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“The twentieth century has seen a huge upsurge in the importance placed by western society on physical beauty, particularly for women” (Wood “Perceptions of Feminine Beauty,” n.d.). Fashion industries, cosmetics, and plastic surgeries have all flourished on the importance society has placed on physical beauty. Marketing ploys from these industries often show tall, slender, white women who suggest cosmetics, diet regimens, and other beauty enhancements to successfully transform one’s aesthetic. With the fashion and media industries heavy reliance on visuals, there have been a plethora of evaluations conducted to examine the media’s influence on women’s body image. Yet, there has been little research conducted with non-able-bodied women, specifically women with visual disabilities, and the effects that the media has on their self-image. To determine this, I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews, with six college-aged blind or visually impaired women which focused on their lived experiences and exposure to the media. Recruiting participants through convenience sampling, I interpreted the data based on participants’ race, culture, and other common themes in response to their lived experiences. Results demonstrated participants had a positive self-image; contributors included their family, self, and partners.

Keywords: disability, visual disability, body-image, women, media

THE EFFECT OF MEDIA AND BEAUTY STANDARDS ON THE BODY IMAGE OF  
WOMEN WITH A VISUAL DISABILITY

by

Taneka Robertson

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Approved by

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Committee Co-Chair

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Committee Co-Chair

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APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by Taneka Robertson has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Co-Chairs Gwendolyn Hunnicutt  
Arielle Kupenberg

Committee Members Emily Edwards  
Tara T. Green  
Ethan Zell

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Acceptance by Committee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Final Oral Examination

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## PREFACE

When I lost my sight at twenty-one, to an unexpected illness, I became more focused on my physical appearance and the opinions others had of me. Prior to my sight impairment, I found little interest in focusing on my body size. Yes, of course, there were comments on my body size in grade school, coming from peers, family, everyone, but once I graduated high-school I found friends that accepted me for me. When people commented on my body I did not care, because I could see myself, and it really did not matter what people said. If I was happy with me, then I was happy with me. When I lost my sight and people commented on my body my reaction changed, I would think—"what the hell do they see that I cannot feel."

After losing my sight, I did not want to get darker in the summer because I did not know how others would view me. I would not go outside unless the sun had set or I would sit in the backseat where there was a tint. I became focused on my body size, mentally comparing myself to other women. I would do this when they guided me, mentally comparing their arm to mine, or through hugs. I mentally compared my height to that of other women. I had always relaxed my hair, but I started timing it with the calendar—every six weeks, even though it was damaging my hair to do it so frequently, so nobody would see my hair naturally. It bothered me when others compared me to my siblings, especially when pointing out things I did not have and could not change. I hid myself behind material things like clothes and makeup. I equated "feminine beauty" with someone who is thin, light-skinned, and has straight hair.

My research shows that my experience is not unique. My understanding of the “perfect physique,” taken from both when I was able to see media, and also after I lost my sight is a common one. People tend not to appreciate that women without sight would have the same understanding of the perfect physique because they receive media through audio descriptors, music, and the environment, instead of from visual depictions. I hope to shed some light on the fact that the self-esteem or self-concept of women with visual disabilities can also be affected by the media. Just because one cannot see one’s body does not mean one is not influenced by others and media, such as magazine articles, films, and television shows.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
II. FEMININE BODY IDEALS 1900s—1990s.....	6
III. ENGAGING WITH CRIP THEORY, ABLISM, AND DISABILITY .....	18
IV. REVIEW OF LITERATURE .....	27
V. METHODS .....	35
VI. PARTICIPANT PROFILES AND RESULTS .....	38
VII. CONCLUSION.....	52
REFERENCES .....	54
APPENDIX A. IMAGES FROM TEXT .....	59
APPENDIX B. CHAPTER III FEMININE BEAUTY IDEALS CHART.....	65
APPENDIX C. BODY IMAGE SURVEY.....	67

