

# **“The Global Marketing of Body Image Disturbance: Mass Media as a Mediating Structure between Global Capital and Women’s Bodies”**

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## **Abstract:**

In the United States there are multiple industries that profit off of women’s bodies including the fitness industry, the diet industry and cosmetic surgery. The success of these industries is intimately linked to the mass marketing of an ultra-thin body ideal. Working to further the accumulation of wealth in the multi-billion dollar beauty and body related industries, the mass media serves as a mediating structure between women and their bodies. In the age of globalization sociological research is showing that disordered body image, previously prevalent in only Western cultures, is now spreading throughout the world. The global media, intimately connected to capitalist profit, is disseminating Western images of female beauty, and the products and services available to aide in “achieving” this unhealthy standard, to the girls and women of the world. Empirical research shows that rates of eating disorders and disorderly eating are increasing in both industrialized and developing nations. In addition to detailing this process and offering specific cases of where this is occurring (including Fiji, Tonga, India, Japan, Australia, etc) this paper outlines: 1) research designs and strategies sociologists can employ to study this phenomenon , and, 2) strategies that can employed at local levels to counter-act this negative trend and empower girls and women.

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## **Introduction**

In the United States there are multiple industries that profit off of women's bodies including the fitness industry, the diet industry and cosmetic surgery. The multi-billion dollar success of these industries is intimately linked to the mass marketing of an ultra-thin body ideal. Working to further the accumulation of wealth in the multi-billion dollar beauty and body related industries, the mass media serves as a mediating structure between women and their bodies. In the age of globalization sociological research is showing that disordered body image, previously prevalent in only Western cultures, is now spreading throughout the world. The global media, intimately connected to capitalist profit, is disseminating Western images of female beauty, and the products and services available to aide in "achieving" this unhealthy standard, to the girls and women of the world. Empirical research shows that rates of eating disorders and disorderly eating are increasing in both industrialized and developing nations. This is deeply troubling for all those concerned with the life chances of girls and women throughout the world.

### **Profiting off of Women's Starving Bodies: The United States Constructs a Mass-Mediated Female Body Ideal**

Through the mass media American culture sends a powerful message to girls and women: only the beautiful and thin are valued. Not only must females be beautiful and thin, they must meet American mass mediated standards of beauty and be painfully thin. Reiterated by other primary agents of socialization such as families, peers, and schools, this notion is taken seriously by many young women. So seriously, in fact, that anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa occur ten times more frequently in women than in men (Harrison and Cantor, 1997). Such disorders create a range of physical and mental health problems and anorexia remains one of the few psychiatric disorders with a significant

mortality rate. The prevalence of eating disorders is increasing not only in the US but on a global scale. These disorders are affecting females at younger ages; and they are not confined to a particular class or ethnic group as once believed (Abrams and Cook Stormer, 2002; Altabe, 1998; Atlas et al., 2002; Bary and Grilo, 2002; Botta, 2000; Demarest and Allen, 2000; Goodman, 2002; Gordon 1988; Hesse-Biber, 1996; Hesse-Biber et al, 2004; Molloy, 1998; Nielson, 2000).

Stice and Shaw (1994) recognize that within socio-cultural models of disordered eating problems there are multiple “mechanisms” in which a culturally thin-ideal is *communicated* to individuals, particularly females. While family and peers are influential in this process Stice and Shaw show that through movies, magazines, and popular television the mass media is “one of the strongest transmitters of this pressure (1994:289)” to be thin. However, the media is only one capital-driven industry responsible for the manifestation of eating problems, negative body-image, and low esteem. There are a number of other industries that help to promote image, weight, and body obsession among females—and they do so for profit. These capitalist institutions in conjunction with families, peers, schools, etc. form a “socio-cultural network” that can create and promote body dissatisfaction and ultimately body obsession within the individual (and arguably, within the culture) (Levine and Smolak, 1996).

