All Consuming Self-Destructiveness: Images Of Female Attractiveness In Fashion Advertising And The Impact On Women's Body Satisfaction, Self-Presentations On Social Networks, And Beauty-Related Consumption Behavior

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SOCIAL NETWORKS, AND BEAUTY-RELATED CONSUMPTION BEHAVIOR

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A master’s thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

ALL CONSUMING SELF-DESTRUCTIVENESS:
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Maria Christoforou

Advisor: Professor Eugenia Paulicelli

Sociocultural stereotypes of feminine beauty are widespread in almost every form of popular media, but most pervasively in fashion advertising. The fashion advertising industry overwhelms women with images that represent what is considered to be the “ideal beauty.” In reality, for most women such stereotypes of beauty are almost totally unachievable, as the ideal beauty portrayed in advertisements is based on absolute perfection. Advertisers’ use of such extreme and unrealistic role models implies that in order for a woman to be considered beautiful she must be perfect, which makes it difficult for her to achieve any level of contentment with her physical appearance.

The purpose of the present study was to investigate how the ideals of excessive thinness and explicit sexuality for women in fashion advertising can occasionally raise comparison standards for physical attractiveness, enhance beliefs about the importance of physical attractiveness in one’s socialization process, and lower body satisfaction and level of self-esteem. This effect, which is known as the social comparison, is one of the several theories that are used to explain why and how women internalize the media idealized beauty standards (Festinger, 1954).

As women attempt to adapt to such beauty standards, the majority of them overadapts, sometimes to the point that they experience the self as an object (Kilbourne J., 1999;
Gonzales & Hancock, 2010). The present study examined how these implications may increase the discrepancy between the real and the ideal self and how they determine women’s self-presentations on online social networking sites, like Facebook. Lastly, the study attempted to explain how biased perceptions about social reality and the self, originating from fashion advertising, can lead to addictive or conspicuous consumption.
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Introduction

As adults in a toxic culture, some of us fall in love with cars or chocolate cake or, more dangerously drugs. But, just as we are more vulnerable to the glory and heartbreak of romantic love than we will ever be again, at no time are we more vulnerable to the seductive power of advertising and of addiction than we are in adolescence. (Kilbourne J., 1999, p. 129)

In the history of the 20th century, the United States advertising has responded to changing business marketing strategies, communication technologies, and most importantly cultural contexts. Furthermore, advertising has become a systematic manifestation of people’s underlying mental structures for apprehending the world; therefore, it constitutes an institution emblematic of American society and culture (Pope, 1983).

In the 18th and early 19th centuries, most goods were produced domestically and women were the source from which many basic necessities flowed. In the meantime, manufacturers who sold in larger markets rarely produced branded goods for sale to consumers. The main role of advertising was to notify readers and buyers of the arrival of goods or the availability of new items (Pope, 1983). However, only few merchants responded to this opportunity of advertising to reach large audiences with attractive and persuasive messages. Before the late 19th century, most newspapers depended on subscriptions for their revenues, so prices were high and circulation was at a minimum. Advertisements in newspapers were small and usually set in eyestraining six-point type, so that the announcements of tradesmen and the blandishments of promoters constituted the bulk of advertising. Consequently, advertising tended to be almost entirely local (Pope, 1983).

In the decades following the Civil War, American capitalism began to produce a distinct market-oriented culture, with the exchange and circulation of money and goods at the foundation of its aesthetic life and its moral sensibility (Leach, 1994). The greater shift, which precipitated the significant transition in American advertising in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, occurred with the development of national markets for the branded,
standardized products of large-scale manufacturers. Department stores reached out to huge urban populations with a broad spectrum of goods (Pope, 1983; Turrow, 1997). Accelerated innovations in technology, and the increased capital accumulation for investment in expansion of production resulted in the mass production of goods, which, in turn, required intensive advertising. The same circumstances that led businesses to advertise branded products required the creation of an advertising industry that specialized in preparing, placing, and distributing advertising messages. Before the Civil War, the industry was virtually nonexistent and agencies in the modern sense were unknown (Pope, 1983).

After the late 19th century, advertising began to have a specifically commercial connotation (Boorstin, 1974; Sampson, 1874). By the early 20th century and the beginning of World War I, things had already changed drastically, as Americans were being enticed into consumer pleasure and indulgence rather into work as the road to happiness (Leach, 1994). Advertising expenditures had passed a billion dollars annually and the main role of advertising had become persuasion and appeal. With the advent of radio in the 1920s and of television two decades later, came the acceptability and the increasing interest in psychology as a newly emerging science. At the same time, the success of propaganda used to convince the population to support World War I, constituted the major factors contributed to the marketers’ ability to reach the masses through the right kinds of broadly distributed persuasive messages. Since then, the social role of advertising has been expanding continuously (Geneen, 1974; Killbourne, 1999; Turrow, 1997). By 1920, American advertising had more in common with its counterpart today than with the advertising of the generation earlier (Pope, 1983).

In the years following World War II, the industrial consumer society rose exponentially, so did the media and the production and distribution of commercial imagery. At that point, as Leach (1994) states, “innovation became tied to the production of more and
more commodities and commercial capitalism became fully identified with the cult of the new” (p. 5). Consequently, it became necessary not just to mass-produce goods but to mass-produce the markets hungry for the goods (Kilbourne J., 1999). According to Jean Kilbourne (1999), “the problem became not too little candy produced but not enough candy consumed,” thus, it became the object of the advertisers to produce consumers (p. 71). Moreover, as Kilbourne states, “Since the 1920s, advertising has provided less information about the product and focused more on the lives, especially the emotional lives, of the perspective consumers” (p. 71). In order to sell more, advertisers started to spend enormous amounts of money on psychological research, which helped them to understand people’s lives, emotions, addictions and behaviors very well (Kilbourne J., 1999). Eventually, consumer behavior became recognized as a science in the late 1940s and since then, advertisers use this knowledge to keep people craving for goods and in denial of reality (Kilbourne J., 1999).

The upsurge of women entering the workforce had undoubtedly fostered this rise, while the belief “to buy is to succeed” turned out to be the hallmark of the post-World-War-II decades. Advertisements depicting and addressing women became rampant, signaling the commencement of a new era, which promised material security, individual success, and liberation from certain forms of oppression of the past. Within this framework, the proliferation of images portraying stereotypical aspects of women’s role in society and women’s position and value in relation to that of men (happy housewives or dependent upon men), became a repeatable vernacular, which, for years, was and still is overpowering society’s vision.

The resurgence of the Women’s Movement in the 1960’s, most specifically Betty Friedan, through her revolutionary *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), called attention to the stereotypical portrayals of women in the mass media, and explicitly objected to them. Friedan argued that placing women at home and rejecting them as workers confines their possibilities
and wastes their talents and potentials. However, despite the influence of the Women’s Movement on the recognition of feminist theory and the direction of scholarship in the field of gender and communication during the decades of the 1970’s and 1980’s, the stereotypical depiction of women in advertising has never been drastically decreased.

On the contrary, sexualization and victimization of women emerged in the advertising concepts of the 1990’s. Women were presented as sex objects and as victims, or potential victims, in various forms of media, including the up and coming internet, which resulted in the increase of acceptance of violence against women (Stankiewitcz & Rosselli, 2008). This is evidence that advertising is growing significantly at women’s peril.

