women today, but now, as I am more aware of my surroundings, the images that I see circulated by mass media are easier to ignore. Whether I truly ignore what I see, or if it is simply just a heightened awareness, I am still not sure. In reality, I am hyperaware of the images that circulate around me, and therefore can think critically about them. I am now able to knowledgably navigate the Internet, mindful of the unhealthy messages inherent in thinspiration images, as well as in average photos posted by my peers on social media. Nevertheless, with the ability to access these images from essentially anywhere at any time, it is not getting any easier for anybody to control. I now want to spread awareness.

Thinspiration is not a word in the dictionary. Nor is it considered a word when I type it into this Microsoft Word document. The squiggly red line is staring right at me. It wants me change it to inspiration. But it's not inspiration. Thinspiration, according to the Families Empowered and Supporting Treatment of Eating Disorders Glossary, is:

“Any form of media, print, online, pictures, videos, etc. that are utilized in an unhealthy manner to promote continued weight loss. This information can take the form of images of slim celebrities; individuals afflicted with an eating disorder or emaciated models and is often exchanged amongst members of online pro-eating disorder communities (pro-ana, pro-mia) [...] Poems, music lyrics, quotes, sayings, etc. that encourage weight loss, promote the eating disorder and endorse it as being a life style and choice rather than an illness.” (F.E.A.S.T).

A surprisingly large niche of young people today consider thinspiration to be a new way of life, or at least a huge part of their lives. Thinspiration photos are typically “selfies” of young, emaciated girls – skin and bones. Instead of being negative and frightening, images to show the reality of the destruction that comes from an eating disorder, these pictures are meant to be positive, motivational, and, just as the word says, inspirational. It is not uncommon to see phrases such as “hunger hurts...but starving works,” or “food is the drug we must all quit,” superimposed on bodies of skeletal young women as one form of thinspiration. The images glorify thin bodies and highly promote the “thigh-gap” that apparently all females should have – and if they don’t, they should do whatever they can to shrink their quadriceps and attempt to attain the unattainable – thighs that do not touch, not even close, when their standing up, feet together. Images like the one on the following page litter the Internet. They are extreme examples of the lengths to which girls these days are going in order to achieve the thin ideal that they see in the media.



Source: <http://l-e-t-i-t-b-e-l-e-t-i-t-b-e.tumblr.com/post/47411013449>

The photo above is an extreme example of the current thinspiration fad, but demonstrates the types of figures that young women today are striving to achieve. While thinspiration images can also feature thin women who look healthy and fit, the message is the same: you must look a certain way. Whether skeletal or not, the thinspiration trend and the images related to it, demonstrate the tremendous emphasis that our society puts on physical appearance. Historically, cultural perceptions and expectations about physical appearance and beauty have been swayed and shaped by what is portrayed in the media, especially through images in advertisements that are typically edited and airbrushed to create idyllic, yet unattainable figures. The models used in advertisements are sexy and appear to have perfect figures, which suggest to the average woman, that in order to be considered beautiful, she, too, must look like what she sees in ads. Research has shown that female body image is affected by what they see in the media, and I argue that that concept has been intensified within the last 20 years. Images of women have historically been used to sell products, but what happens when our friend or are classmate begins to post the same types of images – images that embody society’s ideal female beauty, but without the Photoshop expertise of professional advertisers? With constant access to technology via laptops, tablets, and smartphones, women today are surrounded by mass mediated messages of what society thinks they should look like. Even when I compare today to just three years ago when I decided to swear off magazines, there were less factors in the media contributing to my body image than there are today. At that time, I did not have an Instagram, and I was only just learning how to use Pinterest. Now it is much more difficult to avoid media, which makes me question how women have been and are going to be influenced. Today, in addition to professional mass media in the form

of billboards, magazines, and television commercials, there is an increasing amount of digital content created by average people on social networking sites. Simultaneously, there are a disturbingly high number of women with diagnosed eating disorders as well as women with self-reported body dissatisfaction.

The Internet and social media provide a platform for women to seek out images of what they want to look like, a place for women to search for diet and exercise advice, as well as a an outlet through which women can perform outward comparisons with their peers and celebrities. Social networks may not create new problems for women, but they do certainly intensify existing ones. Social media has made constant the ability to critique and analyze bodies in such a way that promotes body dissatisfaction, constant body surveillance, and disordered thoughts – all of these factors that can potential leading to very serious eating disorders.

The purpose of this paper is to understand and criticize the role of social media in the development and/or encouragement of eating disorders, disordered eating, and body dissatisfaction in college-aged women. I am looking at college-aged (18-25) females as they make up significant percentage of social media users. But more important, college women are exceptionally vulnerable to the impact that social media can have on their body image as they develop an outlook on their bodies and accept the developmental changes that occurred during puberty. It is the age when young women, like myself, are first making decisions on their own without their parent's authority. It is when they are selecting which foods to eat without parental guidance. They are considered to be at a higher risk for eating disorders and disordered eating than any other age group (Carrie

399). This paper seeks to provide evidence that there is a relationship between the recent surge in disordered eating and high consumption of social media. I will examine the ways in which traditional advertising has portrayed women throughout history, as well as analyze the ways in which this depiction of the female ideal has helped shaped society's perspectives about beauty and increased the rate of disordered eating among college aged females. Further, this analysis will assess the ways in which the thin ideal as portrayed in advertising encourages women to look a certain, unrealistic way. I want to explore the influence and high acceleration of social networking sites (SNS) and demonstrate that they have similar affects on young women as advertising and other forms of mass media do. It is the exponential growth of the SNS that I fear will exacerbate the impact of media on society. I will also consider various social psychological theories to explain how women in society form their perceptions with a combination of what they see in the media as well as what they see in their friends and family. Therefore, I will argue that SNS, as a combination of real life and a personalized form of advertising, can potentially have the same, yet amplified, consequences. Indeed, I argue that the ubiquitous and enduring nature of social media websites result perhaps in a wider and more detrimental impact to the body image concerns of college aged women than advertising or the media generally.

CHAPTER 1

The Rise of Unsatisfied Women

We are living in a world that idealizes the sickly thin and shames the overweight.

Throughout history, to be underweight was typically frowned upon. It was a sign of poverty and lack of resources. In fact, obesity was actually considered “prestigious and admired” (Cassell xiii). To be fat was seen as an accomplishment – as a way to judge success. Today, as the United States becomes wealthier and shifts to a culture of overindulgence and abundance, rates of obesity are rising, but it is no longer a sign of success. Instead, in our society, which focuses on physical appearance, fatness is looked down upon, while thinness is idolized. And as a result, our society is now facing two problems: an epidemic of obesity as well as an increased rate of women who are unhappy with their bodies.

So how can it be that the rate at which body dissatisfaction rises is increasing simultaneously with the average body mass index (BMI). Over the past 40 years, “women’s average weight has increased [...] with [...] well over half [being] overweight” (Dittmar 45). At the same time, however, between the years 1995 and 2005, “the prevalence of dieting and diet product use among female adolescents showed significant (25%) linear increases” (Chao 131). Although paradoxical, the relationship between obesity and eating disorders makes sense. In fact, they feed off of each other. The fact that more women are moving farther and farther away from the thin, airbrushed ideal that surrounds them in the media nearly every second of the day, is “likely to be reflected in many women’s self-concept, in the form of discrepancies between how their body is and how they would ideally like it to be” (Dittmar 45). The gap between the size

of the average woman in real life and the average woman depicted in the media is widening, which can contribute to a higher prevalence of body dissatisfaction among females.

Before discussing the social psychology and media influence behind the development of negative (or positive) body image and unhealthy behaviors, it is important to note the difference between clinically diagnosed mental eating disorders and the more common condition of disordered eating.

People with *Anorexia Nervosa*, as defined by the American Psychological Association, suffer from:

“a distorted body image that causes them to see themselves as overweight even when they're dangerously thin. Often refusing to eat, exercising compulsively, and developing unusual habits such as refusing to eat in front of others, they lose large amounts of weight and may even starve to death.” (APA)

Anorexia is commonly considered an “individual pathology” or “coping mechanism that relates to a woman’s inner doubts and lack of self-confidence, respect, control and competence” (Hesse-Biber, “The Mass Marketing” 210). As a result of these psychological imbalances, anorexia, then, leads to a combination of extreme behaviors such as starvation or highly restrictive dieting in order to look a certain way or feel a sense of control over one’s body.

Another commonly detected eating disorder among women, *Bulimia Nervosa*, is diagnosed in people who:

“eat excessive quantities, and then purge their bodies of the food and calories they fear by using laxatives, enemas, or diuretics; vomiting; or exercising. Often acting

in secrecy, they feel disgusted and ashamed as they binge, yet relieved of tension and negative emotions once their stomachs are empty again.” (APA)

The psychology of an eating disorder is typically understood to be rooted in anxiety and obsessive-compulsive related phenomena. Psychologists refer to anorexia and bulimia as mental disorders – they are not something as simple as the decision to diet in order to look a certain way. Eating disorders can also be genetic (Hesse-Biber, “The Mass Marketing” 210). Usually, in diagnosing eating disorders, psychologists first look at factors within the individual such as his or her traumatic life events or internal thoughts regarding depression or suicide. Psychologists can also look at the patient’s family life or other psychological traits. Although psychologists do cite culture, mass media, and society as influencing factors, it is less heavily relied on than psychological factors.

Although anorexia and bulimia used to be the most commonly diagnosed eating disorders, additional categories have been added to the clinical spectrum, such as the Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (EDNOS) from which I suffered. EDNOS is specifically defined as a condition when “individuals have eating-related problems but don’t meet the official criteria for anorexia, bulimia or binge eating” (APA). Similar to my experience, those who suffer from EDNOS do not binge or purge, nor do they starve themselves; yet they are still consumed by disordered thoughts about their bodies and their caloric intake. They have a fear of gaining weight and their lives become consumed by their unhealthy obsessions. Disordered eating, on the other hand, does “not manifest the full range of psychological traits usually associated with” Anorexia, Bulimia, and EDNOS, but still results in the same types of dangerous behaviors (Hesse-Biber, “The Mass Marketing” 210).

The fact that there is a difference between eating disorders and disordered eating is significant in relation to this research. It supports the conclusion that social media has an impact on *overall* body image concerns and anxieties, rather than attempting to argue that social media is the sole cause of clinical eating disorders, which is not the entirety the case. This paper uses a sociocultural perspective, not an entirely medical one. Therefore, we assert that social media is not the outright root of the problem of complex psychological diseases, but instead, is a cultural factor that influences the body (dis)satisfaction of *all* women, whether predisposed to certain psychological imbalances or not. I do assume, however, in Chapter 4, that the clinical side of psychology helps explain who is most susceptible to the cultural influences to which I discuss.

Although they have different psychological roots, both conditions result in a disappointment with one's physical self and both are highly influenced by what people see around them. Behavior patterns like extreme dieting and the use of laxatives are typically culturally induced and result from various external factors such as the extreme emphasis on the thin female ideal that is so pervasive in our society (Hesse-Biber, "The Mass Marketing" 211). The typical model is now 20% underweight, which puts her in the category for anorexia (Dittmar 44). In fact, 15% underweight is one of the criteria used to diagnose anorexia, so the average model could even be considered an extreme case (Dittmar 44). Further, the thin ideal typically depicted in the media is only "possessed naturally by 5% of American females" (NADA). As a result of the widening gap between the ideal and the real, more women are developing eating disorders. In fact, 20 million females will "suffer from a clinically significant eating disorder at some time in their life," according to the National Eating Disorder Association (NEDA) (Hesse-Biber, "The

Mass Marketing” 209). This problem of body dissatisfaction is particularly acute on college campuses. The negative body image among women between the ages of 18 and 25 has become so strong that one study reported that “over ½ of females between the ages of 18-25 would prefer to be run over by a truck than be fat, and 2/3 would rather be mean or stupid” (Gaesser).

A disturbing number of college women have fallen victim to negative body image and extreme self-consciousness, two main factors that contribute to the eventual development of pathological thoughts surrounding dieting (NIMH). Most college students live in a geographically confined area with a homogenous population for at least four years. They live in a bubble without their parents, constantly surrounded by people their own age. Students on college campuses can compare themselves to a classmate within the same demographic, which has contributed to a widespread trend of weight-related issues in college aged females. Even before the widespread use of the Internet and social media, in 1995, 91% of college women attempted to lose weight through dieting (Kurth). Now, those numbers are only rising. Although they are often considered taboo and intentionally left out of public conversation, eating disorders affect four times as many people as breast cancer (The Center for Eating Disorders). And although the problem is prevalent among males and females, 95% of all who are diagnosed with eating disorders are women (Hesse-Biber, “The Mass Marketing” 209).

The above statistics only refer to the amount of women recognize that they have a problem or who meet the criteria for the diagnosed psychological disorders defined above (NEDA). There are thousands more who suffer from “sub-clinical disordered eating

attitudes and behaviors” (NEDA). Although there are a range of potential causes to eating disorders such as perfectionism and compulsion, most people in these categories, whether clinical or sub-clinical, “suffer from low self-esteem, feelings of helplessness, and intense dissatisfaction with the way they look” (APA). The disturbing part is, though, that these individual symptoms, not just the cases of eating disorders, are increasing (Kurth). For instance, “between 4% and 9% of college women have diagnosable eating disorders, but more frightening, 34% to 67% experience disordered eating at sub threshold levels” (Fitzsimmons-Craft 796). Sub-clinical eating disorders are actually “at least twice as common as full syndrome disorders,” and can be more dangerous if left untreated (Hutchinson 1557). As those numbers rise, I fear for the mental and physical safety of college women. People who only suffer from neurotic obsessions regarding their weight and appearance do not necessarily meet the criterion for psychologically defined disorders, yet they result in the same stress on the bones, heart, and overall enjoyment of life as those experienced by individuals with anorexia or bulimia.

Eating disorders have one of the highest rates of mortality of any mental illness (Kaye). They are the “most lethal psychiatric disorder[s], carrying a six fold increased risk of death – four times the death risk from major depression,” according to WebMD Health News (DeNoon). About 20% of those that suffer from anorexia will die from premature causes, including heart failure, according to The Renfrew Center for Eating (The Renfrew Center). For female anorexics between the ages of 15 and 24, specifically, “the mortality rate associated with their mental illness is twelve times higher than the death rate from ALL other causes of death” (Sullivan). For people suffering from eating disorders, suicide is extremely common, with sufferers being 23 times more likely to

commit suicide than the rest of the population (Sullivan). The “rate of suicide among ED patients” is higher than most psychiatric conditions, according to The American Association of Suicidology (AAS). It is not only anorexia that has high mortality rates, though. One study performed in 2009, found that the mortality rate for EDNOS, was 5.2% (Crow). These numbers demonstrate both the sometimes ignored, fatal dangers of eating disorders, as well as reveal the often-overlooked consequences of EDNOS. In looking at all types of disordered eating and the death rates associated with each one, it is clear that this problem is not only pervasive and rampant, but an extreme danger to those who suffer from it.

The “best known contributor” to both clinical eating disorders and sub-clinical cases of disordered eating, is negative body image and high body dissatisfaction (Stice). Body image is understood to be a combination of “subjective understandings of the body including a conceptual understanding of the body as well as an emotional attitude toward one’s own body” (Rumsey 26). It normally includes ones “perceptions of bodily form such as bodily size, shape, and characteristics” (Dittmar 1). Today, negative body image encourages women to engage in disordered eating and obsessive behaviors in order to fit a certain beauty ideal represented throughout mass media as well as through their peers both in the physical and online worlds. More and more college women who are “otherwise psychologically normal,” are becoming increasingly obsessed with caloric restriction, dieting, and extreme exercise, which suggests, “there are different agents at work” (Hesse-Biber, *Cult of Thinness*, 156).

Body dissatisfaction, which is similar to body image, refers to a discontentment with the shape and size of one's body and appearance. Specifically, it is the "experience of negative thoughts and esteem about one's body" (Dittmar 1). People tend to judge their body dissatisfaction on "the difference between an ideal body shape/size and perceived own body shape/size" (Rumsey 130). Body dissatisfaction is "so pervasive that more than 25 years ago it was labeled 'normative discontent,'" according to *The Oxford Handbook of the Psychology of Appearance* (Rumsey 175). That is, so many people, especially women, are dissatisfied with their appearances, that it is considered *normal* to feel that way. When there is a high prevalence of body dissatisfaction, women are more likely to suffer from "a range of physical and mental health problems," which includes both eating disorders and disordered eating (Dittmar 1). It is frightening to think that one of the main contributors to eating disorders and unhealthy dieting and behavioral patterns has become normalized in our society.

Although this displeasure is considered normal and standard in society as a whole, it is "especially prevalent among [...] young women [...] in early adulthood," as they attempt to form their identities (Rumsey 455). It is common for women in this demographic to experience negative body image issues and self-esteem fluctuations regarding physical appearance. Therefore, it is also more common for females in this age group to experience disordered thoughts as a result of those insecurities. For example, research shows that 86% of women with eating disorders developed symptoms by age 20, while 43% reported an onset between the ages of 16 and 20 (National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders). In addition, 91% of college-aged women have reported dieting in an effort to control their weight, according to the National

Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders (NADA). This age group is particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of all types of media on body image.

Media “helps to shape beauty ideals by showing certain body sizes [as...] beautiful and desirable” (Rumsey 217). Now, it can perpetuate images through a variety of distribution vehicles and can more easily set the cultural standard for appearance in society. Today, female Internet users can scroll through their Instagram news feed and look at “thinspirational” images of girls, or click through Pinterest to look for fashion, exercise, and diet tips, or even read the gossip site, TMZ, to learn about the new celebrity that gained – god forbid – ten pounds. The word “thinspiration” stems from a new trend among women who post pictures of models and peers whose looks they admire and want to mimic – pictures that they consider inspirational, that embody some type of idealized body image. Now, more than ever, women are surrounded by constant reminders of what they should look like, as well as what and how much they should eat, and how much they should exercise.

Two authors, Vickie Rutledge Shields and Dawn Heinecken, in their book, *Measuring Up: How Advertising Affects Self-Image*, looked at the ways in which mass media, specifically advertising, impacts how women feel about their bodies. They argue that the drive for thinness leading to eating disorders among young women has a high correlation with media influence and advertising (Shields 71). One of their main points is the explanation of the ways in which advertising perpetuates the norms of a patriarchal society. They discuss the fact that images of women in advertising are consistent with the media theory of a “male dominated” gaze (Shields 71). Referring to media theorists, such

as Laura Mulvey and Rosalind Crawford, Shields asserts that this “male gaze” transforms women into objects of the heterosexual man’s eye (Shields 74). Therefore, she continues, advertisements and other images of women are shot in such ways that encourage female audiences to adopt a certain perspective when looking at other women and themselves (Shields 77). Shields and Heineken argue that women in society have been conditioned to “see the female body” in the same way the men see it and constantly feel as though they are being looked at (Shields 74). As women continue to feel as if they are always under the scrutiny of others, especially men, it is more likely that they partake in self-surveillance practices, which, unfortunately tend to result in disordered and negative thoughts about one’s body. Now, the male gaze influences, both directly and indirectly, the complex relationships between women and their bodies through a number of mediums.

