

**THE IMPACT OF THE BODY IDEAL IMAGE  
ON THE BEAUTY MAGAZINES READERS IN EUROPE**

**Mădălina ALAMĂ**

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***Abstract***

*The following article wants to offer a brief tentative analysis of the impact that the concept of **body ideal** presented and promoted by different mass media has on the feminine readers from the European cultures. I will not attempt a very clear definition of European cultures here due to the fact that the participants to the surveys I have used come from most European geographical spaces. In this paper European magazines and especially readers can be understood by contrasting them to American readers.*

***Keywords:*** consumerism, hyper-consumerism, self-esteem, body ideal, norm

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***The Body Ideal***

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In order to better explain the impact mentioned in the title, I will briefly refer to the way in which the male public relate to the standards promoted by media and I will underline the small differences that exist between European and American readers of both genders concerning the standard(s) that influence their self-esteem. I focused mostly on the images that appear in beauty and health magazines and linked them to the internalization of the concepts of body ideal and drive for thinness.

What I put forth is the idea that the emancipation of the contemporary woman is to a great extent a normative one and it is imposed by the modern consumerist society and augmented by the hyper-consumerist post modern one. The emancipated modern woman and the completely independent post modern woman represent new types of consumers and new types of products.

In this global cultural context, the body is depicted by media, nowadays more than ever before, as capital which is to be invested and re-invested with new dimensions. These dimensions become norms due to the intensity that the media promotes them with. Thus, beauty is almost entirely standardized and health is an attribute of one's social status. Beauty, as well as health become irrefutably attached to thinness and the requirements of achieving and maintaining one's body as thin as possible. I am interested in these requirements, their intensive, if not aggressive advertising and the effects of this type of advertising has on the European readers.

In pre-modern times the woman was considered a mirror of the social and financial status of her husband and therefore not to be perceived separately from a male figure. She was a « vitrine de l'homme » who « se voit chargée d'afficher la puissance pecuniare et le statut social de l'homme ». (Lipovetsky 1997, 78)

The contemporary woman is much more than a buyer who has some degree of autonomy. She is an independent individual, with a career of her own, an income of her own and a degree of emancipation that allows her to capitalize on all the qualities that she has.

In various ways, the media promotes ever more aggressively the image of the woman who understands her body through the detached and hedonistic lenses of profit. Of relevance here is the example discussed by Jean Baudrillard in 'The Consumer Society', on page 130 where he quotes an article from a women's beauty magazine. The article holds that the most important ideal for a woman is to inhabit her own body in order to make herself feel beautiful. Filling out one's body in a way similar to the one in which one fills out a dress one's size is explained here as a major requirement in order to achieve the success that is itself a mandatory wish for the contemporary woman. A woman's body is to be "worn" just like a coat inside which the owner enjoys herself, a coat which is permanently adjusted and controlled according to the needs and exigencies of the possessor AND especially according to the exigencies of the contemporary society of hyper-consumerism.

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### ***Consumerism and the restrictions it imposes***

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The studies on consumers' behaviour have shown that this new rapport that the contemporary woman has with her own body is to a very small extent the result of her "emancipation" and to a much greater extent the outcome of a normative set of values generated by the social logic of consumption.

The restrictions imposed on the body are explained by some sociologists (Lipovetsky, 1997, 83-85) as a complete schism from the traditional system of values that society had about women and consequently from the expectations to be had of them. If the voluptuous body was celebrated because it was considered a symbol of fertility, the contemporary woman rejects the round body shapes that are

associated with her maternal role since this is a role that she perceives as imposed on her.

The struggle to have a very supple body comes as a result of rejecting and/or leaving behind a set of norms that are external to the individual and the re-investing one's body with new sets of values. The new values are to a great extent sexual for both men and women. The studies show that since the 1980s men have been increasingly interested in what their bodies look like and less interested solely in having functional bodies. This re-investment is due mainly to the fast and aggressive propagation of the new values advocated by the consumer's society: freedom of choice, power to make changes on one's body, perfect mastery of one's bodily and emotional selves.

