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Media Says: Lose Weight, and then Some

“Have you ever looked at your body and wanted to *cry*?” These are the words written in big letters at the top of an advertisement for Hydroxycut weight loss pills. Weight loss has become a dominant force in the ever-growing trend of “improving” physical appearance, largely because of “ideals” shown in the media. The social consequences are intense, as people, women in particular, are going through extreme measures to conform to such unreal ideals.

Hydroxycut is advertising their product, labeled as a “dietary supplement”, by showing a success story: a woman named Brandi who lost 23 pounds in 8 weeks. Along the left side of the advertisement, spanning the entire height of the page is a view of Brandi of how she looked after losing all that weight. She wears black pants that cover her legs completely, but her top exposes much of her upper body. It seems as if the only reason it is staying on is because it is wrapped tightly around her upper body. Near the middle of the advertisement is a typical “before & after” display with four images altogether of Brandi in a bathing suit (a pink bikini to be more specific). The first and third images show the “before” Brandi, an overall frontal view and a buttocks view, respectively. The other two images show the “after” Brandi, in the same fashion. On the bottom right corner of the advertisement, is a bottle of the product itself. In big black & red lettering is written “Hydroxycut” and other phrases are present in regular sized text: “Advanced Weight Loss Formula”, “Lose Weight, *Fast\**”, Increase Energy\*, Clinically Proven, 100% Natural.” The general idea that this advertisement is giving is that your life will improve greatly if you take this product to help change your body. Just see how happy Brandi is with that smile of hers.

Another advertisement to consider is for a weight loss pill called Trimspa. This TV commercial features a NASCAR racer describing a curve that he was having trouble racing on. A few seconds later, it is revealed that to help his description, the racer pointed to the curves on a supermodel that just happened to be there. Directly afterwards is a shot of the supermodel walking towards the camera, flinging her hair. And then in big letters, the Trimspa logo is shown, implying that the supermodel had used Trimspa. Another thing to note is that the NASCAR driver, his crew, and the supermodel are all wearing “sponsor outfits” in Trimspa’s colors that say “Trimspa” all over them. The general message of this advertisement is that you can become thin like a supermodel and have curves on your body if you use this product.

The overall message in both of these advertisements is that you will lose lots of weight by using the product, and as a result, your life will improve. It should also be mentioned that both of these products have disclaimers stating that the success stories that they show are not typical results and that the actual typical results are of much less magnitude. These advertisements also have some very similar hidden meanings. For example, both products claim that they’re for both females and males. However, each of these products suggests that females are the primary target. The Hydroxycut advertisement has a lot of pink coloring on it. There is large text in pink and the background colors are in different shades of pink. Then there is the pink bikini that Brandi is wearing. All this pink coloring suggests a target of females rather than males. As for Trimspa, they claim that their product is for both sexes (on their website) yet the bulk of the testimonials there are for women. Also, these messages seem to imply that you have to look thin to be accepted in our society. Why else would you “look at your body and cry” before having taken such a product?

Even the names of the products imply something. It is not surprising that Hydroxycut” has the term “cut” in it; a term that is commonly used to describe defined body structure (which

helps compose a good physical appearance). “Trimspa” is more obvious as it contains the term “trim” which is often used when discussing weight loss (to trim down). Then there is Trimspa’s slogan: “Be Envied” which suggests that the product will give you something that many others will want (a slender body).

These advertisements are involved in a much larger and much deeper societal problem. The problem is the enormous amount of importance that is placed onto physical appearance. Because of the “ideals” portrayed in various media outlets, people feel the need to match it. And because most people are not like the “ideal” there are self esteem issues. A nationwide survey found that a “fully 87 percent of adults say that if they could change any part of their body for cosmetic reasons, they would; of those, half would change multiple body parts” (Fetto). And one problem is that we live “in this age of the ‘extreme makeover,’ [where] total body metamorphosis is becoming increasingly available” (Fetto) and thus many people are making use of such unneeded resources. And while this survey is taken for both males and females, it noted that there was much less body image satisfaction with females than with males. Other sources show that females are more influenced than what this survey lets on. One example would be to simply compare the wardrobe between males and females. Women usually have many more outfits and definitely more accessories. But that isn’t enough. The survey showed that “almost half of all women (45 percent) say they regularly have their hair colored or highlighted, 1 in 4 (24 percent) has regular manicures or pedicures, 16 percent have some part of their body waxed and 11 percent get a facial on a regular basis” (Fetto). The advertisements described here are for weight loss though. And although it doesn’t really seem to fit in well with this societal issue, it actually plays a key role.

Weight is the single most governing force in physical appearance. It surpasses all of the other criteria that make up a woman’s body image. For example, in a societal study conducted

on university age women (with the average age being 24) through the use of a modified video camera apparatus (VCA) test, it was found that:

Women expressed a strong desire to be smaller than their current sizes.

