

University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

ScholarWorks@UARK

---

Marketing Undergraduate Honors Theses

Marketing

---

5-2021

## Media's Portrayal of Women and its Impact on Body Image and Self-Esteem

Hannah Bareis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/mktguht>



Part of the [Communication Technology and New Media Commons](#), [Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication Commons](#), [Marketing Commons](#), [Mass Communication Commons](#), [Visual Studies Commons](#), [Women's Health Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

---

### Citation

Bareis, H. (2021). Media's Portrayal of Women and its Impact on Body Image and Self-Esteem. *Marketing Undergraduate Honors Theses* Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/mktguht/48>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Marketing at ScholarWorks@UARK. It has been accepted for inclusion in Marketing Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UARK. For more information, please contact [ccmiddle@uark.edu](mailto:ccmiddle@uark.edu).

**Media's Portrayal of Women and its Impact on Body Image and Self-Esteem**

**by**

**Hannah Leigh Bareis**

**Advisor: Dr. Anne Velliquette**

**An Honors Thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Bachelor of Science in Business Administration in Marketing and Supply Chain Management.**

**Sam M. Walton College of Business  
University of Arkansas  
Fayetteville, Arkansas**

**May 8th, 2021**

## ABSTRACT

This project addresses the portrayal of women in media and its damaging effects on body image and self-esteem. It raises two critical questions: What negative impact is media creating on women? What can be done to combat these destructive effects?

According to a study done by Common Sense Media, "American teens use an average of 9 hours of media daily, not including for school and homework" (Common Sense Media, 2015). This data, along with many others, shows the severity of media exposure to teens. This has brought a valuable discussion to the table. How has this impacted female body image, self-esteem, and health? The majority of the media is photo-manipulated, displaying a false perception of body image, causing significant concerns for future generations. However, companies such as Dove and *Darling* have taken a counter-cultural approach to display an authentic version of beauty.

This study takes a historical look at magazine publications in the United States and how they have evolved. Then it dives into Dove's Real Beauty Campaign success and how they have been a vital pioneer in this movement. Lastly, the research methodology and findings from a focus group are discussed where young women were asked to evaluate media's portrayal of women.

This research confirms that media will continue to embed itself into every facet of consumers' lives. If more companies and brands worked to bring diversity into their content, we could see a change for the future generation of women. Likewise, consumers can educate themselves on media literacy and utilize resources to create a healthier relationship with the digital world.

## INTRODUCTION

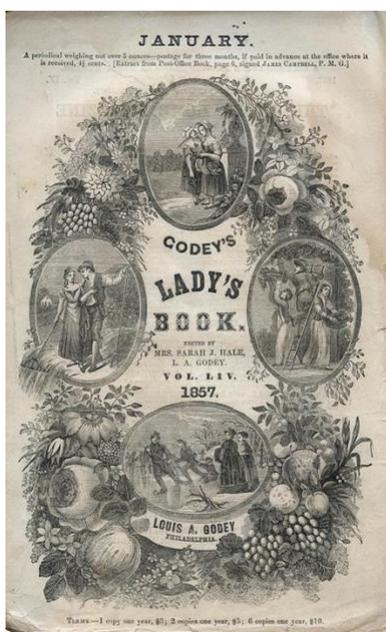
A young girl passes down the checkout lane to purchase her items; as she waits in the aisle for the next shopper to be done, she looks towards the shelf lined with magazines. Each publication is brightly colored with aesthetically pleasing fonts and fashionable clothes. The women staring back at the shopper with bright eyes and sculpted abs look like a distant dream in the Walmart grocery store's stark reality. She stares at the famous artist of the month and envies her success, but not because of her successful music career, but because she has the world's ideal body. In many ways, this young girl was me for a long time. Until I had the opportunity to work for a company that combats this daily lie. This past year I have been fortunate enough to work at *Darling*. *Darling* is a female-led women's media company that consists of many parts, a print magazine, blog, products, and social platforms. These pieces work together to create an impactful company that aims to create a better content source for women. *Darling* provides thought-provoking content by empowering women and reminding them of their purpose. Through my time interning with *Darling*, I have seen the impact the organization has made on their consumers and myself. One of my most significant takeaways from the company is their dedication to a no retouching policy. *Darling* is the only publication that does not retouch its models (as stated on their LinkedIn). This has left me encouraged as a shopper but also has educated me on the media space. Through my experience, I have become more passionate about this topic and want to better understand its effects on consumers. Therefore, in this research project, I will be taking a historical and current look at the media's portrayal of women and the impact on stereotypes, beauty standards, self-esteem, and body image. This research matters because the way media depicts women will have lasting effects on generations of females to come and how they perceive themselves and those around them.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *A Historical Look on Magazine Publications in the United States*

To better understand the media's portrayal of women in magazines, it is important to see how these publications have evolved over time. This part of the study will take a historical look at magazine publications catered to women in the United States to illustrate the similarities and differences to what was published then compared to the twenty-first century. *Godey's Lady's Book*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Vogue*, and *Seventeen* all offer different perspectives of how magazines have evolved.