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

While gathering preliminary research, one of my colleagues inquired about the effect media and feminine beauty standards has on the non-able-bodied community, more specifically persons with a visual disability. This conversation inspired me to the final research of said topic. In the beginning of my research, I wondered how many feminine beauty enhancements (lipstick, diet regimens, and personal hygienic products) were sold in the United States every minute. These figures were interesting due to the vast number of ways women have access to them. Women no longer have to solely order from magazine catalogs or travel to department stores. According to Etoff (1999), in the United States more money is spent on beauty than on education or social services. In other words, every minute 1,484 tubes of lipstick and 2,055 jars of skin care products are sold. In 1996, moreover, approximately 696,904 Americans “underwent voluntary aesthetic surgery that involved tearing or burning their skin, shucking their fat, or implanting foreign materials” (Etoff, 1999). Cosmetic surgeries during this time were utilized to “improve” one’s aesthetic, rather than correct deformities. More to that, in 1992, four hundred women every minute were having breast augmentation before the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) limited silicone gel implants. Thus, we can witness the various methods women have undertaken in order to achieve an “ideal” aesthetic

through corrective surgeries and cosmetics in order to fit into society's standard of Feminine Beauty.

And so, what is the definition of "beauty"? "While inserting "beauty" into various dictionary websites, I noticed definitions were based on one's physical attributes. The Merriam Dictionary, for example, defines beauty as the present quality in a thing or person that gives intense pleasure or satisfaction. Likewise, the Webster dictionary states beauty is the qualities of a person or a thing that gives pleasure to the senses or to the mind. However, this is certainly not the case for all definitions. Historian, Joan Jacobs Brumberg, and author of *The Body Project* (1997), for instance, provides a historical yet diverse definition of the term. According to Brumberg (1997), women during the Victorian era focused more on their character, service to others, and spirituality. For instance, an adolescent diarist in the late 1800s wrote, "...not to talk about myself or feelings. To think before speaking. To work seriously. To be self-restrained in conversation and actions..." (Brumberg, 1997, p. 6).

In addition to Brumberg's text, Cash and Smolack (2005) and Grogan (2007) also provide an historical analysis of body image. According to the authors, the study of body image originated in the work of Paul Schilder in the early 1900s (Cash and Smolack, 2005; Grogan, 2007). Prior to Shidler's research, body image focused primarily on the perception one had of distorted bodies caused by brain damage. Before the 1980s, studies into body image were conducted with women because of the work in clinical psychology and psychiatry which focused on eating disorders (Cash and Smolack, 2005; Grogan, 2007; see Chap II). These studies reinforced the ideas that body image was primarily

relevant to young women and constructed on weight. Later, a shift took place in order to broaden the population of body image in psychology to incorporate other groups (boys and men) that focuses on more than one's weight. Moreover, Cash and Smolack (2005) cites the van den Berg et al (2002) Tripartite Influence Model which "proposes media, peers, and family are key sociocultural channels for the transition for body ideals" (p. 4). Although there are studies that have been conducted on women's thought process on body image, it is difficult to capture the nuance of the topic due to an individual person's culture and socio-economic background.

Despite an abundance of research and literature which focuses on self-image, the thought processes of women in regards to their body image is often a difficult yet sensitive topic. The media's portrayal of what the female body "could" or "should" look like is often at the center of many controversies, such as whether or not to photoshop or airbrush pictures. Often, advertisers will have idealistic models with memorable slogans to sell and make a profit in magazines, on television and films, and commercials and billboards. For example:

- Beauty Best Buys— "Pretty attracts us. Beauty changes us. Be a force of beauty";
- Maxolip (and Perfect Pout)— "Kiss your thin lips goodbye";
- Olay— "Because younger looking eyes never go out of fashion";
- Revlon— "Because you're worth it";
- Steel Magnolias—"There's no such thing as natural beauty";

- The Ultimate Look Barber & Salon— “For that Feminine Look You Always Wanted (Gaille, n.d.).