One study about adolescent body satisfaction and dissatisfaction asserts:

“Although the media and social culture may encourage a certain body preference for females that virtually all adolescent girls are exposed to on some level, it is the more immediate culture of family and friends that either support the thin ideal body preference [or] encourage body dissatisfaction” (Kelly 395).

This leads me to conclude that online social networking, which is essentially the combination of immediate family and friends and the media can only magnify the problems of body dissatisfaction. The purpose of this paper is to explore exactly that - the relationship between social media (e.g. Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, and Pinterest) and the body satisfaction or dissatisfaction among its college-aged female users.

One experiment performed in 2011 by Nina Haferkamp and Nicole C. Kramer revealed that “people who look at attractive users [on Facebook] have less positive emotions afterwards and are also more dissatisfied with their own body image than people who look at unattractive users” (Haferkamp 313). Another 2011 study performed at the University of Haifa in 2011 by Professors Yael Latzer, Ruth Katz and Zohar Spivak of the Faculty of Social Welfare and Health Sciences had similar results. It looked at the correlation between the amount of time adolescent girls spent looking at Facebook and negative body image and (dis)satisfaction. In this particular study, researchers looked at females from the age of 12 to 19, and asked them to self-report their social media use and approaches to dieting, as well as a general sense of how they feel about their bodies. In the end, it was established that:

“the more time girls spend on Facebook, the more they suffered conditions of bulimia, anorexia, physical dissatisfaction, negative physical self-image, negative approach to eating and more of an urge to be on a weight-loss diet.” (University of Haifa).

It is important to note that Latzer, Katz, and Zohar did not assert that there was causation between Facebook use and body dissatisfaction. Nonetheless, the high correlation between the two suggests that girls who spend a lot of time on social media may be using it as a way to feed their negative body image or just to find dieting and weight loss tips. Although this study focused on a slightly younger demographic of females, the results are telling of the dangerous side effects of high social media use. One psychologist, Dr. Harry Brandt, at The Center for Eating Disorders at Sheppard Pratt says that “Facebook is making it easier for people to spend more time and energy criticizing their own bodies and wishing they looked like someone else” (PRNewswire). That “someone else” used to

only be depicted in the constant advertisements that appear throughout society, but can now interfere into everyday life through *several* platforms and devices.

Many studies reveal that “the media communicates very complex messages about cultural standards of beauty, femininity, and masculinity,” but its role has become increasingly critical, as we, as a society, have now been given the power to create our own content (Rumsey231). Through SNS, average people, not just marketers, can be held responsible for the communication and circulation of cultural norms.

Written in 2002, Shields and Heineken’s book does not address social media, which barely existed at that point, but I would argue that women who participate in social media are exposed to the same, if not more, influences as female consumers of advertisements. As it is extremely time sensitive, often centered on one’s peers, and quickly changing, “little attention has as yet to be paid to the impact of ‘new media,’” on the behavioral and psychological patterns associated with high consumption (Rumsey 457). SNS, however, combine the effects of advertisements with those of our peers. According to various social observers, imitation has been “long recognized [and] important in human society” (Bikhchandani 152). Further, “the propensity to imitate is presumably an evolutionary adaptation that has promoted survival over thousands of generations” (Bikhchandani 152). As a deeply rooted social construct, then, imitation can potentially be utilized in adverse ways. Media representations tend to include “distorted cultural norms concerning appearance,” which corrupt and confuse the average woman’s expectation of beauty (Rumsey 455). This corruption, then, can cause the internalization of the male gaze, “the self-surveying gaze,” to become “overwhelming, and in turn,

distorted” (Shields 102). In recognizing the statistical increase of both eating disorders and disordered thoughts regarding weight, food, and appearance, I can more clearly see the strong correlation between changing media technology and affected self-esteem and body image. Social media has the potential to foster an internalization of the male gaze as described in the analysis of advertisements, as well as the desire to imitate our peers, as described in sociological and psychological theories. For females in the 21st century, the strong emphasis placed on social networking and photo sharing can only build on the already existent phenomenon of social psychology, sociology, and media effects theories that help explain body dissatisfaction and disordered eating.

CHAPTER 2

The Shrinking Ideal

The pervasive and disturbing growth of eating disorders has become more well-known in the last the fifteen years, but the issues surrounding body image, and the idealized way in which women have constantly been portrayed in the media have been pervasive in American society for decades. So, before discussing the influence of new and social media on female body image, we must trace and analyze the various depictions of beauty that have circulated throughout advertising and media history; as well as how those changing images have affected women in society. As established in the previous chapter, the prevalence of negative body image continues to rise. Additionally, the speculation that media consumption affects the way in which people feel about themselves is not a new concept. Even before the Internet and social media were so prominent in everyday life, traditional advertisements in newspapers and magazines or on billboards and TV have been extremely influential in shaping society's perceptions. It will be helpful to analyze the way in which traditional media have portrayed women throughout the past century in order to understand how women today have learned to portray themselves both in real life and on their social media profiles – essentially, their own forms of personal advertising. Then, it will be easier to argue that social media, in fact, builds upon an already existing phenomena of media influence that, prior to the Internet, was largely only attributed to the advertising industry. Once this paper establishes a correlation between body image changes and fluctuations of the size of the average woman as she appears in advertising, I will have a stronger foundation on which to base my argument that social media, like advertising, can have adverse effects on

female body image. This chapter will contain a critical analysis and close reading of specific advertisements throughout history and discuss how our notions of body image and self-worth have evolved accordingly. For the purpose of this paper, I will focus only the evolution of the ideal woman as she appears in advertising.

Photo-based advertising has only been utilized since the beginning of the 20th century, yet in its relatively short life, it has become clear that it “sells values, images, and concepts of [...] normalcy” (Kilbourne 74). Through perfectly posed graphics, advertisers attempt to set up a virtual reality and dictate what is considered normal for society as a whole. Author, Jim Fowles, refers to the changing fashion trends as “the cycle of attractiveness,” and argues that it is “defined in popular culture and then refined in advertising” (140). And through the analysis of the evolution of the female role in this “cycle of attraction,” we can see changes in style, fashion, and most important, the values of society (Reichert 83). Using a variety of idealized graphics, advertising “tells us who we are and who we want to be [...] it corrupts our language and thus influences our ability to think clearly” (Kilbourne 74). One way that advertisers do this is to utilize and sexualize women as a way to sell a product. Unfortunately, in doing so, they also create a “toxic environment” for women’s self-esteem (Kilbourne 131). This environment cultivates a “body-hatred that so many young women feel,” which ultimately leads to disordered thoughts and body dissatisfaction as well as “simply being obsessed with controlling ones appetite” (Kilbourne 135).

Since the early 1900s, young women have been surrounded by photo-heavy media that has helped shape their perspectives of themselves and those around them. And

although the ideal beauty has been expressed through a variety of body types, the thin and fit ideal has consistently been a “key signifier of femininity,” encouraging women to embody a certain, usually unrealistic figure (Rumsey 175). This thin ideal has continued to decrease in shape and weight since the 1950s, and today, is even more slender, sometimes to a dangerous point of emaciation. (Rumsey 175). In 1970, “the average fashion model was 8% thinner than the average woman. Today, that number has risen to 23%” (Derenne 259). Advertising agencies now actively seek out thin models. In fact, between the 50s and the 80s, “the proportion of heavy models dropped from 12% to 3% [...] whereas the use of very thin models rose from 3% to 46%” (Fowles 141). “There is a significant dichotomy between society’s idealized rail-thin figure and the more typical American body” (Derenne 257).

Although the trendy styles and desired appearances as dictated by the media change regularly, “each tiny deviation from the previous look [has been] greeted with utter delirium” (Mulvey 9). In other words, most new trends that have been introduced in the media have been eagerly mirrored in society. Each decade brought new fads. In the very early 1900s, the “cinched waist” was popular, while the 1920’s emphasized the “flat chested and straight bodied flapper” (Shields xii). Thirty years later, in the 1950s, a “full-chested hourglass” woman was preferred again; while, twenty years after that, she was reduced to “the skinny waif” of the 1970s (Shields xii). In looking through the past century, advertisements have always reinforced the idea that women should fit a certain standard. The only difference between then and now is the size of that standard.

In 1916, Pond created an advertising campaign for Vanishing Cream that definitely contributed to the standard for women at the time.



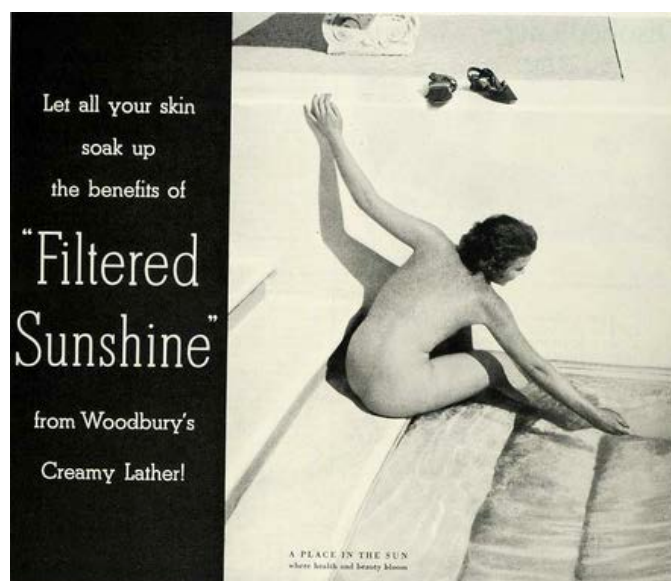
Source: <http://www.vintageadbrowser.com/beauty-and-hygiene-ads-1910s/4>

The cream, itself, suggests that in order to be considered beautiful, women need to have clear, perfect skin. In addition, the ads for the product, which appeared in *Vogue*, a popular woman's magazine, display the "benefits of being attractive" by positioning the woman as an object of desire in the middle of six men (Reichert 82). Although the ad features cartoon drawings rather than real models or actresses, it still implies that women must look like the female cartoon in order to be courted and desired by men. If the placement of the figures isn't enough, Pond even adds text to the ad that reads, "What a man looks for in a girl" (Reichert 82). The marketers left nothing up for interpretation – men want women to look a certain way and this product will help achieve them that look. The woman in the ad looks very different than women in today's advertisements. Her body does not appear to be excessively slender, but her dress does accentuate the area just below her chest, which was a desired physical trait of the era called the "empire line" (Mulvey 52). An empire line is the narrow waist right below the bust of a woman that is

meant to accentuate her breasts, a typically objectified body part for women. The cartoon woman has a pale skin and a short, boyish haircut. In fact, during the time the ad was featured, “short hair was seen as chic” and as a result of ads like this one, the style was mimicked by hundreds of “in the first week of it being reported” in the media (Mulvey 54). The speed at which styles changed as a result of media and advertising was impeccable even in the early 1900s. Even in the early 1900s advertising had an almost immediate effect on the style preferences with regards to clothing, hairstyle, and physical appearance. Imagine now, with the advent of the Internet and smartphones, the potential speed at which styles and preferences can change. Back then, just like today, women wanted to look like what they saw in the media. They wanted what the advertisements showed them – fame, beauty, and attention from men – and they were conditioned to think that in order to achieve that, they would need to mimic what they saw. For that reason, advertisements have always held a certain power over women, as they tend to dictate what is socially acceptable as a female ideal.

Twenty years later, in the 1930s, advertisements continued to reinforce the myth of the ideal feminine beauty. One advertising campaign for Woodbury’s Facial Soap focused on the obsession with being beautiful and “as always, beauty and its effects were just out of the average women’s reach” (Reichert 75). In other words, advertisements suggested that beauty was attainable, but just one product or one diet away. Women in advertisements appeared just beautiful enough that average women felt as though, with work, they, too, could look like that. The fact that these “beauty effects” were “just out of reach” encouraged woman to continuously scrutinize themselves against the advertisements as a model to which they strived (Reichert 75). Although men were not

the intended audience of these advertisements, these 1930's Woodbury ads contained images of nude women – a first for the industry (Reichert 97). Instead of using nude women to attract men, Woodbury used the women in the ads to show other women how they could and should look naked. They attempted to dictate the ideal 1930s female body, yet in comparison to previous eras, Woodbury women actually addressed the full female form, sans clothing. The nude woman in the advertisement reveals that she is comfortable with her body as well as the “serious sex appeal” that was popular in the 30s (Mulvey 93). Back then, just as they do now, advertisements “define what is sexy and, more important, who is sexy” (Kilbourne 260). In this ad, the body is not extremely skinny, but actually has a slight crease in her right side, revealing some curves. In the 1930s, “curves [were] fashionable again” (Mulvey 94). Unlike the waif of later years, the 1930s were a time when women were allowed, in society's standards, to have *some* curves, but not enough to be considered fat. For example, although curvy, the woman's outstretched arms suggest her openness and accentuate her lean, lengthy figure – definitely not overweight. Instead, her curvy, yet fit body type is consistent with the advertisements and media related images that encouraged women to adopt exercise programs during that decade. At the time, “diet and exercise were accepted as [...] necessary for the well-being of women” (Mulvey 96). The transformation from simply curvaceous and big-breasted to voluptuous *and* in shape marks the end of the 1930s and a transition in society to a strong emphasis on weight management and appearance that has continued into the 21st century.



Source: <http://ecx.images-amazon.com/images/I/51sekz53vcl. SY300 .jpg>

In the 1950s, like the 1930s, popular advertisements were not those with extremely thin girls, like today, but those with photos of full-figured women – women like Marilyn Monroe, Audrey Hepburn, and Elizabeth Taylor (Mulvey 120). It was in the 1950s that film and television had an even more “profound influence on the way people wanted to look” (Mulvey 122). So, in addition to advertisements, other sources of media played a pivotal role in reinforcing the thin ideal for women. During this time, society became more materialistic and consumer focused, so advertising within the television and film realms became even more powerful and influential than in other media entities. The 1950s marked the time when advertising began to have “more influence than ever before” (Mulvey 123). Advertising was responsible for “new crazes popp[ing] up like mushrooms overnight” (Mulvey 132). At the same time, women were being more objectified in media, with an extreme emphasis placed on their bodies. In fact, “it didn’t matter if a girl’s character might be questionable as long as she looked good” and that’s what society began to believe (Mulvey 122). As a result, society began to value looks more than

anything; and by looking at song lyrics during the 1950s, adolescents were particularly affected by this change in thought – they sang about their desires and “agonised [sic] about being normal [and] being attractive” (Mulvey 132). Young people were being pressured and influenced by peers and media to look and dress a certain way and were beginning to feel preoccupied about their physical appearances. To make matters worse, instead of using real people in advertisements, the industry began using a combination of models and photo editing software to assure that the advertisements would portray the idealized, perfect person (Mulvey 128). At the time, the perfect person was still “leggy and voluptuous,” not skeletal and waif-like, but the models still suggested that women in that day and age were only considered beautiful if they, too, had the perfect balance of curves and fitness (Reichert 107).

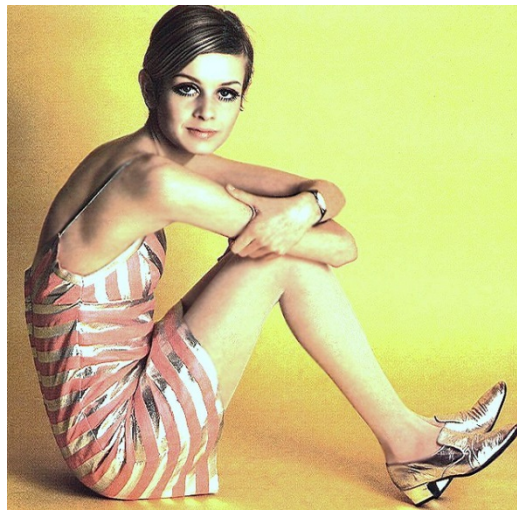
One telling example from that era is the Maidenform “Dream” campaign. A campaign for bras, this 1950s advertisement depicts the feminine ideal of the era: “very womanly and curvy” (Mulvey 130). The campaign features “striking, blatant, voluptuous” women (Reichert 144). Additionally, it emphasizes breasts as the focal point of the image, reinforcing the need for deep cleavage lines in the definition of sexy (Mulvey 130). Even the name of the company emphasizes the importance of the woman’s body – “a maiden’s form” (Reichert 144). The title suggests that, for a woman, her body is her most important feature. As the theme of the campaign is “dream,” it blatantly builds on the idea that its audience should aspire and *dream* to look just like the women in the ads. It plays upon the basic premise of advertising – “that a particular product can make you a more ideal person” and help you achieve your dreams (Rumsey 175). In this particular ad, although “curvaceous,” the women have “flat midriffs” and toned muscular

arms and legs (Reichert 144). As previously mentioned, the 50s introduced a new focus on exercise and nutrition, and the Maidenform female is an example of the “control and discipline of one’s weight as a means of achieving idealized femininity” (Shields 89). The creators of the Maidenform ads, like many marketers, expect women to see strive to look like the Maidenform women, and therefore buy the Maidenform bra (Reichert 144). Advertisers are essentially selling two products: the item itself, as well as an attitude or set of values about appearance. The Maidenform ads are not blatantly trying to make a woman feel badly about herself, yet, like many advertising campaigns, a decreased feeling of self-worth in females is an adverse consequence because they do not feel as beautiful or perfect as the women they see in the media. In fact, “studies at Stanford University and the University of Massachusetts found that about 70 percent of college women say they feel worse about their own looks after reading women’s magazines” that are full of advertisements like the one pictured below (Kilbourne 133).



Source: <http://sylvanaknaap.blogspot.com/2012/05/look-back-at-maidenform-bra-ads.html>

Ten years later, in the 1960s, those feelings of shame and guilt, somewhat perpetuated by the media's emphasis on body surveillance, were causing women to go to greater lengths to reach society's standards. Plastic surgery became even more conventional and less taboo (Mulvey 146). The theme for women at the time was "liberation," yet, ironically, they were medically altering their bodies to fit a certain mold (Mulvey 137). Instead of freeing themselves from the confines of society, women were taking extreme measures to conform. During this time, feminine face of advertising was the shorthaired, extremely thin, shapeless, "childlike" figure of Twiggy depicted on the following page (Mulvey 138,146).



Source: <http://nursingclio.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/twiggy.png>

The image she embodied was called the "dollybird" (Mulvey 146). Twiggy exemplified the drastic change in body type that was glamorized in the 1960s as compared to that of the 1950s. She made the short, boyish, "urchin cut" popular and inspired many young women to adopt the hairstyle. So much so that it was featured in the *New York Times*. An article was published that "featured six pictures, and asked which were girls and which were boys" (Mulvey 144). In previous decades, the curvaceous womanly figure was

considered beautiful, but the ideal physique quickly changed to “gangly, waif-like girls with huge staring eyes and the rounded uncoordinated limbs of children” (Mulvey 148). The idealized woman in advertising during this decade was not womanly at all, but instead, almost appeared as young boys – completely without curves. And this look was nearly impossible to achieve. During this era, the media began to overwhelm women with the conflicting demands that they would continue to face for the next 50 years – “to be overtly sexy and attractive but essentially passive and virginal” – two body types and attitudes very difficult to embody at the same time (Kilbourne 130).