There are many studies that have discussed the relationship between the mass media and the development of eating disordered behaviors, assuming that the media ideal of beauty deeply impacts females’ body attitudes and behavior. However, historically this presumption has lacked empirical evidence. (Bissell, 2002; Groesz et al., 2002; Grogen et al. 1996; Harrison 1997, 2000; Harrison and Cantor, 1997; Heinberg and Thompson,

1995; Murray et al., 1996; Posavac et al. 1998; Stice and Shaw, 1994; Thompson and Heinberg, 1999; Tiggeman and Pickering, 1996; Turner et al., 1997; Wolcox and Laird, 2000).

The studies that have tried to provide empirical evidence that links the media and disordered eating behavior, have largely focused on the *exposure* of such idealized images through content analyses (Harrison and Cantor, 1997). Their focus has been to show that the messages of the thin ideal, appearance and femininity, as well as beauty and success are prevalent in various forms and types of media. Only recently have studies begun to look at the varying levels of *awareness* and *internalization* of these messages. Most Americans are exposed to these widely popularized images yet not all individuals develop eating disorders (Cusumano and Thompson, 1997; Morry and Staska, 2001; Stice et al., 1994). By looking at awareness and internalization we may be better able to account for the "variance beyond that associated with simple awareness of pressures and other risk factors" (Thompson and Heinberg, 1999:342). Given the relationship between media and body image, Levine and Smolak (1996) use the "media as a context" within which to discuss the prevalence of eating disorders.

Analyses of American popular culture over the last few decades show that the ideal woman's figure has become slimmer and slimmer. Historian Lois Banner (1983) traces the origins of the ultra-slender body ideal to the 1960's, when super-thin fashion models became popular. This was in clear contrast to the curvier hourglass figures of the popular American movie stars of the 1950's such as Marilyn Monroe. The last several decades have not been the only time when a hyper-slender body type has been the ideal promoted to women in the United States. In other periods, when women have asserted

their rights and sought independence and equality, similar trends have occurred. During the 1920's, a time of increased feminist activity, the "flapper" represented the ideal of feminine beauty. Not surprisingly, evidence of a dramatic outbreak of anorectic-like behavior accompanied the acceptance of this ideal.

Cusumano and Thompson (1997) summarize this trend toward thinness in support of a previous 1980 study on *Playboy* centerfolds conducted by Garner, Garfinkel, Schwartz and Thompson. Their longitudinal research found that not only were the initial measurements of the centerfolds "significantly lower than that of the average female for the same time period," but that these measurements decreased over time (1959-1978) while the frequency of diet articles increased (Cusumano and Thompson, 1997:702). We can see a clear connection between advertising an ideal and advertising products and services aimed at achieving that (albeit impossible) ideal.

This study was followed up by Wiseman, Gray, and Ahrens (1992), who looked at the next ten year span from 1979-1988. They found this slimming trend continuing, with centerfold measurements reflecting weights 13%-19% lower than healthy weights (cited in Cusumano and Thompson, 1997). Harrison and Cantor (1997) also cite these studies in their discussion of the mass mediated American ideal as resembling an anorexic body. They reference the American Psychiatric Association (1994), which states that being 15% below one's expected body weight is symptomatic of anorexia nervosa. So we can see that the American media was portraying a body ideal for girls and women equivalent to anorexia. And because profits were and are at stake, soon the message would spread.

### **Globalization and the Mediated Spread of the Western Ideal**

The image of ideal female beauty, based largely on a hyper-thin body type, presents tremendous profits for body-based industries in the US including the fitness industry, the diet industry, the fashion industry and cosmetic surgery. Because of the enormous profits flowing from the female body ideal, capitalists are now exporting their body ideal to the rest of the world through distorted imagery and advertisements. With economic globalization comes cultural globalization, and in this instance, the two are intimately linked. We are now seeing the rapid dissemination of the American body ideal throughout the industrial and developing world. Researchers have begun to study the effect of these images on girls and women throughout the world and what they are learning is astonishing and very troubling. Women throughout the world are beginning to exhibit the low body esteem and eating disordered behaviors previously thought to be an American phenomenon. While more cross-cultural research is needed, the research that has been conducted is very revealing and needs to be taken seriously by educators, capitalists and social policy makers else the western ideal of beauty will continue to spread as will its devastating consequences for girls and women.

