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# Chapter 1

## The media, body image and obesity

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### **Can we blame the media for the 'thin ideal'?**

Many commentators suggest that the media's influence on body image stems from the 1920s when the illustrations in fashion magazines changed from drawings to photographs. Readers could now see, and aspire to look like, real fashion models wearing beautiful clothes or advertising expensive products. In the 1920s, magazines and the fashion industry taught that the ideal figure for a woman was a pre-adolescent one, with little or no bust or hips. This so-called 'Flapper' figure showed off the new low-wasted dresses to their best advantage, and fashionable women took to binding their breasts, wearing restrictive corsets and dieting in order to achieve the look [1].

During the 1930s and 40s a more mature female figure became the ideal, with the influence of film stars such as Jean Harlow and Mae West. However, clothes were still cut tight to the body, with an emphasis on the hips and bottom. The influence of Hollywood remained strong in the 1950s with icons such as Marilyn Monroe, with her hourglass figure, setting the standard. The focus moved from hips to breasts, as exemplified by so-called 'sweater girls' such as Lana Turner. Such an emphasis on a 'womanly' figure came at the same time that women were being encouraged to return to domesticity and child-bearing after their involvement in the working life of the Second World War. However, by the end of the decade there was a move towards a

slimmer figure, with actors such as Audrey Hepburn and Grace Kelly suggesting a connection between sophistication and slimness [2].

This renewed emphasis on a slim figure was taken to the extreme in the 1960s with the arrival of models such as Twiggy on the scene. The under-nourished and pre-adolescent 'waif' look dominated fashion magazines and the catwalks for the next two decades. However, this time there was a growing awareness of the costs of such an emphasis on thinness, and this combined with the Second Wave of the feminist movement to produce commentary such as Susie Orbach's *Fat is a Feminist Issue* published in 1978 and one of the first texts to explore women's attitudes to dieting and obesity. Orbach suggested the women stop dieting and start to explore the reasons why they were fat in the first place [3]. A growing awareness of eating disorders was further fuelled by the tragic death from anorexia of singer Karen Carpenter in 1983.

If you take a look at films or sitcoms from the 1970s, you will see slim figures, but not necessarily very toned ones. It was in the 1980s that the emphasis changed from one of slimness alone to the need for a tight, toned body, with exercise videos by celebrities such as Jane Fonda urging their viewers to 'feel the burn' and to achieve weight loss through exercise rather than just dieting. It was also in the 1980s that images of muscular and toned male bodies began to appear in the mainstream media, and commentators such as Grogan suggest that this increase in the visibility of the male body was paralleled by a growing preoccupation amongst men with their weight and body image [4].

The end of the twentieth century saw the rise of 'heroin chic', where fashion spreads in magazines used very thin models such as Kate Moss and made them up to look like drug users, with pallid skin and matted hair. However, renewed emphasis on a very thin ideal was this time accompanied by enormous attention to body image in the media. Newspapers, magazines and even specially convened government committees debated the damaging influence of pictures of super-thin models on young, impressionable girls. This debate has continued in recent years, addressing worrying trends such as size zero, the deaths of fashion models from anorexia and the rise of eating disorder support sites on the Internet, where would-be anorexics can gain 'thinspiration' from photographs of very thin celebrities. Throughout this debate, the finger of blame has been constantly pointed at the media itself. Critics suggest that the media has distorted Western culture's idea of the female form by constantly promoting an extremely thin ideal, and that the media both reflects and moulds social pressure, on women in particular, to be a particular size and shape. Women's magazines are accused of using airbrushing and clever photography to produce an unattainable ideal and also mocking and humiliating those who have not achieved such an ideal by the use of cruel 'candid' photographs of celebrities' cellulite and weight gain.

Is it true that the media can influence people's attitudes towards their own bodies?