According to Kilbourne (1999), the real violence of advertising is that “words can be made to mean anything, which is hard to distinguish from the idea that words mean nothing” and this is why imagery becomes more and more powerful (p. 75). Today’s advertising depends and focuses on images, which are symbols that can deliver meanings as effectively as verbal symbols can. On the billboards or in people’s homes, on the magazine covers or on social networking sites, images are ubiquitous. Images unintentionally shape our perception of reality and influence our notions of what it is socially acceptable, or what it means to be male or female in society (Kang, 1997). Indeed, today is characterized by a solid consumer culture based on visual identity consumption that articulates and interacts with each consumer’s daily activities, words, and visual perceptions (Lin & Yeh, 2009).

The ubiquity of media images is evidence that advertisers have an enormous amount of money and power. But, as Kilbourne (1999) states, “we can use their weight against them. We can use their very images to educate about their real messages” (p. 32). All of us, who seek a cultural environment safe from confining gender stereotypes or limiting beauty standards, can redefine the vital concepts of freedom, beauty, sexuality, and success that
advertising has degraded, and use them in a way that is only good for women’s health, power, and self-fulfillment.

**Literature review**

The ideal image of feminine beauty, currently and consistently for the last decades presented in advertising, is rigid with an excessive emphasis on thinness and sexuality (Kilbourne J., 1999; Posavac, Posavac, & Posavac, 1998). Many researchers have suggested that exposure to media portrayals of feminine beauty and attractiveness not only distort society’s perceptions of women’s role in society, but, can also raise comparison standards for physical attractiveness and reduce body satisfaction for women (Martin & Gentry, 1997; Richins, 1991). At the same time, exposure to advertisements depicting attractive models give women a perception of an unrealistic body image that can lead to eating disorders and ultimately to beauty-related consumption behavior (Eisend & Moller, 2007; Stice, Schupak-Neuberg, Shaw, & Stein, 1994).

The major and most frequently cited studies on the portrayals of women in advertising were first published in the 1970s and 1980s. One of the most significant and most frequently replicated study was the “Woman’s Place: An Analysis of the Roles Portrayed by Women in Magazine Advertisements” conducted by Courtney and Lockeretz in 1971. This study indicated that women in magazine advertisements were hardly ever shown in out-of-home working roles, especially in professional positions, and they were never depicted as venturing far away from home without the companion of a man. At the same time, men were often portrayed as considering women primarily as sexual objects or as domestic adjuncts. A follow-up of this study using the same methodology was conducted by Wagner and Banos (1973). Wagner and Banos discovered that women identified with advertisements involving cleaning products, drugs, clothing, and home appliances; whereas men identified with advertisements related to cars, travel, alcoholic beverages, cigarettes, and banks.
The most complete research study of visual imagery in U.S. advertisements was Erving Goffman’s 1979 study, *Gender Advertisements*. In his book, Goffman presented an analysis of approximately five-hundred examples of print advertisements chosen from popular newspapers and magazines. Based on his frame analysis focusing on the more subtle clues that can provide important messages about gender relations and his coding system (focusing on hands, eyes, knees, facial expressions, head posture, relative sizes, positioning and placing, head-eye aversion, and finger biting and sucking), Goffman found that gender stereotyping in advertisements occurred primarily in ways that can be captured by the following categories: relative size; feminine touch; ritualization of subordination; licensed withdrawal. In Goffman’s study women were almost never shown taller than men. Women, more than men, were portrayed using their fingers and hands to cradle or caress objects. In addition, women were portrayed in subordinate occupational roles; where housework scenes were presented, males were shown in no contributing role at all. Also, women were pictured engaged in involvements, which removed them psychologically from the social situation. For example, their attention often drifts away, they gaze into the distance as if they were not part of the scene, and they appered to be disoriented, whereas men stay alert and ready for potential threats to their control of situation. Goffman concluded that “advertisers do not create the ritualized portrayals they employ, but rather conventionalize what already exists in our society” (as cited in Courtney & Whipple, 1983, p. 24). Despite the fact that newest studies criticized Goffman’s methodology and were skeptical towards his sampling technique and his drawing of biased samples—claiming that were deliberately chosen to show gender differences that represented his preconceptions instead of randomly selecting advertisements to analyze—Goffman’s study became a reference point for many other scholars and concluded to some considerable results.
In 1997, Kang conducted a study in which she used Goffman’s coding categories and added two new categories in order to examine any variations or revolutions in the way women have been portrayed in magazine advertisements. The two additional categories included: body display, which measured the degree of nudity; and independence/self-assertiveness, which looked at women’s overall image in terms of independence and self-assurance. The findings of Kang’s analysis of advertisements in *Vogue, Mademoiselle,* and *McCall’s* show that only a slight decrease in the stereotypical depiction of women occurring over time, despite the influence of the Women’s Movement and the systematic study of the effects of advertising on people’s behaviors, attitudes and psychological well being (Lindner, 2004). Overall, the degree of sexism in magazine advertisements remained approximately the same from 1979 to 1991, which signifies that the process of change in advertising images was a slow one. However, Kang’s results revealed that the types of stereotyping have changed over time. It is possible that stereotypes of women have shifted to a view of a more powerful and independent woman than the previously portrayed domestic housewife, but it seems that the underlying ideological foundation remains untouched (Kang, 1997). Given that women of the 1980s had already started to rebel against the old-style model of motherhood and the perception of the perfect wife, we can assuredly argue that advertising does not show how women actually behave, but rather how society thinks women behave or should behave (Kang, 1997; Warner, 2005).

A recent study by Katharina Lindner in 2004, which was based on the same coding scheme developed by Erving Goffman in 1979, examined the portrayals of women in advertisements in the general interest magazine *Time* and the women’s fashion magazine *Vogue* from 1955 to 2002. The results of this study revealed that 78% of the magazine advertisements portrayed women stereotypically with regard to at least one of the coding categories and that especially *Vogue,* reinforces an inferior and weak image of women, either
by showing them wearing revealing clothes, or occupying domestic sceneries such as kitchen, bedroom, and bathroom, or objectified, where their only purpose was to be looked at. In addition, Lindner found that the primary way that Vogue portrayed women in positions of inferiority and low social power was the use of sexualized images. According to Lindner, these portrayals of women as inferior, is vital and necessary for the existence of a woman’s magazine like Vogue, since its primary role is to advertise and sell products that are suggested to be a ‘cure’ for women’s feelings of inferiority and inappropriateness (Lindner, 2004).

More specifically, Lindner argued that “the illusion created is that purchasing and using these products will make them feel sexy and beautiful, and thus happy and successful” (Lindner, 2004, p. 420).

Taken as a whole, the results indicate, as Lindner found, that advertisements include messages about gender roles in terms of appropriate behavior and appearance, that influence women and society’s attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviors (Kang, 1997; Lindner, 2004). It can be assumed from these five literature reviews that these messages are confining and limiting as they perpetuate the degree of sexism existed in earlier decades and counteract women’s progress in gaining social power (Lindner, 2004).

Method

Given the associations between images of women in the media and the actual physical appearance of women in our society, the purpose of this study was to investigate whether there is, indeed, a connection between exposure to extreme or unreal images of female attractiveness in fashion advertising and women’s body dissatisfaction, self-presentations on social networking sites, and beauty-related shopping behavior.

