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### Society Shaped Self-Image

“I hate myself.” “I’m not pretty enough.” “I will never live up to their expectations.” All these phrases constantly recur in the minds of teenage girls living in today’s American society. With the way the culture has transformed over the past decade, the generation of today struggles to find a foothold in the world. From the ever-changing ideas of the “perfect look”, mass media takes hold of the struggle surrounding today’s society and molds the teenage female generation to what it wants to see. But what makes girls so easily molded or even cared about for society to want them to change? The answer is that they are vulnerable. But now, what makes girls so vulnerable? That answer lies in the fact that girls ages twelve to nineteen try to discover themselves and to find their own image. Sadly enough, that image cycles back to the idea of the “perfect look.” Magazines, songs, and billboards all show off this concept of what a teenage girl should look like in order to fit into the culture and others surrounding her. With the methods used, the ideas thought, and the measures taken, today’s society shapes the idea of the “perfect look.” Shown through media, teenage girls form into what society wants to see that leads to low self-esteem and self-worth that damages one’s lifestyle. Once most of the generation today succumbs to looking a certain way, buying into everything celebrities buy or eating whatever models eat, the culture decides it is time once more to change “the look.” If one were to think back on all the different fashion statements made throughout history, one would be able to

identify “the look” for a certain decade. For example, one living through the 80s would be able to identify with the shoulder pad, leg warmer, parachute pants fashion trend that swept through the nation. The trend changed to overalls, butterfly clips, and glitter jelly shoes not long after. The idea of teenage girls trying to find “their look” is a topic which will always be timeless; thus, society finds its target in teenage girls striving to reach it. Another question one might also ask is what comes of the girls who constantly change their look to meet society’s standards? The answer cannot be seen behind the layers of makeup and the designer clothes, but with what lies inside. Teenage girls are drowning in ideas of low self-worth that engulf their minds. Once one thought creeps into their minds, there is no telling of all the negative emotions that will soon culminate. Low self-esteem leads its way down a wandering path to depression. An individual who suffers from depression might seek out self-harm as a way to alleviate the pain from low self-esteem. One might begin to wonder how they managed to get this low or come this far, but the cause was the subconscious or conscious decision to fall prey to society. And sadly enough, that is exactly what society wants everyone to do. Psychologists are trying to figure out how and why the human race allows such a thing to happen, but all the answers show that it lies in the fact that everyone allows it to. The crisis rising up in today’s culture is one that is deteriorating the minds of teenage girls at a rate faster than ever. Now the question that remains: Will it ever stop? One would hope that it would, but with the way media craves the attention from the teenage generation, it does not look like there is an end in sight.

The American society falls in a downward spiral with the teenage generation leading the pact. With society constantly changing, the youth are on the constant prowl to have the newest fashion trends and the latest technology. But will all this seeking and searching ever come to an end? The end that results is internal. No article of clothing or gadget will ever satisfy this need

to fit into the status quo, yet this train of thought escapes the minds of the ones so easily affected. From an outsider's perspective, this logic comes natural. Why would someone so easily give in when s/he sees this chase is never ending? Yet for the ones on the inside, the chase is the exciting part. Always seeking, finding, and being the latest and greatest is what this generation thrives on. The teenage generation sets themselves up for destruction, with or without actually knowing it, when they have this mindset. What is the destruction one might ask? The destruction is the lowered self-esteem in teenage girls that harms them mentally and physically for the rest of their lives. And it all starts with the poor self-image teenagers get of themselves through self-objectification. According to authors Amy M. Brausch, Jennifer J. Muehlenkamp, and Jenni D. Swanson of "Self-Objectification, Risk Taking, and Self-Harm in College Women," self-objectification "occurs when a woman's body, parts of her body, or sexual capabilities are separated from her person and regarded as representing her in exclusion of other personal attributes" (Brausch 24). In other words, self-objectification is the view a woman takes of herself through the lens of others, seeing her body as an object. This could occur through what one might think other's view her as, what society sees her as, or what she truly believes herself as. Through self-objectification, one is gathering and feeling certain emotions based on other people's judgment. Now to make matters worse, society "teaches women to internalize an outsider's view" such that they take that idea and lock it up inside. Individuals then allow this negative thought to bolster up slowly but surely (Brausch 24). Women harbor these negative emotions which give way to a negative regard for their bodies. Just like with the saying "you are what you eat", women who constantly feed themselves with the idea that "I'm not good enough", or "I will never look like this model", slowly take on this mindset and believe it to be true. Depression strikes in as women allow negative thoughts to capture their thinking and leads to

