Research indicates that body image is a major concern for many Australians. For example, the Australian Longitudinal Study of Women’s Health found that only 21.6 percent of surveyed women were happy with their weight. Statistics from other countries concur with the Australian situation. In fact, research from the United States shows that up to half of all American women and a quarter of all American men are unhappy about their physical appearance.

Many theorists contend that media images influence how people develop and interpret their sense of body image. They argue that women are particularly vulnerable to dissatisfaction with their bodies because the media portrays the ideal female stereotype as thinner than average. However, negative body image is not limited to women. Recent studies show that boys and men are becoming increasingly concerned about their physical appearance, and research links this trend to an increasingly muscular body ideal in the media. Other body image issues include, for example, aging, hirsuteness (hairiness) and skin colour.

Clinical and social psychology connects negative body image with mental and physical health problems including depression, eating disorders (such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia), and potentially health-damaging behaviours such as steroid abuse and dieting.

Understanding the Discussion

Anorexia nervosa: A psycho-physiological disorder characterized by symptoms such as a fear of gaining weight (even when the person is under-weight), distorted body image, denial of low weight problem, and interruption of the menstrual cycle. Some anorexia nervosa sufferers will achieve low body weight by restricting their calories, while others may binge eat and purge.

Bulimia: A psycho-physiological disorder characterized by binge eating followed by purging. Purging commonly takes the form of vomiting, but can also include the use of laxatives and enemas. Sufferers often have low self-esteem associated with negative self-image, guilt and shame, and other self-destructive behaviours. The signs of bulimia include tooth decay (from stomach acids eroding tooth enamel), dehydration, electrolyte imbalances, and other symptoms that result from malnutrition, purging, and self-harm.

Eating disorder: A pattern of eating that involves eating too much or too little, to such an extent that it affects a person’s mental or physical health. Eating disorders include anorexia nervosa and bulimia.

Ideal: A concept of something in its highest degree of perfection.
Media: Mass communication methods, such as television, magazines and newspapers.

Stereotype: A social construction that may have some basis in reality but is simplified and exaggerated. Stereotypes can be positive (e.g. “Boys are good at mathematics.”) or negative (e.g. “Boys are poor at English.”).

History

Ideal body shapes and standards of beauty have varied throughout history, and many scholars draw a connection between body image ideals and social roles. For example, some theorists attribute the physically robust female body type—idealized as working class in the pre-industrial era—to the requirement of working class women during those times to produce and sustain large families, as well as perform physically demanding domestic and agricultural duties. During the same historical period, the upper-class preferred a female body type that was diminutive and slender. Physical fragility was considered a desirable quality in upper-class women, and thinness was accentuated using undergarments such as corsets.

In the early twentieth century, cultural ideals of the female body shifted away from emphasized femininity to a more boyish body ideal. Women’s hairstyles became shorter, makeup became more dramatic, trousers became socially acceptable for women, as well as dresses that revealed the lower legs and created a slim, nubile appearance. This period in history also marked the beginning of the organized women’s liberation movement, a period in which social ideals of female behaviour were changing. The popular female fashion of the period was called “flapper.” Advertisements and movies from the 1920s often depict flappers smoking, drinking and socializing boisterously—behavioural mores that were traditionally reserved for men. In the mid-twentieth century, there was a return to a fuller figured female body ideal that was epitomized by Marilyn Monroe. Many scholars attribute this change to the Second World War, when women entered the paid workforce in large numbers, followed by a period after the war when women were encouraged to return to more domestic pursuits and have babies.

In the 1960s, the curvaceous body ideal was replaced in the media by one that was considerably thinner and more androgynous. The 1960s ideal female body shape was exemplified by the British model Twiggy. This image continues in the media today, exemplified by celebrities like Kate Moss, Calista Flockhart, Nicole Richie and Lindsay Lohan, as well as an ongoing preference for “size zero” models in the fashion industry. According to a 2006 article in the journal Academic Psychiatry, “twenty-five years ago, the average fashion model was eight percent thinner than the average woman. Today, that number has risen to 23 percent, likely reflecting a combination of rising obesity rates in the general population and progressively thinner ideals.”