In order to address the research prepositions an online survey and in-person interviews were conducted. Between September 2013 and June 2014, sixteen women were interviewed between 18 and 30 years old, from three different CUNY Colleges (The
Graduate Center, Baruch College, and Queen’s College). All interviews were given individually and written consent from all participants was obtained prior to beginning of the sessions. Confidentiality was assured and pseudonyms are used for the purposes of this project. All females were Caucasians that live in the metropolitan area of New York.

The interviews consisted of three parts. The first part was based on a semi-structured 11–question guide intended to extract information in regards with women’s awareness of advertising impact on society, and consequently, on them, as well as to conceptualize women’s perceptions of the ideal female beauty. In the second part, the interviewees were asked to express their reactions on a poster, which juxtaposes two advertisements portraying different aspects of female attractiveness, that of Victoria’s Secret, “Love My Body Campaign” and that of Dove’s, “Real Beauty Campaign” (See Figure 2). The third part consisted of an experiment carried out intended to establish that there is a connection between female portrayals of excessive thinness and sexuality in fashion advertising and women’s self-presentations on social networking sites, particularly Facebook. In order to attest this hypothesis, a content analysis of the interviewees’ profile pictures on Facebook was performed. A total of 160 pictures were observed and analyzed. The results of this analysis are shown in Table 3.

In addition to the interviews, an online survey was conducted. The survey was created on October the 29, 2013 and followed the same structure as the interviews, excluding the third part. A total of 58 responses were collected. The target audience of the survey was women between 18 and 30 years old, and from various parts of the United States. They were all American citizens, with predominantly higher education.

The results of the interviews and the online survey were categorized with regard to the three prepositions of this study. Each preposition constituted an individual part. Part 1 was designed to present women’s personal beauty standards and to explain how these are
influenced by fashion’s most prevalent beauty ideals, such as the ideal of the excessive thinness. This effect was then associated with women’s increased concern about their body weight and feelings of dissatisfaction and frustration. Part 2 intended to analyze how the use of sexualized imagery in advertising determined women’s perception of sexuality and feminity as women tended to identify themselves as primarily sexualized beings. This element was proved to be responsible for the way women choose to perform their sexuality and present themselves to others through Facebook. Part 3 intended to be general account of how fashion advertising can lead to addictive and conspicuous consumption through deceptive promises and false perceptions about reality and the self.
Part 1: Body dissatisfaction

There is a great deal of research that supports how women are negatively affected by constant exposure to images of attractive models that fulfill the extreme and unrealistic media ideal of beauty (e.g. Bower, 2001; Kilbourne J., 1999). Research has established that by comparing themselves with attractive models, women often experience undesirable feelings, such as dissatisfaction with their bodies and low self-esteem.

When participants were asked to list two well-known female personas they considered influential or inspirational and met their own beauty standards, they portrayed a similar female image (See Table 2). With the exception of Emma Watson, who had a pleasant but cute appearance, the 7 of the 8 personas that appear in Table 3 had a feminine or sexy appearance reminiscent of the female portrayals in fashion advertising.

Table 3 reveals that the ideal woman, according to participants’ responses, was either a famous model or a famous actress. The women were tall and thin (or seemingly tall and average size women who were made tall and thin through Photoshop); they had blue or green eyes, large breasts, thick lips, and long hair; and were most often blonde-haired. The women were Caucasian with light and clear skin. However, in most of their portrayals these women appeared to have a tan. In general, the majority of the eight women shown in Table 3 incorporated many of the same characteristics that research has proven to be responsible for women’s low self-esteem and unrealistic expectations because so few women possess them (Englis, Solomon, & Ashmore, 1994; Groesz, Levine, & Sarah, 2001; Millard, 2009; Solomon, Ashmore, & Longo, 1992).

The results betrayed no diversity; neither diversity of the beauty types nor diversity of the stimuli shaped their beauty standards. Obviously influenced by advertising and film industry’s one-dimensional female beauty standards, participants, unknowingly, acknowledged three semiotic resources as key factors to performing beauty: a thin body; a
sexy appearance; and a fashionable look (Millard, 2009). In respect to this argument, a 19-year-old interviewee stated:

I follow some of the trends I see women wearing in fashion media because they’re inspiring and I generally like them. There’s the obvious pressure I’ll feel to try to make my body look as thin and elegant and sexy as theirs in fashion ads. Honestly though, I’ll never have the same tall and narrow features that they have so its kind of pointless to even try. I’m critical of my body just like most people. I would love to loose 15 pounds and keep them off for longer than 5 months without gaining them back (Interviewee 1, personal communication, October 12, 2013).

This parameter illustrates that social beauty standards, have established thinness and explicit sexuality as highly desirable characteristics for women and, as a result, participants seemed to readily identify these normative standards with their own personal expectations. Although the norm often evokes the notion of the average and not the majority, the normative body constructed by mass media is far from any sense of the average body of real women (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). Rather, media has normalized cultural ideals of physical beauty and, conversely, problematized any deviations from these ideals (Bordo, 1993). When women did not and could not fit today’s very slender beauty standard, problems ensued (Groesz, Levine, & Sarah, 2001). If women perceived a discrepancy between the acceptable social standards of female attractiveness and their own bodies, they became concerned that their own weight is not acceptable (Posavac, Posavac, & Posavac, 1998). This aspect is illustrated through the following statement of a 28-year-old interviewee:

I am dissatisfied with my weight. I would like to have a flat belly and longer and healthier hair and I dream of a clear not oily face skin. The things I mentioned are the anxieties I have to deal with daily, and make me feel pretty, happy, confident or not. If I loose weight I think it will certainly have positive effects on my social and personal relations, because everyone admires beauty, and for men thinness equals beauty. I think men would like me better. Also, beauty except from attractiveness means that you are healthy (Interviewee 2, personal communication, October 16, 2013).

Similarly, a 28-year-old survey respondent from Phoenix, Arizona stated:

I often feel the urge to lose weight after looking at fashion advertisements, though I know that I will never physically be as thin as models. At this current point in time,
my overall body is a point of stress in my life. I have gained some weight, which has caused some self-esteem issues. I have begun a more regular workout regime to assist, but if I could afford it, I would consider liposuction. Sometimes it makes me want to put some more effort into my outfits, but then the constraints of my life (time, energy) take over and I just stick with my usual routine. I think people would take me more seriously if I made more of an effort with regards to my looks (Survey respondent 1, personal communication, October 30, 2013).

The excessive emphasis on thinness for women in media but especially in fashion advertising has created a gap between the contemporary cultural ideals of beauty and the actual physical appearance of women in society that it should not be surprising that the overwhelming majority of the interviewees and the survey takers were dissatisfied with their appearance. According to participants’ last three responses, a thin body did not seem something easy to possess and was experienced as a problematic development. The possession of a thin body was perceived as an ongoing process, which required much effort, genuine concern, and motivation, in order to be rewarded for. Participants’ approaches to a thin body, besides discipline, connotated increased attractiveness in the eyes of men, or, according to past research, even superiority over overweight women (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995; Cash, 1990). This happened because Western culture values thin over averaged sized or full figured women, while also attributes positive qualities to thin women, such as intelligence and work ethic, and negative ones to averaged sized or full figured women (Peck & Loken, 2004; Vannini & McCright, 2004). As Cash (1990) and Fallon (1990) argued, being overweight or obese is a highly stigmatizing condition in our society, which often includes the attribution that individuals who substantially deviate above implicit body weight norms have not exerted sufficient effort and self-care to avoid such a condition.