The 1970s, similar to the 1960s, valued the “stick-like” woman (Mulvey 166). There was still “an immense pressure to stay thin” and a strong focus on the drive for thinness (Mulvey 166). So much pressure, in fact, that women felt that they should pay to correct their bodies – that artificial changes would hopefully help them appreciate and accept their bodies. The 1970s also brought the “glowing tan skin and bright lips,” also known as the “California look” to the forefront (Mulvey 164). Starting in the 70s, “anybody who felt they deserved it was having a facelift or liposuction” (Mulvey 165). More and more women were choosing to color their hair and apply fake nails in the hopes of emulating what they saw on models and actresses (Mulvey 165). Women prevented themselves from aging and evolving with their natural body processes because they wanted to look just like the airbrushed advertisements. Advertising typically sends the false message “that [the thin ideal] is possible [with] enough effort and self-sacrifice” and therefore, “girls spend enormous amounts of time and energy attempting to achieve something that is not only trivial but also completely unattainable” (Kilbourne 132). The 1970s was the beginning of the “me generation” – an era that saw many bouts of plastic

surgery in an attempt to fit a certain mold of unattainable physicality (Mulvey 165).

Extremely high amounts of money were spent on these artificial practices, partly because the image that was being portrayed in the media was unable to be attained naturally.

Women were also more health conscious and exercise obsessed during this decade. Additionally, possibly as a result of the new “dollybird” trend and promotion of a rail-thin image, there was an increase in eating disorders, especially anorexia (Mulvey 166). The cause of this was speculated to be an effort “to maintain a pre-pubescent body shape” (Mulvey 166). What was called the image of the waif, was an extremely skinny, almost androgynous, fragile woman. The waif was associated with women like Kate Moss and “provoked concern amongst feminist and media commentators who linked her extreme slenderness to the rising incidence of anorexia in the West” (Burke 41). In the 1970s, the fashion industry was highly criticized for encouraging an unhealthy ideal, which, I would argue, has re-entered the media landscape today. Although psychological diseases like anorexia and bulimia have various causes and roots, advertising “provides a fertile soil for these obsessions to take root in and creates a climate of denial in which these diseases flourish” (Kilbourne 135). In general, the 70s were a time when women began to take extreme measures to fit the ideal that was portrayed in media. Society’s values, “both reflected and reinforced by advertising, urges girls to adopt a false self, to bury alive their real selves” (Kilbourne 130). Plastic surgery and starvation aided in the creation of the false self, while simultaneously destroying the real self.

The image of the waif did not last too long, because, perhaps in a reaction against criticisms, women in advertising in the 1980s were “muscular tanned breast-implanted [and] aerobicized” (Shields xii). The 1980s Calvin Klein “Y-front jock underwear for women” campaign redefined the masculine female style that endured since the 60s – still masculine, but with some shape (Mulvey 185). Instead of using emaciated, scrawny models, like Twiggy, Calvin Klein advertisers used images of both men *and* women as a way to “transcend gender” (Reichert 175). The ads featured men and women in one advertisement, both wearing similar undergarments. Women were no longer emaciated and stick-straight, but instead, fit and sporty. Women were now sold “sports underwear” and the “Calvin Klein look found its way into the women’s locker room” (Mulvey 186). Starvation and eating disorders “had been the rage in the 70s, [but were] now recognised [sic] [as] self-defeating” (Mulvey 185). Instead, women adopted healthy exercise routines to maintain their figures. Although the ads for Calvin Klein underwear did not encourage the unhealthy, disordered eating that Twiggy influenced, they still featured perfectly shaped, idealized, and eroticized female bodies which contributed to society’s superficial values.



Source: <http://www.ohlalomag.com/.a/6a00e54fb7301c88340167630c4b94970b-pi>

Similar to the Maidenform campaign of the 50s, the Calvin Klein campaign took advantage of society's insecurities. The brand Calvin Klein used its' fame as a designer label to reassure buyers that there was a solution to their anxieties: buying designer underwear. The Calvin Klein advertising campaign used society' self-doubt to sell more products, but this was nothing new. Advertisements play upon insecurities. The campaign also drew on the "label conscious" society of the 80s, and was successful in convincing buyers to purchase intimates at a higher price than normal (Mulvey 185). The reason it worked? According to *Forbes'* Jeffrey Trachtenberg, "insecure people feel better wearing designer labels – and there are plenty of insecure people out there" (Reichert 183). The campaign built upon the idea that people strive to be like the beautiful people in the ads that they see, and convinced them to buy products to increase body satisfaction.

The trend that started in the 80s with Calvin Klein continued into the early 90s as the Wonderbra increased in popularity. In the early 90s, "women were ready for figure-flattering curves," instead of Twiggy's extremely slender body type of the 70s, but that was short-lived (Reichert 185). The style dictated by the media for the first few years of the 1990s was a fuller, big-breasted figure with real curves but it didn't last long. Instead, "thin models and anorexia" became extremely prevalent again. Beauty was, yet again, represented through "pencil thin" women beginning "in the mid-90s, and has continued to today (Mulvey 195). Instead of maintaining the voluptuous feminine ideal that reappeared in the 80s and early 90s, the 90s eventually transitioned into a decade of "intense [body] scrutiny" (Mulvey 202). The people of the 90s were "more aware of looks, health and lifestyle," and would do anything to feel perfect (Mulvey 204).

Advertising of this era promoted “an ideal image of a quest for ever improving goals and personal best, in a tough urban jungle” (Mulvey 205).

Today, the majority of women in advertising are rail-thin. But, in reality, these slender bodies in many magazines and advertisements have been airbrushed – with most companies in the industry using “expensive computer technology to correct blemishes and hide figure flaws” (Derenne 258). In today’s society it is far less common to see a woman with curves than a stick skinny woman on a billboard or in a magazine. The thin ideal is now based on “absolute flawlessness” (Kilbourne). The ideal female physique is shrinking at an increasing rate. Unfortunately, a large percentage of the ideals that women are attempting to mimic are, in reality, not even as skinny as they appear in photos. Photo editing software has the ability to completely transform an image. Women “portrayed by the media are rarely real,” yet female audiences still use images in the media to create their own version of the thin ideal (Derenne 258). Not only are women in advertising today appearing smaller, but also, more ads, magazines, and television shows are emphasizing the importance of dieting and fitness in order to achieve the bodies of the idealized models and actresses that we see around us.

Historically, advertising has shaped society’s perceptions of beauty and what people should look like. Today, advertising is everywhere. We see it on billboards, on buses and trains speeding by, on the television, and now even on our personal social networks. Many advertisements intended for audiences of men and women, feature female actresses and models as the focal point. Marketers have perfected the ability to create a sense of desire and aspiration in society, thrusting “a very narrow ideal of female

beauty” upon society because they have learned what type of portrayal attracts customers, and therefore, money (Fowles 153). For instance, “a recent Market Facts survey found that 44% of 18 to 24 year olds said they would be more likely to buy clothing if it was advertised with sexy images,” so obviously advertisers strategically sexualize their ads (Reichert 250).

Through a variety of images of women, advertisers help dictate society’s opinions and aspirations regarding appearance. As the standard for female attractiveness has changed, it is fascinating to see how women today feel about their bodies in the past. For example, there are *Playboy* models from the 80s who, at the time, were gorgeous and envied, with perfect, voluptuous bodies, but today when they look at the same photos, consider themselves “flabby and jiggy” (Shields 73). This demonstrates the dramatic ways in which our society’s perspectives surrounding female figures have changed. As the perfect female body has become smaller and tighter, women who, at a time, considered themselves beautiful according to the beauty ideals of that era, now look back on that same time with different ideals in mind and consider themselves ugly and imperfect. It is “this general exchange-value of the ideal female body [that] reaches far beyond advertising [...] but a cultural way of seeing” (Shields 74). Whether we are aware of it or not, advertisements have set certain standards and social norms for society. The graphics within advertising are typically “idealized human beings” and therefore encourage the rest of society to strive to look the same (Fowles 156). Because the characters in ads are idealized, not realistic, “this physique [...] has been described as physically impossible to attain” (Rumsey 175). These physically unattainable body sizes have changed shape over the past century and therefore, so, too, have the general

expectations of beauty within society changed. The constant presentation of idealized female images only heightens a sense of anxiety among women to look a certain way. And the changing image of the average woman in advertisements demonstrates the evolution of society's perceptions on physical attraction and ideal beauty. Between the early 1900s and today, women have attempted to imitate what they see in the media:

to have no waist but large hips, to be full-figured but thin, to have no breasts but lower body curves, and today, to have sizeable breasts and muscle but no body fat.” (Calogero 8)

It is a physically conflicting body type that, in most cases, cannot be attained without extreme dieting or plastic surgery. Airbrushed images are encouraging girls to strive for an unhealthy and unachievable body type. Therefore, no matter what, women are not satisfied and always feel like they can make themselves look more like what they see on billboards and in magazines. Unfortunately, what a lot of women don't realize is that that body type is nearly impossible to achieve.

In reality, what advertisers do, through the use of nearly perfect models and actors, advertisements is “actively promote a self-improvement motivation for comparison” (Rumsey 229). The images appear frequently and are perpetuated through society, almost normalizing the existence of the female ideal: “slender, full-breasted, and well-toned” (Rumsey 175). The perfect images can blur the line between the achievable and unachievable body types. “Mass communication has made possible a kind of national peer pressure that erodes private and individual values and standards” (Kilbourne 129).

Today, as advertising and socializing have begun to merge, our lives have become photo heavy – basing much of our judgments on what we see on the screen of our

computers or smartphones. The Internet and social media have become more ubiquitous, so the line between the virtual and the real is blurred even more. Now, the perfect female body is not only on the billboard down the street or in the commercial on TV, but is strategically, yet seamlessly placed in our social networks. The slender, yet big breasted and flawless figure is intertwined with photos of our peers on Facebook and Instagram. In fact, the body type is even replicated amongst ordinary people, not only models and actresses. This unachievable ideal is deceptively normalized through social media, but is still misleadingly achievable. Comparisons have only become stronger and more powerful, and as a result, more and more drastic measures have been taken to reach a certain ideal. There are now thousands of young girls who post “selfies” on their social networks – “selfies” that are not airbrushed. Girls are attempting to achieve unhealthy body weights that they see in digitally edited photos in advertisements and replicating them on their own social media profiles.

Although the ultimate goal of advertisements is to sell a product, and social networks are, as stated in their title, “social,” both technologies communicate ideals: “what we want to be like, whom we want to be with, and what we want to have” (Reichert 71). So, then, it is not that surprising that as the woman in advertising has decreased in size, so has the real woman tried even harder to reach that size. Are people unknowingly succumbing to the same dangers and corruptions that are raised by advertising through their peers on Instagram and Facebook?

After establishing the critical role that advertising plays in the lives of women, I think it is logical to assume that female body image will be similarly affected by other

types of media. As the thin ideal portrayed in the media has quickly decreased in size, often due to photo editing software, more women have participated in extreme dieting habits. I fear that social media will exacerbate this problem. If we spend the majority of our time on photo-heavy social networking sites looking through pictures of our friends and our friends' friends, will that play the same role as advertising and remind us of everything we are not? On social media, photographs are no longer ephemeral, and reserved for friends and family, but permanent and available for the world to see. What happens when women use the timeline feature on Facebook to look through pictures of themselves and others, tracing weight loss and/or weight gain? I argue that photos on social media have similar, but more pronounced adverse consequences as advertising.

CHAPTER 3

The Era of Social Media

“I’m on Instagram now...Because apparently real life, email, text, FB, and Snapchat aren’t enough.”

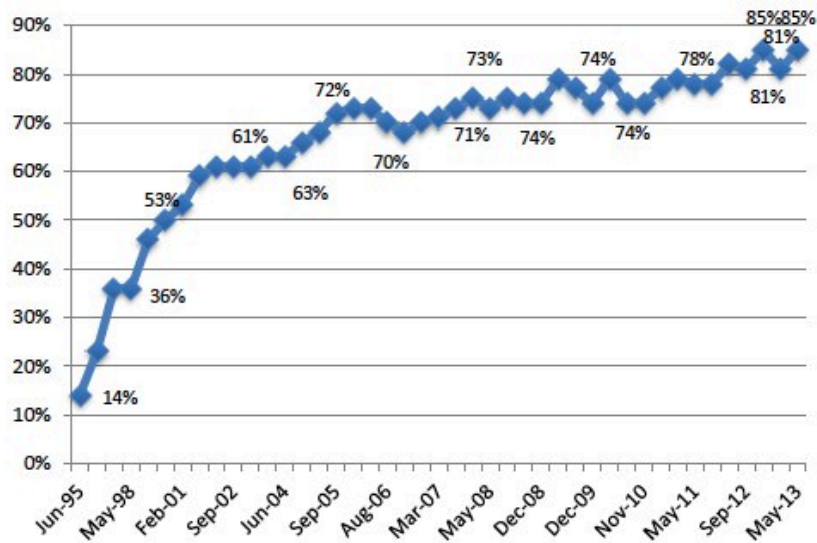
A few days ago, I logged into my Facebook account to find the above quote at the top of my news feed. When Facebook asked my friend Matt “what was on his mind,” as it does each time a user opens his or her account, his answer completely captured his generation’s heavy reliance on technology and social networking. Young adults, like Matt, are growing up in a world where in addition to constantly being bombarded with advertisements, it is normal to share, immediately and constantly, interpersonal thoughts, pictures, and their locations with an online audience. Having just joined Instagram in 2013, Matt is a fairly late adopter. Y-generation young adults are accustomed to a lifestyle in which nearly everyone around them has something in common – social networking and the Internet.

In today’s technologically driven and information heavy world, everyone has a variety of digital resources at their fingertips. Informational needs of all types can be answered on the computer and on smartphones – literally, at their fingertips. More important, the Internet and social media are changing the way in which people interact, spend their time, and understand themselves and the world around them. Since 1995, the percentage of adults who use the Internet has increased from 14% to 85% according to one Pew Research Survey (Pew Internet and American Life Project Surveys). The Internet’s universal nature is one critical reason why it has the ability to change society and life for good. Figure one shows the dramatic increase of Internet use and

demonstrates its near ubiquity among Americans. With relatively low barriers to entry, people of all demographics can, in one way or another, involve themselves online.

Internet adoption, 1995–2013

% of American adults who use the internet, over time



Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Surveys, March 2000–May 2013. All surveys prior to March 2000 were conducted by the Pew Research Center for People & the Press.

(Figure 1)

Figure one demonstrates both the increased use and the increased accessibility of the Internet since June of 1995. It suggests that we have become a networked and plugged in society. We are society of online consumption. Everything is commercialized – everyone, not just companies, seem to be building their online “brands.” Many pundits and social critics have wondered whether the impact of this universal Internet and social media presence is positive or negative – for example, whether or not it discourages face-to-face communication, whether it improves the worldly knowledge of its users, or whether it is merely a mindless distraction. The media-saturated environment in which

we live fosters a certain way of life dependent on instant gratification and virtual communication.

Walk through any college campus and you will find young adults splitting their time between using their laptops, smartphones, and tablets. The role of media today is increasingly critical, as it can now interfere in everyday life through several platforms and devices. And although they are college students, just because they are using the Internet at extremely high rates, that does not mean they are using it for schoolwork or productivity. It is common to find college students multitasking – balancing homework with the constant updating and checking of their various social networking profiles. Extremely prevalent in the everyday life of college students like me and my friend Matt, social media has the potential to heavily impact the way in which we live our lives. Too little research has been performed on this constantly evolving and omnipresent topic, perhaps because it is so new. It is important to understand the role that social media plays in the lives of college students as well as grasp the unbelievably high consumption rates at which social media is used, before reviewing its' potentially negative consequences.

A social networking site is defined as:

“Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site.” (Boyd 211).

Most SNS start with a Profile, “a form of individual home page, which offers a description of each member [...and] comments from other members” in which people can create online identities (Boyd 6). Social media allows those online identities to be in

constant contact with their family and friends, as well as celebrities and brands. It no longer matters if a friend attends a university half way around the globe, with the Internet, everyone has the ability to maintain or at least try to maintain long distance friendships both in text and in pictures. In fact, one Pew Internet and American Life Project report titled “Why Americans Use Social Media,” found that the upkeep of friendships, “both new and old,” are a main reason taken into consideration when choosing whether or not to join an online social network (Smith). Dan Lyons, a writer for *Newsweek*, put it perfectly, “one reason people like social media so much better than TV is that [...] with social media, you can be part of the show” (Lyons). People tend to sign up for SNS with the hopes of interacting with others – as a way to stay in touch with friends and family.

One study performed by the International Data Corporation (IDC) in conjunction with Facebook also found that the most important feeling evoked when using a smartphones is connectedness through the use of social applications (“Always Connected” 4). What is interesting, though, is that the “use of social applications is higher during events when we are out socially” in real life (“Always Connected” 11). People are so invested in their social media profiles that they cannot stop using them, even when involved in physical social interactions. Social media users seem to profit greatly when they use these sites- they can maintain long distance relationships, look at photos of relatives whom they would otherwise not see, and stay up to date on the social activities with which they are involved. It is important to note, however, that the positive benefits from the social interaction function on SNS can overshadow their often overlooked negative consequences, similar to those of advertising.

SNS are still a relatively new concept, with most being introduced within the last fifteen years – most notably the start of Facebook in 2004 (Boyd 212). Social networking sites have gained extreme popularity and have extremely high user rates. Everything is moving at record speed. The number of users on social network sites has increased dramatically in the past few years according to one Nielsen study (Nielsen 7). Figure two (below) shows that the increase in the total number of users for some SNS has increased well over 100% (Nielsen 8). In fact, the amount of time spent on social media increased by over 24% from 2011 to 2012, “suggesting that users are more deeply engaged” (Nielsen 5). In 2012, Internet users spent more time on social media websites than any other sites on the Internet (Figure 3- Nielsen 8). Men spent six hours and thirteen minutes using social media on their computers, and six hours and forty-four minutes using social media on their smart phones (Nielsen 6). In the same year, women spent eight hours and thirty-seven minutes using social media from a computer, and nine hours and forty-three minutes accessing social media sites through their smartphones (Nielsen 6).