### **Global Cases: The World Begins to Mirror a Distorted Model**

#### ***Fiji***

The case of Fiji, which surfaced in 1999 in *The New York Times*, is probably the most famous case of western beauty norms impacting the body image attitudes and behaviors of girls previously thought to be immune to such problems. Eating disorders had been unheard of in Fiji largely because the cultural norms surrounding eating, health, and beauty stood in opposition to a hyper-thin body.

“In accordance with the traditional culture in the South Pacific nation, dinner guests are expected to eat as much as possible. A robust, nicely rounded body

is the norm for men and women. “Skinny legs” is a major insult. And “going thin,” the Fijian term for losing a noticeable amount of weight, is considered a worrisome condition. But all that may be changing...” (Goode, 1999:17)

The reason for the change, US, British and Australian television, via satellite, has moved into Fiji. A marked shift in girls’ body image was swift.

In 1995, one month after western television was “beamed” into Fiji, Becker (and colleagues) began a three-year study on body image among school girls. In 1995 the team conducted body image survey research on sixty-three Fijian school girls with an average age of seventeen. In 1998 a comparative sample (age, weight, etc) was surveyed. While the 1995 sample showed that 3% of the girls had induced vomiting, the number shot up to 15% in the 1998 sample. In 1995 13% of the girls scored high on an eating disorder risk test and in 1998 an alarming 29% scored high on the same test. Further, in the 1998 sample, girls who watched television three or more nights a week were 50% more likely to say they were “too big or fat” and 30% more likely to diet than the girls who watched less television. While some have argued that these findings represent an inability of girls in this culture to properly adjust to a rapidly changing global economy, I argue that the attitudes and behaviors exhibited by these girls represents a logical, albeit grotesque, adjustment to the economically motivated cultural globalization imposed on Fiji by western appearance-based corporations.

### ***Asia: Japan***

According to Kirjike, Nagata, Sirata and Yamamoto (1998) the prevalence of binge eating and bulimia nervosa in Japan has been comparable with that reported in Western countries.

“It has been suggested that eating disorders have been associated to sociocultural factors such as unrealistic expectations of thinness as a

symbol of beauty and success, the changing female role and social standards, and attitudes toward obesity.” (1998: 279)

During the last 35 years, the slim body has become an ideal in Japan; “...a slim body has become increasingly desirable for young women as a symbol of beauty and success as well as in Western countries (279).” Advertising, fashion, and cinema perpetuate the ultra-*thin* ideal. “In Japan, eating disorders have been increasing among females during adolescence or early adulthood (280).” The researchers conducted a study on body mass index in order to track changes in normative body types. From 1960 to 1995, males of all ages and females ages 6-14 years old increased in height/weight/BMI. In females ages 15-24, the height increased and the weight slightly increased, but the BMI gradually decreased from 21.5 (1960) to 20.5 (1995).

“Over the last 35 years adolescent and young adult women have become thinner... The main cause of the decreased BMI was that weight did not increase in proportion to the increase of height (279-80).”

The researchers hypothesize that females in Japan have decreased their BMI by dieting in order to become slim.

“Although there are no available data on food consumption, especially in young females, it is generally believed that young females ate much less rice than adults because of dieting to be slim or Westernized eating habits.” (1998: 279-80)

With respect to the decrease in BMI in young females, researchers predict a further increase in the rate of eating disorders in Japan.

Experts in the study of body image are particularly surprised that women in Asian cultures are now at risk for poor body image and caution that this is a strong signal about where we are heading.

“Plumpness has been well accepted in many non-Western cultures as a sign of prestige and affluence. Consequently, many researchers felt eating disorders and the desire for thinness would be rare in Asian

countries. Therefore, the recent phenomena of a desire for thinness in Japan is quite surprising.” (Iijima Hall 1995:9)

The adaptation of Japanese women to the white western beauty standard is alarming and indicates that in the global era where US media dominates, unhealthy feminine ideals may sweep the globe.

