“MYSELF AS THE IDEAL”: EXPLORING THE STATUS OF BODY IMAGE

by

Teresa L. Martens

An Abstract
of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
in the Department of Communication and Sociology
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April, 2010
ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this research is to explore the dynamics of female, college freshman concerns about their bodies and provide recommendations for programs such as *The Body Project* who work with college age women on body issues. Much of the research surrounding this issue primarily focuses on body image as a mental health issue rather than a lived and experienced relationship. Two strategies were utilized. Observation and interviews with women with identified body image concerns were conducted. Secondly, a 22-item survey was constructed to gather all opinions of all freshman women regarding the level of subscription to the beauty, health and body acceptance ideals. Findings included that the women struggle with simultaneous acceptance and rejection of all three ideals. As well as the identification that objectives in programs like *The Body Project* need to primarily focus on rejecting the beauty ideal.
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Teresa L. Martens

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APPROVED:

Thesis Chair: Dr. Karen Bradley
Thesis Committee Member: Dr. Mary E. Kelly
Thesis Committee Member: Dr. Elizabeth Cassidy

ACCEPTED:
Chair, Department of Communication & Sociology: Dr. Jack Rogers

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL MISSOURI
WARRENSBURG, MISSOURI
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INTRODUCTION

Sitting in the small conference room around a table with all the other women who enrolled in the workshop, we listened as Sabrina tried to explain the conflict she felt between believing the myths about beauty, trying to let health be her motivation for changing her body, and believing she was beautiful as she was. She told the group how her family gave her messages connecting relationships and her body. She told the group how her mother, sisters, aunts and grandmothers explained to her the necessity of being thin in order to have a happy relationship with a man. She explained to us how the media began to reinforce this message as she got older. She described her frustration with “knowing better” than to believe the messages of her family and media and the struggle with still “letting it [the beauty myth] get to” her. Sabrina told us about an experience we were all already familiar.

We gathered together because we shared a common concern: our bodies. We felt we were too fat, too thin, too tall, too short, not toned enough. Our feet were too big or too small; our noses, butts or breasts should look different. Simply put, we were too much or not enough of something and looking for relief.

We had all responded to a campus activity announcement for any college female with body image concerns. The Body Project is an eight week workshop that was sponsored by the University of Central Missouri Counseling Center. The workshop is based on the book The Body Project: Promoting Body Acceptance and Preventing Eating Disorders: Facilitator Guide by Eric Stice & Katherine Presnell. The aim is getting

\[\text{Stice, Eric and Katherine Presnell. 2007. The body project: promoting body acceptance and preventing eating disorders facilitator guide. USA: Oxford University Press.}\]
young women to break through the social ideals of what the perfect body image is, and offer realistic activities to lose weight in a healthy way.

Classes like this are offered to help women understand the beauty myth which Naomi Wolf (1991) wrote about so many years ago. While Wolf (1991) is often credited with bringing the conversation surrounding women and body image to the limelight, the fact that body image classes still exist, suggests we really haven’t come so far. Many women continue to work to attain the “perfect body.” However, what is considered perfect is very elusive and vastly unattainable. So many years after the evolvement of Wolf, why is this struggle still occurring and how wide spread is it?

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this research is to explore the dynamics of the responses from female, college freshman to concerns about bodies and provide recommendations for programs such as The Body Project who work with college age women on body issues. Utilizing a case study of the Body Project and a survey of UCM women in general, I will address narratives these women use to navigate body concerns and consider how wide spread those concerns are.

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

This research is necessary to offer an important perspective in the dialogue surrounding the way women think and talk about their bodies. Much of the research surrounding women’s body image is based in a psychological approach, primarily addressing mental health issues and eating disorders of women. A vast majority of this research speaks from a medical and highly technical standpoint, often dehumanizing the very population it concerns. It is incredibly pertinent to make available studies that
address the standpoint of the women who are speaking about their bodies and written for the women whom this research may affect.

ORGANIZATION OF STUDY

This thesis begins with an overview of body image research as it pertains to ideal beauty and beauty standards for women. Chapter one lists and defines three narratives as it pertains to this discussion. Here, I also address the role of the media with a critique of the ideals in the media. Chapter two outlines an explanation of the methodology that guided the research Chapter three describes findings from The Body Project workshop observations, interviews and primary document analysis. Chapter four presents and discusses the findings from this study follows. That chapter discusses both the quantitative and qualitative data from the survey. Finally, chapter five concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the study, recommendations for programs like the Body Project and considerations for future research.
CHAPTER 1
MYTHS OF BEAUTY IN AMERICAN CULTURE

Naomi Wolf (1991), author and political consultant, wrote to expose the “beauty myth” in which she argued the beauty ideal works to keep women under rule by the patriarchal system, created for “men’s institutions and institutional power” (13). Wolf argues the “beauty myth” is the idea that the quality of beauty, “objectively and universally exists” (12) and what is defined as beautiful in women is not about appearance but symbols for desirable female behaviors of the time. Wolf argued the ideas about beauty “have evolved since the Industrial Revolution side by side with ideas about money” (20). She listed examples of “looking like a million dollars,” “her face is her fortune” and “first-class beauty” (20).

Wolf also described this “beauty myth” as an “iron maiden.” This idea draws upon the original iron maiden of medieval times. This was a metal device which closed to trap individuals and torture them to death through starvation, or the quicker method of spikes through their body. It gets its name from the fact the originals were “a body shaped casket painted with the limbs and features of a lovely, smiling young woman” (17). Applied to beauty, Wolf argued the “‘iron maiden’ of today is the modern hallucination in which women are trapped or trap themselves is similarly rigid, cruel, and euphemistically painted boxes” (17).

Wolf was one of the first to expose the “beauty myth” and is often referenced as a leading voice in the third-wave feminist movement. Her work was groundbreaking in the critique of Western ideals of beauty and attractiveness. Her infamous writings have encouraged the public to become skeptical and critical of understanding the motivation
behind our social institutions, previously accepted as given. Most of all, Wolf illuminated how the “beauty myth” worked to infiltrate our daily lives from every aspect.

American culture places a heavy emphasis on one’s image and particularly on body image. Generally, ‘female body image’ can mean the perceptions about the physical appearance of a woman’s body (Gleeson and Frith 2006). Women’s body images play a large role in women’s identity construction and self-esteem. The degree to which body image is positive or negative is influenced by a number of social factors such as media. However, although Americans’ waistlines have grown at an alarming rate over the past few decades, our obsession with our bodies is not a recent trend.

A modern notion of one’s body image is not simply focused on one’s weight but rather every physical attribute about oneself. This emphasis on the physical is even still an evolving trend. The literature suggests previous shifts in the beauty ideal. Joan Jacobs Brumberg (1997) illustrates how the modern beauty ideal developed. The beauty ideal of the Victorian era required strict adherence to a model emphasizing personality and behavioral characteristics which were historically associated with femininity.

Joan Jacobs Brumberg (1997) offers historical recounts of those shifts. She collected information from the Victorian Era to the 1990s to illuminate American culture’s progression away from encouraging ideal character or personality traits to define beauty, to the emphasis on physical appearance as the standard for measuring beauty. Using personal diaries of American girls from the 1830s to the 1990s, she mixes her historian voice with theirs as an organizational framework. The purpose was to use the diaries to tell the story of how the “American girl’s relationship to her body has changed over the past century” (xxi). She discusses the ways in which women first began
altering their bodies to fit a specific image. From corsets, to flapper gowns to diet and exercise, women have been working on several “body projects” to conform to the changes demanded by our culture. Her discussion of the first bras is particularly relevant, as many of responses from the women’s journals, help to illustrate how the beauty ideal has specific standards for different parts of the female body. Beyond a woman’s weight, her breast size and shape has come under scrutiny causing a drastic rise in breast augmentation procedures. This fixation on specific parts of the body is the second theme to arise from the qualitative responses of my research. From Brumberg and through other authors, it is clear American’s obsession with breasts is neither recently developed, nor based purely on sex. This discussion is a direct example of the beauty ideal’s variation from the emphasis on weight and body size to pushing itself into other areas of women’s bodies.

According to Brumberg (1997) the first bras were to flatten the breasts, not shape and control like ones today. This is interesting because the first bras were meant to shape and support what was naturally already there, not create the illusion of more like the bras of today are designed to do. Brumberg states that “circular stitching to enhance the roundness of the breast” [as well as our] “current cup size system (A, B, C, and D)” emerged in the 1930s (109). However, in 1900, girls wore what we today would call a camisole and there were just variations of those up through adulthood. The aims of these were to emphasize the waist, and minimize the bust line. Brumburg (1997) found many girls in the early 1900s made their own bras, but like many other things that began as homemade items, transitioned to mass-produced models. This is the beginning of the “specific body part” trend in the beauty ideal.
Today, it seems as if a standard exists for everything: weight, hair color, eye color and shape, skin tone, breast size and shape, leg length, shoe size, and a woman’s bust, waist and hip ratio. It also seems the standard is determined or at least reinforced by mediated messages. Mediated messages refers to messages which are produced and maintained by various media sources through a variety of media outlets which aid in shaping the population’s view of others and themselves. Yet, as a female and consumer of media, it is not too difficult to notice a movement towards newer messages; messages which supplement or challenge the beauty ideal.

We now know what is meant by the beauty myth; the idea that one body is beautiful for all, regardless of age, race and culture. However, women are relating to alternative messages to the traditional model of defining beauty. Messages that focus on health and body acceptance have become more prominent in helping women decide how they feel about their bodies. Examining the historical shifts the beauty ideal has gone through, one can see how it became the stereotypical negative ideal it is known as today. A sociological understanding of those shifts might show how they were deliberate and selfishly motivated actions.