One area more deserving of further inquiry could be: How do images of women in the media affect women who are blind or visually impaired? I argue that women who have a visual impairment may experience an exacerbated negative effect from media images compared to women without sight impairments, because they are no longer able to see their body. They must strive at all costs to make up for two alleged deficits: not having an ideal body shape and the perceived shortcoming of being blind/ visually impaired. But this is certainly not the case for all women who live with a visual disability. In this space, these women have to cultivate a certain level of trust with the people in their lives. However, this trust can be manipulative and misleading, because if these other peoples’ value systems line up with the damaging ones in society, their agendas can be pushed on someone who has a more difficult time challenging these notions of ideal beauty. For example, who would these blind or visually impaired women compare themselves to? What counter arguments could they employ?

Therefore, there is a high risk of these women being exposed to damaging information about their physical selves. They have smaller pools of influence because they cannot conduct their own research and form their own opinions about ideal women in the media or fashion industry. For that reason, I contend that living with blindness or a visual impairment as a woman can imply a higher risk of developing a negative self-

concept, eating disorder, self-harm, depression, etc. Thus, I aim to study the effect of the media's images of the thin ideal on women who live with visual disabilities. To do this, I will examine the history of feminine beauty ideals, investigate current and historical works on self-image, and conduct, analyze, and report interviews with women who live with a visual disability. In addition, I will investigate the exposure to the media and the influence, if any, it has on their self-image

## CHAPTER II

### FEMININE BODY IDEALS 1900s—1990s

The expansion of mass media such as magazines, social platforms, and television commercials has also seen an increase in ideal beauty. Women’s magazines, for example, often include advertisements with images of “perfect” thin models, subliminal messages, self-enhancing products (makeup), and captions which reject one’s feminine inner beauty. Thus far, feminine beauty standards shown in the media has changed significantly on the account of the emergence of popular trends. Adding to that, feminine beauty standards are often in conflict with the previous generation. From Marilyn Monroe to Kate Moss, the physiques of the most admired women have become increasingly difficult for the average woman to achieve. Due to the lack of research in the twentieth-first century, this chapter only examines shifts in feminine beauty standards and women’s fashion across the twentieth century.

Between the 1900s and the 1910s, the “Gibson Girl,” invented by Charles Dana Gibson, remained an iconic image of prevailing beauty. Explicit and clearly defining “beauty”, Gibson’s illustration was based on 1000 “American girls.” Femininity was depicted as slender and tall, but with a “voluptuous” bust and wide hips. To achieve this appearance, women used corsets, which pinched the torso and waist significantly. (Corset refers to a close-fitting undergarment...often capable of being tightened by lacing...worn, especially by women, to shape and support the body; see Appendix A)

Additionally, women wore frilly puffed blouses that were lace collared or ribbon tied along with separate hip-fitting fluted skirts. Even though the “idealistic” woman began as an illustration, various models and actresses such as Camille Clifford and Evelyn Nesbit brought the image to life.

In contrast to the previous decade, the 1920s placed more emphasis on “natural endowment than any time in the proceeding centuries” (Wood, “Perceptions of Feminine Beauty,” n.d.). Cosmetics main purpose was to conceal women’s natural imperfections and draw attention to their natural beauty. Additionally, women were far more casual than the corseted Gibson Girls. Specifically, the flapper (see Appendix A) was an “immature young woman—a teenager or young adult—who was scantily-clad and had little regard for uptight behavioral norms” (“Women’s Body Image and B MI,” 2018). More to that, the flappers were often times described as being independent, wise-cracking, and reckless. Unlike the previous decade, women appeared more boyish and androgynous—for example, women had minimal breast, short hair, and a slender physique without the use of a corset. It was also common to see women showing their legs, knees, and ankles. Since a large bust was not “desirable,” designers created brassiere’s to “flatten” women’s breast.