### *Arabs in Egypt*

Ford, Dolan and Evans (1990) conducted research at the University of Cairo in order to examine body image among Arabs. Students attending introductory psychology, sociology, and anthropology classes at the American University in Cairo were recruited for the study. Of the total sample, 160 women and 58 men were citizens of an Arab country (88% Egyptian; 4.6% Jordanian; 1.8% Lebanese; 5.6% Syrian; Libyan, Kuwaiti, Algerian, or Sudanese). The study shows a clear preference for thinness in Arabic culture; however, the ideal shape for Arabic women was still significantly larger than that reported by the American women. The research supports our understanding that exposure to Westernized society can lead to the internalization of Western attitudes concerning eating and body shape. In this study, Arab female students felt their current body shape to be significantly larger than the ideal body shape (the one thought to be most attractive to men), which indicates that a dissatisfaction with body shape is present in Arab women who have been exposed to some Western influences (505).

“Perhaps our sample is experiencing a similar phenomenon within their own country given that there are Western influences in their academic surrounding which differ from the socio-cultural norms of the country (507).”

Ford et al. are not alone in their conclusions as research is increasingly showing the link between Western media and body dissatisfaction in Egypt.

Nasser (1994) conducted a study in a state school in Roda Island, Cairo. All the 1<sup>st</sup>-year pupils were included. Students completed both the *Eating Attitude Test Questionnaire (EAT)* and the demographic features questionnaire (1994:26). There was a clear indication that 12 girls (3.4%) showed “sufficient” concern about eating: “They all dieted, vomited, or used laxatives or slimming pills as means of controlling their weight (27).” Dieting and excessive concern of weight abounded in three distinct ways: 1) binge eating was prevalent, 2) the use of slimming pills was prevalent, 3) the presence of self-induced vomiting (28). The investigation confirmed that morbid eating patterns are emerging in Egyptian culture, with similar rates to those in western society. Also noteworthy, Egypt has a particularly large young student population (50% of the overall population), a group that we already know is particularly vulnerable to such eating disorders (28).

“It is generally acknowledged that the traditional values of Egyptian society do not overvalue thinness, and that they attach significance to women’s fertility, idealizing motherhood. These values were thought for a long time to provide some protection against the development of eating disorders...The susceptibility of the Egyptian culture to developing such disorders could be based on the easy accessibility of western values to the Egyptian public through the media and the readiness to assimilate them.... transcultural research will continue to be of value, not perhaps with the objective of eliciting differences, but more to substantiate the impact of the social milieu and the power of the media on the development of abnormalities of behavior.” (28-9)

The study concludes that increased exposure to this western ideal increases weight consciousness and leads to the development of eating disorders. Ultimately, no culture within the world is immune from eating disorders because of globalization and the increased exposure to the western body ideal.

“This identification has to do with images that are easily transmittable as the world shrinks by virtue of mass communications, a phenomenon referred to as

global culture, where the world is physically linked by electronics and ruled by media concepts (28).”

In the age of globalization American media concepts are coming to dominate the global cultural space allowing for the mass global transmission of a particular beauty ideal.

### ***The Middle East: Lebanon and Iran***

Afif-Soweid, Najern Kteily, and Shediac-Rizkallah (2002) conducted a study to explore the prevalence of preoccupation with weight indicators and disordered eating behaviors among students entering Lebanon University and identify factors associated with these indicators and behaviors. Data was collected by means of a self-administered questionnaire; comparisons were made by gender, mother’s education, and body mass index. The final sample included 954 students entering the American University of Beirut in Lebanon during fall 1998. Measures included BMI, weight-directed behavior, preoccupation with weight indicators, disordered eating behaviors, gender, and mother’s education. The mean age of respondents was 18 years and 53.5% were male. The most prevalent indicators of disordered eating included a desire to be thinner and an awareness of caloric content. The behaviors engaged in most frequently included strenuous exercising and avoiding particular foods. Both indicators and behaviors varied by gender and body mass index.

“Results of our study are comparable with previous research on preoccupation with weight indicators and disordered eating behaviors... As suggested in the literature, this may be reflecting the trend in the Middle East towards Westernization.” (2002:54-5)

However, this trend is not uniform in the Middle East but is rather intimately linked to exposure to Western media.