The most dramatic example of such influence happened on the island of Fiji in the 1990s. In 1995 American television arrived on the island. Before this time, Fijian tradition admired and valued large female bodies as being symbolic of health and plenty and food was enjoyed without guilt. However, access to American television programmes such as *Beverley Hills 90210* introduced dieting and eating disorders to

the island. By 1998 11% of women and girls on Fiji were engaged in self-induced vomiting, 29% were at risk of developing eating disorders, 69% had dieted and 74% admitted that they felt 'too fat'. Nothing else had changed on the island apart from access to Western cultural norms mediated through the television [5].

### **How are overweight and obese people represented in the media?**

We have seen how the media is indicted by most commentators for the way in which it has shaped cultural expectations of body image. But how are overweight or obese people portrayed in the media themselves? In Western culture, being overweight is often linked to laziness, a lack of will power or not being in control. Since the media both reflects and helps to form public opinion, it is not surprising to find this attitude to overweight people being reflected back at us in television programmes, magazines and films.

To begin with, there are far less overweight people shown on television shows or in magazines than there actually are in the real world. Take a look at the average prime-time television programme – the vast majority of characters will have an average or thin body. Greenberg and colleagues examined prime-time television series in the US between 1999 and 2000. They suggest that thin women are particularly over-represented in such programmes. While around 5% of women in the US are underweight, one-third of female TV characters have this body shape, as any viewer of *Sex and the City* or *Friends* will confirm. In comparison, only 24% of male and only 13% of female characters are depicted as overweight, which under-represents the proportion of the population in the US that is overweight or obese (30% of men and 25% of women) [6]. Fouts and Burggraf suggest that the figure is even lower for

sitcoms with only 7% of female characters and 13% of male characters being above average weight [7].

Where a character is overweight, there may also be the implication that this says something about his or her character – that they are lazy or unable to control themselves. Such characters are rarely given major romantic storylines and overweight female characters in particular are frequently found in stereotypical submissive female roles such as nurses, cooks or housekeepers. Studies of prime-time television demonstrate that thin actors are given more major roles while overweight actors tend to be given supporting or minor roles. Thus the media underlines the suggestion that success is related to being and staying slim.

This emphasis on thinness particularly impacts on women actors. Male actors such as Jack Nicholson or John Travolta can be seen to grow older and slightly more paunchy through the years and yet will still be offered film roles – and roles that still see them as sexually desirable. Women actors that allow themselves the same laxity find that the roles quickly dry up, a point made in the pseudo-reality television show *Fat Actress* starring Kirstie Alley.

While racist and sexist stereotypes have decreased in films and television programmes over the last twenty years, there is little evidence that the mocking of the overweight has diminished. In fact, a character's size is now one of the safer attributes to poke fun at. Overweight actors in films and sitcoms are more likely to be the butt of jokes, with overweight female characters in particular depicted as unattractive and disrespected by other characters. Overweight male characters also tend to be

considered less attractive but are not as likely to be the butt of other characters' jokes about their weight. In fact, overweight male characters are more likely to make jokes about their weight themselves, perhaps teaching the overweight males in their audience that it is better to make a joke about yourself before others do it for you [8].

Researchers such as Himes and Thompson refer to such characterisation as Fat Stigmatization – the devaluing of an individual because of their excess body weight [9]. Their research into television programmes and films shows that comments about an overweight character's body and fat humour are often presented directly in front of the fat character themselves. In addition, they suggest that male characters are three times as likely as female characters to engage in such fat humour, demonstrating to their male audience that it is reasonable behaviour to make comments about a woman's weight and to judge that woman on the basis of her body shape. Fouts and Burggraf found that in sitcoms the heavier the female character, the more negative comments were made about her and to her and that such comments were significantly reinforced by audience laughter. In addition, they found that the thinner the female character in sitcoms, the more positive comments she received about her body from male characters. Sitcoms are the most popular television programmes for young adolescents and so it is to this audience that the media promotes a state of permanent judgement and concern about physical appearance. Fouts and Burggraf point out that young female viewers learn from such programmes that men pay attention to female bodies and that if they fail to match the thin ideal they may be subject to derision and ridicule. In addition, those members of the television audience who are overweight and who identify with the heavier characters may be affected by such fat stigmatization.