As it emerges from this theory, thinness and consequently physical attractiveness are a form of socialization and interpersonal communication with both same-sex and opposite-sex peers (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). As expected, participants’ perception of their body image as a problematic situation—that is often described as being a matter of lack of
effort, discipline, time, or self-care, rather than genetics—often determined their socialization process and decreased their degree of self-esteem and self-confidence. Such perceptions reflect our cultural heritage that has established the overweight body as a problematic state that must be the target of accusation or justification (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). Such perceptions also echo past analysis indicating that physical condition and appearance have often been interpreted as symbolizing the ethical character of the self (Fallon, 1990).

As Kilbourne (1999) and Wolf (2002) have asserted, women are sold the myth that they can, and they should, achieve physical perfection in order to be considered as valuable counterparts in society. In the meantime, models are getting thinner and thinner,¹ while at the same time fashion advertising concepts are becoming more provocative by using sexually explicit imagery. Thus, once women realize that they are striving to achieve the unachievable, they experience failure and dissatisfaction. As women attempt to adapt to the contemporary cultural standard of beautiful woman, some of them overadapt, sometimes to the point of incapacitation, starving themselves without realizing that they have passed beyond the point of optimal beauty (Mazur, 1986). The words “anorexia” and “bulimia”, which were barely known a decade ago, are now in common use to describe self-destructive eating habits, particularly among young women (Mazur, 1986). According to Mazur (1986), “for every anorexic there are numerous perpetual dieters who over-committed to that cultural ideal of beauty that is currently in vogue” (p. 301). The following statement of the 29-year-old survey respondent from California illustrates this effect:

Of course, images of slim models and celebrities in fashion advertisements affect the way I look and take care of myself. As a vain woman, I do find myself being bothered by my body figure. I would like to lose those ten or so that I gained in college. I am working on this through diet and exercise. I have always been on a diet. Diets have been an attached part of my life. I do feel that I was still dissatisfied with some of my

¹ According to National Eating Disorders Association the average American women today is 5’4” tall and weighs 140 pounds, while the average fashion model is 5’11” tall and weighs 117 pounds, which makes her thinner than 98% of women. In 1965, the average fashion model weighed only 8% less than the average American woman (National Eating Disorders Association, 2009).
features even when I was in my best shape. I would consider plastic surgery if it were in my means and after much thought and research (Survey Respondent 2, personal communication, October 30, 2013).

A 23-year-old survey respondent from Utah had similar views:

Seeing a very skinny fashionable model in an advertisement definitely makes me feel worse. In the same token though, I am often motivated to start diet and exercise by the thought of eventually looking like them. Yes. I exercise almost every day, get my hair cutstyled every 6 weeks or so, have gone through random phases of tanning and diet, as much as I look fit. I always think it will have an immediate positive effect on certain relationships. It may not matter, but I still get stuck in that thought (Survey respondent 3, personal communication, October 30, 2013).

A 24-year-old survey respondent from Dallas, Texas, also shared the same views:

I need to lose 20 pounds. Diet and exercise are essential. I would build more self-confidence. I think I would be perceived more positively; right now, I am embarrassed of my weight and I think others can read that, or read that I am defensive. I was treated way differently when I was thin and pretty (Survey respondent 4, personal communication, October 30, 2013).

Research suggests that women’s concern about their body weight results from a social comparison process, whereby female perceivers evaluate their appearance relative to society’s standards as portrayed in the media (Eisend & Moller, 2007; Heinberg & Thompson, 1992; Wood, 1989). It is clear that women were being driven to achieve for themselves a degree of thinness comparable to the thin body images of models they see in advertising. Only women who were initially satisfied with their body image and their weight did not report having excessive concern with weight following exposure to advertising images, which suggests that not all women were equally affected by comparisons. Rather, some women might have expressed more optimism and motivation, especially, when their ideal look was considered attainable and the body part that concerned them the most was considered to be readily alterable (Bower, 2001; Richins, 1991). A 27-year-old interviewee from New York stated “I am happy with my body since I am tall and thin. However, I would like to work on my butt area and make it more toned” (Interviewee 4, personal communication, January 20, 2014). A 23-year-old interviewee from New York, has the same
exact feelings and states “I am overall the most satisfied I will be with my body, although my upper thighs could always be slimmer (Interviewee 5, personal communication, January 23, 2013).

Women, who were more vulnerable than others, seemed to integrate and preserve their feelings of dissatisfaction for a very long period of time, that it almost became a lifestyle for them. Since advertising’s idealized image of slim feminine attractiveness is so pervasive, the most of the participants were destined to perceive a discrepancy between their bodies and that of media standard, when they compared their appearance with that of the fashion models in advertisements. This subjective inferiority as an outcome of the social comparison process can be exceptionally harmful and lead to feelings of self-loathing, as physical appearance is an important determinant of women’s social outcomes, psychological well being and level of self-esteem (Posavac, Posavac, & Posavac, 1998). However, as per Cussins (2001), “it seems unlikely that the fashion and advertising industries will call an end to using very thin models, when the marketability of fashion and consumer goods has been shown to be so effective by doing just that” (p. 106).

The paradox is that when asked to express their reactions on the Victoria’s Secret advertisement portraying fashion models with characteristically skinny bodies and the Dove’s advertisement portraying real and full figured women, who were not professional models, the majority of the participants criticized and disapproved the excessive emphasis on thinness in the first one, while identified the latter as being closer to reality (See Figure 2). This result was in conflict with participants’ interpretation of the ideal female image, as the 6 of the 8 personas reported as ideals of beauty among participants appear to be skinny or very skinny in the most of their media portrayals, while the other 2 appear to be thin. In other words, 6 out of the 8 personas shown in Table 3 possess a body type analogous or identical to the one
portrayed in the Victoria’s Secret advertisement. Some of the interviewees and survey respondents’ most notable responses are listed below:

The Victoria's Secret Angels are, without a doubt, gorgeous women, but they aren't realistic representations of the women in the world (Interviewee 4, personal communication, January 20, 2013).

Perfect bodies, perfect faces, result of a perfect Photoshop. In fact how many of the girls you see in the streets look like the girls on the first picture? (Interviewee 5, personal communication, January 23, 2013).

I feel like Victoria’s Secret image really shows how we are influenced to think the models’ look "normal" when in reality "normal" does not look anything like them (Survey respondent 4, personal communication, October 30, 2013).

The campaign "Love my body" implies all these women are vain, or that Victoria's Secret has a pretty unrealistic perception of their clientele. Really, what they are doing is advertising to insecure people who think that by purchasing their merchandise, they will look thin (Survey respondent 5, personal communication, October 30, 2013).

I think they are all silly. Women need to stop allowing themselves to be made objects of (Survey respondent 6, personal communication, October 30, 2013).

VS Models = too thin and totally photoshopped (Survey respondent 7, personal communication, October 30, 2013).

They're too thin; women need more volume and curves, they don't need corners. They look like they need to eat, and then they might be happier (Survey respondent 8, personal communication, October 30, 2013).

It's all about selling a product at the end of the day. ‘Loving your body’ should include different body types. Victoria’s Secret photo shoot is by professionals, whose sole job is to maintain that body (Survey respondent 9, personal communication, October 30, 2013).