J. Robyn Goodman and Kim Walsh-Childers (2004) conducted three focus groups of college women to “examine how women negotiate exposure to mass-mediated images of disproportionately large-breasted women” (658). They argued that, “during the past decade, breast augmentation surgeries have grown 548% and account for 15% of all cosmetic procedures” speaks to the extremes women go to in order to achieve the ideal breasts (657). Although serious illness and even death have been the result of the extreme body augmentation methods many women endure, women still resort to surgery to
achieve their body ideal. While the women in the focus groups viewed women in magazines like Playboy, Victoria’s Secret, and Cosmopolitan, they acknowledged that the women’s breasts looked fake and disproportional, but still said they would like to have their bodies. At the same time, women in this study understood the fictitious nature of magazine photos in general; i.e. airbrushing, make-up, padded bras, and breast tape.

However, the women of their study simultaneously accepted these women in the magazines and catalog as unrealistic, and the mediated message of large breasts as “ineffective” on them, some of them “strongly desired looking like what they perceived to be the male ideal” (665). They also “repeatedly chose to allow it [the male ideal] to influence their own beliefs because they desired the benefits ideal breasts bring” (665). Overall, these women stated they desired “a thin body [like those in the Victoria’s Secret catalogs] with approximately a C-cup breast size, a size that is too large to naturally occur for most women with such a thin frame” (667).

This is an example of how messages, particularly about breast size, have embedded themselves into our everyday lives. As we can see, ideal beauty is not simply about weight, but women are told they must also worry about a specific feature, one of which there is very little control, outside surgical means. For heterosexual women, the having or not having a sufficient size of breast can equate to success or failure in one’s personal and professional relationships, as well as in receiving or not receiving male attention.

Brumberg (1997) argues that “mass-produced clothing fostered autonomy in girls because it took matters of style and taste outside the dominion of the mother” and “with store-bought clothes, the body had to fit instantaneously into standard sizes that were
constructed from a pattern representing a norm” (110). When the clothing didn’t fit, women often thought there was something wrong with them, increasing self-consciousness in women. This model can be relevant to the experiences many girls today face in the dressing room. Her use of young girls’ diaries written throughout history provides exemplary real-life support for her claims. Her work closely examines how the changes in our society’s culture have caused changes in women’s experience of growing up. Her discussion illuminates real-life examples of how girls are navigating our gendered society now and how it differed from a few decades to a century ago.

Brumberg’s examples illustrate that young girls’ primary contributor towards what was ideal was their mothers and grandmothers. Women used the limited products and materials available to them to assist in achieving ideal beauty. The opportunity for greater accessibility and convenience of pre-made products grew into the market. Thus, as a greater variety of products and advertising began to be available, an outside voice to the beauty ideal dialogue was introduced. This voice was media.

COMPETING NARRATIVES

Aside from the beauty ideal, researchers have raised questions about other narratives about women’s bodies that seem to be making their way into mainstream culture. Two in particular are the healthy ideal and the body acceptance ideal. These two ideals appear to exist alongside the beauty ideal. Within popular culture, the media primarily uses magazines and television to sell the three ideals.

One example of the impact of magazines can be found in research conducted by Frances E. Gorman (2005). She conducted a content analysis of 12 issues of Seventeen, for the messages conveyed by their advertisements (analyzing a total of 331
advertisements). She found that teenage girls “use magazine images to construct their definitions of femininity by comparing the images to themselves, others and the ideals of their peers [and] they choose images or stories of femininity they can most relate to and find desirable” (13). She found that the ads in Seventeen “continue to promote the stereotypical definitions of femininity that have been observed in adult women’s magazines for years…displaying them as subordinate and sexualized”(17).

From Gorman, we see how contemporary teens are actively using the images available to them to construct their identities. Rather than a one-size-fits-all message, typically associated with the traditional beauty ideal, these girls were getting slight variations to choose from. Rather than the message centering on the thin/fat dichotomy, she found the girls were given a message with the same underlying power/subordination theme as their mothers. But, there are other things going on here. Contemporary media is contributing to these created alternative messages in the ideal beauty discussion.

A couple of recent trends in mainstream media are an attempt to place emphasis on body acceptance, as well as focusing on health as the motivation for body alteration. I will discuss a few of the more popular examples for the healthy ideal and the body acceptance ideal. A major purpose of each these examples is to attempt to depict a more realistic story and/or character that individuals with body image concerns can identify with their struggles. This is important to know because advertisers are aware that there are more female than male consumers. It is a logical tactic to market towards the female demographic.

Research suggests that women in American culture internalize messages on body and power on a greater level than men. Kate Fox, a social anthropologist, and author and
director for the Social Issues Research Centre (SIRC) based in the United Kingdom provided a summation of research on body image. She argued that because women begin to dislike their reflection in the mirror only a few years after being able to even recognize their reflection, body dissatisfaction is internalized at a very young age (Fox 1997). And, while women become dissatisfied with their bodies at a young age, males are most likely to be dissatisfied with their bodies at ages 45-55. Even then, the emphasis of their dissatisfaction is focused on “height, stomach, chest and hair loss” (Fox 1997:3). Media’s standard of ideal beauty has shifted over the decades, becoming less attainable by the female population.

The negative side effects of the beauty ideal are endured more so by women and also for more of the woman’s life, than men. Moreover, the areas that are of greatest concern to men are fewer than the number of areas of concern to women. Because of Americans’ growing waistlines, the intensification of the thin ideal and the rise of “fat-phobia,” discrimination against the obese, particularly obese women has sprouted. This too is not without consequences. In fact, research suggests a strong correlation between individuals with high BMIs and low levels of mental wellness, lower even than the chronically ill or severely disabled (Fox 1997). Mental illness could be defined as anxiety, mild depression, or social anxiety. One could also argue that the chronically ill and severely disabled have come to terms with their circumstance and have moved to acceptance, whereas one’s weight always seems potentially changeable. We know the stigma attached to being overweight: the assumption that the person is lazy, gluttonous and has no self-control or will power. Of course this is typically not the case. Fox argues it is our culture’s social pressures and the association of beauty with thinness that create
this problem (Fox 1997). Through her research she has found that it is “strong minded individuals who reject current standards [who] are more likely to have a positive body image” (5). However, with hyper-sexualized and demeaning messages bombarding women from all directions and the message that this is what women should be, it can be quite difficult to become a strong minded individual who can reject current standards.

As a leader in research on images of women used in advertising, Jean Kilbourne argues that “sex has been used to sell just about everything” (2005:119). There is extensive research that shows the negative impact of media and advertising on body image. Females and increasingly males are bombarded with messages of what the “ideal” women, men and couples look like, every day. Because of the power these messages have in post-industrial Western society, women often respond with feelings of inadequacy. The message of inadequacy also extends beyond body image. It extends to women’s sex lives as well.

Kilbourne (2000) argued that women are also sold the message of a falsely fulfilling relationship with food. So while we are fed the idea our bodies are not good enough to obtain and maintain relationships, we are also given suggestions on how to alleviate those negative feelings with food. She argued, “Advertisers offer food as a way to repress anger, resentment, and hurt feelings…but the food that is heavily advertised is seldom nourishing and rarely deeply satisfying” (91, 92). Support for Kilbourne’s argument of contradictory messages can easily be found on the cover of any number of women’s magazines. These covers typically highlight ways to lose weight as well as (often weight-inducing) recipes.
Kilbourne’s research shows how media can instill feelings of inadequacy amongst individuals within an entire population, not just a gender. In the case of hyper-sexualized images, we learn that only young, thin, Caucasian (although often tanned) heterosexual couples are deserving and capable of experiencing sexual pleasure. It sets an ideal of what sexual experiences are supposed to be like. This can set adolescents up for severe disappointment or pressure them to engage in behavior to which they may not entirely want to consent.

An example of the impact of media, especially TV, is a cross-sectional study, comparing two samples of Fijian girls before and after prolonged (three years) television exposure (Becker et al. 2002). Their research lasted from approximately 1995 to 1998. Fiji was chosen because it is a country with extremely low incidence of eating disorders and would best exemplify the effect Western television had on their eating behaviors and attitudes. Both groups took a 26-item eating attitudes test and conducted semi-structured interviews to verify self-reported symptoms. They found rates of dieting amongst ethnic girls rose significantly from 0 to 69%, and young people routinely cited the appearance of the attractive actors on shows like “Beverly Hills 90210” and “Melrose Place” as the inspiration for their weight loss. Here, we can see the power of the media.

CONTEMPORARY MEDIA EXAMPLES

An abundance of examples from mainstream media that depict the lengths women go to achieve ideal beauty already exist. Contemporary media has developed more programming centered on health and self-acceptance. Many of these provide real-life examples of individuals pursuing healthy weight loss or depict an individual struggling on the road to body acceptance. Their stories are relatable, entertaining and inspiring.
The healthy ideal refers to the notion that women should ideally be of a healthy weight in relation to their height. This medically formulated equation which calculates one’s Body Mass Index (denoted as BMI from here forward) motivates subscribers to achieve their target number. A chart depicting which BMIs fall into the underweight, normal, obese and morbidly obese can be found at many county health centers and online. A healthy BMI will depend on one’s height and weight, but also one’s age and gender. The range of what is considered healthy, and therefore acceptable, is between four of five BMI numbers, or across about 15 lbs. The healthy ideal is slightly varied from the beauty ideal, in that there is a larger range of what is acceptable. Although the healthy standard is slightly more accepting, it does not necessarily lessen its compulsive grip on its audience. Shows like “The Biggest Loser,” and “Ruby,” which push losing weight in a healthy manner offer tips and lifestyle changes to help viewers manage their weight are two good examples. However, it is important to clarify the distinction between media and clinical depictions of what is healthy. Media-given examples of quick, extreme weight-loss, albeit through exercise and dieting is very dangerous to anyone’s health. It seems as if media presents the idea of what is healthy with images that convey what a healthy body looks like as opposed to what a healthy body can do. Clinical definitions of what the healthy ideal means differs greatly from the healthy ideal we are presented with in media examples.