self-harm. Depressive thoughts “facilitate bodily harm because of the disregard for the body that can emerge from body dissatisfaction/disgust” (Brausch 25). Women feel down about their own bodies that they feel they must obstruct it in one way or another. This may occur to either feel something once again or to release some sort of pain that is exploding on the inside. Once in depression, the body traps itself in a mundane state that is extremely hard to come out of, feeling nothing, tasting nothing, and wanting to do nothing. By using self-harm, one depressed will actually be able to feel something for the first time in a while. On the other hand, a person struggling with depression sees self-harm as a way to release all the “bad” on the inside. The liberation of such bad thoughts, feelings, and pains are “gone” for the time being through methods such as cutting. Harmful methods are common among youth, especially when one suffers with low self-esteem. One might think that a young woman with this way of thinking will recognize it before she gets that far; but once someone engulfs themselves in this negative train of thought and depressive ideas, there is no telling what actions will be taken. Self-harm is becoming more prevalent in today’s society because of the rise of condescending images and ideas the culture throws at the developing teenage generation. Individuals with a low body-regard involve themselves in risk-taking behavior and self-harm practices such as “self-induced vomiting and use of pills, laxatives, or diuretics to control weight...cigarette smoking...[and] alcohol use”. With all that, still “females alienate themselves from their body, evaluating themselves as an object, and become prone to eating disorders and self-mutilation” (Brausch 25). Eating disorders are on the all-time rise for today’s generation due to the images in magazine advertisements that portray the “perfect look” as skinny, tall, and flawless. The idea that people will never live up to those standards swings full circle to the destruction happening inside the body. This destruction may be minor or major depending on the individual but either way it is

rising up in today's generation from the surrounding culture. One may take a certain viewpoint of themselves from another person's perspective, blow it out of proportion to be something it is not, and have a low body-image to this imagined judgment. That then leads into a negative attitude that becomes a habitual thought, always seeing his/her body as that and worse. Once in this downward spiral, self-harm actions are taken that only worsen the thoughts and depression circling in a woman's mind at all times. One may see this cycle as something happening from what society throws at the individuals; however, there are actually key factors in a woman's life that make her prone to such thinking, whether she wants it to happen or not.

Self-esteem issues can happen in either males or females varying in a wide range of ages; although, the target audience for media and the most affected gender seems to be woman between the life stages of teenage to young adult. Teenagers are at the ripe age where they value everything going on in the world while at the same time try to put themselves out there. They try to find "their look" while surrounded by a culture that tries to mold this generation into what it wants to see. One crucial way as to why the female gender is the one so heavily targeted is that they already struggle with self-esteem issues, always have and sub sequentially always will. The situation is similar to the statement, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." Why would someone go to the trouble to change its audience when they are obtaining the desired results? Financially, companies retain way more than the amount put into their advertisements of a certain product or look. So why bother to target males when females are giving them what they want? Young women fall prey to what media companies want to happen because of the low self-esteem already present from someone else's previous work. Society throughout the ages has almost in a sense programmed teenage girls to desire this standard set that only leads to destruction. Another reason as to why teenage girls are the ones being targeted is that "they are socialized to