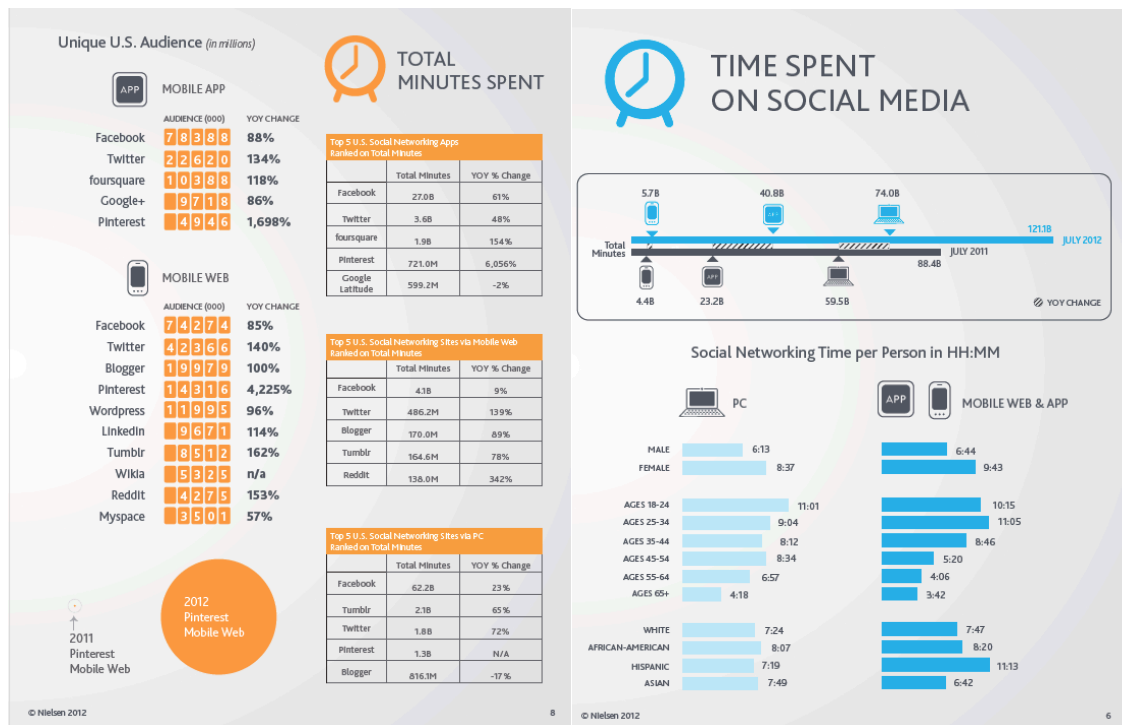
The use of these SNS has become so omnipresent that most users have “integrated these sites into their daily practices” (Boyd 210). Mobile technology has allowed users access to their favorite social media sites wherever they are, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. With more access to our social networks via various mediums, people have more freedom and more opportunity to use social media at any hour of the day, whenever they feel it is necessary, and research shows that people are definitely taking advantage of this – spending nearly half a day on social media. The same study quoted above, performed by the IDC and Facebook, found that one-half of the US population connects on

smartphones “from the moment we wake up until the end of our day” (“Always Connected” 3). In fact, IDC found that:

“within the first 15 minutes of waking up, 4 out of 5 smartphone owners [between 18 and 44] are checking their phones and among these people, nearly 80% reach for their phone before doing anything else. These statistics alone drive home the utility of and reliance on smartphones.” (“Always Connected” 8).

In looking only at 18 to 24 year olds, the same report found that 90% instead of 80% check their phones within the first 15 minutes of waking up (“Always Connected 8).

The results of this study demonstrate the pervasiveness of social media, as well as the frightening direction in which our addictions may lead.



Source: Nielsen (Figure 2)

Source: Nielsen (Figure 3)

These overwhelmingly high percentages and long hours demonstrate the relentless dependence this demographic has on social media and connectedness. Social media is

becoming one of the most critical parts of our social relationships, which in turn, shape our identities.

Although they are becoming increasingly popular among all ages, the pervasiveness is particularly present on college campuses. Eighty three percent of people between the ages of 18 and 29 use SNS compared to the 52% of people aged 50 to 64 who log on (Duggan, “The Demographics,” 2). As demonstrated in figure three, last year, for users between the ages of 18 and 24, 11 hours and 1 minute were spent accessing social media from a computer, and 10 hours and 15 minutes checking social media from a mobile device (Nielsen 6). And around “75% of teens and young adults are members of at least one social networking site” (Thompson 88). Within this college- aged demographic, the most active social networkers are female, and within female users, photo-heavy SNS are the most popular (Nielsen, Enright). At the same time, females at this age are more inclined to suffer from self-consciousness than males of the same age, so it is of interest to study social media’s impact on their body image (Enright).

The main SNS used among college females today are Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, Pinterest, and Tumblr, according to various sources (Boyd, Duggan, Nielsen). These sites allow college women the opportunity to both create their own textual and graphic content as well as look at and critique the content created by peers and celebrities whom they admire. With 74% of all women using SNS, there must be certain lifestyle and behavioral consequences that stem from the constant ability to monitor one’s online profile (Smith). Once we understand the extreme prevalence that SNS, specifically photo-heavy social networking, plays in the lives of college females, it

will be easier to assess its potential impact on social comparisons and body image. In observing the relationship between young female body image with their use of social network sites (SNS), it is important to understand the purpose they serve, how pervasive they are, and what ideals they reinforce. As social media blurs the line between the physical and the virtual, the question is whether social media intensifies the impact of peer group pressures that have always existed in physical peer pressure or if it introduces an entirely new problem.

Facebook, whose mission “is to give people power to share and make the world more open and connected,” has over 1 billion active monthly users and 699 million daily users (Facebook Fact Sheet). Since it started in 2004, Facebook’s user growth has been remarkable and demonstrates the pervasiveness of social media as a whole. In December 2004, Facebook had 1 million users and one year later, in December 2005, it reached 6 million (Facebook Fact Sheet). One year after that, in December 2006, that number had doubled to 12 million users (Facebook Fact Sheet). Even more astonishing, in December 2007, those 12 million users has nearly tripled – 58 million users (Facebook Fact Sheet). As of September 30, 2013, Facebook reached 874 million active users on mobile products, and 727 million average daily active users (Facebook Fact Sheet). Today, in the United States, in 2012, over 152 million unique users logged onto Facebook from a computer (Nielsen 7). Whether from an application, a mobile web site, or from an actual PC, Facebook has been ranked the highest based on total number of minutes spent on the site (Nielsen 8). In fact, the time spent on Facebook increased by “a massive 566% - from 3.1 billion minutes to 20.5 billion” from 2011 to 2012 (Nielsen “Global Faces and Networked Places” 3). Facebook makes up one out of every four minutes of the total

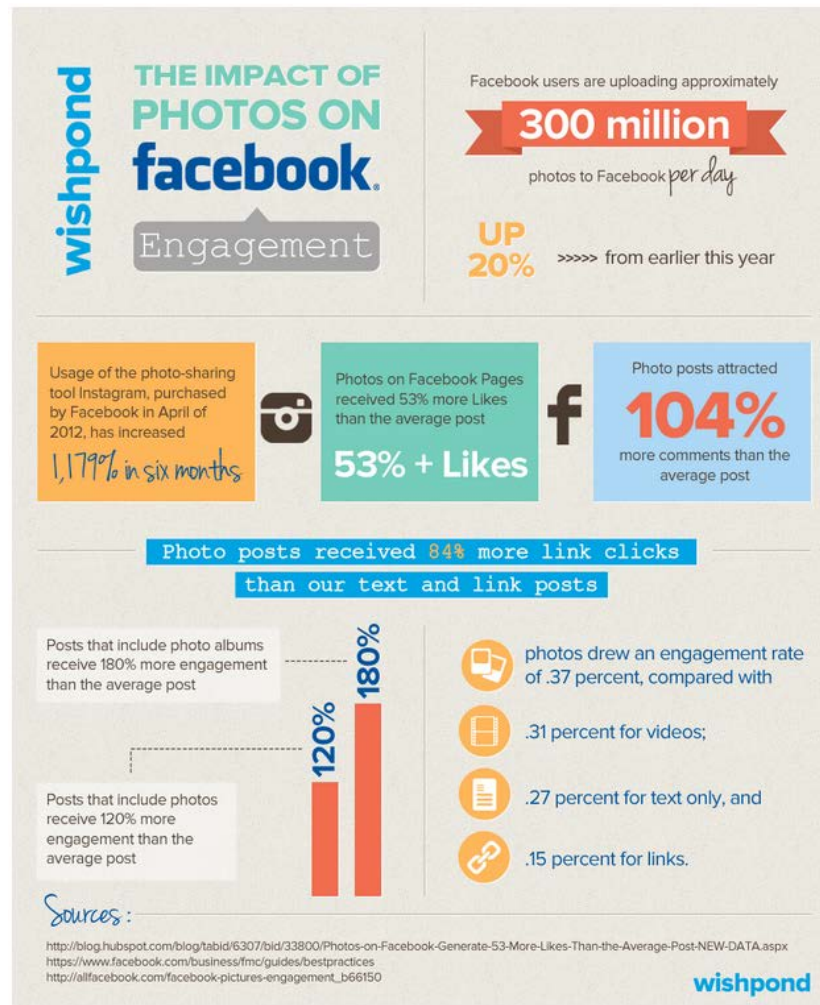
time spent on a smartphone (“Always Connected” 12). Facebook has become essentially normalized into everyday life, with 23% of users admitting to checking their news feeds at least five times a day (Pick). It is clearly the most popular website in the United States (Nielsen 4). The power within SNS like Facebook is viral and dominant. Like on other SNS, among Facebook users, females have been found to be more active users than men, posting an average of twenty one posts a month, while men average six (Hampton 4). Young women are spending the majority of their time engaging with and following people on social networking sites – devoting an extreme amount of attention to connecting online. But is a virtual connection all that happens?

Facebook’s mission also says that “people use Facebook to stay connected with friends and family, to discover what’s going on in the world, and to share and express what matters to them” (Facebook Fact Sheet). But is that all that it does? The way in which Facebook is constructed – with each user creating a profile that includes written information as well as hundreds of photos – provides users with a platform to create an online persona. Each user has certain customization options within his or her profile, including a profile user picture as well as a “cover photo” which is a banner that lines the top of the profile. Photos on Facebook can be uploaded by an individual user, but users can also be “tagged” in photos that are uploaded by their friends. Facebook also encourages users to reveal information regarding family, work, and school on their profiles. On Facebook, users can communicate via direct personal messages, public comments, or they can simply click “like” on a post or photo that they like. The use of that button is “among the most popular activities on Facebook,” according to Pew Research Center (Hampton 13). On the Facebook profile, there is a timeline feature that

allows other users to look through their friends' profiles – comments, statuses, and photos, included – in chronological order. In the context of this research, the chronological feature of the timeline raises a critical point – it provides users a way to trace back in time through a sort of photo diary of their evolving clothing styles, haircuts, friend groups, and body types. It essentially functions as a time capsule in which people can compare and contrast photos through history, just as I did in the previous chapter with advertising images.

Photo sharing has become a critical medium of communication, which gives users an opportunity to constantly scrutinize themselves and others. In fact, as more photo-based SNS, like Instagram, gain popularity, so, it is becoming quite normal for young adults to share personal photos with the online world. This year, 54% of Internet users above the age of 18 claim to “post original photos online,” compared to 46% in 2012 (Duggan). The figure below (Figure 4), created by social marketing firm called Wishpond, demonstrates the high frequency of photos on Facebook, further supporting the idea that as society becomes more reliant on social media, individuals become more focused on physical appearance and superficiality. For instance, there are almost 300 million photos posted to Facebook per day, which attract 104% more interaction than the average comment post (Wishpond). Facebook users are more likely to engage with a photo than text, as photos are more frequently clicked on and engaged with. We no longer rely on face-to-face communication or even text to socially interact with peers. Instead, we scroll or click through several different photo albums in an attempt to understand the lives and expressions of our peers. Just as advertising is meant to portray a certain ideal or sell a certain product, each user's Facebook profile is meant to display

some sort of image, as chosen by that particular user. Our obsession with posting and engaging with Facebook photos is an extension of previously established phenomena in advertising and mass media – only in this case, we are the models, instead of the professionals.

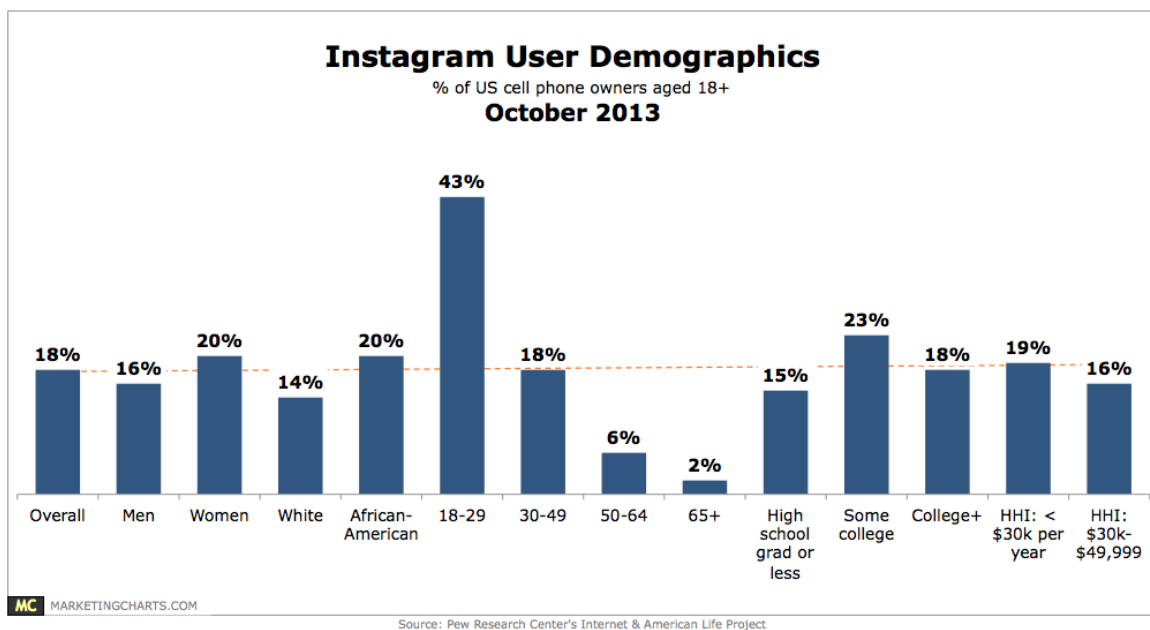


Wishpond Infographic: The impact of Photos on Facebook Engagement

Source: Wishpond (Figure 4)

Recently, as social media has become more photo heavy, Instagram, a SNS rooted solely in photo sharing, has increased in popularity. In fact, Instagram is now considered the “second-most important social network” for young Internet users (“The

Demographics”). It is accessible by computer, but began as a smartphone application, and is most often accessed as such. In October of 2010, Instagram started independently from Facebook and, since then, “its 15 million users have already taken more than 400 million pictures from all over the globe (Hochman 6). Recently, however, Facebook acquired Instagram for \$1 billion, which indicates the value, both figuratively and literally, our society places on social media and its potential growth (Albanesius). After acquiring Instagram, Facebook photo uploads increased 1,179% in six months, further emphasizing the increasing growth and pervasiveness of photo based social media (Wishpond). Forty three percent of Instagram users are US cell phone owners between the ages 18 and 29, according to the Pew Research Center’s Internet and American Life Project (Duggan 13).



(Figure 5)

Among those users, 24% claim to use the application several times a day, while 12% claim to use it about once a day (Duggan 14). It is important to note that, like other photo

SNS, women (20%) are more likely to use Instagram than men (16%)” (Duggan 4). The statistics further indicate the 24/7 connectedness that is so prevalent among college women, giving them no escape from their social media sites. Instead of a leisure activity, it acts more as an extension of real life.

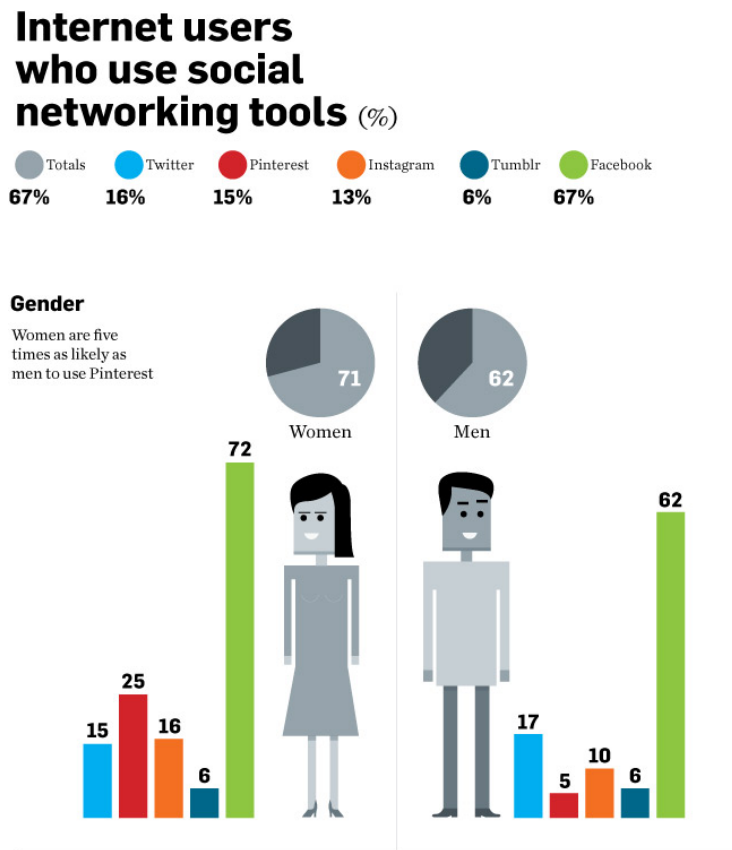
Instagram provides “a way to snap photos, tweak their appearance, and share them on various social networks with friends family and complete strangers” (Hochman 6). The Instagram newsfeed is a collection of photos that have been posted by other users, which can be both friends and celebrities. With almost no text involved, Instagram, like various other SNS, is just another way for friends to stay connected. Although there is a comment option on all of the pictures, most users click the small heart below the photo if they like what they see. Every second, Instagram users write 81 comments; a statistic dramatically lower than the amount of “likes” – an almost unfathomable 575 clicks per second (Wishpond). Overall, in the year 2012, 78 million photos were “liked” (Wishpond). In the same year, there were 7.3 million daily active users (Wishpond). The statistics are astounding. Instagram, like Facebook, has become an everyday, nearly every second, habit. Like Facebook, Instagram creates a photo story of each user, and can therefore, complicate the ways in which we see ourselves and others. The “like” feature on both Instagram and Facebook poses another problem – users can now place a numerical value on their reputation, attractiveness, and popularity. Although there is no dislike button, users can assume that if their photo has not been virtually “liked,” it means that their post or photo is not physically liked or approved by their peers. In looking at and analyzing the photos of their peers, “teens get a sense of what types of presentations are socially appropriate,” and then construct their own profiles in lieu of that (Boyd 10).

The danger comes when they translate this self-constructed socially appropriate profile to their physical life and qualities – shaping their true identities and self-esteem from what they learn on their social media sites.