This advertisement grabs more people’s attention but these stick skinny models aren’t real figures for women (Survey respondent 10, personal communication, October 30, 2013).

I think the women in both Victoria’s Secret and Dove ads are beautiful. I mean, some women are born thin and tall, but, I believe that Victoria’s Secret models are ridiculously unrealistic and rare, which is why they’re so famous only because of their bodies (Survey respondent 11, personal communication, October 30, 2013).

I do sometimes wish I looked like the Victoria’s Secret models but I know that is unrealistic and unhealthy. I love the Dove’s Real Beauty campaign although as a medical professional I do strongly believe that it is not okay to be obese - it is a risk factor for so many preventable diseases. None of those women (in Dove’s campaign) appear to be obese, but I believe it is possible to go too far the other way (from
Victoria’s Secret) and justify being unhealthy. It is completely unnecessary to look like the VS models, and all women are built differently (bigger hips, etc.), but it is not okay to use that as an excuse to not take care of yourself and become a burden to the rest of America and our failing healthcare system. It is absolutely ridiculous how much obesity costs our country (Survey respondent 12, personal communication, October 30, 2013).

Both unrealistic; but Victoria’s Secret one is beyond ridiculous. Victoria’s Secret uses extremely skinny models whereas Dove uses average-to-chubby models. None of this reflects reality and a representation of women. Both adverts leave me feeling sad for the people behind them (Survey respondent 13, personal communication, October 30, 2013).

Women’s attitudes towards advertising’s excessive emphasis on thinness are particularly critical. The majority of the participants, including those who were striving to achieve or maintain thinness, resented this rigid beauty standard and wished for it to disappear or stop being so influential and interfering, especially when the portrayed image diverged from their own appearance. Although participants theoretically disagreed with the one-dimensional beauty standard of thinness produced by mass media, they kept striving to achieve it. This effect of “internal struggle” between women’s verbal and nonverbal behavior towards advertising’s ideals of beauty is of great significance but as of yet scarcely studied by past research. Nevertheless, one could assuredly claim that this effect demonstrates women’s awareness of advertising’s impact on body satisfaction and other aspects of the self. On the one hand, women’s awareness could be attributed to the research and scholarly debates of the past years that highlighted advertising’s harmful role in society. On the other hand, women’s awareness could be pertained to what Hall (1980) called, a negotiated reading, which suggests that readers are acknowledging the dominant message of an advertisement, but they are simultaneously resisting and modifying it, in a way that satisfies their own expectations. Or, it perhaps happens because advertising has the potential to shift reader’s attention to their inadequacies and deficiencies, which, in turn, affects their level of self-esteem (Kilbourne J., 1999).
According to psychological research, one of the most pervasive facts about the construction of self-esteem, is that regardless of its level, low or high, all humans have a vital need to maintain and/or raise it (Mehdizadeh, 2010). It is therefore assumed that, since self-esteem is contingent upon and measured by the degree of likeness or deviation from the media’s standards of beauty, women will keep striving to achieve media’s ideals, especially when these are credited with positive connotations.
Part 2: Self-Presentations on Social Networking Sites

In today’s fashion advertising, rather than making thoughtful arguments on behalf of their products, advertisers have switched to the exploitation of sexualized images to market and sell their products (Dahl, Sengupta, & Vohs, 2009). In a culture that is organized around mass consumption and the relentless pursuit of profit that leads advertisers to resort to increasingly radical tactics, it is self-evident that the mass promotion of goods and services will have regressive effects on individuals who become dependent on external judgments of what is necessary for their well being (Cussins, 2001).

The realization of the fact that sex sells, initiated an open war among the advertising industry, as the majority of advertisements are being transformed in a domain extremely harmful for young girls and women; especially, when women’s perceived ideals of femininity and sexuality, predominantly originate from advertising. Consequently, the fact that advertising industry is producing ideals that are getting more and more sexualized, implies that women, will most likely identify themselves as being primarily sexualized beings (Kilbourne J., 2010).

When participants were asked to express their reactions on Victoria’s Secret “Love my Body Campaign,” besides the excessive emphasis on thinness, they criticized and disapproved the emphasis on sexuality as well. The 28-year-old interviewee from Queens, New York stated:

I feel like sexuality is the underlying motivator to sell the product. I don't care to see women's bodies exposed. This photo is full of air brushed models and images that are altered and give young women false perceptions of what they should be (Interviewee 3, personal communication, December 1, 2013).

This response reflects what Dahl, Sengupta, & Vohs (2009) called “gratuitous use of sexual images in advertising, which is defined as the use of a sexual image that is unnecessarily explicit to promote a product or service” (p. 216). Dahl, Sengupta, & Vohs
(2009) suggested that women’s negative reactions to this type of advertising, reflects their unwillingness to respect conflicting views or principles that are considered unethical or inappropriate. However, the volume of sexualized imagery that implies that women’s value is measured by the level of their sex appeal, overwhelms women’s perceptions of femininity and sexuality so that they accept and adopt an objectified and passive view of themselves (Courtney & Whipple, 1983; Thompson & Hirschman, 1995).

The content analysis of interviewees’ profile pictures on Facebook, verified this claim (See Table 3). This experiment also verified one of the prepositions of this study, which was to establish that there is a connection between female portrayals of excessive thinness and sexuality in fashion advertising and women’s online self-presentations on social networking sites.

Online social networking sites have initiated a totally new way of interacting, communicating, and presenting one’s self to others. Indeed, Facebook’s impact on self-perception, self-evaluation, and its ability to socialize, has been often addressed by contemporary research, as well as the role that socializing online plays in enhancing self-esteem and in bonding and bridging social capital (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Gonzales & Hancock, 2010; Valkenburg, Jochen, & Schouten, 2006). This cyber-social phenomenon provides a new medium through which scholars can observe the construction of one’s behavior. Therefore, it is important to consider what kind of aspects the participants themselves select to emphasize for their visual impression management, as well as what kind of aspects are worthy of portraying in the hopes of gaining acceptance, admiration, or approval among the peer-group (Siibak, 2009).

The results of this experiment revealed that the 66.89% of interviewees’ profile pictures on Facebook consisted of images where the portrayed person was either wearing beachwear or revealing clothing, or was found posing in a way that body language implied
sex and facial expressions were seductive. It is worth mentioning that the most of interviewees’ profile pictures were self-portrait photographs, typically taken with a hand-held camera phone. Moreover, the majority of interviewees’ self-presentations were emphasizing their physical appearance, while only the 1.25% of these self-presentations was emphasizing their intellectual side, defined by studying or working. The pictures were mostly portraying women in an inferior way relative to their capabilities and potential, perpetuating the sexism manifested in clichéd stereotypical and decorative female roles in advertising (Plakoyiannaki, Mathioudaki, Dimitratos, & Yorgos, 2008). Overall, the results revealed a high level of sexual explicitness, analogous to that of sexualized female portrayals in fashion advertising, as the tone in the most of interviewees’ self-presentations was positively biased, which means that pictures were selected to present preferred or positive aspects of one’s physical appearance (Gonzales & Hancock, 2010).