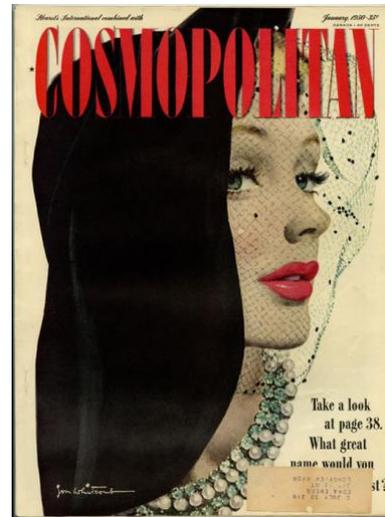
*Godey's Lady's Book* was the first American women's magazine published in the United States. This magazine was published in Philadelphia from 1830 to 1878 and was the most widely circulated magazine during its time. *Godey's* "provided a platform for women's interests and fostered traditions with a lasting impact on American culture" (Tomek, 2015). This magazine featured hand-tinted fashion plates, which were drawings depicting the current fashion trends. While they were intended to display the clothing, "they subtly conveyed important meanings about "ideal" women" (New-York Historical Society, 2017). This is a similar theme we still see today. In these plates, it was common for the women to be "white, pretty, slim, and usually dark-haired and young" (New-York Historical Society, 2017). These plates were widely popular and highly effective in increasing sales because they added a visual feature for women to aspire to. Magazines were written for white middle-class females. However, they were read by many different classes. Alongside her major influence on the country's fashion trends, Sarah Hale, the magazine editor, influenced many other causes. One of the most notable causes Hale advocated for was the institutionalization of a national Thanksgiving holiday. She used the publication to share recipes while she spoke to numerous presidents over 38 years. She wrote to presidents: Taylor, Fillmore, Pierce, and Buchanan, who rejected her argument for a Thanksgiving holiday. President Lincoln finally agreed in 1863. She wrote, "From Maine to Mexico, from Plymouth Rock to Sunset Sea, the hymn of Thanksgiving should be simultaneously raised" (Bookman, 2013). *Godey's* was the beginning of female expression and offered as the springboard for many female-focused magazines and leaders to come.



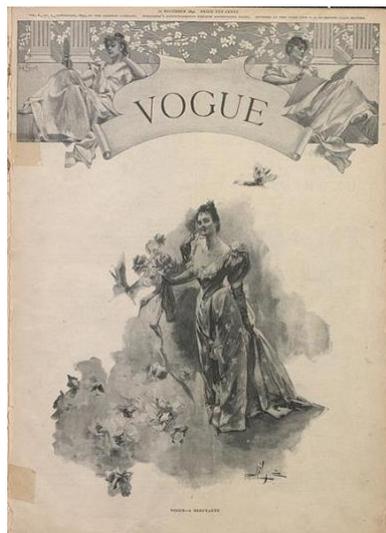
*Harper's Bazaar* is a women's fashion magazine known for its elegant content. It was first published in 1867, where it is still currently based, in New York City, New York. The publication first began in the newspaper, which catered to women in the middle and upper classes. In 1901 it moved from a piece in the weekly newspaper to a monthly magazine publication. They continue to reach their audience through various topics of interest. Some of the subjects they cover are celebrities, culture, bridal, politics, and fashion. *Harper's Bazaar's* mission is to continually reinvent itself and "turn the unexpected into the wildly coveted" (Harper's Bazaar).



*Cosmopolitan* is a best-selling monthly fashion magazine geared towards women. It was first issued in March of 1886 and is still currently printing issues. *Cosmopolitan*, also known as "Cosmo," was first published as a family magazine but later reinvented itself into a women's magazine for single working females. This transition happened in 1965 when Helen Gurley Brown took over as the chief editor. Brown is known as one of the most influential magazine editors for women due to her progressive thinking concerning women and their relationships. Charles Whitaker, dean, and professor at Northwestern University Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications, has high praises of Brown. He stated, "spot-on in her vision of a hole in the magazine marketplace begging to be filled by a publication that empowered young women to think differently about their lives, careers, and sexuality" (Northwestern). The magazine stood out amongst others by discussing sexuality. *Cosmopolitan* continues to follow the late Brown's vision for the magazine. They state, "As the biggest young women's media brand in the world, we're in an intimate relationship—and ongoing conversation—with our audience" (Cosmopolitan). They aim to provide readers with "fresh, funny, and fundamental intel about what millennials truly care about (from how to survive a tough Tinder date to how to run for political office)" (Cosmopolitan).