In a reality-based setting, “The Biggest Loser,” is a game show which “challenges and encourages overweight contestants to shed pounds in a safe and recommended manner through comprehensive diet and exercise as they compete for a grand prize of $250,000.” “The Biggest Loser” is a popular television show which brings 20 severely
overweight contestants together with two professional trainers. The trainers work with the contestants to lose a lot of weight very quickly. The show discusses how the contestants gained weight throughout their lives and the reasons why they want to change. The underlying suggestion is that this is the last resort for these individuals before obesity takes their lives. Over the course of a two-hour episode, viewers watch the contestants intensely work out with their trainer pushing them the whole way. Through different game challenges contestants have the chance to win phone calls home, extra weight deduction at the weekly weigh-in ceremony, or immunity from the elimination at the end of each week. On a stage, with large display screens, the contestants weigh-in at the end of the episode and their overall percent of fat loss is calculated and the two with least amount of fat loss for the week are on the ballot for elimination. Contestants vote on who should be eliminated and then that contestant leaves to continue their weight loss journey at home.

“The Biggest Loser” runs a promotion in which they challenge at-home viewers to lose weight along with the contestants of the show. Prior to each commercial break viewers see a short video segment from the trainers of the show. Either or both trainers host guests of the show like chefs or celebrities, and use this time to offer ideas of how viewers can fit activities or dieting tips, which incorporate products used by contestants, on the show into their daily lives to help them achieve their dream of a healthier (thinner) lifestyle. Since initially airing in 2004, the program has grown to become its own “health and lifestyle brand.” Offering an,

…online diet and exercise subscription-based extension of the show,

Biggestloserclub.com, The Biggest Loser Meal Plan, a New York Times best-
selling books series, best-selling fitness DVD series, line of appliances, fitness equipment, protein supplements and countless other health and lifestyle based products, The Biggest Loser consumer products program has generated over $50 million in spending with presence at more than 25,000 major retailers to date.²

Ruby,³ another reality-based show, which addresses health ideals about a southern woman, who states she “struggled with weight her since childhood” and risked death. This motivated her to lose weight and get healthy, for good. The show follows her journey as she loses the weight; which, at her heaviest was 715 pounds, dropping to about 350 pounds since starting the show in 2008. During each episode the viewer accompanies Ruby as she faces a new challenge regarding her changing body. Viewers watch her work out, walking all over New York City, going on dates, talking to plastic surgeons, going to a water park, buying new clothes, and working to view herself as little Ruby. Along the way, she narrates her thoughts, feelings, challenges, and suggestions to others who may find themselves in similar situations. Since the beginning of the show she has written a book and completed countless TV, radio and public appearances talking about her weight loss journey. She is very active in the mainstream media, keeping a blog on the Style Network’s website, and a Twitter account where she invites fans to come workout with her. No one expects Ruby to become a model, but rather simply become healthy. While “The Biggest Loser” and “Ruby” are examples of individuals losing weight for health reasons, there is a contrasting ideal that focuses on acceptance.

The body acceptance ideal is the outcome of what initially began as backlash to the beauty ideal, demonstrated through clear and extreme contrasting messages. For the

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purpose of this thesis, this ideal should be understood as the belief that everyone is perfect in their own way. While being healthy is a great goal, it also is not the ideal for many, and many examples found in media do not portray healthy means to achieving a healthier body. So to contrast, an individual who may be any size may simply prefer to embrace their bodies as they are. This idea reflects the body acceptance ideal.

The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty states their mission is “to make more women feel beautiful every day by widening stereotypical views of beauty.” The campaign was launched in 2004 and is possible due to proceeds from product purchases. With this money they hold beauty workshops which work to educate women, specifically young girls, on how to accept themselves and view themselves as beautiful. The campaign aims at “widening the definition and discussion of beauty.”

In 2005 they created advertising featuring real women with real bodies and curves, in an effort to debunk the idea that only thin is beautiful. The advertisements for their products depicted un-retouched women of a variety of shapes, sizes and color. Text in the advertisements emphasized body acceptance and encouraged women to love their bodies. After some research, Dove widened their scope to include young girls. They believed this message of acceptance needed to reach girls at a younger age, before the beauty industry did. And so, the development of the Self-Esteem Fund created opportunities for women everywhere to mentor the next generation and celebrate individual beauty. To become involved, women can work with one of Dove’s partners like the Girl Scouts, Boys and Girls Club of America and Girls, Inc. to work on furthering self-esteem building events and educational resources.

Another example, in mainstream media, of the body acceptance ideal is the sitcom “Drop Dead Diva.”\(^5\) Aired weekly on cable television, it is described as “a comedic drama series that puts a wildly unique and entertaining spin on the complex issues of a woman’s identity in today’s world.” The premise of the show follows the main character, Deb, a stereotypical fashion model who relied on her beauty to get her through life until a fatal car accident sent her to heaven. She was accidentally sent back to Earth. However, she now inhabits the body of a successful, plus-sized young lawyer, Jane, who was shot by a disgruntled former client coincidentally, at the same time as Deb’s car accident. Throughout the show she is faced with challenges revolving around her “new” body and struggles to navigate the world using her “brilliant new mind,” at the deficit of losing her “most valuable asset.”

Deb/Jane struggles with the new body and the new problems that come with it, while simultaneously yearning for her previous body. She also has striking moments of Jane’s intelligence bursting through to save the case. At the end of the day, she comes to understand that her intelligence and personality are what make her beautiful, and she tries to simply accept that.

**BEAUTY AND PROFIT**

While a goal of these contemporary efforts is to provide alternative messages to the beauty ideal, it is easy to recognize when the message is interwoven with capitalistic motivations. Wolf argued, all those years ago, that beauty is tied to economic structures. That seems to continue to be the case.

Shows like “The Biggest Loser,” and “Ruby,” push losing weight in a healthy manner by offering not only tips but also products to help viewers make lifestyle changes

in an effort to manage their weight. For example, the “Ruby” website indicates it is sponsored by Glucerna® which offers products (shakes, snack bars and cereal) targeted towards individuals with diabetes, certainly a concern for many seriously overweight individuals. “The Biggest Loser” has several sponsors, like Brita® water, Extra® gum, Ziploc®, Subway®, Walgreens®, 24 Hour Fitness® gyms, and Verizon Wireless®. Not to mention their Biggest Loser brand line of products. They also have their own resort where individuals can enjoy a “fitness getaway” that offers programs and activities in line with “The Biggest Loser lifestyle.”

It appears as though shows like “Ruby” and “The Biggest Loser,” and to some degree the Dove Campaign, have progressed in terms of genuinely positive healthy or body acceptance focused content but at the same time continue on the treadmill of capitalistic production. One wonders what happens when they expand shows (like “The Biggest Loser”) into 2-hour long dramatic commercials. From watching the shows, and witnessing this transition first-hand, I could see how the expansion of the show from one hour to two hours was based simply on the opportunity to promote products from corporate partnerships and produce a more diverse, and therefore, lucrative company.

Utilizing media to counter its own message is a good idea, but as Wolf (1991) suggested, we need to evaluate who is creating these messages, the reasons why these messages are (re)created every day and what we can do to use them to empower us. She said, “perhaps debate renewed in more political terms about the beauty myth in the media, and the seriousness of its consequence, will forge new alliances in support of those women in print and TV and radio journalism who are eager to battle the beauty
myth at ground zero” (Wolf 1991:278). As I have illustrated, I am not so sure we have begun to achieve this to our best abilities.

However, this not true for everybody. “Drop Dead Diva” provides an entertaining, and realistic look into the struggles plus-sized women face. The premise of the show illustrates the dichotomous message women are constantly faced with; beauty versus brains. More directly, it isn’t endorsing a make-over kit or book collection.

The healthy and body acceptance ideals were developed out of dissatisfaction with the “one size fits all” beauty ideal. However, as I have demonstrated, the overall intent of the ideals may be improving, but the meat of these messages is not where it needs to be. Because of this, the messages could be similarly damaging as the beauty ideal.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Critique of the “beauty myth” has been well-established and is flourishing. Resistance movements to the “thin ideal” have been launched to promote body acceptance and healthy lifestyle changes. We can argue with Wolf’s critique but what about regular women. With all the messages out there, how do average college women manage this dialogue? The purpose of this study is to explore the dynamics of the three competing/outstanding ideals and provide recommendations for programs such as the Body Project who work with college age women on body issues. This study is more than the tired story of girls and their (positive or negative) body image; it is about the degree to which messages about their bodies are being internalized by a new generation of women who take on even more conflicting messages than those before them. By utilizing findings from surveying women in general at UCM and a case study of the Body Project,
I will explore the body image concerns of women and how widespread concerns about their bodies are in a broader sample of undergraduate women.
CHAPTER 2
METHODOLOGY

To explore these questions, I utilized a mixed methods approach. I conducted a case study of the Body Project focused on women with concerns about their bodies and supplemented this with a survey of the general population of freshman women on the University of Central Missouri campus to see how widespread concerns about the body are. UCM is a regional university. Freshman status was determined based on the amount of credits the participant had completed at the time of data collection. I selected the UCM campus because of convenience and there is no reason to think this campus is unique for the Midwest.

CASE STUDY OF THE UCM BODY PROJECT

To explore this issue, I conducted a qualitative case study of The Body Project. The Body Project is an eight week workshop that is sponsored by the University of Central Missouri Counseling Center. The workshop is based on the book The Body Project: Promoting Body Acceptance and Preventing Eating Disorders: Facilitator Guide by Eric Stice & Katherine Presnell. The goal is to get young women to break through the social ideals of what the perfect body image is, and offer realistic activities to lose weight in a healthy way.

A case study was chosen because it allowed for the study of my research population in a natural context in which to share their lived experiences, personal feelings about body image, and specifically how they reference popular culture. Case studies are useful for focused, exploratory research. Case study research places emphasis on

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meaning rather than causality. These were all elements I was looking to implement in my research. I wanted to focus on the feelings of the women in *The Body Project*.