believe that appearance is an important basis for both self-evaluation and evaluation by others” (Henson 723). The ways which society hypes this idea that “appearance is everything” drastically affects the female mindset negatively but the company’s pocketbook positively. It goes back to what was just discussed that media takes this cause and effect relationship that has been happening for centuries to target the prime audience. Women are molded and fashioned to believe that their look represents who they are internally just as much as externally. “Adolescent girls are expected to be nice, kind, and polite to people at all times” whether that comes across in their appearance or personality; women are still brought up to believe that the perception of others is what makes someone who they truly are (Henson 723). It is an expectation of today’s culture for young women to perform and look a certain way, regardless of their own desires trying to tell them to be themselves. This topic again goes back to the idea of self-objectification. Not saying it is right or wrong, but the youth are brought up in a way that makes them more aware and conscious of what other’s think of them, altering their looks to meet someone else’s standards, not their own. Yet another reason as to why the female gender is the one so easily targeted is that women are under relational expectations. This means that little girls are to be raised to show respect to their elders as being the “nice, kind, and polite” children they were brought up to be, while the women “are expected to be good wives and mothers who care primarily for the needs of families” (Henson 723). These expectations put a lot of pressure on women who are constantly worried about not living up to these standards. The whole relationship comes down to the desire for a connection between two or more individuals; and women think this connection will come from succumbing to what others want them to be and look like. “This healthy desire for connection unfortunately comes with a cost: the tendency to sacrifice or ‘silence’ one’s own needs and desires in order to please others and avoid conflict”

(Henson 724). An individual, especially a woman mothering a family and caring for all those responsibilities, needs to care for herself in order for the care of others to be as effective and genuine as it is wanted and needed. Mothers especially think they must conform to this certain role in order to be the “perfect mom.” Taking on this persona either naturally or forcefully, women tend to put their families first in most circumstances. Once one puts her needs on the back burner, that individual is unable to fully give, with or without knowing it. The ones cared for usually receive all the time and energy the caregiver can give, leaving the caregiver with less than nothing for herself. As her needs, wants, and desires are not being met, her emotional state is highly affected as well. The standard for women to mold themselves into the “perfect mom”, the “perfect wife”, and “perfect person” adds more stress to a life that is already bogged down. Media sees this already deteriorating mentality and spirit and runs with it. The advertisement companies target any female ranging from the teenage years to having the perfect model-like look and wardrobe to the motherhood years of being the perfect mom by looking fit even after having all those kids. It is and will be a constant battle women face while with the society that surrounds them today.

What is the most influential method to approach and attract the teenagers of today?

Media. Mass media such as television commercials, songs on the radio, and billboards bursting with images of the hottest models draws the eyes and attention of the youth in this generation. Surrounded by ever-changing technology, it only makes sense that teenagers follow what society tells them is “acceptable”. Most parents try to raise their children with the understanding that “acceptable” means getting good grades during high school to land them that prime spot in the college of their dreams; however, those same teenagers have one thing and one thing only on their minds: acceptance of their peers. They are trained to believe that if they do not have this

article of clothing, this piece of technology, or this diet plan then they will not fit in to society's ultra-high standards; And that is the exact way media and society target its audience. The workers behind-the-scenes of all the advertisement companies scale in on the appropriate times and ways to most effectively reach their prime audience. For example, during the daytime hours only commercial advertisements for stay-at-home moms are showed to ensure maximum effectiveness while commercials for man's outdoor sports may be played in the later evenings or on the weekends. Advertisement companies know that teenagers today thrive on social media and pop culture so that is exactly what they attack. So for today's generation, advertisements might show up on Facebook, Twitter, or during late night TV as the companies know their audience will be most attentive in these settings. And it does not stop with the advertisement companies. Once someone with the "perfect look" posts about their latest and greatest item on one and/or more social media sites, then the desire to have that same look goes throughout cyberspace. It seems as though more and more people have the desire to look like someone else based on the assumption that what they have holds their place in the world. For example, one of the Kardashian sisters may post her newest fashion trend on Twitter which causes the teenage girls that follow her to continue in her footsteps. This may also lead the young women to think this certain article of clothing may elevate their status just knowing they too look like a Kardashian. All this may seem silly but this is the exact train of thought occurring in millions of teenage girls' minds in America alone. However, it does not stop with celebrities. It ranges from their peers that teenagers want to become like, but also the "perfect" images seen as one walks through the malls or what is heard in the most popular song on the radio. One way which media portrays the "perfect look" is by plastering the tiniest models with layers upon layers of make-up while being clothed with less-to-nothing. This is one huge factor as to why teenage



