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In the world we live in today, the media is an incredibly involved part of most of our lives—and in how we perceive our bodies. Social media is used by 4.8 billion people worldwide, and even those without social media often spend time watching television, browsing the internet, and getting more involved in the technology that surrounds us. Social media can often make it difficult for people who may be prone to eating disorder behaviors, and in other cases, can lead to dangerous body images. There are many cases in which the media can create unrealistic beauty standards, which can give people young and old alike a complex about their genuine selves.

One of the biggest indicators of the effect these standards created by the media have on the individual is in the realm of child actors. There have been many popular scandals in which a child star has “gone wild.” But is it possible that these outbursts may stem from their constant presence in the spotlight and a shared expectation for how these actors are to behave?

In the early 1920s, Hollywood studios began to operate in a way that closely resembled a factory, in which they often neglected the mental and physical health of their young actors. In addition to neglect, directors would (and still do) have specific standards for their child stars to meet to achieve a certain look for their film or show. This practice of having a child change to better fit a director’s standards not only damages a child’s mental health by not allowing them to explore their own identity, but enforces the idea that they are not good enough how they are, and must change themselves to be successful.

As child stars begin to grow and go through puberty, many of the once available child roles dissipate, and directors are often left scrambling to find solutions to this “problem”. For example, when the show *Stranger Things*, directed by the Duffer Brothers, began in 2016, most of the actors were between the ages of 11 and 14, relatively around the same age as their characters. However, as the show has progressed and taken some lengthy breaks, actors like Noah Schnapp (now 18 years old) appear much older than their freshmen-aged characters. Schnapp revealed that he was asked to conceal signs of aging by the production team, and one of the Duffer brothers told cast members “They need to not grow up while we’re shooting.”

Although Schnapp was able to hide signs of his growth and maintain his iconic role, many other child actors don’t have the same fate. In order to appear younger to get more roles, some child actors will turn to eating disorders to stay smaller in figure. This goes back to the idea that the media sets certain standards for the appearances of people, as many TV companies have said that a “child” character going through puberty will lose audience interest and not come across as funny. Thus, child actors feel that they must fit into a box of what society will accept, and to do so, they begin to resent their bodies.

Another problem that affects child actors is their constant presence in the spotlight. The environment that social media has created makes it so that celebrities are scrutinized more than ever before for their actions. They have to be on their best behavior constantly to avoid any scandals that tarnish their image. Imagine this constant pressure on you to be a “picture perfect” person, acting as a saint for the eyes that are constantly on you. Now imagine this pressure on you as a child, while you’re still growing up and learning right from wrong. For child actors, this public criticism is what typically leads to their self-destructive behaviors and outbursts down the road.

This perceived image perpetuated by the media can also lead to body image problems with celebrities, as they feel that any unhealthy habits they display will lead to shame from the public.

Many studies have found that in young adults, this shame manifests itself into self-destructive behaviors and tendencies, such as substance abuse, violence, and in many cases, eating disorders. Celebrities, especially younger ones, feel as though they must remain in the perfect mold society has set for them, and if they begin to fall out of that mold, they look toward behaviors that are unhealthy for their bodies so that they can continue to please their audiences. Take Judy Garland—a star of Hollywood for her role as Dorothy in the iconic *Wizard of Oz*, but behind the scenes forced to not eat as much as she wanted to, and was often abused by her managers as a child.

One child actor who relatively recently experienced these feelings of shame and their negative effects firsthand is Jennette McCurdy. The former *iCarly* star recently released her memoir, “I’m Glad My Mom Died”, in which she details her experiences with Nickelodeon and the turbulent relationship she had with her mother.

A large portion of the book deals with McCurdy’s struggle with eating habits, and what sparked her eating disorders. As she was getting older in the spotlight, McCurdy revealed that she asked her mother how to stay smaller so she could continue to be eligible for child roles. McCurdy, like many other child actors, began to see her opportunities fading away from puberty and wanted to keep as many doors open as possible. Her mother then taught her about calorie restriction, and the two bonded over counting their calories and trying to keep McCurdy as small as they could. This instance helps to demonstrate how because of the ideas created by the media of what audiences will enjoy and continue to watch, child actors will bend over backwards to meet certain beauty standards and size restrictions so that they can continue to make a living in this atmosphere. And these stringent eating standards continue to apply to actors far beyond their youth, which in turn are the images we take in that inform our ideas of what a “good” or “acceptable” body may look like.

When McCurdy became a country singer and went on her first tour, she returned having gained a bit of weight. Her mother then took to verbal abuse and made McCurdy vow to her that she would diet and lose all of the pounds she put on while away.

Besides this being a ploy to control Jennette and her actions, McCurdy's mother most likely pushed her towards a diet so that she could remain relevant in the eyes of the people, and fit her into the unrealistic beauty standards the media continues to push. Around the time McCurdy's mother died, she developed binge-eating disorder and Bulimia, but now, she is finally getting the help she needs and is making a recovery.