Appendix A offers a sample of interviewees’ profile pictures in order to demonstrate the impact that media has on the way interviewees perceive themselves. Figures A1 and A2 each consist of two images, the interviewee’s profile picture and a media image, that were intentionally juxtaposed and compared in order to reflect the great similarity between interviewees’ self-presentations on Facebook and images of contemporary fashion advertising. Both of the top images in each figure were published in fashion magazines, online advertisements in blogs, social networking sites and/or printed style guides. Similar images can be occasionally seen on billboards, street advertisements, or in particular retail stores. This gives weight to the assumption that after being overwhelmed by media images of female attractiveness, women unconsciously internalize such stereotypes and acquire a subtle tendency to perform their beauty and promote themselves according to the prescribed standards of beauty that fashion advertising suggests.
The similarity of images in Figures A1 and A2 is profound. However, some details that mark the differences between the two sets of images should not be overlooked. First, each image was taken at a different time and place. Some aspects such as brightness and sharpness provide a better quality analysis of the top images, as well as differences regarding the angle, the balance and the focus of the picture. The distribution of the visual elements in the two top images is more symmetrical and the main element, the model, is more clearly focused, in contrast to the main element of the bottom ones. This occurs because both of the top images were taken by professionals and have presumably been processed using high quality photo editing tools, like Photoshop. Yet, the viewer has a common impression, since the setting and the background appear to be identical and the interviewees are posing in a very similar manner to that of models in the top pictures.

The issue raised here is whether the similarity between these pictures is the result of a conscious or a subconscious imitation. When the two media images were shown to the interviewees portrayed in the bottom images of Figures A1 and A2, they were both surprised and reported that they were not aware of the existence of the specific publicity. Therefore, the similarity was unintentional. After, they became aware of publicity’s existence they, indeed, justified the event as their subconscious tendency to pose and project themselves in a manner analogous to that of female portrayals in fashion advertising. Specifically, the interviewees stated:

Well, I have seen photos like that before so that is where I possibly got the idea. I feel that this particular pose is very common in advertisements involving swimwear, summer fragrances, or sun care cosmetics so it came out instinctively (Interviewee 5, personal communication, January 23, 2014).

To be honest I had no idea that there was a Victoria’s Secret publicity portraying a model posing the same way as I did. Perhaps we are implicitly influenced by the portrayals we see in media. Being a follower of top models and other celebrities on Instagram and Facebook I probably must have seen something similar, which was engraved in my subconscious and was awaken when I got to pose under similar circumstances (Interviewee 6, personal communication, February 2, 2014).
The previous statements reveal that in creating their visual self, participants valued the self-reflecting aspects of photographing more than other qualities, such as, for example, beautiful surroundings or interesting activities (Siibak, 2009). Although it is hard to distinct whether interviewee’s images in Figures A1 and A2 are actually a representation of their behavior or just a staged performance, these images serve a specific role in the online self-presentation context, which is to create favorable impressions in the eyes of peers (Siibak, 2009). Regardless of their theoretical views on the exploitation of female beauty in fashion advertising, the majority of interviewees could not overcome the importance of presenting themselves in a physically favorable manner. Behind the most of their self-presentations, there was a tendency that often became a compulsion to select photos that are considered attractive. This notion emphasizes the influential role that visual impression management plays in online environments, like Facebook (Siibak, 2009).

Figure A3, which consists of another set of images, an interviewee’s profile picture and a media image, was created to show that in certain cases, interviewees were also being strategic, besides biased, in constructing their visual self. The left image in Figure A3 shows an interviewee, who, similarly to Andriana Lima’s portrayal in the right image, is holding a cigarette near her mouth. The interviewee, who had previously seen the particular media image on different fashion blogs, admitted that she intentionally imitated Andriana Lima’s portrayal and reported that she shared it on Facebook believing that smoking can make a women look powerful and stylish.

Although the degree to which the two images in Figure A3 look similar is not that high in relation to Figures A1 and A2, it betrays that the level of impression management varies according to the individual’s expectations and that individuals construct their visual selves based on a set of beliefs and values that are associated with the ideal self (Siibak, 2009). The interviewees’ tendency to feel like women who are considered beauty ideals and
thus to create a socially ideal self, could be associated with women’s need to focus more on the construction of a group identity, especially, given that the interviewee in Figure A3 was not a smoker (Kilbourne J., 1999; Siibak, 2009).

This discrepancy between the actual and the ideal self—a phenomenon, known as identity shift—demonstrates that online social networking sites, like Facebook, provide an ideal environment for the expression of the “hoped-for possible self” and enable individuals to engage in a controlled setting, where an ideal identity can be conveyed (Gonzales & Hancock, 2010; Mehdizadeh, 2010, p. 363). This shift focuses on real socially desirable identities an individual would like to establish given the right conditions (Mehdizadeh, p. 358).

It is worth mentioning, that in their previous statements, the interviewees portrayed in Appendix A reported that: (a) they disagree with the way media and especially fashion advertising utilizes female sexuality in order to enhance communication effectiveness and sell more products; and (b) they are aware of the fact that female portrayals in fashion advertising is what predominantly shapes their perceptions of beauty, and ultimately, what determines their performance of beauty. Therefore, they acknowledged the level to which their online self-presentations were reflecting certain media portrayals and that most of their own portrayals were biased and destined to attract peers’ attention. Although interviewees’ self-presentations were in conflict with their previous statements and general beliefs regarding media’s exploitation of female sexuality, they all confessed that receiving positive comments and encouraging feedback regarding a sexy look, was quite uplifting, especially, when it comes to important others. One of the interviewees stated “I believe that the majority of women are vain and since physical appearance or beauty is the first thing to be noticed we need to attract people externally and then show them our inner assets” (Interviewee 6, personal communication, February 2, 2014).
Research suggests that women’s over-adaption to sexualized female roles, represents the loosening of repressive sexual standards rooted in the sexist and patriarchal societies of the 19th and early 20th century (Jacobsen & Mazur, 1995). Hence, it is not necessarily problematic for women to be portrayed as sexy, nor should women habitually react negatively to every single example of advertising that emphasizes on female sexuality.

The real problem is that sexual repression of previous centuries followed by the liberation of the 1960’s and the second wave of feminism, has now been replaced by the exploitation of women’s bodies for the sake of profit. The dilemma is not restraint or tolerance, tradition or modernity. The problem is the shift from sexiness to offensiveness. According to Jacobsen and Mazur:

The rigid gender roles of the 1950’s denied men and women their full range of sexual and human possibilities, but so does the commodified sex depicted in advertising. Ads that depict women and men as sexual objects to be bought, admired, and consumed (or brutalized) offer a bleak, limited view of sexuality. (p. 888)

In the past years, advertising portrayed women as the passive, mute objects of male gaze. Today’s advertising still portrays women as the inferior gender. The difference with portrayals of the past, according to Attwood (2009), is that today, women are active and desiring sexual subjects, “who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner, since it suits their liberated interests to do so” (p. 100). This means that, as long as sexiness is being linked to liberation, women’s performance of beauty will continue to be characterized by the level of their sexualization.
Part 3: Beauty-Related Consumption Behavior

Advertising sends messages about reality that are based upon dissatisfaction and craving. At the very same time, advertising tells us how to escape dissatisfaction and how to stop craving. Similarly, it tells us how to get the body that we have always wanted, how to be feminine and attractive. Advertising shows us how to be successful and happy through shopping, that is, the conviction that the change that we all wish to see comes from the market (Kilbourne J., 1999).

