

## Freeze frame: a body that must always be thinner

For female models, singers, and actors, skinny is in. These media icons project an ideal of female beauty that is all too often embodied 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



## 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. Of these women, almost half have a healthy body weight! Assailed by stereotyped images equating thinness with beauty and success, many women become dissatisfied with their bodies and embark on the vicious cycle of weight-loss diets.

The normalization of thinness as the single most important standard of beauty has gradually given rise to intense prejudice against full-figured women. Plumpness and obesity are now synonymous with failure and shame.



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

"By presenting beauty standards that are hard to match and maintain, we encourage the growth of industries that sell weight-loss and anti-aging remedies. Women who are concerned about their appearance are more likely to buy beauty products, new clothes and weight-loss products."  
Réseau Éducation-Médias

An image to die for for  
**+ thinner**

## Social impact: jeopardizes physical and mental health

The social pressure to be thin has assumed alarming dimensions. It can be seen in the excessive concern about weight, even in grade school kids, and in the eating disorders that sometimes result in death.

Constant dieting has major economic and social costs:

Illness due to weight-loss products and caloric restrictions (tachyarrhythmia, stroke, hyperthyroidism, diabetes, etc.) – **loss of self-esteem** and **depression** – eating disorders (anorexia, bulimia, binge-eating disorder\*), **obesity** – risks related to stomach surgery and liposuction.

\*Food binges accompanied by feelings of guilt and shame.

## Freeze frame: an eternally youthful body

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 these advertising icons are so well 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: shiny hair, pouty lips, satiny skin, firm bodies, and, of course, a slender body with a shapely breast. Wrinkles and white hair are definitely forbidden.

"If top models represent the culturally accepted standard for female beauty, the ideal age is somewhere around 17."  
American Psychological Association



## Shock wave: cosmetics and the knife

Social pressure to have a youthful body and ageist discrimination can drive women into taking radical measures. Sales of anti-aging products and cosmetic surgery are going up all the time. The pharmaceutical and medical industries eagerly profit from this cultural obsession with youth. Female consumers are willing to pay dearly and medical credit companies know this only too well.

Amazingly, women who are still young want to look even younger: 47% of the cosmetic surgeries practised in the U.S.A. are conducted on women aged 35 to 50.



Question: do you think this body is representative of most of the women who read this ad?

"Between 2000 and 2005, the annual number of Botox injections in the United States rose from roughly 3/4 million to nearly 4 million, or a total increase of 388%."  
American Psychological Association

An image to die for  
**+ younger**

## Social impact: real risks

The quest for eternal youth 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 (anaesthesia-related complications, hemorrhage, infection, etc.) – **plastic surgery risks (inadequate or irregular corrections, paralysis, ruptured implants, 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

## Freeze frame: a hypersexualized body

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 perfume, 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, advertising and video-clips are saturated with these images, in which women and girls are reduced to their sex appeal. 'Hypersexualization' is the term used to refer to the omnipresence of this phenomenon in our public space.

"The fashion and music industries, magazines and movies are increasingly targeting young girls aged 8 to 13."  
Pierrette Bouchard, Ph.D.



## Shock wave: social toleration of the exploitation of women's bodies

Teens and girls develop their identities by imitating the stereotyped media images. Lipstick, T-shirts emblazoned with sexy slogans, bare bellies, body piercing, G-strings, tiny skirts, platform heels. Bombarded by hypersexualized images, girls begin to turn themselves into sex objects before they have reached psychological and emotional maturity.

For thirty years, the prevalence of these pornographic images has increased our tolerance to increasingly explicit sexual content. Can we remain silent and complicit in the normalization of hypersexualized culture?



Question: what type of male-female relationship do you see in this image?

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."

An image to die for  
**sexier**  
**+**

## Social impact: a doorway to violence

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

Some examples:

Loss of self-esteem – **falling grades** – mounting 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)**

"We've established a correlation between girls' sexual precocity and the use of coercion in their first sexual experiences: the younger they are, the higher the coercion rate."  
Lilia Goldfarb, Y des femmes de Montréal - YWCA

\*Sexually transmitted infection.

## Act now for an egalitarian and diversified standard of beauty

The stereotyped images of the female body conveyed by the fashion industry, advertising and the star system set off an unpredictable chain reaction, with consequences more far-reaching than the weight of runway models. In its 2006 gender equality policy, the Québec government deplored "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 is in our hands: **Let's use it for change.** You don't like an ad? You think that a little girls' clothing item is inappropriate? Talk to your friends or co-workers and file a complaint against the company in question. Be a responsible consumer and savour the satisfaction of helping to promote a more just society.

**Take action. No action is too small. For an egalitarian image of women in public spaces.**



Réseau québécois d'action pour la santé des femmes, 2008  
www.rqasf.qc.ca

Original French version funded by:



• Santé et Services sociaux  
• Culture, Communications et Condition féminine  
• Développement économique, Innovation et Exportation



English translation funded by:



## What's so bad about selling dreams?

### Merchandizing women's bodies: the hidden reality

Fashion, advertising and the star system have created, and are continuing to create, stereotyped images of the female body: **always sexier, thinner, and younger.**

The media's omnipresence in our lives has enabled these industries to impose a single—unrealistic—beauty standard.

An image to die for?

**And what if the dream became a nightmare for your girlfriend, your sister, your wife, your daughter, or your mother?**

**sexier**  
**+**  
**thinner**  
**+**  
**younger**  
**+**