girls are so heavily targeted but at the same time the most affected. Young women already struggling with self-esteem issues see an extra small model and begin to wonder why they do not look like that and how they too can be that pretty, thin, or have that boyfriend. It is only second nature for women to view such images as Hollister or Victoria's Secret models having the perfect figure getting the most perfect man and evaluate their own self through the lens that society wants them to have. Like stated earlier, this low self-worth brings forth depressing ideas which spiral out of control. Once the doubt and degradation of one's self occurs, a large amount of money is spent on the consumer's side to obtain that exact look that was shown for a short period of time. The process is rather advantageous for the companies so why would they not spend most of their money in advertising? Most of the self-objectification occurs for young women through the process of seeing the "perfect" model, while the degrading of women as a whole comes mainly through song lyrics. For example, songs such as "Blurred Lines" by Robin Thicke and "Candy Shop" by 50 Cent talk about women giving into men's desires as if without control. Spoken words have the power to become engrained in someone's mind as they repeatedly hear the words to a rather catchy beat. Those two raps songs can almost in a sense get away with the harsh words because of the powerful beat that attracts its audience. The crowd is at first listen lured in by the rhythm and beat which then turns the ear over to fully hear what the song is saying. Listen after listen, the song lyrics seem natural and one does not even notice its once jaw-dropping response. Therefore, it is almost second nature for those words to flow freely from one's mouth as the song comes on wherever they are once the brain has a certain song memorized. But that automatic nature the mind is programmed to is not necessarily a good thing. Ultimately it is saying that the degrading lyrics coming from today's pop artists are subconsciously going on in people's minds at all times and show when triggered by the beat. It

was not until later speculation that people realized just how awful the words were to “Blurred Lines.” People had the lyrics already memorized as it blazed throughout the world becoming locked into everyone’s subconscious. So what does it mean that the lyrics are constantly going on and on in someone’s head? Well it means that whatever someone feeds into his/her mind gets programmed in there and that is what an individual subconsciously and then consciously think of themselves. Back to the phrase “you are what you eat”, when someone jams to harsh, demeaning songs all day long, those lyrics become engrained in his/her thinking, almost becoming a part of them. With such songs, young women view giving in to men’s temptations as “okay” due to the number of songs that make it seem “normal.” Teenage girls take on this idea that in order to be someone they must do as these lyrics tell them to and become what these sang-about men desire. On the other hand, when someone is constantly listening to soothing, spiritual, or positive music, it might have the opposite effect. Thus again, what the teenagers in today’s society feed into their bodies plays a crucial role in the view, worth, and idea they have of themselves. With the changing of the culture, songwriters see that what is popular are the harsh songs about degrading women, sex, drugs, and alcohol so they tune their writing into such. Listeners crave more of this music that they feel is part of the culture, when the culture actually tries to live up to what the listeners want. It is a hard balance to find and an even harder starting view to pinpoint. None the less, the minds of today’s teenagers are withering away from self-worthy thoughts to self-worthless thoughts.