It is worth noticing that the traditional requirements of a woman's body, namely the ones pertaining to marriage and motherhood are replaced by a new set of rigorous requirements. Most of these can only to a small extent be attributed to the intrinsic values of the magazines' readers. All studies indicate that the level of self-esteem decreases once the viewers are presented with ideal body images of the same gender. The active and fit looking body of the wo/man who works out and controls each and every aspect of life has become a norm which is incessantly and ever more aggressively imposed on the readers (and not only if we are to consider all media surrounding an individual). Only partially do these values overlap with the needs that readers have as their very own. Several studies show that when asked about the models presented in advertisements most participants to the studies, male and female declare that the models are not real and that they would not even try to look like that. Some needs, however, are very real and the readers are met half way by the standards advocated by health and beauty magazines. (The war against unwanted body tissues is a good example of a meeting point for excellent marketing strategies and consumer needs: an infinite array of products is presented and offered to alleviate the readers' pain.)

This desire to be supple, the "drive for thinness" (Hausenblas 2004, 45-60) is exacerbated by the media to the point of being the only norm of beauty and health that consumers are presented with.

The level of self-acceptance of each individual is directly correlated with the constant definition and redefinition of self. This "appearance schemata" (Hargreaves and Tiggerman, 2002) through which the self image keeps re-negotiating itself is extremely sensitive to the image that the subject has of its own body, of the ideal bodies and of the distance between the ideal bodies and its own. This leads to a clash that a reader/viewer has: the distance changes once the subject has been presented with a specific body ideal.

The studies done in the field of consumers' behaviour indicate that the self-esteem and self-image of the readers who have generally a high level of self-respect are affected positively by the viewing of very slim bodies. The important part here is

that the viewers were told that the photographed bodies belong to some professional models. This small but essential piece of information led to an increase of self-esteem among the female participants. The images from the magazines were considered very nice but not real. In the many cases in which women who participate in the studies are unhappy with the way they look, the more ads containing bodies they see the unhappier they become.

It is worth mentioning that in the case of male participants, their re-investment was positive regardless of what they were told about the men in the photos.

My question remains unanswered: why does the entire media industry in Europe (and not only) promote the body ideal that is ever thinner and ever less real? All recent studies on this topic show that over 80% of the readers throughout Europe are affected negatively by the images of the very thin models. Several studies also indicate that most readers are not positively affected by what Baudrillard names "the myth of feminine emancipation" (Baudrillard, 1998). The idea that the body has become liberated and thus can and must become a product, a merchandise that is to be valued, is not internalized by female readers. Yet, most marketing strategies persist in putting forth this very myth.

Another aspect that derives from the same marketing strategies is the standardization of beauty. We can observe that Europe accepts only non-hybrid models for women as well as for men. Mass media imposes new exigencies of feminine identity: the *hard*, professional identity is to be combined with a *soft* one of accessible femininity without involving multicultural elements. The few such nuances are insignificant both number and impact wise. To coordinate this process the beauty magazines promote re/feminization recipes insisting on models that are somehow traditional and general: a professional look and a familiar attitude seem to be the norm. (Borland, 2007, 310-333)

Men are encouraged to pay more attention to their looks. The new man is very much in touch with his feminine side and to his health.

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### *Conclusions*

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There is a slight tendency towards the androgynous appearance. Men are no longer promoted as physically hard working and women, as I have already explained above, refuse to be depicted as voluptuous mothers. This is the image that permeated past centuries and contemporary media has done away with it. Another myth was debunked and replaced by a new set of exigencies.

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*The author*

**Mădălina Alamă** is assistant lecturer at the Academy of Economic Studies where she has been teaching for five years. She is currently working on her PhD in Cultural Studies. Areas of interest: consumerism, visual studies.