Shopping is one of the key motivating forces that guide and shape today’s social consciousness. One of the major problems with consumer cultures is that people interpret the practice of spending money and consuming things as a means of validating themselves and verifying their worth. This occurs, in part, because advertising constantly reminds people of what they do not have, so they do not focus on what they already have, but on what they do not have and want to buy (Kilbourne J., 1999).

When the subtext of many advertisements—ranging from advertisements for automobiles to advertisements for beers, and from those for technological devices to those for fashion—involves the matter of (female) sexuality and desirability, it is likely that there will be a connection between buying a product and becoming desirable by emulating the portrayed role model (Berger A. A., 2011). As John Berger (1972) explains in his book *Ways of Seeing* “Sexuality is never free in itself, it is a symbol for something presumed to be larger than it: the good life in which you can buy whatever you want. To be able to buy is the same thing as being sexually desirable” (p. 144).

In this case, the implicit message of advertising is that if you can buy a certain product, you will become desirable and if you cannot, you will be less desirable. This means that purchasing beauty-related products or services is most often charged with fantasies and dreams
of sexual desirability and physical attractiveness (Kilbourne J., 1999). Beauty-related consumption is even charged with notions of control and gender supremacy, considering the amount of advertisements that tell us being sexually active cannot be a special attribute to men. One of the interviewees explains why beauty-related consumption is so important to some women and yields such great anticipating pleasures: “I love Victoria’s Secret products and their models! I always wanted to be one, so I always buy their products in hopes I will feel as sexy as the models look” (Interviewee 4, January 20, personal communication, 2014).

Evidence suggests that a certain quantity of media consumption positively influences materialism and negatively influences life satisfaction (Speck & Roy, 2008). Media images influence how consumers should be in terms of their possessions, lifestyle, and status. As a source of information on which elevated standards of comparison are based, media images affect not only consumers’ perceived ideals about social reality and the self, but also the level of materialism in a culture (Speck & Roy, 2008). The following responses illustrate this notion:

I look at the advertisements because I want to make sure I am keeping up with the latest trends. Not just clothes; For example, how are celebrities and models wearing their hair or their make up (Interviewee 1, personal communication, October 12, 2013).

I love, love and love Louis Vuitton advertisements. When I was younger I used to cut these out of Vogue and hang them all around my room for inspiration in hopes that one day I could own one. These advertisements are so sexy, chic, professional and amazing. It is like art! This is not a realistic advertisement for average women as they cannot afford Louis Vuitton, but it is saying if you own this bag you will be feminine and powerful (Interviewee 4, personal communication, January 20, 2014).

My perception of the ideal female image is influenced by famous women, who are admired for their beauty . . . Fashion advertisements, and sometimes editorials, do affect the way I shop because I like to follow trends and I do have a general interest in fashion and what’s currently being focused on (Survey respondent 14, personal communication, October 30, 2013).

These three confessions reveal that there is a link between fashion advertising and materialism which, in turn, leads to consumption behavior in order for women to construct an
ideal image of the self corresponding to that of attractive models in advertising (Bower, 2001; Eisend & Moller, 2007; Speck & Roy, 2008). The participants’ responses show that this effect occurs due to biased perceptions either related to social reality (e.g. women who can afford luxury brands are feminine and powerful) or the self (e.g. in order to be attractive you need to follow what is currently being focused on in fashion advertisements, otherwise discrepancies between the actual and the ideal self may occur and lead to dejection-related emotions, like disappointment and dissatisfaction) (Higgins, 1987; Eisend & Moller, 2007).

When women’s shopping behavior is driven by biased perceptions of the self, aiming at preserving or renewing their attractiveness, relying totally on what was previously seen in advertising, there is always a possibility of constructing a fluid identity. According to Reith (2004), “with an increasing number of commodities and lifestyles on offer, identity comes to be defined as a fluid construct rather than an essential, core category, and one whose formation is a matter of personal choice” (p. 285). This model of fluid identity is founded on the premise of freedom and the ultimate fallacy of neo-liberal ideologies that consumers are free to choose (Reith, 2004). In reality, consumers are free to choose among a variety of marketed options available. This very same variety eliminates creativity and imagination and makes decision-making very difficult. In reality, the standardization of mass production of goods has far extinguished the individual sign, as advertising and consumer culture’s one-dimensional and stereotypical expression of beauty and promotion of beauty-related products endorses equation and homogeneity, rather than individuality and uniqueness.

At the same time, when women shop based on perceptions of social reality, they shop for status, as Sharon Zukin illustrates in the Point of Purchase (2004), and to compensate for being excluded from high positions in business and politics. Women find in shopping a realm of
freedom, which is contrary to the constraints of social and gender inequality (Zukin, 2004).

However, although they might have uncovered some of the empowering potentialities of consumption, women as consumers are often dichotomized. On the one hand, women are indeed free to choose and carve out a lifestyle and identity based on the marketed options available. On the other hand, women are also left with no option but subjugate aspects of themselves and shape their inner desires in conformity with cultural norms and social institutions (Reith, 2004).

These discursive conflicts that exist in seeking freedom through consumption, explain why women might develop a pathological dependence on specific things that are suggested by particular advertisements either as the status objects of a given group or category (e.g. having a Luis Vuitton bag = not an average woman = feminine and powerful), or as the solution/cure to their problem (Reith, 2004). This notion is illustrated through the following statement:

Fashion advertising makes me want to shop because I want to keep up with the latest trends. I love luxury brand items because they make me feel fashionable and feminine. I own real FENDI, CHLOE and Louis Vuitton bags. Additionally, I love Michael Kors and Marc Jacobs and have bags, wallets and watches by them (Interviewee 4, personal communication, January 20, 2014).

In search for liberation through consumption and assurance through brands or accumulation of goods, women often become enslaved by transforming freedom into determinism and desire into need (Reith, 2004). In this state of addiction, rather than consuming to liberate, govern or define the self, women are consumed and governed by consumption. The self is rather destroyed and subjugated than invigorated and freed. The choices are displaced by rules, which is exactly the difference between consumption and addiction: while the consumer chooses to buy, the addict is forced to do so.

This does not mean consumers should either demonize shopping or renounce it, as Sharon Zukin suggests, as long as they understand why and how they shop (Zukin, 2004).
Though consumers’ shopping patterns and preferences often contradict their ideals, admittedly, shopping does consist a pleasure and it does sharpen the consumers’ sense of value, if it is used to express their creative and ethical self (Zukin, 2004).

At this point, it is worth mentioning the etymological root of consumption, which comes from the Latin *consumere* – to take wholly or completely/ to devour/ to waste/ to kill – and alerts us to its dual nature: its destructive, enslaving potential, as well as its creative possibilities (Lewis & Short, 1879; Reith 2004).
Conclusion

This study set out to explore the relationship between beauty stereotypes of female attractiveness in fashion advertising and women’s satisfaction with their body, as well as the relationship between these stereotypes and presentations of the self on social networking sites, and beauty-related consumption behavior.

Together, the results from the interviews and the online survey clearly demonstrate that exposure to media images of female attractiveness is capable of causing increased weight concern among most women. This result appears to be quite powerful, as increased concern about body weight often resulted in low self-esteem and low body satisfaction for most of women. Only women who were initially satisfied with their body and weight did not report having excessive concern with weight following exposure to media images. This effect suggests that not all women are equally affected by exposure to media images.