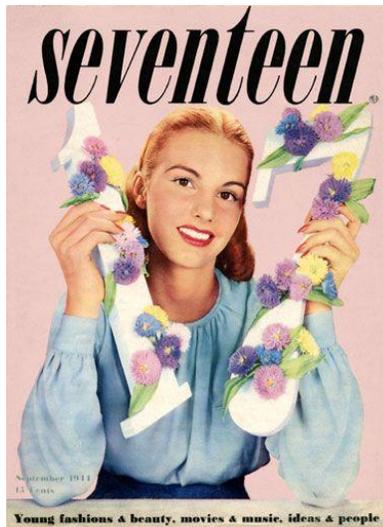


*Vogue* is the "world's number one fashion magazine" published by Condé Nast (*Vogue*). The magazine was first published in 1892 as a weekly newspaper similar to *Harper's Bazaar*. The first issue was sold for 10 cents. The company is known for its magazine but also for its annual event, The Met Gala. The Met Gala is a highly coveted fundraising event hosted by *Vogue* that has been held since 1971. Influential fashion designers, celebrities, and politicians are invited to attend the event on the first Monday of May in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute. The magazine is led by editor-in-chief Anna Wintour, known for her signature haircut, bob, and sunglasses. Alongside the widely successful American edition of *Vogue*, there are 26 international editions. The company continues to reach consumers through its podcast, app, and YouTube channel.



In 1944 *Seventeen* magazine was founded by Helen Valentine and was first published in New York City, New York. Thus, a new sector of magazines was offered to consumers. Teen magazines were at first created to encourage young girls to engage in the community. Articles concerning work and citizenship were prominent at the beginning of these publications. Fashion

and beauty articles were also included, but not the main focus as they are today. Now *Seventeen* claims, "you can find whatever you need to navigate life as a teen," in their content (Seventeen). While Magazines used to be only available in print, brands now make themselves available to consumers through various media. *Seventeen* has seen an increase in digital usership through platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Snapchat Discover. In 2018 they decided to shift their focus to a digital-first strategy, where their content is mostly displayed online, with the exception of a few special publications that can be purchased at newsstands.



These prominent magazines have provided entertainment for women for hundreds of years. They have offered a place to find content on popular culture, insight on upcoming fashion trends, and tutorials catered to females. However, they also have left their consumers with a damaging side-effect. Through photo manipulation and forced beauty "ideals," women have been left with lower self-esteem, unhealthy eating habits, and a false view of body image. Many studies have shared that Western media has caused an increase in the exaggerated importance of physical appearance. One study had 5th to 12th-grade girls self-report their related behaviors and frequency of reading fashion magazines. Out of 548 girls, "those who frequently read fashion magazines were twice as likely to have dieted and three times as likely to have initiated an exercise program to lose weight, than infrequent readers" (Morris & Katzman, 2003). This negative impact on women of all ages has caused brands to act. These brands are fighting this inaccurate perception of beauty by displaying various body types, refusing to retouch images, and offering educational videos. These efforts are only a few of the things they are doing to combat the negative media space. Two companies this study highlights in particular for their efforts are *Darling* and Dove.

### ***A Magazine with A Purpose***

*Darling* is establishing a different approach to the portrayal of female beauty. *Darling* was founded in 2009 by Sarah Dubbeldam. It is printed quarterly and is based in Los Angeles, California. At first, *Darling* consisted of only a blog, but in 2012 the first print issue was published. Since then, 24 other issues have been released with care to their no retouching policy. *Darling* advocates for women to find their purpose through content aimed to uplift women in a

dark media space. They are different than other publications because they offer "tangible, deep advice on painful issues facing women such as depression, anxiety, and eating disorders" (Darling). They do this by providing thought-provoking content through their magazine issues, engaging social media platforms, and products sold through their online store. Companies such as *Darling* are introducing a new type of magazine, one that challenges cultures' idea of beauty.



### ***Case Study on Dove's Real Beauty Campaign***

Dove has been considered a pioneer for changing female perceptions in the beauty industry. Their vision drives the brand, "We believe beauty should be a source of confidence and not anxiety. That's why we are here to help women everywhere develop a positive relationship with the way they look, helping them raise their self-esteem and realize their full potential" (Etkoffr, Orbach, Scott, & D'Agostino, 2004). Dove's journey displays the media's portrayal of women and its impact on their self-esteem and the standard of beauty they feel held to. Their nearly twenty-year campaign demonstrates a brand's ability to influence millions of young adults while increasing sales positively.

Dove is a personal care brand owned by Unilever. The brand was introduced in 1957, making it 64 years old, and is sold in 150 countries. Dove was initially recognized for its Beauty Bar but now offers products such as cleansers, deodorants, and body wash. Their products are praised by consumers and industry experts, making it the number one dermatologist recommended brand in the United States.