Despite the horrible effects that eating disorders have on an individual's mental and physical health, the media has taken a liking to glamorizing eating disorders, and portraying them in a way that is watered-down compared to reality. TV shows will often use an eating disorder as a plot device, giving a conventionally attractive character an ED as a method for them to lose weight. The shows rarely demonstrate the harmful outcomes of eating disorders, such as hair loss and rotting teeth, and don't do nearly enough to emphasize how dangerous these behaviors can be.

One example of a show unrealistically portraying an ED is the show *Skins*, in which one character, Cassie, develops anorexia. Her struggles weren't taken seriously by the show, and it got to the point where young girls across the world were using photos of Cassie for "thinspo" or inspiration to try to be as skinny as she was. *Skins* isn't the only show guilty of promoting the myth that EDs make you automatically skinny and more attractive, as other shows with a heavy teen audience such as *Glee* and *Pretty Little Liars* included eating-disorder plotlines that were brushed over and not properly addressed. Including eating disorders in shows that are marketed to young, developing minds without acknowledging why these behaviors are so wrong can, in some cases, encourage young adults to adopt these eating habits and emphasize the false idea that an eating disorder is the best way to lose weight quickly.

Some of these bad messages marketed toward youth can begin even before they reach their teenage years. Disney is often the company that creates the princesses that many kids look up to. However, there are some inherent flaws within the princess industry. Although Disney has worked at making the princesses more independent, most princess movies demonstrate the idea that a young girl's beauty is their most valuable asset and that a girl must look a certain way to be worthy of attention.

To confirm this, a study conducted on 200 kindergarten students found that girls with a lower body image were often the ones who indulged the most in princess culture, and were found comparing themselves to the skinny, conventionally-attractive characters they saw on the TV. Not only do these unrealistic standards and messages get pushed on the television, but in real life at the Disney parks as well. For princess actors, there are specific height and weight restrictions, and the women who play the princesses must have a slender, athletic build. This enforces the idea to young girls that the only people worthy of being a princess are those who are skinny, and it can break down self-confidence in girls who may not look the same way that their role models do.

Now social media is a much more direct example of how beauty standards are perpetuated by the media. Through the spreading of diet trends, Photoshop, and other methods, young adults are constantly looking at and comparing themselves to hundreds of other people with different lifestyles across the internet. This comparison can be damaging to one's self-esteem and eating habits going forward.

Certain trends on TikTok have provided platforms for influencers to promote unhealthy eating and encourage other users to eat in the same way. One of the most recent examples of this is the "girl dinner" trend, in which girls show a jumbled array of small foods and snacks that they eat for dinner. Although the trend began as a harmless way to show off favorite foods and snacks, it soon turned into a widespread promotion of unfulfilling meals. In one "girl dinner" video, a girl was only eating a bowl of ice. In another, one girl boasted a boiled egg, a singular strawberry, and a string cheese. Some argue that the trend shows meals that aren't balanced or nourishing and can trigger other young girls who may have previously had eating disorders.

Additionally, because the trend only shows a small portion of what many eat in their day, it could mislead viewers to believe that they are eating too much because their meals don't look like the meals they see online. Ultimately, the girl dinner trend highlights the idea that we should praise undereating, and creates an outlet for people to share misleading meals with their followers.

Another trend that has been seen as problematic is the “What I Eat in a Day” trend. These videos show an influencer’s full day of eating, and although many of these videos can be helpful and demonstrate balanced meals, others promote eating much less than you should and give false healthy tips. One study by the University of Vermont found that most of the food and nutrition content on TikTok advocates for a toxic diet culture. Researchers at the University of Vermont analyzed 1,000 videos under the most popular body image hashtags and found that less than 3% of the videos were weight-inclusive, and 44% promoted weight loss. Many of the videos also assign “good” or “bad” food, which can give viewers the idea that they have to cut foods out of their lives to stay healthy. With 60% of the viewers of these videos being teen and college-aged women, it is safe to say that these harmful messages that weight loss equates to health are often reaching many impressionable minds. Without emphasizing the idea that health can come in all shapes and sizes, young women may feel as though they have to give into diet culture to fit the norm at the time. TikTok’s algorithm also makes it so that the more these women interact with the videos, the more they will see videos promoting similar messages, so it will be nearly impossible for young minds to escape these constant reminders that they aren’t good enough as they are.

Now, who are the people on TikTok who are sharing these not-so-body-positive messages? While many claim to be experts and have knowledge in their field, the study from the University of Vermont found that only 1.4% of the advice videos they researched were posted by licensed dietitians. Across the app, real nutrition experts are often overshadowed by influencers who sell a simpler message that is more appealing to fans. Many fans believe that more followers mean that a source is more credible, while this is oftentimes far from the truth. Although some people on the app may claim to be nutritionists, there is a distinct difference between nutritionists and registered dietitians and what kind of training they have.

