

The becoming of bodies: Girls, media effects and body-image.

In *Ten things wrong with the media 'effects' model*, David Gauntlett argues that; to understand the effects of media on human behaviour, we must first look at the subject in relation to the media, rather than the media in relation to the subject (1998). However, when considering the twenty-first century Western woman in relation to the media, the two are so deeply intertwined, that it is impossible to put one before the other.

The 21st century woman has been exposed to mass media creations of the feminine since birth, therefore, has no sense of defining herself as a woman without them. Her sense of self, her body image and often, her sense of worth, are intrinsically linked to mass media representations. She is constantly exposed to images that sexualize her body and these images '*...have powerful effects on their readers, serving to foster and maintain a "cult of femininity", supplying definitions of what it means to be a woman.*' (Coleman,2008, P5).

However, the 'cult of femininity' (as labelled by Coleman), is not a harmonious unit. Not all women subscribe to the same ideologies of femininity, especially those represented in mass media. However, most women make positive or negative judgements of themselves based on them. (Warren, 2014) They realise that the media representations are often unattainable ideals of the feminine, yet, they also believe that they were created in reflection of the essence of what a woman likes, how she behaves, what makes her feel beautiful and how she looks. To varying degrees, she realises that she is intrinsically associated with these representations and judges her sense of worth on her ability to emulate them.

Over time, we consciously and unconsciously internalize these cultural norms, evaluating ourselves and others in comparison to them. Usually without conscious awareness, we grow up trying to emulate whatever culture deems to be most valuable because we all want to be desired, loved, and wanted. (Warren, 2014)

Some women enjoy and perpetuate depictions of women as objects of flawless beauty and sexual desire. They use this to their advantage, finding a sense of power within it. They take a 'Foucaultian' view, in realizing they can construct 'who' they are by adopting certain

values and rules of femininity, whilst casting others aside. They construct themselves based on the imprints many influences have left upon them throughout their lives, including; mass media, women they live amongst, historical figures and personal experiences.

The latter is not simply 'self-awareness' but self-formations as an 'ethical subject,' a process in which the individual delimits that part of himself that will form the object of his moral practice, defines his position relative to the precept he will follow, and decides on a certain mode of being that will serve his moral goal. And this requires him to act upon himself, to monitor, test, improve, and transform himself. (Foucault, 1998, P28)

Many female pop-stars, such as - *Rihanna, Jennifer Lopez* and *Beyoncé* present as powerful women who are in control of their lives and make conscious choices to use their bodies as objects of sexual desire. Yet, as *Turnstall* questions in her article, *Dear music industry: Please un-do 'booty' pop videos (2014)*, how much power do they actually have when their ultimate success is reliant on the record company they are contracted to?

Very few people would question the power of Beyoncé or J-Lo to control and decide upon their images. But how far does that power go when they work in an industry in which three companies (i.e. Sony BMG Music Entertainment, Vivendi Universal, and EMI and Warner) control 75% of the global market? (Turnstall, 2014)

In this sense, 21st century Western women feel as though they have a choice about how they represent themselves, in unison with feeling forced to conform to the well-established 'norms' of their society. Even those who chose not to conform to the ideals are held in comparison to them anyway: *'Even the most accomplished and professional women are reduced to the sum of their body parts in most of the British media' (Lord Justice Levenson, Sum of their Body Parts, 2013)*. There is a sense of failure and rejection attached to a woman for not meeting the media's criteria of the ideal female form. No matter what she has achieved, or what she values, she will always be judged – by herself and others – based on the way she looks.

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