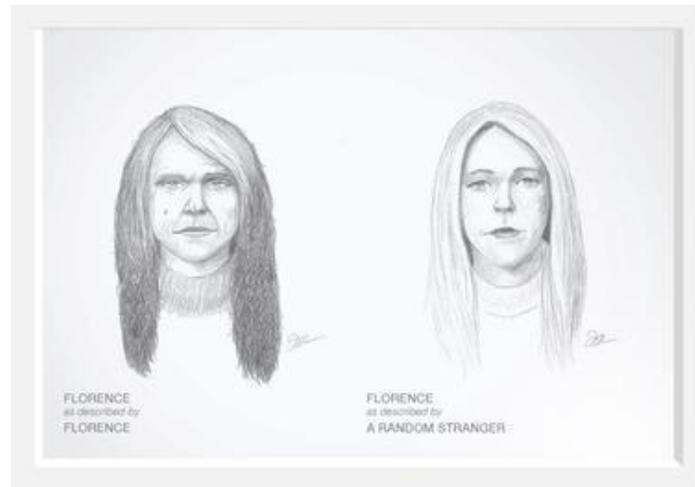
In September of 2004, Dove was becoming overshadowed by other brands and started to search for ways to rebrand. They decided to hire the PR Company, Edelman, to help them conduct research. The purpose of the study, "*The Real Truth About Beauty: A Global Report*," was to understand the portrayal of female beauty better. With concern for women's well-being, Dove aimed to explore what beauty means to women in a culture that promotes an unauthentic version. Edelman surveyed 3,000 women in 10 countries. They discovered sobering results. One of the significant findings stated that "Only 2% of women around the world choose beautiful to describe their looks, fewer even than choose "attractive" (9%), "feminine" (8%), "good-looking"

(7%) or "cute" (7%)" (Etcoffr, Orbach, Scott, & D'Agostino, 2004). This quota set the company into action to change this perception, which began Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty. Over the past 17 years, Dove has launched numerous advertisements, but it is crucial to recognize two of their most well-known advertisements throughout this journey, *Evolution* and *Real Beauty Sketches*. *Evolution* was released on October 6th, 2006 (Tpiper, 2006). The film pictures a woman sitting in a studio where viewers see her evolve into the version that individuals would see on billboards. The woman goes through sequences of appearance changes through the addition of makeup, hair, and lighting. After the crew is done adjusting her appearance, she is photographed. After multiple photos, one is chosen and receives numerous edits, including lengthening her neck, enlarging her eyes, and slimming her face. The image is finally ready to be placed on a billboard where the once ordinary and realistic woman is now an unrecognizable version of herself. This 60-second clip illustrates the distorted perception of beauty that brands are endorsing. The video currently has 20 million views, and the company offers a guide for parents and mentors to hold conversations with children. The action checklist encourages individuals to watch the video, look at other media, and broaden the discussion with children. They hope to offer this tool for parents to increase the confidence of children concerning body image. While this video was posted 14 years ago, Dove posted this checklist in 2020, which shows they continuously improve their resources and are confident in their campaign several years later.



Roughly seven years later, Dove released "Dove Real Beauty Sketches," which aired April 14th, 2013(Carey, 2013). In this film, Dove studied the way women view themselves versus how others do. Gil Zamora, an FBI-trained forensic artist, created two portraits. The first portrait was drawn based on the description of the woman herself. The second portrait was created from the description of the woman she briefly talked to before the study began. Zamora did not see the woman being sketched until both images were complete. After Zamora was finished with both pictures, he placed the drawings next to each other. He then allowed the woman to reflect on what she saw. The results are astonishing, displaying the stark contrast in the portraits. The study showed that when women describe themselves, they typically have a negative outlook towards their appearance—describing themselves as more aged, heavier, and unwelcoming. The women featured in the video described their experience as troubling and impactful. One participant stated, "I should be more grateful for my natural beauty. It impacts the choices and friends we make, the jobs we apply for, and how we treat our children. It affects everything" (Vega, 2013). Roughly eight years after the commercial was first published, the

video now has 69 million views on YouTube. This video showed viewers how women tend to be overly critical about their appearance, which resonated with them, and it continues to do so online. From both of these advertisements, it is clear that women are engaging with Dove and the messages they have for their consumers. Beyond these commercials, what makes The Real Beauty campaign successful?



Dove's success story of empowering women is attributed to many elements. Over the past decade, Dove continues to engage with its consumers through its various social media platforms. While their campaign is displayed on their media pages, they also invite consumers into the discussion. One of the ways they have done this is by promoting #RealBeauty. By enabling this campaign, they can show viewers the investment they have made into their mission while also tracking those interacting with the hashtag. Dove also aimed to change perceptions about female beauty while incorporating their brand but not specifically targeting a singular product which has allowed consumers to relate to the brand and its identity as a whole. This relationship has built trust amongst their consumers because it promotes the brand and the Dove community rather than creating forced product advertisements. Additionally, on Dove's 60th anniversary, they launched a pledge consisting of three vows. The three vows state: "We always feature women, never models, we portray women as they are in real life. We do not digitally distort our images, and we are helping 40 million young people build self-esteem and positive body confidence (Dove)." The brand remains committed to its mission and acting on its explicit goals. Through their original commercials, social media platforms, and videos, they have built brand loyalty. As Kevin Roberts, the author of *Lovemarks*, states, "*Lovemarks* are the brands, events, and experiences that people love. Not just like or admire but love passionately. For great brands to survive, they must create loyalty beyond reason in consumers" (Roberts, 2005). Their consumers no longer saw Dove as their preferred soap, but a brand that's a part of them, a *Lovemark*. The Real Beauty campaign ultimately remains successful through the trust and credibility they have built over time, creating brand loyalty amongst their consumers.