All women who participated in *The Body Project* were included. The workshop had already established the conditional criteria for participation in my research, such that, all individuals who wished to participate in the workshop had to be female and an enrolled student at UCM. The results from this case are not generalizable; however, by focusing on this population it provides a rich source for data collection.

I used three strategies to collect data. This allowed triangulation; that is, using more than one strategy of collecting data. I used triangulation because it allowed for the collection of data from several different people in several different locations, at different points in time. I believe this method offered some support to the truth in the themes that arise from the analysis. Utilizing triangulation to gather data from several sources allowed me to tell the story as best and as accurately as possible. The three sources of data I analyzed included primary documents, observations, and interviews.

The primary document I used was the guide published by *The Body Project*. The facilitator’s guide was very useful in understanding the mission of the workshop and what the workshop leader was trying to get the group to understand. I also used the workshop’s workbook that was given to each participant as another primary document. This workbook included “homework assignments” and readings that led the group from the previous session into the issues to be discussed at the next session.

As mentioned previously, I attended and participated in the sessions in order to observe the group. I took notes during the group discussions and listened to regular, naturally occurring conversations for relevant or insightful comments. The purpose of
observing this group was to gain insight into the conceptual framework in which these women think and talk about their bodies as a group, particularly as they used and referenced popular culture.

There were eight weeks in the workshop. While I observed the weekly workshop meetings, I asked for volunteers to be interviewed. Interviews used a semi-structured interview format using open-ended questions from the interview guide. The interview guide consisted of 22 questions about cultural ideal beauty, individual ideal beauty, how their ideals were developed and differ from the beauty ideal, how they relate to media, and how they work to situate themselves in the dialogue of ideal beauty (See APPENDIX A). Only three participants volunteered for the formal interviews and were willing to talk about their body issues. Each girl was interviewed once for about an hour. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Each participant in the workshop and in the interviews has been assigned a pseudonym. At each interview verbal consent was received and all ethical standards were followed.

After all observations and interviews were completed, I analyzed my observation notes, facilitator’s guide, workshop workbook, and interview transcriptions for interwoven connections. At that point I moved to the second phase of the research, the questionnaire.

QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN

For the next step of the research, I conducted a cross-sectional design using an anonymous questionnaire. Using a cross-sectional approach allows me to examine one representative subset of a particular population, at one point in time. For this phase, I was interested in the same population as the Body Project study, UCM undergraduates. To
find these women, I distributed questionnaires in 12 General Sociology courses at UCM until yielding 81 surveys. Verbal permission from instructors was obtained prior to distribution. For each General Sociology section, I asked the instructor for the last ten minutes of the class to obtain volunteers. I explained that I was interested in speaking to only female students aged 18-25. Once the males, and older females left the classroom, I further explained the purpose of my research and the survey instrument. I then asked if the women would complete the survey.

Freshman women were chosen for the study for two primary reasons. First, they are at the age where their identity is coming to full fruition. As stated by Wilkins (2008):

In our contemporary imagination, adolescence and young adulthood are developmentally changing periods. They are associated with identity phases purportedly aimed at eventual settled adult identity…The developmental model suggests that part of the adolescent imperative is to uncover or resolve who we really are: that is to find stable, knowable identities (4).

Second, this group is coming of age at a time when these three narratives are competing most for their attention. Women, particularly young women, are disproportionately targeted by the advertising industry. More than half of advertisements in women’s magazines and television commercials aimed at female viewers use beauty as product appeal (Hoffman 2004). The use of General Sociology students is not a generalizable sample, but they were available and can be compared to the UCM general student body to identify any key differences.

The use of a questionnaire is beneficial because it is inexpensive and offers greater anonymity than interviews. The items on the questionnaire addressed three central
areas: the beauty ideal, the healthy ideal and the body acceptance ideal. Each ideal scale consisted of five ordinal Likert scale statements using a four point response strongly agree to strongly disagree. There were also several basic demographic question including race/ethnicity, age, height, weight and sexual orientation information. In addition, there were two open-ended narrative responses from participants. The first open-ended item was on their perception of the mediated message(s) of ideal beauty/body and the other was their own idea of ideal beauty/body (See APPENDIX B).

Reliability is the overall consistency of the measuring tool. In the case of the questionnaire, reliability was improved by having close-ended questions, consistent rules for administering the survey and correlations to check the inter-reliability of the scales. Validity concerns the question are you measuring what you really intend to measure. I improved validity by grounding the questionnaire in the qualitative case study results. The use of scales improved validity of the questionnaire as well. The overall credibility of this study as a mixed-method approach is triangulation of information and analyzing the data both intensively in the case study and extensively in the questionnaire.

REFLEXIVITY

Studying a group of women who are so much like me provided a kind of mutual access and respect. I felt I connected to this research and these women because I could identify with their experience in many ways. I was a female, college student with body image concerns. However, also an Asian-American, my identity construction remained a struggle for me. Like the women of the Body Project I worked to situate myself in the limited options presented by our culture.
My personal connection to this research allowed me to empathize with the women, as they told their stories, in a more realistic way. Participating in the Body Project helped me achieve more connective interviews. I felt as if my life-long struggle had prepared me to better understand these women’s experiences and to listen with great care.
CHAPTER 3
THE BODY PROJECT

_The Body Project_ is an example of the kind of program that tries to address body issues with young women. I came across _The Body Project_ in early February, 2010, through a campus-wide e-mail inviting interested students to participate in the workshop. I decided it would be a great research opportunity. At the first meeting of the _Body Project_ I was introduced as a student-researcher by the facilitator, and was able to talk to the other women about my research and any role they may have in it. All participants were allowed to ask any questions after I briefly explained to them my roles as both researcher and participant. Afterwards, each participant gave their verbal consent to my presence and to have their comments included. Each time a new individual joined the group, my role and research was explained and verbal consent was obtained.

The women of the workshop were all undergraduate students, except for one. They varied in height, weight and perceived ethnicity. A couple of the girls were thin and athletic appearing, while some women were larger, more heavy-set. Some wore makeup, curled their hair, and dressed up, while others wore sweatpants and hooded sweatshirts. The women were mostly outgoing, and willing to speak and share with the group.

The meetings were held in the counseling center’s meeting room. We sat around a large rectangular table with windows on two walls. The windows allowed the bright sun to come in and warm the room, despite the wintry cold temperatures outside. Each meeting typically began with the facilitator introducing a concept and discussing it briefly. After a group activity relating to the newly introduced concept, we discussed the homework from the workbook that accompanied the workshop. The group activity
usually allowed for a bit of sharing from each participant, resulting in the session being an hour long.

The facilitator’s guide provided a step by step guide for each meeting. It read very much like a teacher’s manual. It introduced the lesson, explained the objective and methodology for the lesson. It then provided questions and examples to help re-iterate the point of the lesson.

NEGOTIATIONS OF THE BEAUTY IDEAL

From analysis of interviews and observations, several themes resulted from discussing ideal beauty. During the first four sessions, the facilitator focused questions on identifying what participants felt media was telling them about ideal beauty, and how that message affected them. Many women discussed feeling conflicted in knowing the media was wrong, and that women needed to make their own ideal, even so many still felt compelled to attempt to come as close as possible to media’s ideal. This negotiation of simultaneous acceptance and rejection of the beauty ideal was overwhelmingly present in the analysis.

When Body Project participants were asked what they felt the beauty ideal was, the women overwhelmingly responded with ideas of what they thought it was, based on media standards, but then discussed a more “realistically attainable” idea. These women conveyed they understand there is an idea of what ideal beauty is, as seen in media, but they also understood the critique of that standard. The women in the Body Project seem to be in constant negotiation of accepting varying degrees of the ideal and critiques as truth for them. The women use this varying degree of acceptance to help guide their behavior and thoughts about their body concerns.
The women were also asked about their own ideal of beauty. Each acknowledged the media standard of beauty and then described what their own ideal was. Their idea of the media standard of beauty focused on physical features, weight, body size, breast size, hair etc., while their own ideal focused on facial characteristics, personality elements and only some mention of body size/type. They all alluded to an ideal, but none of the women actually identified what it specifically was. There are a few ideals floating around out there, rail-thin and flat-chested, or rail-thin and large-chested. While these two ideals, the supermodel and the Baywatch babe, differ in chest size, they are still unrealistically thin (Derenne and Beresin, 2006). Across the conversations, observations and interviews this is how the women discussed ideal beauty. As Brooke put it:

*The idea is to be generally thin, flawless complexion and like somebody who would be in a magazine or on TV, but in reality, my idea is somebody who is like my friend, [name omitted], who always looks good, I think it’s mostly because she’s always smiling; she has this face that’s always smiling. I think that’s really attractive (Brooke, 60 year old Junior, Psychology Student).*

While participants recognized the beauty ideal existed, the negotiation between self-confidence and fitting the ideal was evident. Many women in *The Body Project* expressed they know they should think of themselves as the ideal (body acceptance ideal), but still struggle with rejecting the beauty ideal absolutely. An example of this can be seen in what Barbara shared:

*I should say myself, is what I should say, but I know it’s not what I’m going to say. It’s the media, I know they are playing me and I let them. Um, I think one of my really good friends, she’s not skinny, but she’s not big, um she’s probably*
around a size 14, I think is average and I think it’s beautiful, because if you’re too skinny, it’s just not as attractive as people like to think it is. But, she’s athletic, um, cute brown hair, you know round face, she’s just all American and isn’t not just her body that draws me to her, of course it’s her personality. I mean, I love her because of who she is (Barbara, 21 year old Junior Theatre Student).

Participant Latrice gives an example of her ideal female based on physical body type, but then describes her personality ideal as if it doesn’t exist in the media. Because she is African American, her ideal is different than those of her white counterparts. She believes a woman is allowed to be more curvy and “thick” and still be the beauty ideal. This is supported by previous research that argues women in the Black community (and Asian) internalize the majority’s ideal of beauty to a lesser degree (Fox, 1997).