The everyday contact humans have with certain demeaning advertisements or song lyrics without even realizing it is profound. Flipping through magazines, teenage girls scour those images of the models, what they are wearing, the makeup they have on, and the product they are trying to sell. Subconsciously, deep down the girls have a desire to know just what it takes to

look that exact way, but even worse, they desire to *be* that exact way. In society, magazines or billboard advertisements are some of the most common forms taken for companies to get their products across with the most viewers. One example that is prevalent in almost any magazine is makeup ads selling the newest product that will make the consumers look “flawless.” With bright colors, large font, and beautiful models, the images attract the attention, luring the viewer in to wanting more. And once the attention is grabbed, the viewers are hooked, mentally, emotionally, and physically. Mentally by thinking it is natural to have this desire to want to be like someone else, emotionally by degrading their own self to uphold this idealized view of a “real” person, and physically by purchasing and/or doing all it takes to be just like what media is portraying as “the look.” Relating back to a catchy song, makeup companies such as CoverGirl brainwash an individual into automatically thinking “easy, breezy, beautiful- CoverGirl” every time a commercial or the tune is played. That is one huge approach as to how media companies are subconsciously tapping into their audiences’ brains to relay their product. Especially with makeup or other products females use, advertising companies know that their audience will be easily persuaded; but in order to keep their buyer coming back they must provide valuable products accompanied with the appropriate advertising. A teenage girl will almost buy into anything her peers are as long as it presents itself as getting her to the “perfect look.” However, how are the marketing companies going to keep that business when she slowly holds firm to her self-image and finds value in her natural beauty? That is why companies like CoverGirl use jingles that instantly make the buyer think of that brand when walking down an aisle at the grocery store. It attacks the inner conscious of an individual that keeps luring them back for more. Another mode of interest companies use to sell their products is by having the models that show off the item to be famous, well-known individuals. This allows the buyer to wonder, “if I

too use this product, will I look just as beautiful as this person?" Obviously no one could ever purchase anything to make them look like another, but for teenage girls struggling with their identities, their minds constantly go back to that question. Seeing a picture of Kate Hudson selling Almay makeup or Ellen DeGeneres showing off her CoverGirl makeup, teenage girls tap into the idea that if they purchase this foundation or mascara they have the potential to achieve great things such as these famous women. It is not to say that these girls cannot achieve such goals, but by the means of it all happening from purchasing a certain makeup product is very unlikely. These teenage girls are falling harder and harder into the trap media wants them to fall in. Believing everything from the idea they are not pretty enough to the chance that they too could become famous by buying into a certain item, marketing companies know exactly what they are doing and they are doing it well.

Will there ever be an advertisement in today's society that tries to sell the natural beauty of an individual? Well actually there already is. Dove launched a campaign in 2004 to promote the natural beauty of young women in America. From showing off their models in all shapes and sizes to sharing compelling stories that every woman can relate to, Dove has sold this "real beauty" idea to millions of consumers already. It seems kind of simple and a no-brainer as to the reasoning behind what they do. Every woman wants to be told she is beautiful, especially naturally beautiful, so why not sell that idea, right? If a company can convince the buyers that they too believe young women everywhere have this natural beauty, women will then want to start buying into the company that is "starting a revolution." The revolution seems to still be hindered by the masking idea of this generation having the latest and greatest, but Dove approaches this challenge in unprecedented ways. The company provides a wide range of models that capture the eye of any audience and lures them in. Dove commercials show