The impact of the Great Depression in the 1930s through the 1940s transformed women’s imagery of beauty once again. That is to say, skirts for women became longer and showed more of a natural waistline. Staying with some beauty images from the flappers, women during the Great Depression continued to model shorter hairstyles. Moreover, with the production of materials for clothes, such as silk and nylon, women



began to dress for practicality—slim blouses and skirts, “women also received instructions on how to tailor the unused suits of men in combat, remaking them into everyday wear” (“Women’s Body Image and BMI,” 2018). Additionally, women’s trousers were invented after a shortage of materials for stockings. For the first time in thirty-four years, a celebrity BMI was close to the average woman in the United States. The average woman had an average BMI of 23.6, while most celebrities ranged from 18.5 (Barbara Stanwyck) to 20.3 (Lena Horne, see Appendix A).

Similar to the late 40s, women in the 1950s continued to wear “very full skirts, cinched waists and sloping shoulders” (“Victoria and Albert Museum, n.d). Women’s daywear consisted of skirts and jackets or dresses in tweeds or woolens. Women also wore small pill-box or large-saucer shaped hats with short hair set in curls or kept long in simple pony-tails/chignons. According to Wood’s “perceptions of Female Beauty” website, “fashion during this period was divided between the sophisticated Chanel/Dior end of the scale, and the newly invented teenage style (Wood, “perceptions of Female Beauty,” n.d). That is, teenagers wore tight sweaters, pointed brassieres, circular skirts, and tight trousers. In addition, conformity and “flaw concealment” self-presentation was heavily emphasized in the United States. Specifically, “black women, who were encouraged to look as white as possible by straightening their hair and lightening their skin, for example, Beverly Johnson” (Wood, “Perceptions of Female Beauty,” N.d; see Chap III and Appendix A).

Additionally, women in the 50s were curvy and full-figured—a busty and voluptuous hourglass physique, which was demonstrated by models Marilyn Monroe and Grace Kelly (see Appendix A). According to the “Women’s Body Image and BMI” website,

The increasing popularity of Hollywood films helped propel glamour models like Monroe to widespread consciousness, and combined with the increased freedom of material after the end of wartime rationing options were once again extensive. (“Women’s Body Image and BMI,” 2018).

With this, women were still expected to take full advantage of beauty products and constantly “look” their best before leaving their homes. More specifically, women were never to have been seen in public without a full face of makeup—which can include concealer, foundation, translucent powder, mascara, blush, eye shadow, lipstick... Along with the use of cosmetics, women were presumed to have “flawless” skin. Furthermore, “the average woman’s BMI during this time was 23.6, well above that of Shirley MacLane (18.8) or Elizabeth Taylor (20.5) {“Women body Image and BMI,” 2018}.

Moreover, in 1953, Hugh Hefner published the first Playboy magazine which featured Marilyn Monroe. The famous Monroe nude photo was purchased from John Kelly and later captioned, “Sweetheart of the Month.” As stated in the New York Times article, “Playboy in Popular Culture,” Hefner created the magazine “with the goal of featuring the ‘girl next door’ like Jenny McCarthy and Anna Nicole Smith” (“playboy in popular Culture,” 2017). Additionally, Playboy, by the 1980s, was a starting point in

many celebrities' careers. Celebrities like Madonna, Pamela Anderson (who appeared over ten times), and Drew Barrymore was featured in Hefner's book.

Furthermore, in 1959, Ruth Handler, the co-founder of Mattel, created a three-dimensional doll after observing her daughter Barbara playing with dolls made of paper. In 1959, Barbie (see Appendix A) was introduced to the world at the American Toy Fair in New York City. Barbie was to serve as a teenage fashion doll. Two years later, in 1961, Handler created the Ken doll after her son.