Physically, I would say Beyoncé. She’s…well before she lost her weight…because she was very curvy and thick, and at the same time she was in shape and she looks like she has nice skin and she’s very pretty. Um, that’s like the physical ideal to me…for personality, I think it’s someone who is always positive and lives life to the fullest, very accepting of others (Latrice, 23 year old 2nd year Graduate Student).

Discussions in the Body Project confirm this acknowledgement of a beauty ideal and in one group exercise they were easily able to list characteristics that fit into this ideal. They described their conflict in trying to negate the presence of an ideal influence on them, but admitted that sometimes it did. They indicated feelings of inadequacy and confinement. Comparing themselves to the ideal and ultimately falling short is brought to a more immediate level when the beauty ideal encourages women to compare themselves
to friends. Women already compared themselves to a somewhat fictitious version of the ideal, typically a celebrity. However, women also compared themselves (or parts of themselves) to their friends, families, and even the random women they encountered on a daily basis.

COMPARISON OF SELF TO OTHERS

From the observations of the Body Project sessions and the interviews, there was extensive mention of the women comparing themselves to others. “Others” meant a variety of things to them. “Others” would be other real-life females, family members, women in the popular culture, former versions of themselves, and even to other women in the Body Project. This correlates to what Gorman (2005) found in teenage girls’ “use [of] magazine images to construct their definitions of femininity by comparing the images to themselves, others and the ideals of their peers…they choose images or stories of femininity they can most relate to and find desirable” (13). As Latrice says:

I compare myself a lot. Like, I compare their happiness, like skinny makes them happy. I guess I was raised where my parents put it in my mind that for me to find a man, I need to lose weight and I need to be a certain size. So I compare myself to like people who are skinnier, and like “okay, they have a relationship, and they are happy” okay I need to drop pounds to get a relationship (Latrice, 23 year old 2nd year Graduate Student).

At the first session of the Body Project, the facilitator asked us to pick out two photos that appealed to us for whatever reason. Valerie is a white female, who has an athletic body shape, but has body image issues. She struggles with looking “fit enough.” She picked out a black and white photograph of a young woman who was very
athletically fit placed against a black background. The woman is wearing a top and bottom bikini-like workout outfit. She is bending down, putting her body in a sharp “V” shape, and photographed from the side. Valerie told us why she picked this photograph.

*Every time I see a picture where a person has no fat...ugh, I want that* (Valerie, 20 year old Junior Child and Family Development Student).

As Valerie described her feelings, some of the other girls, slightly shook their head. I may be wrong, however I can only believe they may have been thinking the same thing I was, which is “I would kill to look like Valerie, why is she upset?” The fact that other girls in the session outwardly displayed their frustration, showed the comparison of themselves to other girls even within *The Body Project*. Interestingly, even as *The Body Project* attempted to establish an environment of common acceptance amongst girls of all body shapes and sizes. Because our comparative behavior is so engrained in our lifestyle, it is difficult to exclude this behavior even in what should be a neutral environment. What appeared to happen was while we were talking about how we can reject the thin ideal and were shouting out excellent answers rapid fire, they were simultaneously embracing the beauty ideal. This maybe led to comparing themselves to another girl, feeling bad about themselves, and possibly feeling anger towards the girl who they may feel has nothing to be upset about with her body. To them, her body may have emulated the ideal. Under the influence of the ideal, we failed to sympathize with the concerns of others, and maybe even negated them. Brooke said:

*I’m heavier than the ideal. And…but I do, you know try to look presentable and take care of myself. I guess, [I get messages] mostly looking at other people and
comparing probably. Comments my husband makes, he’s always trying to get me to go to the gym and stuff (Brooke, 60 year old Junior Psychology Student).

In the example of Brooke, we see that messages were coming to her from several different sources. She is comparing herself to other people in her life, but also noted comments from her husband. She also identified looking “presentable” as an important, almost counteractive argument for being “heavier than the ideal.”

INTERPLAY BETWEEN HEALTH AND BEAUTY

It has been clearly established that mainstream media consumption is doing something negative to women’s attitudes towards their bodies (Kilbourne, 2000). However, research on body image and popular culture has not fully addressed how “healthy talk” and healthy weight loss initiatives may be influencing our attitudes and feelings.

Media like “The Biggest Loser,” as well as products that promote and support a healthy lifestyle have become a current trend targeting not only women, but the population in general. It is my observation that the presently developed health push emphasizes the same ideals of the beauty ideal, but simply done using a different language. This is mainly because of the existing myth that thin equals healthy. It was at the start of the second half of the workshop that I began to raise questions about what it meant to be healthy. One could surely argue that the idea of health and the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion are socially constructed. The profits from promoting health are quite lucrative, since it is something that is a counteraction of the convenience factor that our American culture values so greatly. The creation of a healthy BMI, weight, and fitness level is all constructed to promote a largely unattainable, but reasonable standard.
This is where my questions about health and body image began. Why the push for health? How does being healthy relate to the ideals of beauty?

The women of the Body Project were clearly frustrated with their struggle in trying to talk about their bodies in relationship to what they felt they were supposed to look like and the logistics of getting there. The beauty ideal is both specific and vague. The beauty ideal is specific in that the women suggested one just knows when they see it. It is vague in that you’re never quite able to achieve it, no matter how hard you try or what you do. It is a moving target.

Participants of the workshop were given the message of resisting the ‘thin ideal’ for various reasons. Health was the major one. Yet, the second half of the workshop focused on losing weight. The facilitator’s guide stated it is not necessary to offer both portions of the workshop together, but both have received support from trials which attest to each portions success. It is also stated there is no data to support any improved success or lessened success with the implementation of both consecutively (Stice and Presnell, 2007).

To begin the first session of the last four weeks, the set which offers lifestyle changing activities, participants were asked what types of things they already thought they did to include more activity in their day. The facilitator’s guide instructs leaders to tell the group that,

*The goal [of the last set of the workshop] is to reach a balance that will permit you to stop obsessing about food and dieting and achieve a lasting healthy weight.*

*We will use proven behavioral principles to achieve this aim because many people find it difficult to make lifestyle changes. This will help you feel better.*
about your body and result in improved health. This intervention is also simple and can be easily incorporated into your busy life. In the workbook, part two of the workshop is entitled, “healthy weight interventions” (Stice and Presnell, 2007: 75).

During the first session participants are told dieting does not work, and that there is extensive research that shows this to be true. It is difficult to ignore how the shift of the workshop changed from loving yourself no matter what to changing what you don’t like about yourself, as long as it’s done in a healthy matter. This shift caused some skeptical emotions to arise. I do acknowledge there is a point where individuals have extensive health concerns in which losing weight is the only solution, but outside of that, women who were in this workshop did not seem to exhibit any of these complications. The women who attended the workshop were not all overweight. Some were very athletic, but still had some body image concerns. One session, in the first set of the workshop focused on how body image concerns affected all girls and women, not just overweight ones. Participants offered examples of how they are learning that girls at any size can have body image concerns. Carrie described herself as “big all her life” stated:

My friend who is a size 0 is showing me that, too fat or too skinny, we have the same problems, just on other ends of the spectrum (Carrie 30 year old Junior Criminal Justice student).

The group also discussed and suggested ways to fulfill the “energy balance equation.” The “energy balance equation” is the healthy weight intervention that is backed by the same research as the entire Body Project. It focused on the individual
women and asked them to commit to making specific changes. The “energy balance equation” as it was discussed in one meeting, suggested:

- **Substitution**-replacing high calorie foods with satisfying lower calorie foods,
- **High water-content foods**-this helps you feel fuller faster. Intended for beginning of the meal,
- **Smaller portion sizes**-fill a smaller plate,
- **Less variety in one meal**-helps to avoid eating servings of everything,
- **Healthier food environment**-avoid dining in front of a television, as this can contribute to mindless eating and/or snacking.

Participants were given “food tracking” worksheets to help them monitor their food intake. This document was created by the facilitator and not published by *The Body Project*. In it, there was also a column in which participants could write down what they were *feeling* when they ate something. There were also columns to rate the level of guilt, anxiety and hunger. In the workbook, however, there is a similar recording sheet. Here, participants simply track the time, food and amount that is eaten. The instructions encouraged participants to keep track of food intake for at least two weekdays and one weekend day for the forthcoming week. The purpose was to help participants become aware of what they are eating.

The next form was the “healthy weight exercise record.” However, I’m skeptical as to how “do-able” this is. They were told:

*Write down each time you exercise for at least 20 minutes this week. This can be planned exercise, such as jogging, or incidental exercise, such as walking across*
campus to your classes. You may photocopy this form from the workbook (Stice and Presnell 2007: 21).

It is unclear if this is meant to intend 20 straight minutes of exercise or 20 minutes cumulative over the course of the whole day. Asking the women in which this initiative is aimed at to suddenly begin exercising for at least 20 minutes a day can be seen as less than “do-able” in their eyes. Particularly if a woman in The Body Project has a perceived weight issue, rather than a health impinging one, this healthy ideal might promote a body image disorder.

However, it is my belief that the aim of the healthy ideal is the beauty ideal’s answer to women’s frustration. The healthy ideal offers a more specific guide to how to become thinner and how to get that perfect looking body. Not only is exercise and dieting something anyone can do, it’s also backed by a more socially acceptable motive; health. The problem with this is that the healthy ideal appears to simply be the beauty ideal but just uses different language. Still, it remains a strategy of control. Overall the Body Project did strive to help women with body image concerns learn to negate the beauty ideal.
CHAPTER 4
QUESTIONNAIRE ANALYSIS

My second approach to exploring this topic was a questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to measure the most important aspects of each ideal I’ve explored: beauty, health and body acceptance. Five statements were generated to create a scale for each ideal. The beauty ideal focused on physical appearance, so variables like body modification, time, other’s opinions, hair and makeup were addressed. The healthy ideal focused primarily on diet, exercise, and other aspects we know to contribute to health; like sleep and toxin intake. Finally, the body acceptance ideal focused on the ability to accept oneself as is. Criteria such as viewing oneself as the ideal, regardless of the presence of other ideals, and variables like height, weight, overall beauty, and overall appearance were addressed. I administered the questionnaire to 81 UCM freshman women in General Sociology classes, as described in the methodology. The data were coded and analyzed using SPSS.

