For female models, singers, and actors, skinny is in. These media icons project an ideal of female beauty that is all too often emulated by vulnerable teens—young girls with childlike bodies. The media have concocted an unrealistic model that values increasingly thin, even skeletal bodies. Image-makers now have a powerful tool: photo retouching software. Women’s magazines and ads abound with images of virtual women with long legs and narrow waists. “Over 75% of the covers of women’s magazine feature at least one title about the best way to change your appearance, through dieting, exercise, or plastic surgery.” Réseau Éducation-Médias

Image: Shock wave: obsession with thinness

The insistent promotion of thinness propels women and girls into an endless quest for the perfect body. Result? In Québec, nearly 60% of women want to lose weight. Many women suffer from eating disorders (anorexia, bulimia, binge-eating disorder*), depression, and loss of self-esteem — risks related to stomach surgery and liposuction.

Social impact: health risks

Constant dieting has major economic and social costs: 

– surgery risks (inadequate or irregular corrections, paralysis, malposition, etc.)
– risks related to stomach surgery and liposuction.
– risks related to cosmetic surgery practiced in the U.S.A.
– psychological suffering due to unrealistic expectations
– cosmetic surgery risks (inadequate or irregular corrections, paralysis, malposition, etc.)
– surgery risks (anesthesia-related complications, hemorrhage, infection, etc.)
– cosmetic surgery risks (inadequate or irregular corrections, paralysis, malposition, etc.)
– psychological suffering due to unrealistic expectations
– cosmetic surgery risks (inadequate or irregular corrections, paralysis, malposition, etc.)

“Between 2000 and 2005, the annual number of Botox injections in the United States rose from roughly 2/4 million to nearly 4 million, or a total increase of 388%.” American Psychological Association

The quest for external youthness represents a number of health risks:

Psychological suffering due to unrealistic expectations — undesirable effects of cosmetics (skin irritation and swelling, hair loss, etc.).
– surgery risks (anesthesia-related complications, hemorrhage, infection, etc.).
– plastic surgery risks (inadequate or irregular corrections, paralysis, malposition, etc.)
– psychological suffering due to unrealistic expectations
– cosmetic surgery risks (inadequate or irregular corrections, paralysis, malposition, etc.)

Added to these are the costs to the public health system in the event of complications, consumer indebtedness, and dubious links between surgeons and credit companies.

“Magazines and TV portray these operations as no more serious than a hairstyling appointment, so women end up believing there will be no pain or side effects.” Louise Vandelac, UQAM

Question: To attain the ideal age is somewhere around 17.” American Psychological Association

The image of women’s bodies we see in fashion and the media imposes a model of eternal youth. Many top models achieve international success before they turn 18. Also, signs of aging in those advertising beauty products are so masked that their faces look artificially smooth, fixed, and unreal.

To be beautiful, you have to be young, or at least, appear young. Magazine covers, reality TV and ads relentlessly drive the message home: skinny hair, pouty lips, satiny skin, firm bodies, and, of course, a slender body with a shapely breast. Wrinkles and white hair are definitely forbidden.

Social impact: real risks

Question: To answer this fantasy body, what price will a 40-year-old woman—after two pregnancies and hormone changes—have to pay?

Réseau Éducation-Médias

Image: Shock wave: cosmetics and the knife
The word ‘sexualisation’ means the attribution of a sexual character to an object or a behaviour that does not normally have this attribute. This practice is not new. As far back as the late 1970s, leading fashion designers like Calvin Klein were blurring the lines between fashion and pornography. To sell jeans, underwear and perfumes, young adults, teens, and even children were made to look sexually provocative with seductive expressions, bare bodies, and submissive poses.

Today, the Internet, TV, magazines and videos are saturated with these images, in which women and girls are reduced to their sex appeal. ‘Hypersexualization’ is the term used by advertisers to refer to the omnipresence of this phenomenon in our public space.

For thirty years, the prevalence of these pornographic images has increased our tolerance to increasingly explicit sexual content. Can we remain silent and not outraged by this phenomenon in our public space?

The fashion and music industries, magazines and movies are increasingly focusing on young girls aged 8 to 13.

In 2006, a group of girls and boys polled by the Gazette des Femmes stated categorically: “Everything is about sex, everywhere you go. You can’t go 20 minutes without the subject coming up.”

The Stereotype: a Doorway to Violence

The consequences of hypersexualization are more pronounced when the phenomenon of children masquerading as sexpots under the loving or horrified eyes of their parents. Numerous studies have demonstrated the harmful impacts of ascribing media stereotypes.

• Loss of self-esteem — falling grades — mourning aggressiveness — vulnerability to sexual exploitation — increased use of tobacco, drugs and alcohol — early sexual initiation — tendency to emotional dependency — at-risk sexuality (STI*, unplanned pregnancies)

Some examples:

- Set off an unpredictable chain reaction, with consequences more far-reaching than the weight of runway models. In its 2006 gender equality report, the Quebec government declared that “many images and attitudes disseminated by the media are still stereotypical, and contribute, not only to encouraging prejudice and inequality, but also, to highlighting various forms of violence. In a brief published in 2008, the Conseil du statut de la femme [Status of Women Council] made the same observation.

As consumers, women and men wield substantial influence. Purchasing power in the fashion industry is a powerful weapon. Let’s use it for change. You don’t like it? You think that a little girl’s clothing item is inappropriate? Talk to your friends or co-workers and file a complaint against the company in question.

Some exampl...