During the past fifty-seven years, Barbie has undergone various alterations to target a larger audience including appearances, pets, companions/relationships, and occupations. For example, Barbie holds a pilot's license, a medical degree, and operates commercial aircrafts, which demonstrates to young girls the sky is the limit when choosing their career path. However, "Barbie has been criticized for her appearance and its impact on girls' body image "(Dockterman and Jones, "Barbie's New Body," 2016). For some consumers, the blonde doll represents an unrealistic form of body image; thus, girls who see Barbie as their role model, may be more at risk of developing eating disorders if trying to emulate her. If Barbie were an actual woman, she would be "5 feet 9 inches tall, have a bust of 39 inches, a waist of 18 inches, hips of 33 inches, and a size 3 shoe" (The South Shore Eating Disorders, n.d.) All things considered; she would lack the 17-22 percent body fat women need to menstruate. One woman, Cindy Jackson, was so heavily influenced by Barbie that she underwent twenty plastic surgeries (to the tune of \$55,000) in an attempt to make herself look like the Barbie image ("Barbie and Body Image, 2018).

Therefore, one can see that Barbie embodies a fixed standard that does not represent all women bodily, racially, etc. Even though the Barbie Company is trying to make dolls more representative of today's woman, there is still significant room for improvement, as Barbie is far from encompassing what every woman looks like. Barbies do not represent all women, which could lead a woman trying to emulate the Barbie by adopting unhealthy habits like "not eating in order to lose weight" (The South Shore Eating Disorders, n.d.). This unrealistic standard of beauty may lead to damaging habits and low self-esteem, especially in young girls for whom Barbie is targeted and who do not yet have a fully formed sense of self.

Forty-years after the flapper, women began to trade their fifties curves for a slenderer and more androgynous look once again. "Twiggy, a major supermodel of the 1960s, embodied many of these seismic shifts in idealized in body types" ("Women's Body Image and BMI," 2018). In contrast to the full-figured and curvaceous Monroe and Kelly, Twiggy weighed 112 pounds, had a minimal chest, short hair, slight frame, and a boyish appearance (see Appendix A). "This form of beauty abandoned all curves and any hint of a mature look, instead appearing almost pre-pubescent" ("Women Body Image and BMI," 2018). Cosmetic surgeries also became progressively popular among models (such as the removal of one's back teeth and lower ribs). Model Pixee Fox, for instance, has spent \$119,200 in plastic surgeries and undergone six rib removals in order to achieve a fourteen-inch waist and mirror the cartoon Jessica Rabbit. In a 2015 interview, at the age of twenty-five, Pixee Fox stated "Those cartoon characters represent idealization of the female body...I want to have the tiny waist, the butt, big

boobs, big eyes, and a really pretty face...Having ribs removed was just another step in achieving that ideal” (Brennan, “Model Pixee Fox has Fifteen Surgeries,” 2015). In addition, in the latter half of the sixties, a “hippie” look emerged which included long, straight hair and full-figured physiques persisted among prominent actresses such as Jane Fonda and Sophia Lauren. Throughout this period, the average woman’s BMI increased to 25.2, again well above celebrities like Soledad Miranda (17.6) or Jessica Lange (20.4).

In the 1970s, however, fashion shifted towards long hair and flared trousers, and miniskirts were replaced by hot pants and ankle-length maxi skirts. The continuance of the Twiggy-like thin ideal from the 60s, often “caused negative outcomes on women’s health and eating habits” (“Women’s Body Image and BMI,” 2018). It was during this time, anorexia nervosa, a mental illness characterized by severe restrictions to lose weight began to receive publicity. Singer, Karen Carpenter (see Appendix A), a drummer and lead singer of the Carpenters, died of complications of anorexia. Carpenter struggled with her eating disorder for a decade to maintain a low weight. To sustain her body size, Carpenter used pills to increase her thyroid, induce vomiting, laxatives, and diets on the verge of starvation. Her condition became severe when she was going through her divorce with her abusive husband of eighteen months.