Pinterest is another photo-based social networking site in which users have the opportunity to both upload their own content as well as share the content of others. The site, itself, claims that it is “a tool for collecting and organizing the things you love,” like a virtual “bulletin board” (Pinterest). Pinterest encourages each user to create “boards” dedicated to categories of their choice. Users then have the opportunity to explore the bulletin boards of their followers, and vice versa. The content on the boards can include photos of animals, food, tattoos, and fashion – basically anything. On Pinterest, each user has the opportunity to follow both friends and strangers, just like on Instagram and most other SNS.

The interest in Pinterest escalated quickly, similar to most social networking sites. Obama even has an account. For example, during a four week period in 2012, “traffic to Pinterest increased nearly 50% from January to February” (Moscaritolo). Pinterest has risen to be “the third most popular social network in the U.S.,” According to PC Magazine, (Moscaritolo). As depicted in Figure 2 (above), 721.1 million minutes were spent on the Pinterest mobile application in 2012, while 1.3 billion minutes were spent on the site from a computer (Nielsen 8). Like other SNS, Pinterest attracts much more female users than male users (See figure 6). It is essentially a “digital version of scrapbooking,” and just like physical scrapbooking, it is “all the rage with women” (Lyons). Among Pinterest users, 19% are between the ages of 18 and 29 (Duggan). More

important, though, is the fact that women make up more than 90% of all Pinterest users (Lyons).



Source: *The Demographics of Users of Social Media Users - 2012.* Pew Research Center. (Figure 6)

Females on SNS are five times more likely to use Pinterest than males, “the largest difference in gender of any site featured” in the Pew Research Center Report (Duggan, “The Demographics” 5). Clearly, Pinterest is another social media site that has grabbed society’s interest and is consuming the lives of many college-aged females. As the top three networking sites for college aged females, Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest place a lot of emphasis on photos and, like advertising, cultivate a mentality based on

superficiality, comparisons, and competition – all potentially causes to a sense of discontent with one's body and physical appearance.

Another popular, and very new, photo sharing application SNS is called Snapchat. Snapchat, a SNS strictly available on smartphones is a completely new way of traditional text messaging. The user has the option to send a photo directly to a specific contact's phone, with the authority to decide how long the other person is allowed to see the photo. After the time limit passes, usually less than ten seconds, the recipient can no longer access the photo. Although there are no profiles involved, Snapchat, similar to the previously mentioned SNS, relies on photos as a means of communication. Four hundred million photos are being exchanged on Snapchat every day (MacMillan). Snapchat is particularly popular among smartphone owners between the ages of 18 and 29, "26% of whom use the app" (Dugan 11). Seventy percent of Snapchat users are female according to CEO Evan Spiegel, yet another indicator of the strong presence of women on photo-based social media (MacMillan). Although still a relatively new social application, I have chosen to include Snapchat in my research because it, like Pinterest, demonstrates the ongoing exponential growth of mobile SNS. It also reinforces the idea that women are still more likely to use social media than men. Facebook recently offered to buy Snapchat for \$3 billion dollars, but Spiegel denied, even though the company does not currently make a profit, nor does it have a definite revenue model (Guynn). Facebook values Spiegel's app at a value three times the amount of Instagram, further indicating society's involvement with and dedication to these seemingly pointless social media applications.

All of the SNS that I have discussed (i.e. Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest, Snapchat) have become normalized and pervasive in our society, especially among young women above the age of 18. These sites provide a platform for women to maintain friendships, but more important, a place to express themselves in both textual and graphical form. Their omnipotent and constant presence create “a powerful multiplier effect” that can be both positive and negative (Webster 53). Social media sites reap positive benefits: they harness the building of communities, the gathering of information, as well as the interaction between peers. Unfortunately, however, they also provide an interactive platform rooted in competition and surface-level comparisons, as well as a place where sub-cultures of like-minded individuals can form. Now, in addition to traditional media and advertising, these SNS contribute significantly to the cultivation of societal perceptions and norms. SNS offer places where women can seek out the thin-ideal images that were typically only available via traditional advertising. In fact, research has shown that “women who are particularly unhappy with their bodies may intentionally pursue thin-ideal images” especially on the Internet, “as it is medium viewers are able to fully control” (Carrie). The Internet and the advent of blogs have made it easier for women to collaborate with other women who have similar negative body image concerns.

Thinspiration images are one example of an adverse consequence of SNS with a “high potential of negative implications” (Webster 47). This refers to the recent extreme obsession with thinspiration in the form of pro-anorexia communities. Although prevalent on various social media sites as supposed forms of encouragement and motivation, thinspiration has recently assumed an even more socially unacceptable

reputation, circulating in a dangerous realm. Pro-anorexia communities have taken the inspiration aspect out of thinspiration. Short for pro-anorexia, the pro-ana movement is a recent popular trend meant for an audience of those who already suffer from an eating disorder. They are websites on which girls who suffer from the deadly diseases can resist recovery and exchange advice on how to maintain their deadly habits. Truly emotional and difficult communities to observe from the outside, the majority of them deny the medical or even societal diagnosis of anorexia and other sub-clinical disorders, and instead, encourage the sufferers to accept it as a “lifestyle choice” (Day 243). In general, the websites, such as “Tiny and Gorgeous,” and “Ana Boot Camp,” feature photos of emaciated girls, along with a place to swap dieting tips and exercise regimes. Pro-ana websites demonstrate the internalization of the extreme pressures some women feel from what they see in social media and advertising. Pro-ana supports take the image of the thin-ideal, that was already shrinking in the first place, and make her even thinner. The sites glamorize the idea of being incredibly, and actually dangerously thin and encourage the shaming of the obese. For a full discussion and analysis of this phenomena, see *Appendix A: A Critical Analysis of the Pro-anorexia Movement*.

Although particularly rampant on pro-ana websites, extreme images of thinspiration appear throughout many SNS, namely Instagram and Pinterest. Pro-ana websites are just an extreme example of the consequences that stem from the combination of social media and negative body image. They reveal the problem that I fear will only continue to rise – the increase in female body dissatisfaction in *real life* as a result of an obsession with the idealized *virtual* female image in mass media as well as on our personal SNS.

CHAPTER 4

Psychology Plays a Role

Now that we have established that photo and text based social media has increased drastically – becoming the dominant pastime activity of college students – we need to consider and better understand the psychological effects already existent in real life that SNS exacerbates. Do women today experience the same body dissatisfaction and negative body image as women fifty years ago? Or does the fact that they can now see themselves from a third person perspective as they scroll through their own social media sites, just as they used to see women in advertisements, change their self-image and self-treatment for the worst? There are various theories of social psychology that can help explain why young women today develop disordered eating habits and low self-esteem. They each lend credence to the conclusion that social media can seriously exacerbate these psychological problems.

As detailed in the first chapter, eating disorders are becoming rampant, and even more upsetting, disordered eating behaviors are considered normative in college females. Since these behaviors are becoming less diagnostic and more normal, social psychology is extremely relevant to their development. Whereas anorexia is a disease to which certain people may be predisposed, disordered eating is not necessarily specific only to a group of people with certain psychological predispositions and, therefore, can affect a larger audience. Disturbingly, “disordered eating and obsession with food is a widely accepted way to deal with weight and body image issues [...] and remains largely [...] ignored by a clinical perspective,” and instead is understood as a “normative” behavior pattern influenced by cultural factors (Hesse-Biber, “The Mass Marketing 211). In fact,

recent studies have reported that eating disorders and disordered eating “diffuse through social ties and may be ‘socially contagious’” (Fletcher 548).

So instead of using clinical psychology as a way to diagnose and define extreme body dissatisfaction, I will use social psychology theories to help us understand how negative, body shaming thoughts are formed in women who are not suffering from deeper psychological disorders. The two main theories that support the cultural origins for disordered eating and eating disorders being intensified by social media are Leon Festinger’s Social Comparison Theory and social physique anxiety as discussed by Ellen Fitzsimmons, Megan B. Harney, Lisa M. Brownstone, M.K. Higgins, and Anna M. Bardone-Cone in their article “Examining social physique anxiety and disordered eating in college women” (Fitzsimmons 796).

Leon Festinger’s Social Comparison theory says that: “People evaluate their opinions and abilities by comparison respectively with the opinions and abilities of others” (Festinger 119). It posits that one’s feeling of self-worth and self-confidence is based largely on social comparisons. In other words, people judge a lot of what they do or how they feel about themselves on what they see happening around them, whether online or in real life. It is important to note that many of the comparisons that people make are with people whom they think embody some sort of perfection. In fact, more than “80% of comparisons made by women” including both peers and models, “are in the upward direction” and usually “result in negative outcomes, such as body dissatisfaction” (Fitzsimmons 797). It is those upward comparisons that tend to be the cause of a more negative sense of self-esteem and body image because the people with whom we

compare ourselves are usually representative of an ideal. Social comparison theory recognizes that women who are already dissatisfied with their appearances are more likely to make upward comparisons and participate in more detrimental activities to eventually reach an “ideal” appearance.

Social media makes social comparisons even more competitive. People now have tangible, qualitative figures to fall back on when judging their self-worth. The SNS like Facebook or Instagram that encourage “clicking like” on photos or comments means that each photo has a permanent number associated with how well-liked it is. For some, that number represents their reality – their popularity, their acceptance, their attractiveness – and if lower than those of others, can be detrimental to their self-esteem. Now, people are not only comparing themselves to the photos that they see, but also weighing that with what others comment on those photos. In other words, people can now compare themselves to others, as well as base their own comparisons on comments that have already been made by a third party. Put simply, “perceptions are shaped not exclusively by what profile users disclose about themselves [but also...] based on others’ comments on Facebook” (Hong 340). This is referred to as the “warranting principle,” which says that “judgment from other-generated information is more influential than judgment from self-generated information” (Hong 340).

Social physique anxiety, a concept commonly associated with disordered eating, is defined as the negative feelings associated with the possibility of others looking at and judging one’s body (Fitzsimmons 796). Social physique anxiety relies heavily on the notions of social comparison, and is exacerbated in instances that can result in negative

judgments, like wearing a bathing suit (Fitzsimmons 796). Therefore, the authors conclude that it “may be a particularly relevant construct for college women given that both social interactions and weight and shape become increasingly important and salient in the college setting” (Fitzsimmons 796). While living in such close proximity to so many people of the same age, it is easy for college-aged women to spend a lot of time focusing on what they look like in comparison to their peers.

I think it is important to look at the psychology behind social physique anxiety and social comparison theory to reveal the processes through which females who suffer from low self-esteem, negative, body image, and disordered eating, come to understand themselves in relation to their peers. There are three related schemas that further serve as building blocks to the overall application and implications of social comparison theory and social physique anxiety. They are: objectification theory, uses and gratification theory, and cultivation theory. Together, these theories help us to understand the relationships between female social media use and body dissatisfaction, and ultimately negative body image and a resulting obsession with the striving for the perfect body. The theories below help explain how negative body self-image and resulting extreme weight loss behaviors can be the outcome of social pressures and external comparisons, rather than, simply, the result of a psychological disorder. Taken together, these theories suggest that a person, especially one with low self-esteem, will base his or her body image heavily on social comparisons.

I will start with objectification theory because it helps explain the root of the problem in social comparisons. It hypothesizes that women are deeply affected by how

they see women portrayed in the media. The theory explains that women in media are often depicted as objects to be looked at, and discusses the implications that that objectification has on average women society. It suggests that society has conditioned young women to look at other women in a certain way. Objectification theory refers mostly to what women see in the media, with less focus on peers, yet is a solid base on which to observe that how college-aged women have grown accustomed to be overly critical about their bodies and the bodies of their peers.

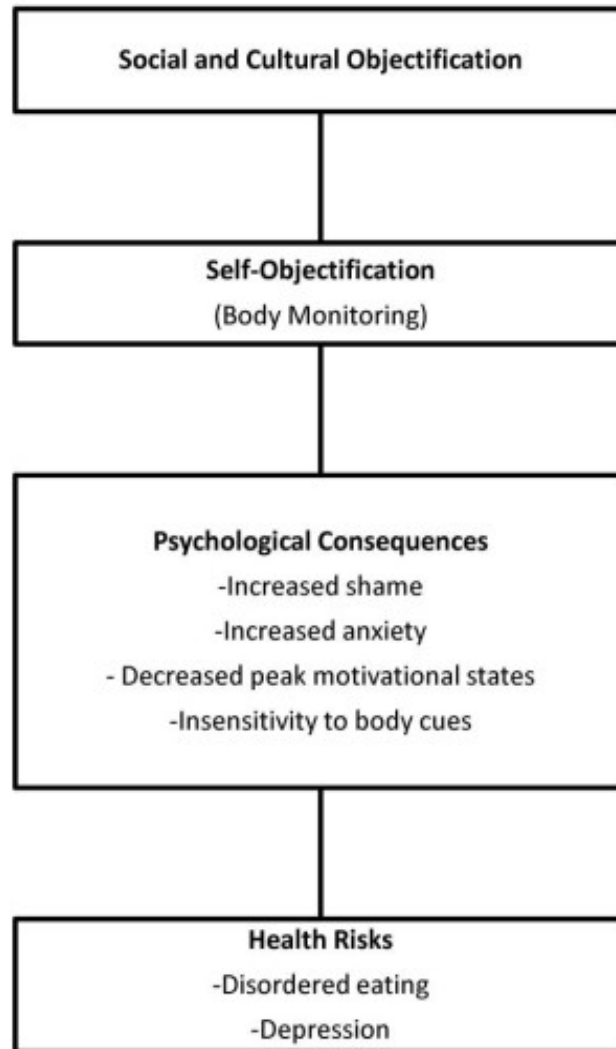
Developed by Barbara L. Frederickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts in 1997, objectification theory also attempts to understand women's decisions and their relation to potential threats to their mental health, such as disordered eating and eating disorders (Frederickson 173). Specifically, objectification theory states that:

“Objectification functions to socialize girls and women to treat themselves as objects to be evaluated based on appearance. Girls learn, both indirectly and vicariously that other people's evaluations of their physical appearance can determine how they are treated and, ultimately, affect their social and economic life outcomes.” (Roberts & Gettman 17-18).

Objectification of women in mass media has a substantial impact on women that forces their subconscious mind to evaluate women in ways that they otherwise would not.

Beginning at a young age, women are taught that by society their bodies are the most important part of their identity – that they are judged based solely on what they look like or the clothes that they wear.

The general process of objectification theory is visually depicted on the following page:



(Frederickson 1997).

It begins with the objectification of women in mass media, which then encourages the development of “habitual body monitoring” in its’ female audience (Frederickson 186). Self-monitoring and self-surveillance can include obsessive behaviors such as, starvation, extreme exercise, and the use of laxatives – which are characteristics of both eating disorders and disordered eating – all in the hopes of aligning more closely with the unattainable thin ideal that is portrayed in the mass media. This is the part of

objectification theory that introduces a danger related to eating disorders and disordered eating: the point at which women begin to objectify themselves. When body monitoring involves viewing oneself from a third-person perspective and constantly criticizing certain body parts, it is considered to be “self-objectif[ication]” (Rumsey 100). Self-objectification occurs when women internalize the “objectifying gaze” ” (Frederickson 176). Frederickson and Roberts assert that this external gaze occurs in three different ways:

1. social interactions,
2. within media that *recreate* social interactions,
3. and most prevalent, within mass media that literally objectify certain parts of the female body, as in advertising (Frederickson 176).

In all three circumstances, the gaze is understood to be that of a man (Frederickson 176). This is important because it suggests that women are taught to base their self-esteem upon what they think men consider attractive. Body weight is an important factor in this “perceived attractiveness” (Hesse-Biber, “The Mass Marketing” 210). Therefore, young women tend to strive for perfection in all aspects of their physical size and appearance in order to gain attention from those around them and *earn* a certain type of treatment.

The “internalize[d] third-person perspective of themselves” creates a feeling of discontent with their bodies and decreased self-esteem because “appearance becomes of central important to self-concept” (Choma 700, Rumsey 100). This leads to a constant self-monitoring, or self-objectification, which can then lead to negative psychological thoughts such as a feeling of worthlessness and anxiety about one’s outward appearance. In fact, the theory states that “disordered eating can be understood as originating, in part, from constant self-objectification” (Choma 700).

As explained in chapter two, women have long been objectified in advertising, their body parts fragmented into fetishized commodities in mass media. They are often “dismembered, packaged, and used to sell everything” (Kilbourne 27). Objectification theory helps explain how media influence women to think that they are only bodies to be looked at and critiqued – that the shape and size of their body will never be good enough. They begin to understand themselves and their female peers as sexualized objects whose bodies are more valued than their minds. As young females become more consistently and constantly exposed to this objectification of women through social media (including both advertising and peer interaction), I fear the process of objectification will be even more profound and more often lead to self-objectification. Photo based social media gives women an outlet on which to self-objectify – a place for them to post photos of themselves that mimic what they see in advertising. And as the amount of time spent on SNS increases, I fear that more women will be left with “surpluses of shame and anxiety,” which is positively correlated with the development of low self-esteem and pathological and disordered thoughts (Frederickson 186).

The theory of uses and gratifications helps explain the reason why certain women’s body image concerns are more affected than others by what they see in the media. Although the thin ideal as portrayed through the media is shrinking, and social media introduces a new platform on which to self-objectify, it cannot be assumed that all women will be equally affected. The way in which each woman is affected by what she sees in her surroundings is different. Different, too, are the lengths to which all women go to self-monitor and self-objectify. Although mass media attempts to dictate a sort of understanding that women are required to be physically attractive, not all women are

affected. Some women are more troubled by the perfect models that they see online and on TV, while others barely notice. Although, “just about everyone in America still feels personally exempt from advertising’s influence,” the uses and gratifications theory helps distinguish for which type of person that is actually true (Kilbourne 27). The theory addresses this problem and specifies those who, in reality, are deeply affected by what they see in the media.

Instead of blaming all media, in general, for manipulating women’s thoughts, the uses and gratifications theory “is concerned with how individuals use the media, and therefore it emphasizes the importance of the individual” (Raacke 170). The theory looks at the type of woman who consumes certain mediums and asks whether or not the content will be an influencing factor in her self-worth, dependent upon her, rather than the content of the medium. It asks what type of person is most likely to choose to use media as a means of gratification and if that person will also be influenced by what he or she sees and hears (Hesse-Biber, “The Mass Marketing” 216). The uses and gratifications theory allows room for certain audiences who are not, in fact, negatively affected by what they see. Specifically, it looks at how individuals “choose to expose themselves to the messages being conveyed through the media and how they act upon their chosen interpretations (Hesse-Biber, “The Mass Marketing” 216). The theory does not assume a passive audience, as is somewhat suggested in objectification theory, but it recognizes:

“that while the frequency and content of mass media images does have an influence, it is mediated by women’s sense of their own body image efficacy. If they feel good about their bodies, they may not be impacted as much by the thinness message.” (Hesse-Biber, “The Mass Marketing” 217)

Conversely, though, if a woman is not satisfied with her body, she will typically internalize the thin ideal, compare it to her own body, and then try to change herself as a result of increased negative body image. The latter more closely aligns to what happens in objectification theory and suggests that a woman with already low self-esteem will be more influenced by a higher exposure to objectified images of women in the media. She is also the woman who will seek out a certain type of media as a way to feed her already negative self-concept. She will choose to consume a certain type of media that will reinforce her already negative thoughts. For example, a woman with high body dissatisfaction is likely to consume media with images of thin and perfect models, which will then adversely affect her already negative feelings. Uses and gratifications theory is important because it suggests that the women who already feel dissatisfied with their appearances and bodies are more likely to be negatively impacted by the images on social media, as well as traditional advertisements. This idea is exacerbated by the fact that:

“Young women will tend to surround themselves with like-minded women [...], which mean highly self-objectified women may seek out other highly self-objectified women as their peer group, thereby perpetuating the experience of objectified body consciousness between and within women.” (Calogero 105)

Not only are certain types of women going to choose certain types of media to encourage their disordered thoughts, but also, surround themselves with peers who do the same thing! Therefore, within the realm of social media, women can choose to only follow like-minded, self-objectifying women.