Akiba (1998) explored body-image issues among people in environments with little or no access to the Westernized media to test the hypothesis that the Western media is responsible for setting unhealthy female standards of beauty. Because Iran banned Western media almost two decades ago, Iranians have not been exposed/internalized Western conceptions of the female body beautiful. Akiba predicted that compared with their U.S. counterparts, Iranians would be more satisfied with their bodies because capital-driven images promoting impossible body ideals were absent from their culture. To test this theory, the Body Esteem Scale was administered in the United States and Iran. In Iran the 32-item questionnaire was translated into Farsi. Iranian women and men attending the University of Tabriz, along with American female and male college students, completed the questionnaire. As expected, the Iranian respondents scored considerably higher on the BES than the U.S. participants (indicating that the Iranian participants viewed their bodies more positively than U.S. participants). Showing the gendered nature of poor body image, in both countries, the men scored higher than the women. The case of Iran corroborates that the western mass media has a role in body image attitudes among female populations.

### ***India***

Studies that have examined the variables of body image and eating disturbance among Indian female populations and then compared them with Western samples (finding similar levels of body dissatisfaction and fear of fatness) (Shroff & Thompson 2004).

“India is a fast-developing country that has been exposed for more than a decade to Western culture in the form of Western media. With an increase in globalization of the Indian economy and greater emphasis on meeting

international standards in every sphere, girls and women in India are increasingly exposed to Western media images.” (Shroff & Thompson 2004:198-9)

India is thus a striking example of the link between the global marketing of a Western body ideal and the capitalist interests which support and drive this mass mediated image of femininity. In this way we can also see how increased economic opportunity may be linked to a particular standard of female attractiveness despite the enormous physical and mental health consequences as evidenced by the alarming rates of eating disorders and disorderly eating in the United States. But this shift is profit-driven and a global market is the ultimate capitalist conquest.

### *Africa*

Historically, body image issues in Africa have not been a concern because the assumption has been that eating disorders are a problem of white economically privileged girls and women; however, with the global transmission of Western beauty ideals eating disorders and related issues are now being studied in Africa. Caradas, Lambert and Charlton (2001) conducted research in South Africa in order to compare body image issues among white and black girls.

“Black and mixed race subjects who were previously thought to be ‘protected’ may now find themselves in a socio-cultural flux between traditional cultural values and values instilled by modern Western society (119).”

Their findings indicate that the prevalence of abnormal eating attitudes is equally common in South African schools with girls from different ethnic backgrounds. “These findings reinforce the notion that eating disorders are culture-reactive rather than culture-bound phenomena and provide insight into the extent of eating-related problems and body image issues in developing societies (111).” Socio-cultural factors such as ethnicity,

socioeconomic status and cultural ideals of thinness are important influencing factors in the development of eating disorders;

“It has been suggested that one of the strongest socio-cultural factors influencing young girls and women today is the Western beauty ideal.” (2001: 112 drawing on Rodin *et al.*, 1984)

In South Africa, a host of different cultures reside side-by-side, including a subsection of “true” Westernized culture. Caradas et al. argue that with socio-economic and corresponding cultural changes, girls will be exposed to different belief (and image) systems which will undoubtedly mediate their ideas about body size. Our understanding of eating disorder pathology in non-Westernized populations is limited and so more comparative research is needed on the effect of cultural shifts and body image.

### ***Tonga and Australia***

Craig, Halavatau, Comino, and Caterson (1999) conducted a study with the aim of investigating the perceived and preferred body size in Tongan adults (a group that traditionally preferred “large” body size) and perceptions with an Australian (largely Caucasian) sample where Western slim ideals predominate. They found that the Tongans preferred larger body sizes than the Australians (particularly men), but that the Tongan women enrolled in a weight-loss program were similar to those of Australians.

“There is evidence that preferences are changing in Tonga with time, and probably with increasing Western influence.” (1288)

There was also a gradual decrease in preferred sizes among the younger Tongan women, which the researchers believe suggests a growing influence of Western preferences for slimmer women.