The results from the Real Beauty Campaign prove this success. After the first ten years, Dove's sales rose \$1.5 billion, their Beauty Bar became the most preferred soap brand in the U.S., and Unilever's bestseller company-wide. Seventeen years later, Dove continues to partner with experts to generate self-esteem and a positive outlook on body image through the Dove

Self-Esteem Project. They have educated over 60 million people on self-esteem and have set a goal of helping ¼ of a billion young individuals with body positivity by 2030 (Zed, 2019).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology that I have chosen to pursue is a focus group. I have selected this method because it allowed a group of college females to speak on their experience with body image concerning the media and how it has impacted them. To best understand the effects of the media's portrayal of body image, we must go to the recipients of their actions.

The focus group consisted of 5 first and second-year students from the University of Arkansas. It was important for these individuals to be underclassmen to understand how the media has affected them in a significant transition in their life, going to college. Members of the group were of various ages and backgrounds. To keep clarity throughout the methodology, participants will be described as A, B, C, D, and E. A voice recording was taken to keep the group's conversation continuous and natural while also maintaining clear and accurate information. Through the focus group, I hoped to learn the participants' perspectives on three main areas: their relationship with different magazine publications, photo retouching, and how the transition into college has impacted their body image and the brands they purchase from.

## FINDINGS

The first area I asked the group to explore was how various magazine publications had impacted their view on body image—placed before them were four magazines, *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Darling*. To better understand what participants were viewing, I will share a brief description of each magazine. The *Vogue* cover is Selena Gomez, a well-known American singer, in a colorful floral and black boa strapless dress. She is standing directly in front of the camera with greenery filling the background. The subtitle states, "Selena Gomez Talks Politics, Faith, and Making the Music of Her Career." The *Cosmopolitan* issue is a photo of Jenna Dewan, an American actress. She is wearing an orange sports bra with black leggings, and the subtitle says, "Your 2019 Sex and Dating Strategy." *Harper's Bazaar's* magazine has an electric orange background with Meg Thee Stallion, a famous American rapper, posing in a black two-piece set that resembles a bikini with a sheer black cape over her chest. The words "Megan Three Stallion Won't Quit" are in bold next to her. Lastly, the *Darling* publication cover consists of a model in a white and black striped floor-length dress in front of a tan building. The subtitle states, "A Guide to Finding Your Purpose."



The participants were encouraged to look through and make observations of the magazines while they were prompted with questions to explore. The first question asked was, "Do you purchase any of these magazines currently or in the past? If you have not, would you consider purchasing any of these publications?" The participants' reactions ranged. Participant A said, "I would only buy *Cosmopolitan* if I needed something to distract myself, such as going on a long flight." However, individual E said they wouldn't buy the *Cosmopolitan* magazine but were interested in the *Harper's Bazaar* issue because it was related to hip-hop, which she has a passion for. Lastly, participant B followed with, "I would only purchase the *Darling* magazine, but I enjoy looking through *Vogue* from time to time." I wanted to dive deeper to understand how these magazines can act as a form of distraction, and when they do, do their lives align with the messages these pieces are selling to consumers? I then asked, "When looking at these magazines, what message do you believe they are trying to sell to you as a consumer?" Participant A commented, "I believe the *Cosmopolitan* magazine is selling me a way to look my best to get attention from a man." The others agreed. "When looking at the *Darling* magazine," participant B stated, "She is more modestly modeling." Participant C added, "she is not as edited." Once the participant opened the magazine, she saw in prominent black letters the words, "None of the women in this magazine have been retouched." This natural observation carried us into the next area that I wanted to discuss, which is the impact of retouching.

Retouching is done so wildly today that it goes beyond the magazine cover and is now accessible to anyone with a smartphone. Popular applications such as Facetune allow users to whiten their teeth, change their facial shapes, contour their bodies, and remove blemishes. The participants I chose to discuss with have been raised with technology being readily available to them throughout most of their lives. Participant C quickly noticed the vast difference in the *Darling* model versus the other publications. The other individuals then began to share their feelings towards manipulating images. Participant D said, "I think it is scary that you can overlook it so easily, and it looks so real. You can't always tell when photos are edited." She also highlighted the distinction of editing a photo to make it more aesthetically appealing or manipulating the model's body. She said, "They make it look so focused on the way their bodies look versus whatever piece of clothing or other items they promote. Instead, they focus on how she looks." The group agreed that they see this same trend. The group's consensus was that they understood the need to edit and retouch things such as a wisp of hair in the model's face, but to adjust the model's body was not something they would like to condone. The group also distinguished what ideal body type is advertised for men and women. Participant B shared, "For men, it is always they look stronger, so men always want to be stronger and have a six-pack but then for girls, our appeal is to be skinnier. Instead of being strong, it is to look thin." Participant D agreed by adding, "I saw a man I follow on an Instagram post a picture of a photo of himself on a magazine cover, and he said, "I wish my arms looked like this." This showed the magazine's desire to retouch the muscles he already had and do so despite the influencer's knowledge. So how does retouching models in large publications affect the very similar concept of social media? I addressed this question by asking participants to elaborate on their experiences with applications such as Facetune. Facetune allows users with iOS or Android devices to photoshop their photos and directly post them to their preferred platforms. Participant E added her personal story with these applications, "When I was in high school, two of my best friends used retouching apps. One did more so on her body for bikini pictures in the summer, or when she was wearing something that showed her stomach even a little bit, she would use it. In comparison, another one of my friends would use it every single time she posted. She would already have makeup on but would add more to the picture, but also anyone else that was in it with her." She shared that it was hard to watch her friends do this because they continued to photoshop their photos regardless of the teasing they faced. She saw that while her friends would make light of them using Facetune when called out by peers, she knew that they were motivated to edit their photos because of feeling insecure about their appearance.