The uses and gratifications theory builds on social comparison because social comparison theory also recognizes the susceptibilities in certain predisposed women. It says that “girls already vulnerable to self-esteem or body image issues are most

negatively impacted by social comparisons” (Hesse-Biber “The Mass Marketing” 217). So, when the two theories are combined, women who are predisposed to low self-esteem and body dissatisfaction are more likely both, choose to engage with a medium that encourages upward social comparison, as well as be negatively affected by those comparisons. They spend more time looking at photos of unattainable bodies and feel the resulting inadequacy more deeply.

The next question I propose, then, is what affect does social media have on that vulnerable woman, as described in uses and gratifications and social comparison theories? Cultivation theory helps explain the dangers women face with a high consumption of social media. The theory says that media exposes people to a “constant repetition of certain forms and themes (values) [...which] powerfully influences and homogenizes viewers conceptions of ‘social reality.’” (Levine 250). This part of social psychology suggests that the more media a woman consumes, the more likely she is to understand those images as her reality – no matter what the medium. The theory explains the fact that a high consumption of media can cause users to confuse media with reality, creating a sort of “social reality” (Levine 250). The more time women spend on the same social media sites, the more standardized and homogenized her understanding of social reality will be (Hesse-Biber, “The Mass Marketing 216). In other words, the more a woman reads *Cosmopolitan* magazine, the more she will believe that the images of the women in the magazine are real and attainable – that she, too, could look like those women. Additionally, the more women that read *Cosmopolitan* magazine, the more homogenized the view of beauty and thinness will be. The theory warns of this type of confusion – the “misperception” that is so often portrayed through professional models

and actresses in traditional media – yet I fear there are similar misconceptions of reality represented on social media sites, as well (Hesse-Biber, “The Mass Marketing 216). I would even argue that because it is not recognized as publicly toxic as advertising, the effects of social media can be even more powerful and detrimental.

As I have already established, there is a high percentage of college-aged women “plugged in” and constantly checking social media via smartphones and computers. Therefore, using cultivation theory, I believe, there will be no distinction between their online and real lives. The theory supports my argument that there are adverse consequences in the constant use of social media among college aged women. Since social networks are our own versions of a virtual life, it certainly must be even easier to consider those online communities our physical realities and to mistakenly believe they are real. Instead of watching the creation of a new reality in the world of television or magazines, we have the opportunity to create our own virtual realities online. Unfortunately, though, since it is a much newer type of media, its negative consequences are more masked than those of advertising. It is easy to forget, however, that the images on social networks, like those in advertising, can be edited and carefully chosen to create a false sense of perfect reality. As I observed in a previous critique of Facebook:

“No one is happy and smiling 24/7. Who is going to post pictures of themselves alone, sulking in their room? Who is going to post pictures of themselves doing homework? Who is going to actually tell Facebook “what’s on their mind?” And who is going to “check-in” and say “curled up in my bed, depressed?” No one.” (Klein).

In fact, on social media, there is an immense “focus on self-presentation: photographs are carefully chosen because users want to present themselves as positively as possible” (Haferkamp 313).

One 2010 study states that “social networking site users are [...] regular visitors, with more than one-third checking their profile daily and almost another 25% visiting [the site] every few days” (Correa 248). Clearly, social media can easily become an obsession. And that obsession, according to cultivation theory, will then lead those people to believe that what they see on their social networks is true to reality. Social media has the potential to subtly encourage the creation of destructive and misleading social realities. Whether realistic or not, the female ideals that they see will have an influence on their thoughts about their own lives and their own bodies, and therefore contribute to the development of their self-image.

Using a combination of cultivation theory and the uses and gratification theory, I believe social media is a perfect example of what can happen when a certain type of woman has a high consumption rate of media. Women with low self-esteem are most vulnerable to choosing what media to which they will expose themselves, and that choice will also contribute to the construction of a possibly distorted understanding of reality. For instance, a woman with high body dissatisfaction will choose to follow other women, whom she thinks embody a certain ideal, on Instagram. In response, she will feed her negative body image and strive to look the same way.

Cultivation, objectification, and the uses and gratification theories all serve as building blocks to emphasize the main points of social comparison theory and social

physique anxiety: that social comparisons play a critical role in the formation of self-worth, body image, and self-esteem. This includes both the comparisons that we make with movie stars and models, as well as the ideals that we see propagated through our peers. People tend to base a lot of their decisions and judgments on what they see in the people who surround them as well as what others have justified as socially acceptable.

In combining all four theories, it can be concluded that many women's feelings toward their own bodies are highly influenced by what occurs around them, whether in the physical or virtual world. Through mass mediated images, women have long been encouraged to adopt and maintain a certain ideal physique and focus on their bodies as the most important aspect of their persona. They have been conditioned to accept the objectification of women in mass media; and therefore, certain women who do not look like, or who do not *think* they look like what they see in the media, tend to suffer from a feeling of discontent. That discontent and dissatisfaction with their body, according to objectification theory, can lead to self-surveillance, self-objectification and anxiety. Then, according to the uses and gratification theory, this anxiety is channeled through their choice of media. It is the women with negative body image who will choose to consume a certain type of medium to participate in upward comparisons and reinforce their negative thoughts. Next, cultivation theory argues that a high consumption of that chosen medium will then cause the woman to create a distorted social reality. Eventually, she will believe that she *must* embody what she sees in that medium. All together, these theories suggest that women with already negative body image tend to be vulnerable to the internalization of the ideal body type that they see in media, therefore causing them to

seek out more thin ideal photos to make upward comparisons, and eventually make diet and exercise decisions to further their progress toward replicating it.

In today's society, social comparisons are more easily made because we have the nearly ubiquitous access to social networks. Although social networks do not feature models nor celebrities, "but rather ordinary people," these networks make it easier to have a continuous ability to post photos, look at photos, and make upward comparisons (Haferkamp 313). It is already been demonstrated through various studies that:

"College campuses provide environments that lend themselves to engaging in social comparisons. That is, women are surrounded by many other women of approximately the same age with whom they interact with both directly and indirectly on a near constant basis." (Fitzsimmons 797)

This supports the conclusion that social media only heightens this phenomenon. Women can now participate in the media, rather than just be spectators – they can mimic what they see in advertising. In the 21st century, with constant access to social media, the environment created on a college campus can easily be recreated on the Internet and smartphones, only heightening the unfavorable consequences of social comparisons and social physique anxiety. Women with already low self-esteem now have a much wider variety of media to choose from. More important, women can now create virtual realities, which, with enough exposure, may eventually transform into their actual understanding of reality. In order to cope with negative comparisons and social physique anxiety, some women utilize "behavioral avoidance," which involves physically removing oneself from a stressor or trigger (Fitzsimmons 796). The ability to avoid social media, however, is becoming more and more difficult. The combination of social physique anxiety, social

comparison theory, and the increased use and prevalence of SNS help reveal the dangers that college women face with regard to body dissatisfaction and social media.

Just as the uses and gratifications theory suggests that there are certain personality types and psychological predispositions in developing low self-esteem and body image, there are also commonalities among Internet and social media users. Recent research shows that certain personality types are more likely to become addicted to or heavily rely on social media and the Internet for fostering relationships. Internet addiction has been found to correlate with “depression, loneliness, low self-esteem, and shyness” (Fioravanti 318). Additionally, “anxious and worrisome” college students tend to use social media more than “emotionally stable” college students (Correa 25). This brings us back to the clinical predispositions of women who are more likely to be influenced by what they see online. The danger, then, comes when those who are predisposed to negative body image overlaps with those who are likely to overuse social media and the Internet.

There is a new reality, full of social comparisons, forming on social media. Even if we are not physically surrounded by anyone, we literally hold our social networks in the palms of our hands (on our smartphones) and can essentially never stop performing upward comparisons. College students spend almost “three hours per day on their own [Facebook] accounts or someone else’s account” (Raacke 173). Keep in mind; this is only referring to one social networking site. It does not account for the combinational use of Facebook with Instagram, Pinterest, etc, which is close to half of a day (Nielsen). For those who choose to tune into social media for the majority of the day, this corporeal obsession becomes their reality. Ordinary women can both objectify other women by

criticizing their photos and treating them as objects, while at the same time posting pictures of themselves in self-objectifying positions. With constant accessibility to photos of our friends and celebrities, what we see in the virtual world is quickly transforming into what we consider reality. Women can continuously scroll through and compare themselves to the photos of their friends, friends of friends, and models. Social media does not necessarily create a new phenomenon, but builds on many that are already defined in theories of social psychology.

CONCLUSION

In order to examine social media and its impact on society relies on our current understanding and knowledge of mass media as well as social psychology. I have established that, as the prevalence of social media has increased, so, too, have the rates of eating disorders and body dissatisfaction among college women. While this may only be a coincidence, there is strong evidence that suggests the relationship between the two is more than just coincidental. Whether the relationship is causal or not is still to be determined because there is currently not enough research due to the incredibly fast-paced media environment.

Recently, disordered eating among young college-aged women has become a more serious and growing problem. In fact, there has been as much as a 25% increase in the prevalence of eating disorders and body dissatisfaction among women between the ages of 18 and 25 (Chao 131). Half of college females, in fact, would rather be hit by a truck than gain weight or be considered fat (Gaesser). Through social comparison theory, I have also established that much of a woman's self-worth stems from how she compares to herself to her peers, as well as the women she sees in the media. The word media, however, now encompasses more than ever before – the Internet and mobile technology. Over 85% of people use the Internet (Pew Internet and American Life Project Surveys), and while online, spend more time on social media than any other sites (Nielsen). The media landscape is currently experiencing exponential change and growth in a variety of ways that impact the lives of women. In fact, women are incredible active in the contemporary media environment as both users and creators.

This paper established that traditional advertising has created images of women's bodies that set the standard for what is ideal. But, more important, it has established that the ideal beauty as she appears in mass media is dramatically shrinking in size. Thinness has typically been idealized and perpetuated throughout society, but as the definition of thin becomes smaller and smaller, the ideal beauty has reached a physically unattainable level of thin. What began as a full-chested, voluptuous, hourglass figure in the beginning of the twentieth century, transformed into the waif of the 1970s, and now, the typical model is 20% underweight, putting her into the category of anorexic (Dittmar). Although advertising has always been considered an influencing factor to female body image and body dissatisfaction (NEDA), the conclusions I have drawn in this research suggest that this vulnerability and susceptibility in women has been heightened through the exponential growth rate of social media.

As the size of the average model in advertising shrinks, women have become more focused on their outward appearances and more obsessed with personal photo sharing through social media sites. The pervasiveness of social media is unquestionable, with 83% of people between the ages of 18 and 29 using it, and 90% of those users checking in on their networks within fifteen minutes of waking up. Social media is supplanting in person relationships – just look at the amount of time people spend on social media as compared to almost all other activities, including live relationships – over 170 billion minutes in the year 2012 (Nielsen). Not to mention the fact that 300 million photos are posted to Facebook per day and 575 photos are “liked” on Instagram every second (Wishpond). Young adults seem to be absolutely dependent on virtual connectedness and social media can easily become and has become an obsession in our

society. I have discussed the ubiquitous nature of photo-heavy social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest, and examined their largely female user bases. It has transformed interpersonal communication through the use of text based messages, yet much of the time spent on these sites requires no social interaction at all. Instead, sites like Instagram encourage people to spend time looking at pictures - pictures of friends, pictures of relatives, and pictures of celebrities. Young women now look to their friends and peers to make social comparisons about their bodies and appearance in addition to what they see in more traditional media. As a result, social media further perpetuates the already superficial values that exist in mass media.

As I mentioned earlier, the uses and gratification theory specifies that the women who are discontent with themselves are the ones that will be more negatively affected by social comparison theory. There is already evidence from the University of Haifa that the more time spent on Facebook, the more likely a woman will suffer from various complications associated with negative body image. There is also historical evidence that traditional media has typically contributed to society's perceptions of what is beautiful and acceptable. So, the problem I raise is: when college women with low self-esteem – the astonishing *half* that would forego weight gain for getting hit by a car – interact with media products, specifically social media, they are the ones more susceptible to their dangerous messages.

In combining objectification theory, cultivation theory, the uses and gratification theory, and social comparison theory, I conclude that social media does have negative impact on women who are already susceptible to body image concerns. This is a

dangerous concern because of the high amount of women who are predisposed to body dissatisfaction, coupled with the extremely high and increasing rates of social media use among college women. Social media allows women to constantly compare themselves to other women, which, as I previously established, is a major factor in their self-perception and formation of identity. It exacerbates all aspects of social comparison theory. When we use social media, it is much harder to escape the confines and pressures that society puts forward through idyllic advertisements and riveting gossip magazines. It is not just that we can see these graphics all of the time. It is the fact that we can and are encouraged to comment on or like them – to interact with them. With the click of a mouse or the double-tap of your finger, you can let people know whether or not you “like” their pictures. We can now keep quantitative tabs, through the amount of likes that we receive, of the times in which our peers approved of us. We can all put numerical value on our social popularity.

Although women have typically been known to critique themselves and others with regard to weight and physical appearance, now, easier than ever, they can trace weight loss or weight gain through the Timeline feature on Facebook or other sites. Before social media became so pervasive, people were exposed to photos of perfectly beautiful airbrushed models and celebrities with unattainable bodies only through traditional advertising such as on TV or in magazines, but today, we are constantly exposed to them, twenty four hours a day, seven days a week, wherever we are. The line between the real world and the virtual world has blurred, which means that people can now be exposed to a variety of sociocultural influences at all times, even when they are physically alone. Even in the bathroom. Social interaction has been mixed with mass

media and it is hard to differentiate real life from fantasy, as explained through cultivation theory. I argue that there is a large overlap between college women with body dissatisfaction and those who constantly browse, update, and check various social media profiles – those who consider social media their own version of reality. This can lead those women to constantly scrutinize and shame their bodies, and continue to strive for unattainable beauty.

Social media has dramatically changed the lives of many people in various ways. It has connected people around the world, increased the sharing of knowledge and resources, as well as encouraged a new form of creativity: user generated content. But that is not all it has done. Social media has played a critical role in the construction of new social norms and, at the same time, the preserving society's definition of normal advertising has done for so many years. It has built upon already existing phenomena in mass media as well as social psychology. And in doing so we, as a society, have suffered some adverse, and as yet, unknown, consequences. Social media has the same impact and characteristics as traditional advertising, only more so because it comes from trusted sources – our peers. It has given us a way to basically carry our social lives in our pockets. It has provided us a platform with which we can constantly expose ourselves to historically detrimental aspects of media. The supermodel, the perfect embodiment of the thin ideal once only barraged us from magazine covers or television shows. Now, it – the thin ideal – intrudes on our computers, our smartphones, and soon, our wristwatches, as we all participate in a cluttered landscape of social media sites and networks that will not leave us alone. Instead of walking by a billboard quickly or turning off the TV, we can sit on our phones or at our computer screens and stare for hours at society's standards of

beauty, reinforced by the images circulated by our friends, making it extremely challenging for women to feel any sense of satisfaction with their own physical appearance, which simply cannot compare to the likes of Photoshop or digital editing.

College women are expected to learn to live independently from their parents, make their own decisions, pick their own food, and form their identities that will be with them for the rest of their lives. But before the Internet and social media became so pervasive, women experienced this exploratory period of young adulthood individually; separate from their peers – each in their own way. Many milestone moments in their creation of their identities are losing their ephemeral qualities, and are being permanently documented and posted on Facebook and other SNS. Women are voluntarily creating chronological photo diaries, as well as actively participating as spectators in the photo diaries of their friends and family. Today, with the strong reliance on social media and the constant and instantaneous sharing of personal thoughts and photos, women go through this period of time with their friends, their enemies, and even the celebrities with whom they are infatuated. As a college student who has experienced the extreme pressures that women feel to look a certain way and embody a certain ideal, I have observed that college is a pivotal time in the lives of women that is becoming more public and difficult, which can lead to disordered thoughts and negative body image.

Although I have articulated the problem and the relationship between the use of social media and the development of body dissatisfaction, what can be done, if anything, in the future to combat these issues? Perhaps there is a way for eating disorder organizations to pay more attention to social media and what is being said about body

image because there is not enough research on this topic. Maybe celebrities or supermodels should speak out and focus more on eliminating the overemphasis on thinness and unattainable beauty in mass and social media. Additionally, feminist or political organizations can encourage movements *against* pro-ana websites or other damaging uses of technology. I think that there should be a requirement for media organizations to publish some kind of symbol on a photo that has been airbrushed, just as the voluntary labels on records and games that show they are violent – a rating system of sorts. Social media's ubiquitous nature and social function make it difficult for women, or anyone for that matter, to eliminate from their lives. But, for the women who are vulnerable to the adverse consequences, it becomes a matter of whether the benefits outweigh the costs – which, in the end, is up to each user herself. If it is a personal choice, it may be beneficial for some people, but I do not think the answer is to use ad campaigns that call for people to drop completely out of technology and use it less often. It's not realistic, and for certain people, it may only encourage them to use it as some sort of rebellion. But I encourage college women, and people of all ages and genders for that matter, to play a more active, affirmative role in changing the way they interact with peers and celebrities on social media – writing proactive blogs and attempting to interact at a deeper, less superficial level. I encourage female college students to monitor and reject negative images that they see online and develop more positive ones. In order to build a supportive community, women need to speak out when they see negative images of women, and discourage their friends from interacting with and sharing negative messages. When they share images of beautiful airbrushed models, they are only fueling the distribution of unhealthy messages. Instead, they can share other forms of positive

media, such as the recent Dove “Real Beauty” campaign that uses real, unedited women that are relatable, flawed, and average. Because social media provides a platform in which users can generate their own content, women must use this power for the spreading of awareness and knowledge, rather than only reiterating unrealistic and unhealthy social norms – what media moguls do for a living.