Examination of frequencies revealed that 94% of the sample expressed a desire to be smaller than their perceived actual sizes, 5% were content with their current sizes, and only 1% of the sample expressed a desire to be larger” and that “nearly all of the women (96%) perceived themselves to be larger than the societal ideal according to the VCA. (Monteath 717)

Also, a modified body esteem scale (BES) test illustrated that “71% expressed moderate to strong negative feelings on the Weight Concern subscale” a value that was of much greater than those of other subscales showing that “clearly, items on the Weight Concern subscale generated the most dissatisfaction” (Monteath 718). Another thing to point out is that in the BES test, the “areas primarily associated with weight gain generated the most dissatisfaction in women. Those body areas, which include the stomach, buttocks, hips, legs, waist, and thighs, are the areas that are most often stressed by the current Western societal ideal” (Monteath 721). The Hydroxycut advertisement plays directly into this as the second set of “before and after” images in the advertisement show the backside of Brandi and the text underneath says, “Hydroxycut helped me lose weight where I needed it the most – my butt and my thighs.” The advertisement markets precisely to the area of dissatisfaction among the women represented in this study (more latent content!).

The societal problems involving women and weight concern are worse than it seems according to Mary F. Rogers. In her piece “Barbie Culture,” she states that the Barbie doll mirrors the societal ideal of a woman. A very negative societal view on “fat people” in the piece:

Compulsory slimness...expressed a need for approval as well as a desire to be *taken seriously*. Moreover, girls and women learn that fat people are slovenly creatures unable to control their appetites by deferring their gratification. Fat people fail modern tests of character. (Rogers 119)

Rogers also argues against cosmetic surgery by stating that it “pinpoints the pressures on women to do what icons like Barbie imply is necessary for achieving feminine success” (Rogers 120). One might argue back that this surgery is used to help people physiologically but this is not the case as cosmetic surgery reflects the “media-idealization of women” and “aims to enhance self esteem and even social status” while reconstructive surgery “is seen as restoring health and physical functioning” (Rogers 120).

The media is indeed an incredibly influential force on body image. This can be shown by the “social comparison” theory, which was highly supported in a study of adolescents. The test involved its participants comparing their physical appearances with those of people in movies, television, and/or music videos. The outcome was very significant:

Results indicate that engaging in universalistic social comparison is inversely related to body-image evaluation (i.e., appearance self-esteem and body satisfaction), and is positively related to indices of body-image investment such as dieting to lose weight and use of pathogenic weight control practices (Morrison 578).

This basically meant that those adolescents that compared their physical appearances with those of people in the media were much more influenced in negative body image. And as a result, these were the people that were more likely to take action to “improve” their image; unsurprisingly, the most likely action being weight loss. And the problem seems like it will get only worse, as Rogers states that “over the past several decades ‘females portrayed in all the

mass media became slimmer, including *Playboy* models, Miss America finalists, and the most popular movie stars” (Rogers 118-119). It is frightening to think about just how far this will go as the cult of thinness is currently at a very extreme state.

The media’s influence doesn’t just involve women though. It spans over to men as well, not in the manner that they are affected the way women are, but in the way they expect women to be. Men have become very judging of women’s physical appearances and as a result, women are more forced to conform to these extreme societal ideals set forth by the media. I have seen this influence on guys firsthand. A lot of the guys I have encountered have shown how superficial they are as I see them making comments when they see random girls. I hear how much they judge their physical appearance. And the main issue does seem to be “fatness” as it has repeatedly been shown to be a very powerful force. The sad thing is that some of these judging guys are friends of mine. Too often, when they see an aesthetically pleasing girl, they tell me “hey, look at that one; she has a nice ass.” Again, a reference is made to a body location very affected by weight loss.

In case I have not implied this obviously enough, I am completely disgusted by the sheer amount of negative influence the media has on the masses of people. It is wrong that women feel forced to conform to the extreme physical appearance ideals that have been set forth. Weight loss has become such a dictating force among the lives of many, for the sole purpose of “improving” looks. These women have become submissive slaves to the media, and are upholding these false and extreme ideals believing that their lives are much better because of it (despite there being no physiological improvements). It seems as if society is trapped in this trend with the only manner of escape being to see the truth, past the superficiality, and past the media’s grip.

## Works Cited:

Fetto, John. "Image is Everything." American Demographics V25 I2 (Mar. 1 2003)

This short piece provides a lot of statistics involving how people view their physical appearance based on a large survey. It explores factors such as age and gender. It also includes survey information about people wanting to change their physical appearance, how they want to do it, and where.

Monteath, Sheryl A, McCabe, Marita P. "The Influence of Societal Factors on Female Body Image." The Journal of Social Psychology V137 N6 (1997): 708-728

This article explores the influences that affect female body image. Many sociological tests were conducted and the results were compared to females and how influenced they were. This also includes their attitudes towards their physical appearance.

Morrison, Todd G and Melanie A, Kalin, Rudolf. "Body-image evaluation and body-image investment among adolescents: a test of socio-cultural and social comparison theories." Adolescence V39 I155 (Fall 2004): 571-593

This piece examines two major sociological theories (sociocultural theory and social comparison theory) and applies them to the ideals of body image in adolescents. The articles how well each of these theories works in real society and applies them to both males and females. This article takes into account a lot social aspects (in regards to adolescents) in a very straightforward manner.

Rogers, Mary F. *Barbie Culture*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1999

This piece explores the symbol of the Barbie Doll and how it is related to society. It explores how it affects children's (particularly girls') minds on the ideal role model. Topics covered include femininity, sexuality, and body image.