authentic women from black to white, large to small, that allow every woman in America to relate to in some way, shape, or form. It steps away from the typical model look into what humans might classify as “normal.” By showing the real look of what humans are like today, it slowly breaks down the walls of the stereotypical model-look that majority of the woman in today’s society crave to be like. However, there are always two sides to any situation and the consumer needs to constantly be aware. What may seem like the perfect approach to a huge crisis into the culture today, may actually just be one company’s method of targeting the prime audience. Dove saw the need for a newer idea to take its turn in today’s culture, so they decided that what they would sell would be the idea of real beauty from women in their natural state. Although this seems like the perfect solution to the problem circulating today’s society, it has a backstory like never before. What most people do not know is that the company Unilever owns Dove but also owns Axe. So while one major company under Unilever promotes real beauty from women being who they are, Axe on the other hand sells this idea of sex-appeal. The Axe commercials today give men this thought that if they smell a certain way then they will attract the hottest women. Again media turns the idea around of degrading women inadvertently to sell to the male audience. All this to say, the consumers need to know exactly what they are getting into before diving headfirst into a product that might not be whole-heartedly selling to their needs. Dove might honestly believe all women have this natural beauty and try to inspire young women to understand it for themselves, but it takes on a contradicting approach when the consumers see a sister company selling to the idea of a woman’s performance for men. From a consumer’s standpoint, watch out. Watch out for the lies media tries to convince the consumers otherwise to believe and actually know the product one is purchasing before “buying in” to what that company tries to promote. The underlying truth is that companies see ways which their

products can sell and run with it; disregarding the basic principles companies try to advertise, all media is about is targeting the prime audience to increase the revenue.

What comes next? How are these teenage girls supposed to move on when their entire emotional and mental capacity has been fixated on such a limiting “look”? Naturally teenage girls struggle to find a foot hold in today’s society falling victim to its schemes. These young women then try to emerge from this pit that gets harder and harder to come out of the more and more they fall into it. Starting with their minds believing a specific ad, these girls slowly but surely start to believe almost every ad they come into contact with, diminishing their emotional state. These low perceptions of self-worth slowly fade into depression. Depression can strike at any time and is again, very hard to come out of. The girls view their bodies as unworthy, ugly, and unimportant. With that thought process going on at all times, they could give into self-harm or other physical harm such as weight-related issues. Teenage girls hold themselves precisely to the standard society sets that teenage girls are to weigh so much and do anything possible to not stray away from what the culture wants. Eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa or bulimia nervosa increase as they become steps young women take to maintain the “perfect look.” In the article, “Preventing the Broad Spectrum of Weight-Related Problems: Working with Parents to Help Teens Achieve a Healthy Weight and a Positive Body Image”, author Dianne Neumark-Sztainer states just how important it is for these girls to have a great support system to encourage them to maintain a healthy body weight and thus create a healthy body image. One key outlet young women need to have is through their parents. Parents can either make or break someone mentally and emotionally. In situations such as these, a teenage girl needs the reassurance from her loved ones to put the value back in her life. Through this, young women can decipher the differences between the positive and negative influences in their life and hopefully alter some to

create a better life for them. However, one may wish to change but it is another thing to actually change. When an individual is in a swarm of depressing thoughts encompassing them 24/7, it will take drastic measures to come to a positive mindset. Slowly but surely the change can happen. Just as a negative thought can come into someone's life changing their mentality, so can positive thoughts come back into someone's life to lead them down a better path. Straying away from depression, positive thoughts allow an individual to have a better view of themselves and have better self-esteem. It will not be easy, but all it takes is the first step.

Yet more questions that should come to the forefront of everyone's mind: Why does all this matter? Why are the majority of teenage girls in today's society so caught up on looking "this way?" How and why do they find their value from someone else's perspective? Young women try to seek the approval of others to build their own worth. But what if media changed, society changed, and then the "perfect image" changed? Would girls be willing to show off this confidence that was once undiscovered? Sadly enough that question may never be answered. American society will never show off the all-natural, real girl and media will never stop using these insecurities to make money. Teenage girls of today need to see that the first step starts with them. The challenge to all young women today should be to stop buying the magazines, listening to the demeaning songs, or giving in to the lies society throws at that generation. Once companies see their profits plummeting from the lack of sales, they too will begin to realize the change in culture. Media will try to alter its ways to give the reader what it wants once again. But what if the girls go so far as to completely boycott any form of media that does not show off the new "all-natural, inner-beauty-filled" girl? Society would thus have to alter its course of action and the culture would change. Self-worth will not come easily, but once society sees that

girls are taking matters into their own hands and finding value in themselves, the culture will soon follow “that image.”



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