In the final discussion, the group shared how the transition into college had impacted their body image and, in return, what brands they choose to shop at. Participant D offered her insight on how she has seen her peers be affected by body image. She said, "I feel like the older I have gotten, the more real it becomes. When I was younger, I was cautious of people editing their photos, but I didn't realize how much it affected people and how much people find their identity in what they look like." Participant A also shared the same sentiment. Before the focus group, I believed that a change of environment and the pressure to fit in would negatively impact my focus group and how they perceive themselves at the University of Arkansas. Still, the women in my focus group shared a different perspective. When asked, "You are all underclassmen and have just recently transitioned into a new environment, do you feel pressure to compete and convey these same beauty ideals the media is presenting to you?" Participant A shared, "I care less about what I look like now than I did in high school, based on the fact that I am with new people. I was with all the dancers who had flat stomachs and abs, and I was always

not that, which was hard because I always went swimming with them." The rest of the participants agreed with her feeling the same type of pressure in high school. However, one participant countered by saying she felt negative about her body, and so did a few of her peers when attending parties and sporting events in college. This began the discussion on various dress codes and how they affected the way the girls viewed themselves. One participant shared that the dress code helped prevent feelings of comparison because there were more restrictions on what you could wear in high school. They shared this notion of feeling more aware of their bodies while at events where they felt pressure to show more of their figures, such as sporting events, during the summertime, and while working out at the gym. Interestingly this thought process was linked to the brands that were the first to come to mind when thinking of supportive brands considering body image. Brands such as Outdoor Voices, Athleta, and Aerie were the first to be mentioned. The only non-athletic brand to be brought to the table was Madewell. Participant B enthusiastically shared, "Outdoor voices is the first brand that comes to mind. I wear brands such as Lululemon, but Outdoor Voices uses different models with various races and body sizes. Lululemon emphasizes, "buy our clothes, and you can do tough workouts," whereas Outdoor Voices supports you for doing little things every day." Participant C piggybacked off of this, saying, "Yeah, Outdoor Voices has the attitude, you can go skip in the yard, and they are like congratulations. They just want you to move your body." The group discussed how these brands make them feel more excited to shop at their companies because of their more inclusive sizing, mannequin's body types, and how they encourage them to feel when wearing their clothes. This conversation showcased their loyalty to the brands they not only purchase from but enthusiastically support.

## LIMITATIONS

If given the opportunity to conduct this research again, I would improve a few things that created challenges for me during my research. The three things that I would improve upon are incentives for participants, the focus group's age range, and having an assistant moderator. First, I would find a better way to incentivize the focus group participants. While the individuals who participated in the group were very responsive and set aside time to help me conduct my research, it was difficult to find people who would remain committed to the specified time. My incentive for participating in the group was a point towards living in the sorority house, which is typically highly desired. Still, because of the time of year and different class schedules, it was not motivating enough. Knowing what I do now, I would offer gift cards to the participants for added encouragement.

Secondly, I would continue this conversation with different ages varying from middle school to motherhood. The college participants offered helpful information on what it is like to grow up in an environment with images of distorted models surrounding them. They also shared their experience with body image and self-esteem during a pivotal transition in their lives. While I am thankful for the college students and the experiences and opinions, I would also like to see how the media has targeted a much younger and older audience. It would be beneficial to see the brands they are loyal to and the messages conveyed to them about body image at their age. It would also be fascinating to see how younger females are being educated on how to examine the media. In comparison, older females could share their experience with aging in a society driven by appearances.

Lastly, I would find a second moderator to be involved in the focus group. While I had a voice recording of the session, it would have been helpful for someone to be taking notes. I spent

time going back and recording these quotes myself; while it was not challenging, it was time-consuming. A second moderator would have also assisted by keeping the discussion on track and making sure the questions were answered.

Overall, the focus group was successful and allowed me to understand the individuals' experiences and perceptions of the media and its effect on how they perceive themselves. These minor adjustments can serve as a reminder and an incentive to encourage discussions with more women in the future.

## **IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

I believe if a future student were to study the portrayal of women in media and the effects it has on body image, I would suggest they look towards three areas: (1) Celebrities taking a stance on their bodies being retouched, (2) men versus women, and photoshop that they experience, and (3) data that shows environments when women tend to feel more pressure to fit the media's beauty standard.