This is not to say that there are not successful overweight lead characters to be found on television. The comedians Roseanne Barr and Dawn French have had particularly successful careers for a number of years. Commentators such as Rowe have seen Barr in particular as an example of the 'unruly woman', demonstrating with both her body and her loud, rebellious behaviour, a transgression of society's rules for the way women are supposed to act. Both she and French 'make a spectacle' of their bodies, drawing attention to them and refusing to change or apologise for the amount of space they take up. In a culture that gauges femininity by how little space women take up, such actors insist on attention for their transgression of society's norms [10]. However, it should be noted that their weight is a very important part of both actors' characters, both on and off stage and that they are very much exceptions in their acceptance of and celebration of their size. As Bordo points out, the norm is one in which the successful media star Oprah Winfrey has stated that the most significant achievement of her life – which has seen her become one of the most powerful women in media in the US – was losing 67 pounds on a liquid diet [11].

On a more positive note, the limited amount of research that has focused on children's television programmes suggests a more positive and equitable picture is being presented here. Children's programmes do have some overweight characters but it is suggested that the proportion more closely reflects national figures (again the research was undertaken looking at American television). Children's sitcoms seemed to present their overweight characters as full members of the gang, less stereotyped than in adult programmes. However, overweight characters still suffer some social marginalisation and, while in the gang, are unlikely to be the leaders [12]. In addition,



studies investigating children's animations have shown that children associate positive traits with thin and average-sized figures and negative traits with heavier ones.

### **Obesity in the news**

Research into the portrayal of obesity in the media has also investigated the way in which news programmes and newspapers frame the 'obesity problem' – the placing of blame for the growth of obesity in the Western world and the need for solutions. The mass media play an important role in the way any problem is defined to their audience, telling them what issues to think about and how to think about them. Kim and Willis suggest that over the last ten years, in both US newspapers and television news, mentions of personal causes and solutions have significantly outnumbered societal attributions of responsibility for the obesity problem, with TV news in particular more likely to mention personal solutions than newspapers [13]. They suggest the reasons for this are complex: the need for TV news programmes in particular to present individual news stories, usually focusing on a specific case, rather than placing the issue in a more abstract social context; the inherently political nature of any public health story; and the fact that the news media is simply reflecting mainstream opinion, portraying society as basically sound and attributing problems to corrupt or irresponsible individuals. However, Kim and Willis point out that in recent years a decreasing number of personal solutions to obesity have appeared in newspapers, which have started to see the issue as a deeper-rooted societal problem requiring changes in society rather than just on the individual level.

### **Make me over**

Finally, no discussion of how the media represents obesity can be complete without a mention of the 'make-over' show, which has become a staple of television schedules in the past few years. Such shows range from those that focus on clothes, and how to wear them, such as *What Not to Wear*, to more extreme makeovers involving plastic surgery such as *Ten Years Younger*. One focus of all of these programmes is the participant's weight and how to disguise or 'slim down' her (and it usually is her) body, either by changing her personal style or by the use of restrictive underwear that will tuck her tummy, lift her boobs and minimise her bottom. Such programmes suggest to the audience that a new and 'better' woman, who will be more confident and successful in her daily life, will be the result. The emphasis throughout is on 'control' – the form-hugging underwear is usually referred to as 'control' pants, etc. Even a programme that claims to celebrate women's bodies in all their glory – *How to Look Good Naked* – ends up inserting them into control underwear in order to 'fit properly' into the chosen clothes. The message given to the participants and the viewers is that women have to control their bodies in order to conform to society's expectations of how they should look and behave. If they are able to control their unruly bodies and look as thin as possible, they will also be able to control their lives.

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