In this paper, I do not blame social media for the recent increase in body image concerns. I have only examined the relationship and made logical conclusions based on psychological theories and cultural studies and my own common sense observations. I have not determined that social media use creates a completely new body image problem, but I do believe research can be performed to examine more closely whether that is true or not. For example, I think longitudinal studies should be performed on current elementary school students who have grown up in a world of touch screens and social media in comparison to those who live in areas or households with very little technology. It will be interesting to look at their lives now, their lives during college, and their lives thirty years from now when they are in the business world – I think the results would reveal a great deal about the impact of technology on all aspects of life. In this paper, I argue that the abundant and persistent social media intrusions on the lives of college women have amplified the detrimental impact to body image that was already resulting from advertising and face-to-face social interaction. Today, social media has become second nature for most college students, and it is easy to forget that it comes with all of the same dangers as in-person peer pressure. Because the use of SNS only builds on already existing psychological and sociocultural principles, there is no panacea to preventing its negative impact on the development of negative body image. If there were

a way to stop the human psyche from making outward comparisons, it would have hopefully been in effect long ago. By writing and distributing this paper, I have tried to expose the way in which social media is exacerbating the problem of female body dissatisfaction, raise an awareness about the problem, and suggest ways in which it can be reduced, combated, or eliminated. An increase in media awareness has to be the first step toward encouraging a healthy relationship between a woman, her body, and her social media network.

APPENDIX A
A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PRO-ANOREXIA MOVEMENT

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Submitted as: Capstone Project for Intercollegiate Media Studies

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Pro-Anorexia: The Problem

Social media has revolutionized the way we communicate in the 21st century. Nearly as pervasive as television, social media is changing mass media, advertising, and interpersonal relationships. As defined by *Merriam Webster's Dictionary* social media is a “form of electronic communication (as a website for social networking and micro blogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (as videos).” In recent years, as technology has advanced and our world has become more reliant on the Internet, more people have turned to social media as a way to start and maintain friendships as well as form online communities. In fact, 83% of people between the ages of 18 and 29 are using social networking sites (Duggan 2). With few barriers to entry, social media is globally accessible and can attract more people than a forum in a physical public space. There are numerous and obvious benefits to the ubiquitous use of social networking sites, such as keeping up relationships with old friends, sharing news resources, and participating in virtual discussions around specified topics. At the same time, there is a pernicious side to social media, which allows all types of people to participate in forums devoted to harmful and disturbing topics and which can even draw in unsuspecting users. It is one of these

groups, one that has been almost completely ignored in academic literature that is the subject of my critical analysis: pro-anorexia online communities.

Short for pro-anorexia, the pro-ana movement is popular among girls who *already* suffer from an eating disorder. It is frustrating that there has been such little research performed on these flawed and even fatal websites. It is not a typical support group, but one that reinforces negative behavior; its purpose is to help create and foster relationships among those with eating disorders. People who suffer from *Anorexia nervosa*, as defined by the American Psychological Association:

“have a distorted body image that causes them to see themselves as overweight even when they're dangerously thin. Often refusing to eat, exercising compulsively, and developing unusual habits such as refusing to eat in front of others, they lose large amounts of weight and may even starve to death.” (APA)

Pro-ana websites are online spaces in which girls who suffer from this disease can escape and resist recovery. A majority of these websites deny the medical and psychological diagnosis of anorexia, and instead, refer to it as “an active lifestyle choice” – as “experiential and aspirational” (Day 243) (Fox 954). But eating disorders are not a lifestyle choice – they are a mental disease very influenced by peer pressure as well as psychological and cultural factors. The websites are an example of the hidden dangers that social media and the Internet nurture in their virtual and ubiquitous nature.

With over 500 websites, the pro-ana movement is a revolution – a revolution that can lead to death and should not be ignored. Eating disorders have one of the highest rates of mortality of any mental illness (Kaye). In fact, 20% of all who suffer from anorexia will die from premature causes, including heart failure (The Renfrew Center). This includes death from natural causes as well as suicide. Suicide is an extremely

common outcome of eating disorders, with sufferers being 23 times more likely to commit suicide than the rest of the population (Sullivan). Additionally, for female anorexics between the ages of 15 and 24, “the mortality rate associated with their mental illness is twelve times higher than the death rate from ALL other causes of death” (Sullivan).

The idea of mortality is definitely apparent on the websites, but not as an instigator of fear, but one of power. The girls in the pro-ana movement seem to celebrate the idea of death. Many of the girls on the sites, as well as the girls who use the websites, bond over their hatred of themselves and their bodies, many times to the point of suicide (*see Appendix 1A*). The mention of death on the sites is almost normalized, as so many of the participants treat it just as they treat their eating disorders, as a choice. Put bluntly, the anorexics on the sites would prefer to be dead than fat. Just as they have reconstructed the psychological diseases from which they suffer, pro-ana supporters have made casual the idea of death. They are not fearful that anorexia will kill them from natural causes, but instead, would take their own lives if anorexia does not do its job – if it does not make them look exactly like the photos of other women that they envy. Without further research and information to spread awareness about the pro-anorexia movement, these websites will be the cause of more destruction and even death. Much of society is not aware that these sites exist, but they must be brought to the attention of more people. But once the existence of pro-ana sites is established, ignoring their destructive power is a silent approval of the death wishes of scores of young women.

Pro-ana websites can be looked at from an academic perspective and can reveal a deeper, more dangerous problem. Through a close and analytical reading of one specific graphic on the personal pro-ana blog, “Tiny and Gorgeous,” I will consider cultural origins of the sites as a female internalization of patriarchal hegemony and I will question and refute the idea that they are an example of female agency. I will argue that the websites are, indeed, a physical and tangible outcome of what Susan Bordo describes as a “complex crystallization of [our] culture” (Bordo 35). The analysis of the sites will reveal the negative consequences of the normalization and internalization of patriarchal ideals as suggested by Bordo, and also use a new perspective in the analysis of pro-ana graphics and text, through the work of author, Kathy Myers. I will first perform a close reading of commonly posted text on the blogs to establish the seductive nature of the sites, as well as the contradictory understanding of personal choice. Next, I will analyze a commonly posted image among the pro-ana community to demonstrate the importance of understanding context before making claims about female representation and liberation. In combining both textual and graphical analyses, I will reveal a lack of female power and activism, as well as an absence of a supportive community. Instead, I will demonstrate that these websites are a toxic outcome of the internalization of patriarchal norms.

Pro-Anorexia Websites: A Textual Analysis

The creators and users of pro-ana content have attempted to reclaim and reconfigure the disease and transform it into an acceptable and personally chosen way of life. Some websites take the form of personal blogs in which the author narrates her daily struggles to maintain an anorexic life, while receiving support and suggestions from any

of her followers that choose to participate. Other pro-ana sites are more professional-looking websites with no identified author, yet have very similar features to the blogs: photos of sickly skinny and skeletal girls, diet tips and tricks, and sometimes an online forum for discussion. One important aspect of these cyber communities is the interactive function, where anorexic girls can participate in destructive conversations and ask questions about hiding their eating disorders from friends and family as well as look for diet advice.

Both the websites and the blogs feature photos of incredibly emaciated girls, who are clearly battling severe eating disorders, and provide “‘thinspiration,’ a blend of thin and inspiration [...] which involves sharing photos/prose intended to inspire eating disorder behaviors” (Lewis 200). There are thousands of graphics with mantra-like statements, encouraging the users of the sites to live their lives in a certain way. For example, on one blog on the social media site, Tumblr, called, *Collar bones. Hip Bones. Thigh Gap.*, there are phrases such as “I only feel beautiful when I’m hungry” and “I want my collar bones to show” (see *Appendix IA*). These phrases demonstrate the common theme among the pro-ana movement: to advocate extreme self-surveillance and discipline as a result of body shaming. What is equally if not more concerning, are the amount of followers that each blog has – often in the hundreds of thousands – and the descriptive usernames associated with the girls who comment on and/or share the “thinspirational” photos and phrases. With usernames such as *all-i-eat-is-water*, *ana-saved-me*, and *imsorrythatiwasborn*, it is hard not to feel sick to your stomach when looking at these sites.

For outsiders, these websites are truly difficult communities to observe. One common feature across the professional pro-anorexia websites addresses the issue of “outsiders,” though. Each has a disclaimer message that discourages anyone who is not already anorexic or bulimic to enter the site. It suggests that the intended audience for the sites is a group of people who are aware of the disorder from which they suffer, or, in *their* minds, the lifestyle that have chosen. These are people who do not seek recovery from their eating disorders, but want to sustain their unhealthy habits. A typical disclaimer message appears on a site called “Ana Boot Camp,” which reads:

“If you are looking to get anorexia / bulimia by being here then please leave now. You will not find information contained within this web site, forum, or any site linked to / from this website on how to become anorexic or bulimic. [...] You have been forewarned. By entering this pro-ana pro-mia web site you are signing a digital certificate stating that you have read and understand the above mentioned conditions and you are entering this pro-ana pro-mia site knowingly and willingly of the aforementioned conditions. Entering by any other circumstance is perjury and can be punishable by law.” (<http://anabootcamp.weebly.com/index.html>)

This disclaimer raises various issues in its complex phrasing and choice of words. First, in labeling it as a disclaimer, this phrase establishes a legal tone, perhaps as a way to defend itself from negative societal opinions or even ward off lawsuits. For example, if people wanted to argue that these sites were encouraging girls to starve themselves, the authors could defend themselves with their opening message. It begins by specifically naming the two eating disorders that it supports, and demands that those who do not have anorexia or bulimia leave immediately. Another way in which this message removes itself from liability concerns is by including the forum and links posted by users in its statement – it recognizes that it does not have full control over what is posted, but warns

that anything that may be written on the site in no way supports a way for people to learn how to become anorexic.

As a disclaimer, the legal jargon attempts to help pro-ana sites in their claims that they are not meant for girls looking to develop an eating disorder, but instead, reserved for those who already suffer. It even specifically addresses the law and threatens punishment. Ironically, though, the disclaimer uses incorrect legal vocabulary. The word perjury, by definition, is “the crime of telling a lie [in a court of law after] promising to tell the truth” (Merriam-Webster). Therefore, the last sentence of the disclaimer does not make any sense. I suppose this message is correct in saying that perjury is punishable by law, but perjury is an act that usually occurs in a courtroom, not upon entering a website, therefore the statement is void. Presumably, the readers did not promise to tell the truth before reading this statement, further supporting the idea that this message only uses legal vocabulary as a to invoke fear in its readers. This “disclaimer,” serves no real legal purpose, but instead, only tempts the Internet users to navigate further. The words appear harsh and direct - even “forewarning” and threatening users with perjury (which, like I said, is misused). These words, however legally void, do serve a purpose. They introduce a seductive aspect to the websites. In creating an “us” versus “them” feeling, this opening message challenges readers to break the rules and enter this coveted, elite community. It suggests that, behind this disclaimer, there are secrets, and upon entering, the user becomes one of “them.”

This seductive aspect of the sites as portrayed through the formal disclaimer is also used on some of the personal blogs. For example, the first blog entry on a blog entitled, “Tiny and Gorgeous,” reads:

“Hello, I almost feel like I’m doing something wrong creating a pro-ana blog. I’ve seen a lot of people get a lot of anon [ymous] hate messages doing this. But everyone wants to be thin, and anyone would give ANYTHING to have a perfect body. It’s no secret. [...] Don’t hate. If you’ve found this blog, you’re curious. Even if you send hate-filled anon messages, you’re the one who went and looked up thinspiration, and probably scrolled through some images wishing you looked like those girls. Just like I do.” (<http://tinyandgorgeous.tumblr.com/>)

Whereas with the formal disclaimer, pro-ana sites indirectly encourage females to continue navigating the sites whether out of curiosity or rebellion, this personal blog directly addresses the issue. The author acts as a temptress to the audience of her site, further emphasizing the seductive nature of pro-ana websites. This user knows that the community is highly critiqued by society, but encourages the reader to continue looking at the site, implying that the entire process is entirely her choice. She tries to convince readers to give into the seduction.

Neither the formal nor informal opening messages claim to force users to do anything, but rather encourage girls to be in charge of their own lives – to be agents in their decision making processes. In referring to anorexia as a lifestyle choice, these websites make users who have already made that “choice” to become anorexic, feel powerful. This entire concept of choice, however, is undermined in “Thin Commandments,” popular in the pro-ana community (*see Appendix 1A*). Thin Commandments are a list of ten rules, such as “If you aren’t thin you aren’t attractive,”

and “thou shall not eat without feeling guilty.” The commandments are a set of ten severe rules to which ana followers must adhere. The mantra-like, cultish statements transform the pro-ana movement into more of a religion than merely a social following or community. Although the users have a choice of whether or not to follow these commandments, the demanding and authoritative tone is threatening and therefore encourages a certain choice to be made – to follow them. Ironically, the Thin Commandments deprive pro-ana community members of choice, and instead, provide them with a formula for extreme self-destruction.

Pro-Anorexia Websites: Context Matters

In her article, “Towards a Feminist Erotica,” Kathy Myers makes several arguments that help support the idea that what appears on pro-ana sites cannot and should not be simplified into something as simple as a response to patriarchal hegemony (Myers). She discusses the representation of women’s sexuality in photographs versus in pornography and explains her frustration with the term objectification. Myers argues that the word is overused and somewhat abused, because if the context of an image is not considered, the word objectification may be misused. She thinks that most images require some sort of objectification. Myers questions the typical use of the phrase “objectification of women” and suggests that objectification is not necessarily always negative. For example, Myers questions the classic understanding of objectification when she performs critical analyses on two images: one from a “soft core porn magazine and one from a woman’s journal” (Myers 264). She specifically compares and contrasts everything from the clothing that is worn (or not worn), as well as the position of the photographer.

Myers compares the poses of the two women and more important, stresses the importance of context when examining the representation of women. Textually, she argues, that both images appear extremely similar – the only difference being that the woman in the advertisement in the woman’s journal “sports a bikini whilst the porn model is naked” (Myers 264). Without knowing where the images came from, it could be argued that both women were being objectified, yet in knowing the pleasure that the audience associates with each one, whether or not objectification takes place is more clear – for just because a woman appears half naked in a magazine does not mean she is being objectified, if her nakedness is for the empowerment of a female audience, instead of the sexual fantasy of a man. Through a detailed analysis of the two images, Myers proves the different ways in which sexual representation can be represented to dissimilar audiences through varying production styles and mediums of distribution.

When examining the portrayal of women in images, Myers claims that a woman’s sexuality cannot be fully understood without taking into consideration the production, consumption, and distribution of the image (Myers 263). She coins a term, “reductive essentialism,” which refers to looking at the content of an image without questioning how it is made, for whom it is made, and how it will be distributed (Myers 263). Myers uses this term to differentiate a successful and unsuccessful analysis. For Myers, when reductive essentialism occurs, the analysis lacks in proof in evidence. To combat this failure, Myers suggests that analyses must include a consideration of context and audience in order to be effective and truthful. Her approach can be applied to the images on pro-ana websites because, although some photos look similar to what people find in

magazines or on fitness websites, these images are circulating in a completely different, dangerous, and life-threatening realm when they appear on pro-ana sites.

One of the most interesting points Myers makes is that there is “an overall tendency to market fleshier women to men and thinner, sometimes sexually androgynous women to female audiences” (Myers 265). Comparing this conclusion to the images on pro-ana websites, it can be assumed that the women on these sites are taking and posting photographs of themselves in their emaciated, skeletal, and somewhat androgynous states, not for the eyes of men, but for women. Myers goes on to discuss the critical role that the audience plays in performing an analysis of an image. In addition to just the size of the woman’s body as presented to men and women, she differentiates between the ways in which women are physically presented to male versus female audiences. Women in photographs meant for a male audience are portrayed as receptive, vulnerable, and “invitational,” according to Myers (Myers 266). For a female audience, on the other hand, the model appears more “self-absorbed,” yet domineering, to evoke a feeling of envy and power in other women (Myers 266). Therefore, a male audience will feel desire *for* the woman, while a female audience feels empowered *by* the woman. Just like women’s magazines, it can be assumed, in looking at the photos posted on the sites, that the understood audience is female. What is interesting, however, in the case of pro-anorexia websites, is that the images of emaciated girls are supposed to invoke both desire and empowerment in the female audience. To end her article, Myer’s lays out a collection of guiding questions that one should consider when analyzing potentially progressive images of women. Using those guidelines of female representation, I will

look at one particularly troubling image that is extremely prevalent on pro-ana websites: the thigh gap.

Pro-Anorexia Websites: A Graphical Analysis of the Thigh Gap

One photo that is posted and reposted thousands of times on all pro-ana blogs is that of the "thigh-gap." These are photos that feature young women with thighs that do not touch when the woman is standing with her feet together - a defining quality of beauty and success in the ana movement. More often than not, the thighs are several inches apart, appearing unnatural and quite frankly, medically unattainable. In fact, there is even a blog called "Smells like Girl Riot" (<http://tinyurl.com/psx5dxt>) devoted to the science behind why a thigh-gap is physically impossible for the majority of women to achieve. The thigh gap image, nonetheless, is circulated and re-circulated through a variety of pro-ana websites.

These images reinforce the fact that the pro-ana virtual communities are "rooted in the corporeal" and encourage women to focus on their bodies in defining their self-worth and value (Ferreday 285). The photos focus on one area of the female body – the thighs and torso – and suggest that the size of that body part defines the person to whom they belong. Young girls who claim to live the pro-ana lifestyle willingly post pictures of themselves or re-blog photos of others girls in this position, which only perpetuates the unhealthy ideas of the images. The photo pictured on the following page and all that are similar to it can be criticized through the lens established by Kathy Myers.



Source: <http://tinyandgorgeous.tumblr.com/post/51241913328/skinandbonesandeyeliner#notes>

Thigh-gap graphics are typically, as seen in the one above, zoomed in on the thigh and torso portion of the female body, and are "headless and feetless" (Shields). In the book, *Measuring Up: How Advertising Affects Self-Image*, Vickie Rutledge Shields and Dawn Heinecken discuss images like the one above – with no head or feet - as "the ultimate form of objectification - unable to think and unable to move" (Shields 42). On the other hand, Kathy Myers may conclude that this image is not a form of objectification because it is not made for a male audience. As Myers explains, images meant for female audiences usually "position the audience as a spectator, to keep a safe distance and to observe, not to touch" (Myers 266). This is where she begins her distinction between two types of objectification. First, with regard to female objectification as a product of Freudian thought, she says that "men fetishize aspects of female sexuality – for example, the legs or breasts – as symbols of acceptable sexual power" (Myers 267). Next, however, she warns against the danger of assuming all "fragmentary images" are

fetishistic and explains that not all forms of objectification are necessarily exploitative (Myers 268). Her argument is complicated through the image of the thigh-gap, as this image appears to fetishize and objectify a female's legs, but is performed for and by women, instead of men. So can it still be considered objectification?

In analyzing this image in more detail, considering my previous understanding of objectification, which is a negative act performed *on* women *by* men, I question what is occurring in this image. I will explore what feeling is meant to be evoked in the audience and where the image is meant to be distributed. Therefore, I will use Myer's focus on contextualization as well as Shields' discussion of objectification as I argue that the thigh-gap image, although produced for a female audience, is, indeed, a form of self-objectification that women have learned from cultural norms, eventually leading to self-destruction.