To begin, five demographic items were included to generate an overall picture of the sample. Table 1 illustrates the basic descriptive statistics of the sample for the population of this study. Of the 81 women surveyed, the average participant was an 18 or 19 year old with average BMI, who identified themselves as heterosexual and Caucasian. There was little age variation due to the target sample being very specific. Because the vast majority of participants were Caucasian, the qualitatively measured race and ethnicity item was dichotomized into white/non-white categories from the original five categories. In the sexual orientation item, a large number of missing data developed due
to participants being confused, and writing in “female” or leaving it blank. This item was dropped from the analysis. Thus, the sample basically consisted of young, white, heterosexuals with average BMIs. My sample is similar to the UCM population, however it also a little more diverse in the race category. My sample was also slightly younger than the average UCM student.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Questionnaire Sample N=81</th>
<th>UCM Population N=10,918</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>35 (43.2%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>38 (46.9%)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>4 (4.9%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>4 (4.9%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average Age</strong></td>
<td>19</td>
<td>25.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race and Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>62 (76.5%)</td>
<td>8,169 (75%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-White</td>
<td>19 (23.5%)</td>
<td>2,749 (25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sexual Orientation</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>60 (74.1%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>21 (25.9%)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>BMI</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>56 (69.1%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overweight</td>
<td>10 (12.3%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obese</td>
<td>14 (17.3%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>1 (1.3%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

INTERNAL SCALE CORRELATIONS

The scale for each normative ideal (beauty, health, and body acceptance) is using the Likert scale format. To check the internal consistency of the scales I used Pearson’s correlations. The variables are multiple indicators of each major concept within each ideal. The next step is to ensure those individual indicators reflect the scaled concept

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7 Interestingly, one participant wrote in “?? I like men!” This particular response could be understood as a product of heteronormativity. Heteronormativity holds heterosexuality as the accepted cultural norm as it aligns with biological sex and gender.
adequately. To examine this, we need correlations of the individual indicators within each scale.

**Table 2. Pearson’s Correlation for Beauty Scale Items**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. If money were no object, I would have some plastic surgery to alter my appearance for cosmetic purposes.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. It’s important to me that others think I look good.</td>
<td>.378**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I don’t think I look good without any makeup on.</td>
<td>.269*</td>
<td>.269*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Having great-looking hair takes too much time.</td>
<td>-.074</td>
<td>-.049</td>
<td>.088</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I take the same amount of time to get ready for a date as I do to get ready for anytime I go out.</td>
<td>-.051</td>
<td>.097</td>
<td>-.143</td>
<td>-.330**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 2 shows the relationship between the five items found within the beauty ideal scale. After running a Pearson’s correlation test for each of the five items included in the beauty ideal scale, four significant associations appeared. The first relationship suggested that if participants were likely to strongly agree with having cosmetic surgery if money were no object, they would also be more likely to agree that it was important others think they look good. It was a significant association at .378.

The second relationship suggested that if participants were likely to agree with thinking they don’t look good without makeup on, then they were also likely to think it
was important for others to think they looked good. This correlation was slightly significant at .269.

The third relationship suggested if participants were likely to agree with thinking they don’t look good without makeup on, then they were also likely agree to have cosmetic surgery if money were no object. This correlation was also a significant association at .269.

The last correlation of the beauty ideal items suggested a negative relationship. If participants were likely to agree that having great looking hair takes too much effort, then they were likely to disagree that they take the same amount of time to get ready for a date as they do to get ready every day. This correlation was a significant association at -.330. Thus, overall there were significant correlations between the ideas but the overall level was low.

**Table 3. Pearson’s Correlation for Healthy Ideal Items**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I engage in physical exercise only to lose or maintain my weight.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. It is important I get enough sleep each night so that I feel my best.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-.181</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Indulging in my favorite unhealthy foods is a good way for me to “treat” myself, if I have had a bad day.</td>
<td>.110</td>
<td>.191</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I would not take diet pills to lose weight.</td>
<td>-.134</td>
<td>.209</td>
<td>-.074</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The health hazards of smoking are worth it if they help you lose or control your weight.</td>
<td>.098</td>
<td>-.293**</td>
<td>.170</td>
<td>-.330**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
In Table 3 are the correlations for the healthy ideal scale. In the analysis of the five items in the healthy ideal section of the survey, only two significant relationships emerged. The first significant relationship suggested that if participants agreed they would not take diet pills to lose weight, they were likely to disagree that the health hazards of smoking were worth it even if it helped control weight. This is a significant association at -0.330.

The second relationship suggested that if participants were to agree with it being important that they get enough sleep each night so that they feel their best, they were likely to disagree with the health hazards of smoking being worth it, if it helps you lose or control your weight. This relationship is significant at -0.293. This meant that the women were likely to model the healthy ideal explanation of behavior. However, this is not a strong scale overall.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I am satisfied with my current weight (outside of health concerns).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I would feel better about myself if I lost/gained 10 or more pounds.</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.680**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I consider myself beautiful just as I am.</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.433**</td>
<td>-0.290</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I am not perfect, but I would not change the appearance of my body.</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.578**</td>
<td>-0.485</td>
<td>0.526</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I would look better if I were taller or shorter.</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.109</td>
<td>0.120</td>
<td>-0.243</td>
<td>-0.022</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
Table 4 reflects the correlations for the body acceptance scale. After running the correlations analysis for the five items included in the body acceptance ideal section of the survey, six significant associations appeared. The first correlation suggested that if participants were likely to agree they were satisfied with their current weight, they were likely to disagree they would feel better about themselves if they lost/gained ten or more pounds. These had a significant association at -.680.

The second negative correlation suggested that the more participants were likely to agree they considered themselves beautiful just as they are, the more likely they were to disagree they would feel better about themselves if they lost/gained ten or more pounds. This correlation was a significant association at -.290.

The final negative correlation suggested that the more participants were likely to agree they would look better if they were taller or shorter, they more likely they were to disagree they considered themselves beautiful just as they were. This correlation was also a significant association at -.243.

The fourth correlation suggested the more participants were likely to agree they considered themselves beautiful just as they are, the more they were also more likely to agree they were satisfied with their current weight (outside of healthy concerns). This was also a significant association at .433.

The fifth correlation suggested that the more likely participants were to agree that they would not change anything about the appearance of their body; they were also more likely to agree that they were satisfied with their current weight. This correlation was also a significant association at .578.
The final positive correlation suggested that the more participants were likely to agree that they consider themselves beautiful just as they are; the more likely they were to also agree that they would make no change to the appearance of their body. This correlation was also a significant association at .526. From these relationships we can see the all the items of the survey shared a relationship of at least some significance. This makes the body acceptance scale the strongest scale. Even so, the relative internal weakness of all the scales reflects the difficulty and complexity of these concepts. No one, universal ideal or even form of an ideal exists (Lynch 2007).

SCALE CONSTRUCTION

Based on the correlations, I proceeded by creating the scales. I divided the participants’ responses into high and low categories for each item. Because a large majority of participants hovered around the middle, it was necessary to use the median as the distinguishing marker to separate the categories. This maximized variation.

Each item of the survey was evaluated asking which response would equate to a high level of subscription to the ideal of that particular section. Each item of the Likert section of the survey had a possible score of 4. Items were re-coded to ensure consistency in interpretation. Scores were tabulated for each participant, for each ideal. A mean for each ideal was then found. Participants with scores at or above the mean were put into the high category, while those below the mean went into the low category. This was done for each participant.

Table 6 summarizes the scores for the three ideal scales. On all three scales, the respondents scored similarly, 11 or 12, out of 20. First, the women tended to slightly agree with all of the statements. Secondly, they showed the same level of support across
all three ideals. These outcomes indicated the women of this study seem to have internalized a little bit of each of the ideals.

**Table 5. Scores for the Three Ideal Scales**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beauty Scale</td>
<td>6-17</td>
<td>11.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Scale</td>
<td>9-17</td>
<td>12.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body acceptance Scale</td>
<td>8-17</td>
<td>12.81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The next step is to examine the relationship between the three scales. As you can see in Table 6, the ideals are not correlated, demonstrating that they are independent ideals. This supports my argument.

**Table 6. Pearson’s Correlation for the Three Ideals**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N=81</th>
<th>Beauty ideal</th>
<th>Health ideal</th>
<th>Body acceptance Ideal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beauty ideal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthy ideal</td>
<td>.041</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body acceptance ideal</td>
<td>-.264*</td>
<td>.281*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**DEMOGRAPHIC CONSIDERATIONS**

Because the sample had very little variation in age, gender and sexual orientation, race and ethnicity was the most significant variable to discuss. Table 7 revealed a few points of interest. First, the body acceptance ideal seemed to be important to whites and most of the non-whites. Second, participants in the white category were evenly scored across all three ideals. I understand why the body acceptance ideal was the ideal in which most of the ethnic participants indicated higher levels of subscription. Literature has long suggested racial and ethnic minority populations tend to differentiate from the white beauty ideal. Compared to the white beauty ideal, the beauty expectations within various races and ethnicities are typically more flexible and accepting, and most importantly,
more realistic, thus perhaps aligning more with the body acceptance ideal. As well, my experience that non-whites have been more likely to describe a beauty that emphasizes personality traits over the physical (Poran 2002).

