

## Chasing an illusion: young women and magazines

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Reading fashion and beauty magazines is associated with wanting to lose weight and initiating diets. (ABC News: Giulio Saggin)

Eight-year-old girls are being admitted to hospital suffering anorexia nervosa. One in 100 adolescent girls develop the disorder.

It is the third most common chronic illness for adolescent girls, causing more deaths than any other psychiatric disorder. Some authorities estimate that as many as one in five female students are bulimic.

Should we be surprised?

Last week was Body Image and Eating Disorders Awareness Week.

It is a good time to look at the causes of disordered eating and body dissatisfaction which is at plague proportions in young women.

When you look at the messages they are sold, perhaps it is really not all that surprising that they are starving themselves to death.

Research shows that many young women feel disgusted by their bodies. Saying they have "low self-esteem" is putting it mildly - they hate themselves.

Women's Forum Australia has just published *Faking It: The Female Image in Young Women's Magazines*, which explores issues around the objectification and commodification of women's bodies, body image, and the sexualisation of girls. It was launched at the Melbourne Town Hall August 18.

Thin, sexualised and digitally enhanced mages of women are linked with women's experiences of poor body image, depression and anxiety and eating disorders. The images contribute to self-harming behaviours and not performing well academically.

### Media images

Women's attitudes toward their own bodies are worse after looking at thin media images.

In young teenage girls, looking at pictures of thin, idealised models is likely to cause lowered satisfaction with their body and a high state of depression. Reading fashion and beauty magazines is associated with wanting to lose weight and initiating diets.

A five-year study found that reading dieting advice in magazines was associated with skipping meals, smoking, vomiting and using laxatives in teenage girls.

WFA has also produced a mini documentary about society's built in messages that you have to be thin and sexy to be acceptable. It's available on [You Tube](#).

In the film, girls talk about how they are influenced by media and celebrity. Flicking through magazines, primary school girls say reading them makes them want to be skinny and go on diets.

A 10-year-old tells us she's going to go on a raw fish diet to lose weight.

Girls are encouraged to see themselves as objects, to value themselves for how they look, rather than as a whole person. Being skinny and sexually attractive and available are deemed signals of success.

### **Psychological harm**

The American Psychological Association recently found that sexually objectifying material contributes to significant harm to young women.

"..there is evidence that sexualisation contributed to impaired cognitive performance in college-aged women, and related research suggests that viewing material that is sexually objectifying can contribute to body dissatisfaction, eating disorders, low self-esteem, depressive affect, and even physical health problems in high-school-aged girls and in young women.

"In addition to leading to feelings of shame and anxiety, sexualising treatment and self-objectification can generate feelings of disgust toward one's physical self. Girls may feel they are "ugly" and "gross" or untouchable. ...strong empirical evidence indicates that exposure to ideals of sexual attractiveness in the media is associated with greater body dissatisfaction among girls and young women."

Girls are told early their bodies aren't good enough - they need continual upgrade and enhancement.

A recent survey found a quarter of Australian teenage girls would get plastic surgery if they could - and 2 per cent already had. The study of 4,000 girls aged 11 to 18 found most were unhappy with their bodies.

Botox is now being pitched to young women as a "preventative" against wrinkles.

Seventeen 17-year-old girls have been reported as having the treatment in Australia.

More and more teenage girls are having breast implants - even though recent British research shows women with breast implants commit suicide in larger numbers.

Cleary, having your breast tissue split open and saline or silicone implant stuffed into them is not the key to happiness for most women.

### **Not the real thing**

But, sadly, too many girls now think fake women are better than the real thing.

They are aspiring to unattainable, sexualised, digitally enhanced images of models and celebrities - women airbrushed beyond recognition.

A young writer and artist in her mid-20s, who contributed to *Faking It*, has suffered anorexia for eight years. Catherine writes about "feeling the pressure of constant idealisation of "size-zero" women and perfectly airbrushed advertising images.

"I am working on my recovery, but constant newspaper and magazine articles blasting the horrors of sugar and fat and the 'epidemic' of obesity are certainly not encouraging," she says.

"I feel it's essential that not only girls, but women, are able to identify the real values we should nurture, and the deeply dishonest images and ideas we are fed".

I can't think of a better goal for Body Image and Eating Disorders Awareness Week.

*Melinda Tankard Reist is a director of Women's Forum Australia and editor of Faking It, which can be obtained from the Women's Forum Australia [website](#). This is an expanded version of an article that appeared in the Daily Telegraph on September 4.*