Myers first asks, "*How is this image produced?*" (Myers 269). In this case, as in most thigh-gap memes the young woman in the picture took this image of herself. I found this image from the girl with the username, "ihatemyself-f." This user, however, reposted the image from "skinandbonesandeyeliner." Because of its high frequency of circulation – over 4,000 re-posts – it is difficult to know where it originated. I can conclude, however, through the way in which the woman has placed herself in front of the camera, as well the lack of a photographer in the reflection of the mirror, that this girl took this photo of herself. There is no external photographer. I presume the photo was taken with a webcam. The producer, in this case, is also the model. It is important to note, however, that the subject (and producer) is unidentifiable because she has intentionally left her face out of the frame. The virtual aspect of these communities adds a layer of anonymity to

the pro-ana movement. Without a face, girls can post pictures of themselves and their bodies without revealing their identities, which encourages more women to participate.

One question Myers proposes in her analysis of female sexual representation that raises an interesting point in this context is, “*How do we recognize the gender of the subject?*” (Myers 269). On a pro-ana site and in this photo specifically, the model is easily identifiable as female based on her bra and underwear, however, without the clothing signifiers, it could be difficult to recognize the gender of the subject. The woman in this picture, as well as the women on other pictures within the pro-ana community, do not have womanly figures or curvaceous bodies, and instead, resemble young somewhat androgynous children. Just as Myers’ mentions in her article, the “fleshier” women are marketed for male audiences, while figures like this skinny woman, are marketed toward women (Myers 265). The fact that women on pro-ana websites are so thin and fragile that they no longer have a typically feminine shape, demonstrate an extreme internalization of patriarchal ideas. What these women have typically understood to be the strongest contributing factor of beauty – thinness – has been exaggerated to the point of emaciated and undernourished bodies.

Next, Myers questions “*whose fantasy is being recorded?*” (Myers 269). In a thigh-gap image, the fantasy recorded is that of the girl in the picture, but also the fantasy of the audience. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact audience of all pro-ana websites and the images within each blog, because the community:

“is not restricted to the web authors or even those who participate in the forums, [...but] all those with eating disorders who identify with the sites’ principles, even if their involvement with the web community is limited to looking at the sites.” (Ferreday 285).

With that in mind, even people like myself, who are critically analyzing the photos and content on the website, can be considered the audience. For this particular image, the audience whose fantasy is being recorded consists of 4,365 people who reposted it on this specific Tumblr as well as people who have looked at it without reposting it. For pro-ana supporters, thigh gap images are a perceived representation of success and willpower, yet in reality, they only represent society's thin female ideal as redefined by the pro-ana movement. The girls in the pictures have internalized the women they see in mass media and taken it to a new extreme. This photo demonstrates a girl who has strived to become so thin that her thighs do not touch and her collarbones jet out, yet she desires to be even skinnier because, as her username suggests, she hates herself. This picture, for her, is a signal of her progress toward her goal and is supposed to be inspiration for those who look at it. The thigh-gap pictures are produced for the purpose of being looked at by a female audience, yet are supposed to invoke feelings of desire *and* empowerment in the audience. It is important to note that the female users on pro-ana websites do not experience a sexual desire. They do not desire to be *with* the girls in the picture, but instead, just desire to *be* them. Perhaps, as a pro-ana supporter, the anorexic audience understands the thigh gap photo to be an example of liberation, but, in reality, achieving this physical feature represents frailty and sickness.

Myers continues her discussion of objectification when she says that images of women produced for women evoke a certain “power and self-determination” within the audience (Myers 267). She differentiates these images from the “exploitative” images of women produced for a male audience (Myers 267). In this particular context, the image meant to evoke power within a female context, but in this case, even though the audience

is female, the exploitation and abuse is still existent. The thigh-gap image complicates Myers' claim that the representation of females addresses a male audience for a purpose different than for a female audience (Myers 266). In a disturbing way, this image, on the surface is powerful to its specific female audience, which aligns with certain ideas of agency; yet on the other hand, after understanding the context of the piece, the same factors are at work as in an exploitative image meant for men. In other words, objectification is still apparent – only in this case, it is literal objectification. Typically, when we think of the act of objectification we think of the negative metaphorical process of treating a person or a body part, usually female, as an object. In this case, though, the girl in the picture has physically transformed herself into an object. It is not objectification through the eyes of the audience, which occurs when the audience is male, but self-objectification performed by the girl in the image. She has stripped herself of her genuinely human qualities such as her face, brain, and body. While her body is physically in the picture, she has reduced herself to skin and bones. Her collarbones, ribcage, hipbones, and even her elbows protrude in an abnormal fashion. Her unnatural figure appears corpse-like and lifeless – a literal form of objectification.

As female audiences look at, critique, and envy pictures of “thinspirational” women on the sites, they are treating other women as objects. Therefore, the idea that pro-ana websites could potentially suggest female power is void as their true function only supports patriarchal objectification of women. On the surface, the fact that pro-ana photos are taken by women, of women, for women, suggests that these women are in a position of power, however, when considered more closely, the photos are actually disturbing objectifications that the anorexic women have recreated from what they have

learned is socially acceptable. The only difference, though, is that they have taken the social norm to the next level – from thin to thinner.

Myers would then ask, “*What power relationship exists in the photographer-model relationship?*” (Myers 26) Although the photographer and model, in this case, is the same person, there is still definitely an internal and external power relationship. Externally, the model is victim to the power of the thin ideal that is perpetuated throughout society. She has taken this picture as a way, in her own mind, to prove to herself and to others that she is in control of her body and has transformed herself into what she thinks is the ideal beauty. Internally, the girl in the photo is battling with an internal cultural influence. Although the pro-ana movement defines this power struggle as a choice, in reality, it is a fatal, internal battle, that without help, she will not win. Within the photo, she has placed herself in a position of self-destruction, both literally and figuratively. First, she has literally starved herself to the point of destruction and ultimately death. Second, she has placed herself in the frame without a face or feet – she has trapped herself in this position of self-destruction. Metaphorically, she has no mind to think for herself or feet to free her from her disease and pathological behaviors. The photos and graphics demonstrate the inability to move on from the societal and cultural norms she has placed on herself. She is stuck without a brain to think for herself or feet to escape society's ideals. Not only are her toothpick sized legs symbolically imprisoned by hegemonic forces of patriarchy, but they are also unable to free themselves from the gaze of onlookers. She has chosen to give her photo a permanent position within the pro-ana community. By posting this picture, she has voluntarily put herself in the position of the object, yet in reality, she is facing an internal power struggle with her eating disorder.

Pro-ana websites, therefore, are misleading in that they deceive their followers to believe they have made an authoritative decision about their lives, when realistically, they have only outlined the path of self-destruction.

As previously stated, Myers is very focused on the contextualization of the image, and therefore, the next question would be, “*How will the image be distributed and where will it be circulated?*” (Myers 269) This image is to be distributed publicly among other women suffering from anorexia on pro-anorexia websites. Even if, initially, an image was produced by a clinician as a way to show the dangers of eating disorders in medical discourse, it now exists within the sphere of a pro-ana website, an entirely different realm. I do know that, in this context, this image is not meant primarily for a male audience as an expression of eroticism, but instead, as inspiration for those who “choose” anorexia as a lifestyle. Although we do not know the true and original intention behind this image, its function on this site is to promote the anorexic lifestyle and encourage others to do the same. The user who uploaded the image did so via Tumblr, and therefore was aware that it would be seen, shared, and commented on by thousands of users within the social network. It was no accident, and therefore cannot be seen as work done unto the model in this photo by patriarchal society, for we assume it was her personal decision to take and upload the picture. Again, although this was her decision, and not the decision of an external photographer, it in no way symbolizes positive agency or liberation, but self-depreciation and destruction.

Pro-Anorexia: Not Act of Liberation

There is a plethora of work that revolves around the portrayal of the thin ideal in mass media; however, there is only a small body of academic work on pro-ana websites.

Even more surprising, much of the already existing research about anorexia, in general, alarmingly refers to the pathological behavior patterns as an example of female agency and liberation. In this context, agency and liberation are used in the same ways that author Susan Bordo uses them – as the opposites of passivity – alongside the words power and action (Bordo 23). Typically used to demonstrate women’s actions against patriarchal oppression, these words have been overused, generalized, and distorted. Certain feminists such as Morag MacSween even view the anorexic as someone who desires to disrupt the patriarchal order, rather than someone suffering from an irrational internalization of that same patriarchal order. This can suggest that pro-ana websites, then, are an extension of those liberation-inducing behaviors. I agree with authors, Nick Fox, Katie Ward, and Alan O’Rourke when they argue that certain definitions of anorexia as “a reaction to Western cultural preoccupations or to patriarchy” previously established by “social scientists and feminists,” are faulty and simplified (Fox 944). It is alarming to think that people, especially those who consider themselves feminists, treat this potentially fatal disease as simply a resistance to or the result of the patriarchal paradigm, when, either way, the condition consumes and potentially takes the lives of innocent victims.

I do not think that women are resisting dominant culture through anorexia and the use of pro-ana sites. Similar to Katy Day, in her article entitled “Pro-anorexia and ‘Binge-drinking’: Conformity to Damaging Ideals or ‘New’ Resistant Femininities,” I reject the idea that anorexic women who use and interact with these sites for help are challenging “notions of femininity [...and] sociocultural pressures” (Day 245). I agree with Day when she argues against such notions and asserts that they only distort ideas of agency

and “oversimplify processes of power” (Day 245). It is far too naïve to refer to the pro-ana community as merely a protest against patriarchal society and a way for women to seek agency and power, when, in reality, pro-ana websites demonstrate an extreme internalization of patriarchal ideals. According to Katy Day, there are certain practices “by which girls and women [can] challenge and resist gender ideals and social processes aimed at controlling women,” yet there is a fine line between what is a positive “(re) construction of meanings and identities”, and a negative one (Day 242). Specifically in the context of anorexia and the pro-ana movement, the words liberation and power have been oversimplified and over-applied to apply to any decisions made by women. I do think that certain female actions, for example, choosing to become a businesswoman or professional athlete in a predominantly and stereotypically male field, can be examples of reconfiguring and challenging gender norms; however, I also reject the general claim that each time a woman reclaims a typically male space as her own, she is taking a positive action. All positions of oppression that are transformed and reconfigured into positions of action and power are not necessarily progressive, especially when they are life-threatening.

Pro-Anorexia Websites: Blame Society?

In her book, *Unbearable Weight*, Susan Bordo argues that the anorexic body is not a *reaction* to dominant society, but a *result* of the cultural influences of the ideal female beauty as portrayed throughout the general public. She argues that society has placed extreme pressures on women to look a certain way, and refers to anorexic behaviors as the “logical (if extreme) manifestations of anxieties and fantasies fostered by

our culture" (Bordo 15). She uses the word logical because she argues that, through the consistent perpetuation of cultural images, women are taught and encouraged to think a certain way about their bodies. For Bordo, eating disorders are the result of extreme societal pressure to look a certain way. Further, for Bordo, it is not "bizarre" that body modification, such as starvation, is becoming more prevalent, as it is basically encouraged throughout our society (Bordo 15). Bordo acknowledges disordered eating and self-monitorization as reasonable. The superficial ideas perpetuated throughout our society contribute to the development of pathological thoughts surrounding weight and physical appearance.

Bordo portrays the anorexic body as a "symbol of the emotional, moral, or spiritual state of the individual" – a combination of all demands that one feels from his or her surroundings (Bordo 193). Much of her argument can be taken as a warning to society – one that explains the detrimental consequences of the thin ideal as portrayed in media. Bordo argues that "culture has not only taught women to be insecure [...] constantly monitoring themselves for signs of imperfection, [but also] teach[es] women how to *see* bodies" (Bordo 57). Pro-ana websites encourage self-monitoring practices among women as well as providing a place for women to look at and criticize other women and either idealize them, or point out imperfections. Therefore, under Bordo's perspective, a pro-ana community is a physical and virtual outcome of what culture has taught women. But that does not mean it should be allowed.

Pro-ana websites support Bordo's understanding of cultural influence. Yet, although these websites are a result of the intense superficial pressures placed on women

throughout 21st century society, pro-ana websites do not represent female agency. It is too simplistic to say that the decision to starve oneself or take laxatives as a means to achieve a certain body type, although chosen by the subject herself, is merely an action taken to exert some sort of control over external pressures that patriarchal society places on women. Anorexia is a disease – it is not a choice. The fact that pro-ana could be considered a powerful reaction against patriarchal society is almost like saying breast cancer is a reaction to male dominance. It's not. Anorexia is deadly and should not be reinforced in the way that pro-ana websites claim to support it. It should be supported in a way that encourages recovery and healing, not tips on how to become thinner. The girls who appear on and navigate through these websites may feel powerful and as if they are active agents in their lives, but in reality, they are on a path of destruction and death. The combination of images and text on these sites may *seem* to be upholding female agency, yet the women are examples of the oversimplified definition of positive agency. Although they claim to have made the personal choice to do this to themselves, rather than being victims of patriarchy, in reality, they only represent self-destruction. Their actions do not suggest agency or power. Instead of creating powerful feminist identities, they have ironically, as predicted by Bordo and Katy Day, fallen back “on traditional masculine values instead” (Day 246). They are still using their bodies to value themselves. The girls have internalized the patriarchal version of the thin ideal and rebelled against treatment and health in the hopes of achieving their own sort of idyllic model - one that they took from society and made even thinner. Through the self-objectified photos on the websites we see the fatal consequence of gender and social

norms that only *seem* to be upholding female agency because of the high female presence and decision-making on the sites.

Pro-ana websites, however “logical,” they may be, are not doing, what I think *Merriam Webster’s Dictionary* refers to when it says that social media enables the building of communities. Pro-ana websites most closely associate with the second definition of community as established by *Merriam Webster’s Dictionary*: “a group of people who have the same interests, religion, race, etc.” As a group of people with same, yet self-harming interests, pro-ana websites complicate the meaning of community. These websites provide a place for anorexic and bulimic girls to “post messages detailing [...] weight loss progress and provide tips, support and encouragement for their peers” (Derenne 259). In mimicking the supportive and empowering aspects of a nurturing community, pro-ana websites only give the illusion of such. They give people with eating disorders a platform through which they can congregate to share stories and exchange advice leading to potentially fatal results. Pro-ana websites are not healthy communities. They are not life sustaining. A pro-ana website is only a dysfunctional community – a failed replication of a community.

APPENDIX 1A

1. Death



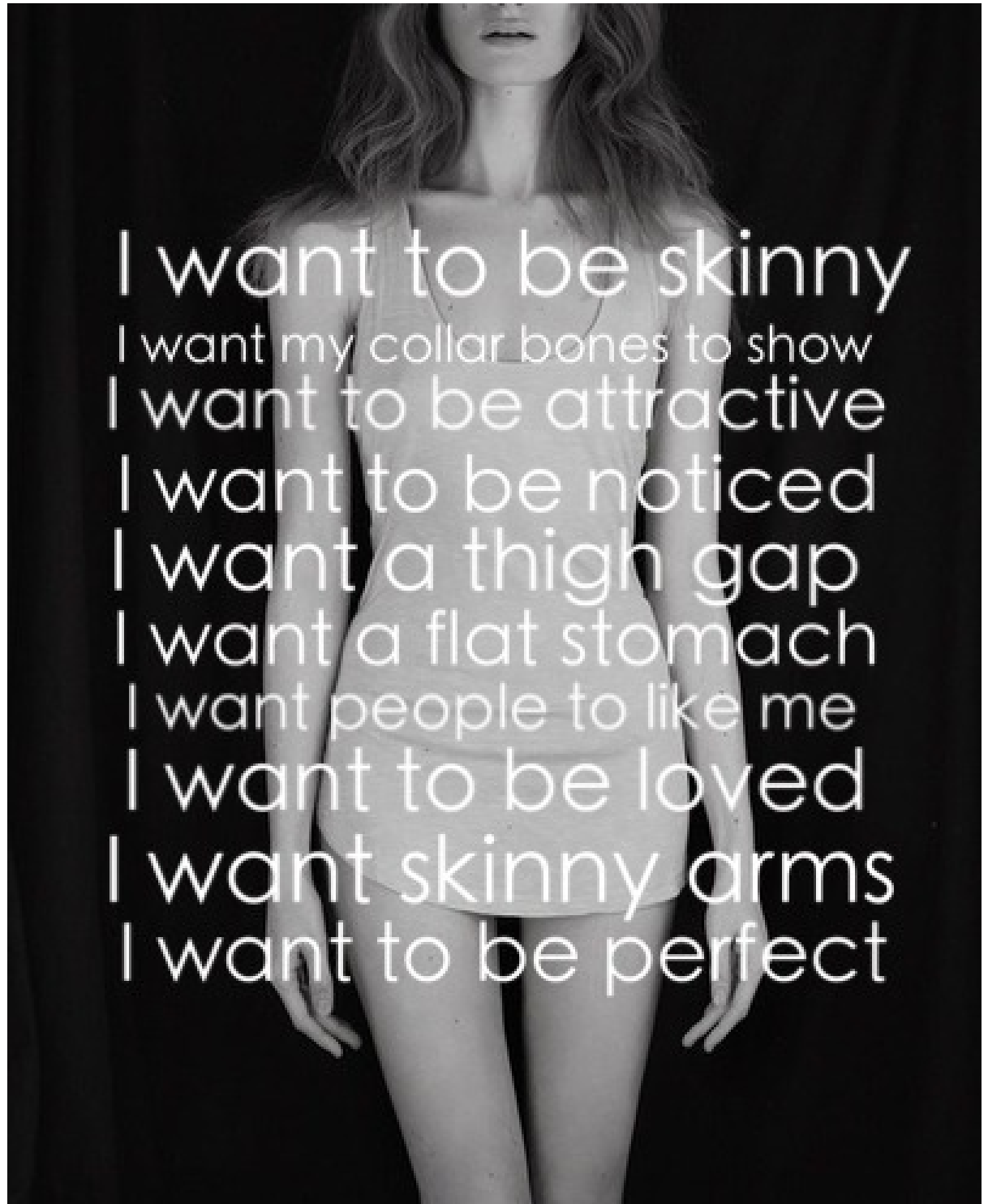
Source: hipbonecollarboneskinmysick.tumblr.com

2. Collar bones. Hip Bones. Thigh Gap



Source: hipbonecollarboneskinmysick.tumblr.com

3. Collar bones. Hip Bones. Thigh Gap



Source: hipbonecollarboneskinneysick.tumblr.com

4. The Thin Commandments

1. If you aren't thin you aren't attractive.
2. Being thin is more important than being healthy.
3. You must buy clothes, style your hair, take laxatives, starve yourself, do anything to make yourself look thinner.
4. Thou shall not eat without feeling guilty.
5. Thou shall not eat fattening food without punishing oneself afterwards.
6. Thou shall count calories and restrict intake accordingly.
7. What the scale says is the most important thing.
8. Losing weight is good/gaining weight is bad.
9. You can never be too thin.
10. Being thin and not eating are signs of true will power and success.

Source: <http://anabootcamp.weebly.com/commandments.html>

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