**Table 7. Means Comparison for Ideal Scales and Race or Ethnicity**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race or Ethnicity</th>
<th>Beauty Scale</th>
<th>Health Scale</th>
<th>Body Acceptance Scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>Mean 11.71</td>
<td>12.60</td>
<td>12.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N 62</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Mean 9.92</td>
<td>12.17</td>
<td>13.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N 12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Mean 9.50</td>
<td>12.25</td>
<td>12.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N 4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israeli</td>
<td>Mean 10.00</td>
<td>14.00</td>
<td>13.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N 1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Mean 14</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N 2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Mean 11.37</td>
<td>12.57</td>
<td>12.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N 81</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**EFFECTS OF BMI**

The survey asked the women to provide their height and weight in order to calculate a BMI\(^8\) for each participant. BMIs were coded against the BMI chart provided by *Clinical Guidelines on the Identification, Evaluation, and Treatment of Overweight and Obesity in Adults: The Evidence Report*.\(^9\) This chart breaks BMI into four categories: “average” “overweight” “obese” and “extreme obesity.” A vast majority of the females in this study had “average” BMIs. Of the 80 participants for whom a BMI was calculated, 25 had BMIs that we beyond the “average” category. This is 31.25% of the sample. Of these 25 participants, 11 scored “high” in at least the beauty ideal section. That is 45% of the cohort. Of the same 25 women who had BMIs that placed them at “overweight” or

---

\(^8\) There was a high level of disclosure from participants regarding their height and weight; the necessary components to calculate BMI. This is contrary to literature which suggests many women are uncomfortable disclosing their weight, regardless of anonymity.

greater, 10 women scored “high” in the healthy ideal section. It seems the current conception of the modern beauty ideal appears to more greatly align with the healthy ideal standards. If this is accurate, then a “high” score in the healthy ideal may be similar to a “high” score in the beauty ideal.

Table 8. Pearson’s Correlation of the Scales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Beauty Scale</th>
<th>Health Scale</th>
<th>Body acceptance Scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BMI</td>
<td>.040</td>
<td>.122</td>
<td>-.202</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed).

Table 8 shows the relationship between BMI and each scale. From Table 8 we can see that higher BMI indicated lower level of body acceptance, unlike the other two. This supported the notion that these ideals are complex and difficult to describe and measure.

From this table we can also see that the questions used to measure the healthy ideal do not have as great an impact on the women of this study, as the other ideals may. A majority of women with “average” BMIs scored “high” in the body acceptance ideal section indicating perhaps they accept their bodies, although they may not be exactly matching the ideal, in their mind, they are close enough to be acceptable. Contrastingly, women with “overweight” or “obese” BMIs fell into the “low” subscription category. This might show these women feel their bodies are unacceptable, indicating that the beauty ideal or even the healthy ideal are becoming or have become internalized to a greater degree.

OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

At the end of the survey, the women were given an opportunity to provide their personal opinion, in their own words, about ideal beauty. I first asked the women to “please describe what you believe is the ideal body type/beauty ideal that is presented
within the media.” I then asked them to “now, please describe what you believe is the ideal body type/beauty ideal.”

The women’s responses to the first open-ended question were reviewed and a count was recorded for key words or phrases the women used to describe the ideal beauty as presented in the media. The women provided a lot of detailed, in-depth responses to these questions. The response rate was significantly higher than expected. Of the 81 surveys collected, only one participant did not provide a response to the second question. However, all 81 women gave some type of response to the first open-ended question.

The women seemed to easily describe the typical beauty ideal. Many women gave a list, or lengthy string of keywords or phrases that they felt described the ideal beauty as presented in the media. An overwhelming amount of the women mentioned the media presented ideal beauty as a woman who was “skinny” (83%), “tall” (37%), “tan” (32%), with “big boobs/chest” (28%), “clear skin/no acne” (27%) and that she be “blonde” (22%). The following ideal beauty statements provide some good examples of such descriptions:¹⁰

SKINNY!!! All you see are skinny models and actresses. If a woman is outside those limits just slightly, she’s considered plus size (Participant 7, 19 years old, Caucasian, BMI=25).

Another said,

The media portrays the idea body to be skin, blond, in-shape, and having perfect everything. They also promote that getting plastic surgery, having perfect boobs,
Exploring Body Image

_everything is the way to go. Also, always having hair and makeup done_

( Participant 10, 19 years old, African American, BMI=24).

One woman gave a formula, of sorts, to describe the ideal. However, the words she used to describe the ideal are still relative.

_**Women have to be the four T’s: tall, thin, tan and tone with additional requirements of flawless skin, beautiful features and perfect hair.** (Also gigantic breasts and full butt) (Participant 29, 19 years old, Caucasian, BMI=29).

Women were also quick to acknowledge media’s presence in the creation of this ideal, however also in the same thought, express some negotiation with accepting the ideal.

_I believe weight is the most important aspect of the media’s “ideal body type.”_

_This idea is present in the media towards both males and females. You are female._

_You should weigh about 110 lbs regardless of your height and body type (about 170 and muscular for men) (Participant 36, 19 years old, Caucasian, BMI=22)._ 

This woman gave one of many standards regarding identifying a race. It was surprising the women picked up on race as part of the beauty ideal. Typically, responses focused on alterable physical traits as characteristics of ideal beauty. However, when responses began identifying White as ideal, I did not expect the women of this study to pick up on that aspect.

_Blonde, blue eyes, skinny, tall, fit, tan, Caucasian (Participant 44, 18 years old, Caucasian, BMI=22)._

The body as a whole is not the only area that is scrutinized by the beauty ideal. As research has suggested, women pick apart their bodies and seem to have a different set of
standards for each body part, whereas men are more likely to express dissatisfaction with their bodies when taken in as a whole, not just their arms, chest, or legs, etc.

*Media portrays beauty as perfection: perfectly clear skin, perfectly soft hair, not too chunky but not too skinny, perfectly tan skin. Beautiful girls are popular and wear all the cool clothes. They often have plenty of money. They are flirty and fun but not too loud. beautiful girls are always beautiful, they don't get to be lazy with their looks* (Participant 46, 19 years old, Caucasian, BMI=23).

Interestingly beauty also revolved around socioeconomic status, and how your body can benefit you in a material and commercial sense.

*The media portrays a healthy body type as the super skinny people-actresses but not models* (Participant 53, 21 years old, Caucasian, BMI=22).

Many responses revolved around what the ideal is. Some thought the logistics of achieving or maintaining the ideal was worth discussing. This woman expressed the vagueness of the ideal standards and the (lack of) absolute definition.

...to look like a super model in maintaining to be super thin and having major designer label to accepted and to be considered fashionable in the media. To look beautiful without makeup (Participant 59, 18 years old, Hispanic, BMI=21).

Many responses, like this one below, were very simply put, and very traditional.

*Within the media I believe the ideal body is tall, thin, tan, and big chested* (Participant 66, 19 years old, Caucasian, BMI=18).

This woman clearly stated there was no diversity in what media states as beautiful. This was interesting as there was no vast diversity amongst the responses from the women, but somewhat unanimous consent that there is no clear ideal, only generalizations.
According to the media, the only way to be beautiful is to be thin and well dressed. There is no diversity in what beauty is. Thin is the only important factor (Participant 70, 19 years old, Caucasian, BMI=34).

The women often used the supermodel and/or Barbie as an exemplification of what they were trying to describe.

Really skinny with a beautiful face and perfect everything. They need to look like models (Participant 80, 19 years old, Caucasian, BMI=19).

When asked about the issue of media, the women gave responses that centered on a few themes. First, these women described a similar but varied beauty ideal. We can see that most of the women who responded described the same ideal body as presented in the media, just simply using different adjectives. Some of the women used “fit,” “toned,” and “in-shape” to describe this ideal. These mentions could allude to the beauty ideal utilizing healthy language in its definitions. Coincidently, this use of healthy language comes at a time when current fads focus on conservation, eating organically, and “being green.” This supports the long-standing criticism that the beauty ideal is unattainable; unattainable because it is elusive and constantly shifting.

SHIFT IN THE BEAUTY IDEAL

The second open-ended item on the survey asked participants to “describe their ideal beauty/body type.” The women’s responses displayed a shifting back-and-forth between the three ideals. Many of the women put responses similar to, “as long as you are healthy and love yourself, that is all that matters. Beauty is on the inside.” Some referenced BMI directly, and a small number of responses were exactly the same as what
the participant had written for media’s ideal. Most of these women’s personal ideals included a medley of all three ideals.

_This is a hard question to answer because I have an eating disorder so I am constantly telling myself that being thin is the only way to be pretty but being in shape should be what an ideal body should be and your personality and how you treat people is what makes people attractive. You can be skinny and treat people badly and your personality is what makes you ugly_ (Participant 70, 19 years old, Caucasian, BMI=34).

Within the mix of ideals, several women stated “just needing to” be or do something. As if the solution was that easy. From this occurrence, it was clear for women to see their bodies the way advertisers and product producers want them to. Since we lack a universal language with accepted terminology and definitions to discuss these concerns, women have resulted to using advertising’s ‘encouraging’ phases.

_I think everyone is beautiful in their own way. Big or thin, short or tall, blond or brunette, every person is beauty they just need to be confident. I would just like to be the best version of myself. To be in shape and healthy and just love myself_ (Participant 43, 19 years old, Caucasian, BMI=35).

Many responses mentioned happiness, and comfort as central characteristics for the ideal. Confidence is identified as the simplest solution.

_Someone who is healthy looking and is comfortable with how they look_ (Participant 77, 18 years old, African American, BMI=30).

While this exemplifies the body acceptance ideal, many also stipulated that happiness and/or comfort is important with a dash of health.
I think the ideal body type is the body weight that doctors suggest for your height that makes you healthy. I prefer to be tan because I feel better about myself. If I had a choice to never wear makeup I would but I’m not confident enough. I think you should be fit for the sake of your health and you just feel better when your fit. I think everything should be natural. My one thing is being tan which isn’t natural for me but that’s my weakness (Participant 55, 18 years old, Caucasian, BMI=19).