“Increasing Western influence in Tonga appeared to result in expectations of decreasing body size, particularly among women.” (1294)

Again, the changing conceptions of beauty impact females at an accelerated rate as compared with men.

***More Examples: Northeast Italy and Israel***

Miotto, De Coppi, Frezz and Preti (2003) note that it seems that Italy, like other countries, has recently started experiencing an increase in the rate of eating disorders among adolescents (152).

Eating disorders and negative body image are also on the rise among Israeli girls. Sasson, Lewin, and Roth (1995) conducted research among 186 students from Grades 3 to 5 (96 boys and 90 girls) and 290 students from Grades 7 to 11 (131 boys and 159 girls) obtained from two randomly selected upper middle-class Jewish secular schools in Jerusalem. Two questionnaires were used: the ChEAT questionnaire and the Demographic and Dieting Questionnaire (DDQ). In Grades 3-11, 54% of students expressed a desire to lose weight and 41.6% reported behaviors aimed at losing weight. As early as the third through sixth grades, 45% of children expressed a desire to be thinner; 37% had tried to lose weight, and 7% scored in ‘anorexia nervosa’ range on the Children’s Eating Attitude Test (ChEAT) (68). By the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, girls became *more* preoccupied with thinness and weight-loss behaviors than their male counterparts affirming the consistent gendered nature of negative body image:

“The marked change in girls’ attitudes and behaviors found between the seventh and eighth grades may allow identification of at-risk girls as early as Grade 8 (1995:71).”

More research needs to be done in order to make clear links between Western media images, capitalism and girls’ negative body image.

**Researching Body Image and Globalization**

The cases presented are merely illustrative of a larger process of the west exporting an unhealthy and white-washed image of female beauty throughout the world. But there is much we still do not know and more research is needed. For example, most of the research that has been conducted on the awareness and internalization of mass mediated messages of beauty has been conducted with white middle and upper class samples. Are the messages internalized differently by other groups? What is relationship between socio-economic status and eating disorder vulnerability in poorer countries? How do women of color outside of the US perceive the largely white ideal type promoted by the US? What happens to women in other countries when the mass mediated images of beauty coming from the US are in opposition to long-standing cultural beliefs and attitudes? What happens when different images of beauty compete for attention? Some researchers have begun to explore “culture clash” theories in relation to the spread of a western body ideal but much more research is needed.

Finally, longitudinal research is needed, such as in the Fiji example, if we are to properly understand the complex relationship between Western media and female body image among diverse populations. Such studies need to monitor the range of economic and cultural changes occurring via globalization in conjunction with the increasing presence of the mass media.

### **Suggestions to Mediate the Spread of Western Body Dissatisfaction**

Since the west is disseminating extreme images of female beauty throughout the globe, pro-active efforts must be taken in order to combat the negative effects these images have begun to have on girls and women. This is a human rights issue: it is about the life chances of girls and women. In addition to continued academic research, I suggest

two initial steps are taken in countries where girls and women are being exposed to western media images: 1) media education and media literacy, and, 2) social activism and policy changes.

### ***Education and Media Literacy***

Media is a form of text and accordingly young people (and adults) must learn how to effectively “read” and interpret this powerful and increasingly pervasive medium. This must be taken seriously because although those in the west have long viewed advertisements and popular culture in general as trivial and unimportant, the evidence of how deeply this cultural context impacts the lives of those who live within it can no longer be ignored—the evidence is simply overwhelming. Educational efforts in the US have begun, but even those are few and far between. However, we can learn from the positive efforts being made in two directions: 1) eating disorder education, and 2) media literacy.

Educational programs on eating disorders are beginning to show up in school curricula in the US (Hesse-Biber et al. under review). In one private school in Boston, MA. all eighth and ninth-grade girls are required to take a 10-week course on anorexia, bulimia and compulsive overeating (Franklin, 1994). At Harvard University, the hot- line known as Echo (Eating Concerns Hotline and Outreach) provides a forum for people who have eating issues or are concerned about a friend who may have an eating problem. They also sponsor speakers and films to educate the wider community (Hesse-Biber et al. under review). The Center for the Study of Anorexia and Bulimia has put together curriculum materials for grades 7 through 12 dealing with such topics as emotions and

eating, body image, and the cultural pressures on women (Center for the Study of Anorexia and Bulimia, 1983).