Both dietitians and nutritionists specialize in nutritional sciences and help people make healthy choices for overall wellness or specific medical conditions. Dietitians, however, must undergo a more rigorous course load and pass a national credentialing exam to give themselves that title.

Additionally, they must complete an accredited dietetics internship, with a minimum of 1000 practice hours working under supervision, and starting in 2024 must have a Master's degree. Since nutritionists undergo less training, they have fewer responsibilities, meaning they cannot provide medical nutritional counseling, or treat diseases or medical issues such as eating disorders. This isn't to say that what nutritionists on TikTok say isn't reliable, but their advice must be taken with a grain of salt as they have had less training and involved work in the field of dietetics and aren't registered to deal with a host of patients.

In addition to the fact that some of the advice you receive on social media may be fake, some of the photos you see may be fake as well. Many social media influencers attempt to curate the "perfect" profile, in order to secure not only more followers but more partnerships with popular brands. Thus, lots of these influencers will use programs like Adobe Lightroom and FaceTune to touch up their faces and bodies, often making themselves appear skinnier and smaller than they really are. According to a study by Face24, 71% of people use FaceTune before posting themselves on Instagram.

One of the culprits of photoshopping their photos was influencer and LSU gymnast Livvy Dunne, who was found making both her face and stomach look slimmer in her Instagram photos. Having 4.3 million followers on Instagram and 7 million on Tiktok, many of them being young girls, Dunne's actions along with the actions of many other influencers send a bad message that an individual's body is not good enough the way it is, and that people should always strive to be slimmer. This widespread culture of Photoshop across the internet creates heightened body dysmorphia and unrealistic standards for the youth across these apps. Epidemiological studies have even found that the prominence of eating disorders has risen over the last 50 years as a direct result of increased Photoshop usage. Social media should be a place where people feel free to share their natural beauty and their authentic selves, but instead, it has turned into a place where people feel they have to tweak each and every imperfection to reach an unattainable standard of what constitutes "beauty."

But where did these practices on social media stem from? What began all of the facades that we see in our feeds? One of the main reasons why people have begun to look at their bodies with such a critical lens is modern diet culture. Diet culture stems from the idea that certain foods are “bad”, and we, in turn, are “bad” for eating them. It fills our brains with strict rules and regulations about what we can eat and how much of it we can have and shames us for choosing certain foods over others. Although diet culture is the site of increased awareness in this day and age, this isn’t anything new. Companies have been telling us we need to change our eating habits for decades, but with the increased use of social media, the problem is becoming even more prominent.

The main tactic of the diet industry is to pinpoint our biggest insecurities, exploit them, and then advertise crazy fads and trends to eradicate our imperfections. However, these trends often come with false promises, which leads to frustration and a distorted perception of hunger, fullness, and what a relationship with food should be like. They also emphasize the idea that healthy means thin, and can even encourage disordered eating. One study by UNC Chapel Hill found that 75% of women practice some form of disordered eating, making it the new norm. Another study found that 40,500 people research the 1200-calorie diet each month, although this caloric intake technically qualifies as starvation.

In reality, research shows that diets end up failing in the long term 98% of the time. In the fashion industry, designers often design clothes on average a size 0-2, while the average size in America for young women is 18-20. Speaking of average, the standard for what a healthy body should look like differs based on genetics, race, ethnicity, and a multitude of other factors. So why do we continue to force ourselves into a box, counting every calorie to make sure we fit the “norm”, even though there truly can be no “norm”? Health comes in all shapes and sizes, and just because you don’t fit the standard of what an out-of-touch industry is promoting does not mean you are not beautiful and worthy of being loved and accepted in society.

Toxic diet culture seems to transcend nearly every aspect of our lives, so how do we begin to reject it? For one thing, many health experts have begun advocating the practice of “intuitive eating”, in which you let your body guide you when you are hungry and need food, or when you are satisfied. You can also avoid diet culture on social media by blocking and unfollowing profiles that promote unhealthy habits, and following accounts that promote diet-culture awareness. If you are looking to make some healthier choices in your life, look into speaking to a registered dietician, and focus on eating the foods that make you feel good and give you the energy you need to be the best version of yourself. Ultimately, remember that what is portrayed in the media isn’t always what is best for you, and in order to lead a happy, fulfilling life, we must remain critical of what we take in through media.

Helpful Tips & Action Items

- Unfollow influencers who you think might be having a negative impact on the way you think about body image.
- Think critically about what you see on TV! Is that one actor just posing at the perfect angle? Remember: most shows and movies are directed by men, and thus often their sexist images of women and bodies is clear in their work. Question and challenge this!
- Discuss these issues with the people around you! The more we talk to one another, the less alone we are when presented with information and images that can impact the way we think about ourselves.

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