After the highly publicized death of a model in 2006 from anorexia nervosa, the Italian fashion industry adopted a self-regulatory code of conduct that aimed to increase the variety of body shapes in modelling, raise the minimum age of models, and require them to provide proof that they don’t suffer from an eating disorder. At the Madrid and Milan Fashion Shows, models with a body mass index (BMI) less than 18.5 are precluded from involvement. BMI is calculated by dividing weight by height. According to the World Food Program, a BMI score below 18.5 indicates malnutrition. Theorists that study body image messages in the media suggest that exposure to idealized body types “plays a direct role in the development of eating disturbances by conveying unrealistic messages about beauty” (Lin and Reid, 52: 2009). In a significant number of studies, a direct link has been found between media exposure to ideal body stereotypes and body dissatisfaction, as well as an anti-fat prejudice. In particular, exposure to certain specific types of media (soap operas, movies and music videos) were found to directly increase body dissatisfaction among young people.
In a study of women in Fiji who had never previously been exposed to television, researchers identified a correlation between negative body image and television consumption. Television was introduced to the community in 1995. By 1998, the incidence of dieting had risen from zero percent to 69 percent. Many of the research subjects reported that their weight loss was motivated by the appearance of attractive actors on television.

While body image discussion tends to focus on women (some authors argue that this is because the social norms that regulate male body images in the media are less strict than those that regulate female body images), body dissatisfaction is nonetheless increasing among men and boys. In a US study, 27 percent of university males said that they used a steroid or other performance enhancing substance, and most of them did so to improve their personal appearance. A number of scholars point to an increasingly muscular body ideal as the cause of rising body dissatisfaction among men. Using *Playgirl* magazine as a case study, a group of scholars demonstrated that between 1973 and 1997, male models became considerably more muscular and lean. Seven percent of the models had low body fat levels that could generally only be attained using steroids. In another US study of 10,000 teenagers, approximately one-third of both the girls and boys said that they regularly thought about or desired toned muscles. In the twelve months prior to the survey, 12 percent of the boys and eight percent of the girls had used dietary aids, including substances such as weight loss preparations, protein powders, creatine supplements, growth hormones and steroids.

**Body Image & the Media Today**

In March 2009, the Australian government announced the formation of the National Advisory Group on Body Image, which consisted of representatives from the fashion industry, as well as from healthcare, media and youth groups. The group’s purpose is to help address the rising level of body image dissatisfaction among young Australians by developing a Voluntary Industry Code of Conduct on Body Image. The minister for sport and youth, Kate Ellis, says, “There is … evidence that body dissatisfaction is approaching epidemic proportions among young Australians, with seven out of ten high school girls consistently choosing an ideal figure that is thinner than their own, and only 16 percent of young women saying they are happy with their body weight.” The proposal calls for the fashion and advertising industries to tell readers when photographs have been altered or enhanced, to portray a more diverse range of body shapes and sizes, and to establish more appropriate age limits for models. Minister Kate Ellis told the press that “the Government is committed to tackling negative body image from a national perspective, by helping young Australians to build confidence and resilience against the body image pressures that they face.”

This national initiative follows the Victorian Government’s state-based inquiry into body image that was conducted in 2005 and also resulted in a Voluntary Media Code of Conduct. The code, according to the Victorian Government Office for Youth, aimed to “decrease young people’s vulnerability to feelings of low self-esteem, disordered eating and negative body image associated with exposure to idealized, unrealistic images in the media and advertising.” The Victorian Positive Body Image Strategy also includes a grants program that funds community-based activities that promote positive body images and healthy lifestyle choices.

**Body Image & the Media in New Zealand**

According to the Eating Difficulties Education Network (EDEN) in Auckland, 80 percent of girls in New Zealand are concerned about obesity, and more girls are afraid of becoming overweight than they are of nuclear war, cancer or losing their parents. In a study of men and women attending a New Zealand
university, media consumption was found to be connected with increased awareness of thin body ideals for both genders, but only women were likely to suffer from negative body image issues as a consequence. The authors concluded that New Zealand women were more susceptible to thin body ideals and negative body image than New Zealand men—a finding that concurs with most gender comparative studies of body image and ideals of thinness. The study did not take muscularity into account.

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**About the Author**

Kylie Grimshaw Hughes has a Bachelor of Arts degree with Honours in Labour Studies and Politics from the University of Adelaide and a Master of Arts degree in Communication Studies from the University of South Australia. Her honours and master’s theses are in the fields of sociology, political science and cultural studies, and her degree qualifications are complemented by professional certifications in training and financial services. She currently lives in the United States, where she works as a business consultant and freelance writer.