Finally, regardless of everything they said about all the ideals, in the end, it remained important to them that they look good to other people. Table 9 demonstrates this. However, this was somewhat less true for the obese participants, than the normal and overweight women.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>It is important that others think I look good</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Overweight</th>
<th>Obese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, the questionnaire results indicate that the three ideal models of beauty exist and women are using them in various combinations to try to affirm their ideas of beauty. However, in the end they still really care about what other people think about their appearance. It was true for women in the Body Project with concerns about their bodies and it was true for these, fairly typical, college freshman as well.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

Women have not always struggled with their body image in the same way we see today. Throughout this thesis, I have discussed how character once shaped what was considered ideal beauty. From there, a shift towards emphasizing physical appearance as the measure for beauty occurred. This new measure, eventually coupled with the appeal to marketable products to reinforce that measure developed into what we now know as the model for ideal beauty. Wolf (1991) and the beauty myth criticized that model and its creators, working towards getting women to be more critical in evaluating how others dictate how we view our own bodies. In this study, we examined at two different sources of data to evaluate how that critique is faring.

The Body Project illustrated that women with body image concerns are not only aware of the beauty ideal, they are very aware of where this message of perfection is coming from. They know what they should be, shouldn’t be and more so, when they aren’t perfect. They can identify the ideal, and feel the constraints of fitting in or being outside of its standards. Women in both groups revealed feeling the pressure to move towards a more “healthy” lifestyle, regardless of body size. They also expressed frustration with being healthy, losing weight, achieving perfection and just feeling hopeless with achieving and sticking to any one ideal.

The questionnaire affirmed what was observed in the Body Project. The women both accept and reject the beauty myth in complicated ways. As well, we saw a development of two additional ideals, the healthy ideal and the body acceptance ideal. The women also demonstrated simultaneous acceptance and rejection of these ideals in an interrelated way. The questionnaire showed us that women are still navigating the
relationship between the three ideals. This complexity is not just applicable to women who are concerned about their bodies, such as in the *Body Project*, but in general.

**STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF STUDY**

Scale development proved to be the most difficult aspect of this study. The overall lower levels of correlations were problematic. Beauty ideals now have less homogeneity than the other, more flexible ideals, making it more complicated to create measures. Because of the interconnection between beauty, health and body acceptance, it was difficult to discern exactly what was occurring. However, this study provides a good starting place for understanding these dynamics. Secondly, the strength of this study comes from having an inductive approach and a deductive strategy to test the ideas.

**FUTURE RESEARCH**

Those who conduct research on body image and college aged women can move forward in new ways. More work needs to be done to conceptualize the three ideals in order to better understand what dynamics are at work. For a topic such as body image, results might be better garnered from strictly qualitative methodology. Methodology that allows for the view of the participants to emerge may help findings be more fruitful. As well, we know these ideas vary across different groups of women. More attention needs to be made across all categories of women, including lesbians, who were largely left out of this study, primarily as a result of the geographic area. A larger, more diverse sample would be beneficial. Future research could really examine the messages from media and the way young women receive messages on the three ideals.

**PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS**

Programs like the *Body Project* are important to help women address the way they think about their bodies. They can help women to learn to recognize the competing
narratives of the three ideals. I appreciate my experience in this project and the conversations I had with these women. Based on this study, programs such as the *Body Project* can improve their service to women on college campuses by doing the following things.

Despite the limitations of this study, this research can offer a few suggestions for programs that aim to engage young women with body image concerns, like the *Body Project*. The organization and main message of the workshop is conflicting. The first four weeks focused on what seemed like body acceptance, then immediately followed by four weeks of how to achieve the very ideal we were taught the past four weeks to negate. However the message seems to be that this is okay simply because it is now done through healthy methods? What about young women who are already a healthy weight or size?

1. Clearly focus on refuting the beauty ideal. Healthy weight management programs already exist plentifully.

2. Work to promote positive character as beauty standards. A great personality is something everyone can control themselves—for free!

3. Survey at the start, mid and ending points of the workshop for expectations, effectiveness, accuracy of information, and feedback. Women are there for very diverse reasons. The program must ensure their needs are being met.

In the end, these programs are excellent opportunities to help women come to terms with how they construct their understanding of their bodies in a positive way and the need to adjust as ideas about beauty change.
CONCLUSION

Data from this study supports that what we once knew as the “Barbie doll model” or “supermodel figure” as the ideal for beauty, is now shifting to encourage a “healthier” look; still thin, but not too extreme. Although different than the much-accused-for-being-damaging beauty ideal, this newer, healthy ideal does not necessarily promote a healthier body image. Simply altering the message to encourage women and young girls to look thin through “healthy” methods does not lessen the psychological damage done to the receiver of that message. In this study, woman after woman wrote a conflicting ideal for themselves. They seem to feel the influence of each ideal, as I suspected, by writing about being healthy, but loving themselves, and still looking good to others. So does this mean the best these women can hope for is to get as close to the beauty (or healthy) ideal as possible, but upon (inevitable) failure, they are to try their hardest to accept their slightly disappointing bodies?

Recall Kilbourne’s (2005) example of who media presents as capable and deserving of sexual relationships; the tanned Caucasian, experienced, yet virginal females. In the qualitative responses gathered from my survey, a small number of women identified that media presented the ideal beauty as the girl who “always has the great boyfriend,” or “a boyfriend who buys her expensive stuff.” This illustrates how they might understand that with ideal beauty comes the ideal life. As the women of this study were able to give similar but varied descriptions of the ideal beauty/body type, there was enough variation to demonstrate our culture’s lack of a constant model or lack of specific vocabulary to consistently describe what exactly the beauty ideal requires.
The lack of a name or label illustrates the lack of value culture has placed on a concept which is used to define, categorize and rank women in our modern society. Having clear, accurate names and definitions for abstract concepts help humans understand the appropriate action or reaction to follow; it helps dictate our thoughts and behaviors. Through naming and defining we create value and ultimately create change.

The women, as shown by the results of this study, leave me believing that women are in a state of flux between the three ideals and could use more language to help clarify their experience. This struggle is also evident in the media where multiple conversations are demonstrating the blurring of beauty, health and body acceptance. However, Wolf (1991) continues to be absolutely correct about one thing, body image continues to be fronted by capitalist campaigns, leaving women to struggle between both their bodies and their pocketbooks.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. What does Body Image mean to you?
2. Can you tell me about how you felt about your body before entering the Body Project?
3. What made you feel compelled to enroll in the Body Project?
4. What do you hope to accomplish from the Body Project?
5. How do you feel about the things you are learning?
6. Are you feeling any differently about your body?
7. Talk to me about how you feel about your body.
8. Pretend I’m closing my eyes; describe your body to me.
9. Tell me about what you think is most attractive about you?
10. In what ways, if any, do you want to change your body?
11. How would you describe yourself—who you are?
12. How do the negative thoughts from yourself and/or other make you feel?
13. Please tell me about growing up. Can you describe your relationships with friends and family members?
14. Tell me about what you think is most attractive about you?
15. What sources of pop culture (movies, TV, music) resonate with you, either positively or negatively?
16. Are there any sources of pop culture that make you feel angry?
17. Can you describe the ideal female?
18. Where do you think your ideas come from? How do you see yourself relative to the ideals you’ve described?
19. In what ways do you think the media portrays femininity?
20. Do you compare yourself to other females in the media, such as actors, athletes, models or singers?
21. Tell me about the messages you receive about appearance, hair, skin, body size, shape and clothing.
22. In what ways, if any, do they mean something to you?
APPENDIX B
SURVEY FOR WOMEN

This survey is for any female student, who is considered a freshman, and is 18-25 years old. The survey will ask you to strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with several statements. Your opinions are completely your own and are voluntary, however, please try to respond to each item. Mark the appropriate box that corresponds best with your opinion. Thank you for taking the time to provide me with your responses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. If money were no object, I would have some plastic surgery to alter my appearance for cosmetic purposes.</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. It's important to me that others think I look good.</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I don’t think I look good without any makeup on.</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Having great-looking hair takes too much effort.</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I take the same amount of time to get ready for a date as I do to get ready for anytime I go out.</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I engage in physical exercise only to lose or maintain my weight.</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. It is important I get enough sleep each night so that I feel my best.</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Indulging in my favorite unhealthy foods is a good way for me to “treat” myself, if I have had a bad day.</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I would not take diet pills to lose weight.</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. The health hazards of smoking are worth it, if they help you lose or control your weight.</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. I am satisfied with my current weight (outside of health concerns).</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. I would feel better about myself if I lost/gained 10 or more pounds.</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. I consider myself beautiful just as I am.</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
14. I am not perfect, but I would not change anything about the appearance of my body. 

15. I would look better if I were taller or shorter.

Please write in your response to the items below.

Race/Ethnicity: ______________________  Height: ________ feet _______ inches
Sexual Orientation: ___________________
Age(in years): _________  Weight: ____________ pounds

(Continued on back)

Please describe what you believe is the ideal body type/beauty ideal that is presented within the media.

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

Now, please describe what you believe is the ideal body type/beauty ideal.

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

Thank you for taking the time to answer the survey. Your opinions are greatly appreciated.
APPENDIX C
HUMAN SUBJECTS APPROVAL

10/13/2010

Teresa Martens
501 W 22nd St.
Higginsville, MO 64037

Dear Ms. Teresa Martens,

Your research project, "Accepting Your Beautifully, Healthy Body", was approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee on 10/12/2010. This approval is valid through 10/12/2011.

Please note that you are required to notify the committee in writing of any changes in your research project and that you may not implement changes without prior approval of the committee. You must also notify the committee in writing of any change in the nature or the status of the risks of participating in this research project.

Should any adverse events occur in the course of your research (such as harm to a research participant), you must notify the committee in writing immediately. In the case of any adverse event, you are required to stop the research immediately unless stopping the research would cause more harm to the participants than continuing with it.

At the conclusion of your project, you will need to submit a completed Project Status Form to this office. You must also submit the Project Status Form if you wish to continue your research project beyond its initial expiration date.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at the number above.

Sincerely,

Janice Putnam Ph.D., RN
Associate Dean of The Graduate School
putnam@ucmo.edu

c: Dr. Mary E. Kelly