But ultimately media literacy, for the entire population and beginning at a young age, is integral to any culture dominated by mass mediated imagery. Teaching media literacy can help people understand the ways in which messages are communicated to us through advertising and popular culture. The major components behind the aims of media literacy are to critically analyze mass media and to develop new ways of putting one's own message into the mesmerizing multi-media network. This empowers individuals and helps individuals to question what is portrayed as reality by media images. In other words, as images are processed differently than written texts, consumers need to be taught how to “read” media images for what they truly are: tools of discontent aimed at creating economic transactions. Developing new ways to process these messages--critically, rather than passively--may intervene in the internalization of unhealthy beauty images (Berel and Irving, 1998; Levine and Smolak, 1998; Levine et al., 1999).

### ***Social Activism: Just Say NO to Profit-Driven Disorders***

Educational initiatives, both about eating disorders and about the media, places consumers at the hands and timetable of policy makers— waiting for something to be done on their behalf. Because such efforts require social policy makers to choose to make this form of education a priority, and given the profits stemming from consumers lack of media training, people can not simply wait for these educational efforts. Pro-active social activism can begin without political or economic sponsorship can empower women.

One activist strategy involves organizing women at the grass-roots level to target and boycott consumer goods whose advertising is dangerous to women's body image

(Hesse-Biber et al. under review). The reason for these fantasy images is profit and as such the real power that women have is in their choices as consumers. Boston-area women who are against the use of ultra-thin models in advertising formed a group known as Boycott Anorexic Marketing (BAM). Their purpose is to "curtail the practice of featuring waif-like, wafer-thin models in ads for a variety of products by identifying companies considered to be culprits and asking consumers not to buy their wares." As the founder of the group explained, "So many women in this group felt powerless at the way our culture applaud anorexia and we thought of this boycott as a way to talk back (Bass, 1994:16)." Making women aware that they have the power to change their social context through their purchasing decisions, could diminish the drive for thinness not simply by demanding companies advertise responsibly but also by empowering women as agents of social change.

It is also important to bear in mind that the mass media is being promoted as a sign of progress throughout the world, and this is not without its truth. Since mass mediated images are deeply powerful in terms of body image, self esteem and self concept, new *healthy* and *positive* images could be enormously beneficial to all people. Levine and Smolak (1998) provide a positive role that the media can. Media advocacy is an integrated approach drawing from community-based strategies and combining them with innovative media technology to target public policy debate and decisions (Levine et al., 1999).

"These techniques...help to construe eating disorders, not just as individual cases of disease, but in terms of social policy issues pertaining to public safety, public health, and gender equity." (Levine and Smolak, 1998:48).

If these tools of persuasion are used effectively, the mass media could help girls and women value their bodies and themselves. Through their consumptive choices, consumers throughout the world are necessary to making this happen. The extreme images currently produced by the western media must in effect “fail” in order for the demand for new images to be heard.

## **Conclusion**

The average American is exposed to three thousand advertisements per day. And now these extreme images, aimed at altering how consumers spend their money, but ultimately altering the cultural context in which people develop ideas about beauty and attractiveness, and ideas about themselves, are being exported to the rest of the world. With economic globalization comes cultural globalization and in this instance that involves sending the American concept of female beauty to the girls and women of the world. But the cost will be high unless we pro-actively understand the implications of these images and make choices accordingly. As of yet, beyond academic research little has actually been done in the US to curb the power of these distorted mass mediated images. The primary reason; such images are highly profitable to industries whose success rests on the appearance-based discontent of their consumers. But with eating disorders on the rise, and effecting younger and younger girls, it is time for something to be done in the US and abroad. Re-socialization is very difficult, as shown by the example of activist and media education efforts in the US and as such consumers throughout the world need immediate access to the tools that will empower them to *see* and *process* western beauty images in a healthy way from the outset. First and foremost is the

awareness that this is a serious problem connected to globalization. It is a women's rights issue, but moreover, it is a human rights issue.

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