Through an in-depth conversation about the impacts of retouching in the media, the conversation of influencers taking a bold stance against the companies they are collaborating with appeared. In the focus group, an individual shared how she saw a fitness influencer share a picture of a publication they were featured in and how they posted their reaction to the unexpected retouching they received. This influencer shared the image with a caption that called out the company's enhancements to his biceps. In recent years this has become more common. Actresses such as Lili Reinhart from *Riverdale*, the CW drama series, also shared her experience with being photoshopped. Lili was featured on the cover of *Cosmopolitan* for both the United States and Philippines issues. However, both covers were visibly different to appeal to the particular country's perceived ideal body types. Lili showed her followers both articles stating, "It's an everyday battle, sometimes. And to see our bodies become so distorted in an editing process is a perfect example of the obstacles we have yet to overcome" (Hardy, 2018). Lili also shared how photoshop can have detrimental physiological effects and pleaded with her followers to be aware of the edits made in popular media publications. She also urged others to abstain from taking part in it themselves. It would be beneficial to see how influencers who have supporters of their own, many times a young following, can create a powerful impact by sharing their experiences with photoshop. It would also add value to this study by seeing their rights when signing to be a part of these endorsements.

Another essential conversation this study has brought to my attention is the different retouches made on men and women. Throughout the focus group, the appeal to be slim for women and the desire to be strong for men was discussed. It would be worthwhile to investigate what traditional edits are made to each gender and how it impacts body image, mental health, and surgical procedures. Future research and surveys could expose the desires of each gender to best combat the unrealistic goal set by the media. This could allow the study to go even further and equip others to hold discussions and educate those around them.

Lastly, the valuable question, "when do women feel most affected by the media regarding their bodies?" arose during the focus group. The participants shared that the transition into college was difficult due to the change of environment and attire in these new settings. In high school, it is common for there to be a dress code that is enforced. Rules prohibiting shirts with sleeves that are less than three fingers wide or dresses above the fingertips when placed on your side are standard amongst most public schools. However, the women participating shared how after 12 years of schooling, a common dress code no longer existed. New situations began to

make them feel insecure, whereas, in the past, they did not. One participant shared her disbelief when arriving at her first football game on campus. She spoke of how she saw different girls wearing outfits that revealed more skin than before, settings such as swimming pools and gymnasiums were no longer the only place that women wore more revealing clothes. This idea of dress code parallels a common pain point for the girls who spoke of their high school experience. As mentioned previously, when the participants were involved in athletic teams, their body image had more effect on them. While they no longer face this issue because they do not participate in organized sports, a new environment has brought unease to them during college. It would be beneficial for further research on the impacts of body image when individuals are faced with specific scenarios and how brands have adapted to these feelings. As mentioned in the focus group, brands that stand out amongst others when looking at supportive and inclusive brands, many of the frontrunners are athletic brands. It would be interesting to see the relationship between these brands and body image and how they have evolved from supporting a specific body type to a more realistic one.

### **PERSONAL REFLECTION**

Through this project, I have been able to have open conversations with females experiencing similar battles regarding body image, learn how brands have taken the initiative to change the narrative, and reinforce my passion for educating others on what I have learned. The focus group was very productive and allowed me to collect data that was beneficial to this study, and it also allowed me to gain new perspectives from my female peers. I learned that each of them had experienced times when the media had affected them and their perception of themselves. They also revealed that athletic brands are a significant driver in advocating for realistic advertisements for women and are the companies that resonate with them concerning this issue. Most importantly, I learned the power of media literacy. It is essential we as consumers develop this skill. If we can understand these brands' intended messages, we can evaluate if they align with our own. This gives us the power to control the distorted thoughts that are communicated to us. I also had the opportunity to see Dove's Real Beauty Campaign in detail. Dove's consistent determination to build self-confidence through their award-winning advertisements displayed a brand's ability to be successful while also investing time and money into advocating for something they believe in. This research has shown me the importance of working for an organization that follows Dove's and *Darling's* footsteps. In a season where I am pursuing my professional endeavors, I appreciate what I have learned and the ability to utilize my newfound knowledge to navigate me in these upcoming months.

### **CONCLUSION**

The media's portrayal of women is impactful, and it is necessary to recognize its control on body image and self-esteem. Brands such as Dove and *Darling* are paving the way for others to follow in efforts to change this unrealistic narrative for women. Not only are these companies successful and have incredibly loyal consumers, but they are also creating a space for women to feel seen for who they are. By combatting the media's unattainable beauty standards, positive mental and physical health changes are being made. It is vital companies recognize the shift in consumer preferences towards brands they can identify with, building a sound relationship between the two and propelling them into a more prosperous company.