The examination of women’s reaction, impressions, and thoughts on particular concepts of contemporary fashion and personal care advertisements, revealed that the overwhelming majority of women disagree and oppose to the media’s beauty standard of excessive thinness (See Table 1). This consequence appears to be in conflict with women’s increased weight concern, which, indeed, resulted from the comparison of their own bodies with the fashion models’ very thin and perfectly shaped bodies portrayed in analogous advertisements (See Figure 2). The results revealed a discrepancy between women’s opposition to the rigid beauty standard of excessive thinness and their increased weight concern, which suggests that women are aware of advertising’s impact on their perception of beauty but unable to effectively resist to its influence. This study refers to this effect as “internal struggle,” for, while striving to achieve or
maintain thinness, women were also wishing for this stereotype to disappear and stop being so influential.

Moreover, the investigation of interviewees’ profile pictures on Facebook revealed that there is a positive correlation between sexualized female images in fashion advertising and women’s self-presentations on social networking sites. The results of this experiment demonstrated the high level of sexual explicitness in interviewees’ profile pictures, which was analogous to the increasing use of sexualized imagery in fashion advertising (See Table 3). The frequency of portrayals that were positively biased and presented preferred or positive aspects of women’s physical appearance among interviewees self-presentations, suggested that physical appearance was an important factor in women’s socialization process. This verified the assumption that social networking sites are providing new access to the self as an object, heralding that societal institutions, perhaps some men or some women, will continue to use women’s appearance against them (Kilbourne J., 1999).

Lastly, the results of this study demonstrated how body satisfaction and notions regarding female attractiveness perceived by fashion advertising could affect women’s consumption behavior. Participants’ shopping patterns and preferences were based on biased perceptions of social reality and the self, resulted from advertising’s unreal and misleading messages. Such messages enhanced the importance of physical attractiveness in the eyes of women who were determined to achieve or maintain a look comparable to the media ideal of beauty, and led to addictive or conspicuous consumption behaviors. This parameter illustrated the fact that women are sold the myth by advertising that they can, and they should achieve physical perfection. Of all the lies that advertising tells women, the most pernicious one is that there is a quick fix, an instant solution to every problem, and this comes from the market (Kilbourne J., 1999).
Figure 1

Figure 1. The Media Which Interviewees and Survey Respondents Mostly Interact With

*Fashion Magazines: Vogue was the most popular magazine, followed by In Style and Cosmopolitan.
**Blogs: Pinterest and Tumblr were the two most popular blogs.
***Facebook or other social networking sites: After Facebook, Instagram was the second most popular.
****No Interaction: Either because of participants disinterest in fashion or because of their intention to avoid exposure to advertising.
*****Other Media: Television and Fashion Catalogues sent at home.

Note. In 2010, Victoria’s Secret, an American retailer of lingerie, launched a campaign called “Love My Body” to promote their latest bras and underwear line. The campaign featured some of the company’s top models. One of the characteristics of this campaign was the models’ identical body type. In, 2004, Dove, a personal care brand owned by Unilever, an Anglo-Dutch company with worldwide recognition, launched a campaign called “Real Beauty”. This campaign featured real women, who were not professional models and did not look like typical fashion models. The missions of this campaign, besides promoting the brand’s products, were to challenge the one-dimensional female beauty stereotypes generated by advertising, and redefine beauty standards by not focusing on just one body type (Millard, 2009). Participants were asked to express their reactions on these two campaigns. The results are shown in Table 1.
Table 1

*Participants’ reactions on Victoria’s Secret and Dove Campaigns*\(^a\)  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories (^b)</th>
<th>Victoria’s Secret</th>
<th>Dove</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joy/Satisfaction</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger/Disappointment</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closer to Reality</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disapproval</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to buy the product</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to achieve the look</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) See Figure 2.  
\(^b\) The categories are not mutually exclusive; each participant could be identified with multiple categories. Values are percentages of participants identified with each reaction.
### Table 2

**Well-known Female Personas Considered as Ideals of Beauty Among Participants and their body statistics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Popularity among participants</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Height (feet)</th>
<th>Weight (pounds)</th>
<th>Measurements: Bust-Waist-Hips (Inches)</th>
<th>Hair Color</th>
<th>Eye Color</th>
<th>Brand Endorsements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gisele Bündchen</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>Model</td>
<td>5’11</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>34-25-35</td>
<td>Light Brown</td>
<td>Blue</td>
<td>Multiple brands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer Lawrence</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>Actress</td>
<td>5’9</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>35-26-36</td>
<td>Blonde</td>
<td>Blue</td>
<td>Dior (2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma Watson</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>Actress-Model</td>
<td>5’5</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>32-23-34</td>
<td>Light Brown</td>
<td>Dark Brown</td>
<td>Burberry (2009/10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andriana Lima</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>Model</td>
<td>5’10</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>34-24-35</td>
<td>Dark Brown</td>
<td>Blue</td>
<td>Multiple brands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary-Kate Olsen</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>Actress</td>
<td>5’2</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>32-24-32</td>
<td>Blonde</td>
<td>Blue</td>
<td>Badgley Mischka (2006)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Each participant listed two characters. The table shows the eight characters that were the most popular among participants’ responses. Other responses included Marilyn Monroe, Heidi Klum, and Cameron Diaz. Data pertaining to body statistics were taken from http://www.healthyceleb.com/category/statistics.
Table 3

Content of Interviewees’ Profile Pictures on Facebook

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Absolute value (n=160)</th>
<th>Frequency (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wearing Beach Clothing(^a)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revealing Clothing(^b)</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>16.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexualized Body Pose(^c)</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>15.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seductive Face Expression(^d)</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>26.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respectful Body Pose(^e)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominant Body Pose(^f)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Part Focus(^g)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on Thinness(^h)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>13.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on Personality(^i)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>160</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.00</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) When the portrayed person was wearing one-piece or two-piece bikini.  
\(^b\) When clothes were showing a part of the body that is usually covered.  
\(^c\) When majority of skin was showing or the body language was implying sex by placements of hands and pose of body (e.g. placing a finger or object near the mouth).  
\(^d\) When the portrayed person was looking directly at the camera with a seductive glance, or sending a kiss, or closing the eye, or curling the lips.  
\(^e\) When the portrayed person had a normal body position and was not flaunting her body in a sexual way.  
\(^f\) When the viewer gets the feeling that the woman had power or authority by the way she was standing or the way her body was positioned near an object or another person.  
\(^g\) When a single body part was focused with the purpose to cause the admiration of others. This category included face, breast/torso, buttocks, and legs.  
\(^h\) When the portrayed person was less or much less than average body weight.  
\(^i\) When aspects of the inner self were given more emphasis than physical appearance, through studying, working, or other analogous activities.
Appendix A

Comparison of Media Images and Interviewees’ Profile Pictures

Figure A1

*Figure A1*. Comparison 1 of a Media Image (top) and an Interviewee’s Profile Picture (bottom). Source of top image: http://weluvmodels.com/category/victorias-secret.html.
Figure A2

Figure A2. Comparison 2 of a Media Image (top) and an Interviewee’s Profile Picture (bottom). Source of top image: http://style4y.blogspot.com/2013/11/candice-swanepoel-on-filming-victorias.html.
Figure A3

*Figure A3.* Comparison 3 of a Media Image (right) and an Interviewee’s Profile Picture (left). Source of right image: http://www.vs-models.com/2012/02/10-victorias-secret-models-who-smoke.html.
References