Young women must be educated on aspects involving body image and media. It is vital this curriculum is embedded into education systems at a young age. Red Ribbon Week is an

excellent example of this. Red Ribbon Week is an awareness campaign that schools participate in to educate their students on the dangers of drug use. Schools could replicate this campaign but instead of drug use, media literacy. It is crucial this conversation is begun early because, according to a report released in 2016, "The average age kids are signing up for their own social media accounts is 12.6" (Common Sense Media, 2016). These lessons could play a vital role in preventing damaging effects on the mental and physical health of the next generation. Areas schools could focus on are diversity, the truth behind photoshopping images, and how to ask important questions when viewing media. If efforts are made to counter the media's unrealistic representation of beauty and body image, then there can be significant changes in body confidence. Lastly, if more companies, influencers, and brands worked to bring more diversity into their images and content, such as Dove and *Darling*, perhaps we will see a change for future generations of women.

## REFERENCES

- Arendse, L. (2018, April 19). Dove: More than just a change in the beauty industry. Retrieved April 04, 2021, from <https://medium.com/rta902/dove-more-than-just-a-change-in-the-beauty-industry-ab5b1f8688d3>
- Backe, C. (2020, September 11). Dove company history and REVIEW: Real beauty, real soap! Retrieved April 04, 2021, from <https://www.mapleholistics.com/blog/dove-company-history-and-review-real-beauty-real-soap/>
- Bookman, T. (2013, November 28). 'Thanks' to the woman who helped make A November Thursday SPECIAL. Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <https://www.npr.org/2013/11/28/247516223/thanks-to-the-woman-who-helped-make-a-november-thursday-special>
- Carey, J. X. (Director). (2013, April 14). *Dove real beauty sketches | you're more beautiful than you think (6mins)* [Video file]. Retrieved April 04, 2021, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=litXW91UauE>
- Cosmopolitan. (2021, March 11). Hey you, meet the cosmo team. Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <https://www.cosmopolitan.com/about/a26950060/about-us-contact-information-masthead/>
- Dove. (n.d.). Retrieved April 04, 2021, from <https://www.unilever.com/brans/personal-care/dove.html>
- Etcoffr, N., Dr., Orbach, S., Dr., Scott, J., Dr., & D'Agostino, H. (2004, September). "The Real Truth About Beauty: A Global Report." Findings of the Global Study on Women, Beauty and Well-Being. Retrieved April 04, 2021, from <https://www.dove.com/us/en/stories/about-dove/our-vision.html>
- Hardy, A. (2018, November 02). Lili Reinhart is not here for magazines that want to photoshop her body. Retrieved April 04, 2021, from <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/lili-reinhart-cosmo-philippines-photoshopping-waist>
- Howard, J. (2018, June 22). What's the average age when kids get a social media account? Retrieved April 21, 2021, from <https://www.cnn.com/2018/06/22/health/social-media-for-kids-parent-curve>
- Morris, A., & Katzman, D. (2003, May). The impact of the media on eating disorders in children and adolescents. Retrieved April 19, 2021, from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2792687/>
- New-York Historical Society. (2017). Center for Women's History. Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <https://www.nyhistory.org/womens-history/education/curriculum/saving-washington/module-2-breaking-the-rules-women/resources/resource-14-fashion-plates>

- Northwestern. (n.d.). Helen Gurley Brown professorship - Medill - Northwestern University. Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <https://www.medill.northwestern.edu/giving/ended-gifts/ended-chairs/gurley-brown-professorship.html>
- Roberts, K. (2005). *Lovemarks: The Future Beyond Brands*. United States: powerHouse Books.
- Seventeen. (2020, November 10). Frequently asked questions. Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <https://www.seventeen.com/about/a12135/about-us/>
- Staav, Y., & Piper, T. (Directors). (2020, November 27). *The evolution video: The use of airbrushing and Photoshop in the media* [Video file]. Retrieved April 04, 2021, from <https://www.dove.com/uk/dove-self-esteem-project/help-for-parents/media-and-celebrities/the-evolution-video.html>
- The common SENSE Census: Plugged-In parents of tweens and teens, 2016: Common Sense Media. (2016, December 06). Retrieved April 19, 2021, from <https://www.common Sense Media.org/research/the-common-sense-census-plugged-in-parents-of-tweens-and-teens-2016>
- Tomek, B. C. (2015). Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia. Retrieved April 05, 2021, from <https://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/archive/godeys-ladys-book/>
- Tpiper (Director). (2006, October 06). *Dove evolution* [Video file]. Retrieved April 04, 2021, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYhCn0jf46U>
- Vega, T. (Director). (2013, April 19). *Ad about women's self-image creates a sensation* [Video file]. Retrieved April 04, 2021, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/19/business/media/dove-ad-on-womens-self-image-creates-an-online-sensation.html>
- Vogue - about. (n.d.). Retrieved April 19, 2021, from <https://www.condenast.ru/en/portfolio/magazines/vogue/>
- What makes us different? (n.d.). Retrieved April 19, 2021, from <https://darlingmagazine.org/what-makes-us-different/>
- Women's magazines: Home. (n.d.). Retrieved April 19, 2021, from <https://guides.library.harvard.edu/c.php?g=310573>
- Zed, O. (2019, April 17). How Dove's real Beauty CAMPAIGN won, and nearly lost, its audience. Retrieved April 04, 2021, from <https://www.prweek.com/article/1582147/doves-real-beauty-campaign-won-nearly-lost-its-audience>