Anorexia is still a pervasive issue today and has been investigated in documentaries such as *Super Skinny Me: The Race to Double Zero*. In this documentary, viewers follow the dietary and fitness choices of journalist, Kate and Louise. Both women have a BMI between twenty-one and twenty-two percent and are size twelve. These women commit to various regimens to help them lose weight. With a goal of

becoming a double-zero, both women undergo drastic lifestyle changes, which include: swimming in extremely cold water, drinking protein shakes, and consuming liquids like lemonade with maple syrup and cayenne pepper. Medical professionals in the documentary believe the “worst” thing that could have occurred to these women would have been cardiac arrest, depression, and eventual death. In the beginning, the women were happy with their weight and body appearance. Louise, who was happy with her weight, participated within the documentary to show others the consequences of dieting. She used magazines to motivate herself to begin the diet. Kate on the other hand used pictures from her past and spoke negatively about her present self. For example, she would say things like “look at how skinny I used to be.”

Different from the investigational documentaries, anorexia is emerging on the web which indicates a subculture of women who are “pro-Anorexic” and find the appearance appealing. According to Wolf (2002), a newspaper featured “a group of thin, ambitious young women talking about weight and quotes one saying, “Now what’s wrong with throwing up?” (as cited in Wolf, 2002).

In addition to anorexia, women during this decade also struggled with bulimia. Bulimia is a serious eating disorder that is categorized by compulsive overeating usually followed by self-induced vomiting, laxative, or diuretic abuse. Following the purge of food, people are then accompanied with feelings of guilt and depression. In 1979, researcher, Gerald Russell, published the first clinical paper on the eating disorder titled, “*Bulimia Nervosa, An Ominous Variant of Anorexia Nervosa*.” “During that time, Russell noticed college aged women attending North American Universities were overeating and

purging regularly. Although some evaluators believe bulimia has declined in recent years, other researchers, however, believe the eating disorder has steadily increased since its first publication in 1979 (James, “History of Bulimia,” 2018). Singer and songwriter, Amy Winehouse, best-known for her song, “Rehab,” died from alcohol poisoning in July 2011. Winehouse’s alcoholism was exacerbated as a result of her struggles with bulimia, substance abuse, and self-harm.

Furthermore, this era also brought the use of diet pills, which potentially used dangerous amphetamines to suppress the appetite. An example includes the weight-loss pill Contrave, which is a combination of the stimulant Bupropion and Naltrexon (Ryan, “A Blast from the Past,” 2015). “Actress Farrah Fawcett and her layered hair and one-piece swimsuits also rose to prominence of a sex symbol during the time” (“Women’s Body Image and BMI,” 2018). In contrast to previous beauty images, women now wore their hair long with minimal makeup to achieve a “natural” appearance. Additionally, throughout this time, the average woman’s BMI was 25.3; meanwhile celebrities on various media outlets had a BMI ranging from 17—20. With this BMI gap, it became increasingly harder for the average woman to fit the media images of idealized beauty.

While the 70s accentuated a woman’s thinness, the 1980s, in contrast, focused more on fitness and exercise. Bodies that were toned, but not overly muscular were prized, and aerobic workout shows and tapes became popular —dieting was no longer the only way women were expected to keep a perfect figure. Women now had to exercise to stay fit and desirable, thus adding even more expectations and stress upon women. Depictions of women in the media appeared slenderer with “big” hair, “big” shoulders,

and over-the-top make up. According to the “Women’s Body Image and BMI” website, “media fashions included headbands, tights, leggings, leg warmers, and short skirts made of spandex or other material” (“Women’s Body Image and BMI,” 2018). Illustrations of popular fashion, feminine beauty ideals, and other popular trends (i.e. exercise and dance) are depicted in 80s motion pictures such as *Flashdance* and *Heathers*. This period also saw the rise of supermodels such as Naomi Campbell (see Appendix A) Cindy Crawford, and Claudia Shiffer.

By the 1990s, the ideal of thinness became more exaggerated—women were expected to maintain an increasingly thin look, yet with large breasts as well, as popularly depicted by Pamela Anderson on “Baywatch” (“Women’s Body Image and BMI,” 2018). Compared to these standards, “Marilyn Monroe, the archetypal beauty icon of the 1950s, would be considered fat” (Wood, “Perceptions of Female Beauty,” n.d). Fashion industries began to focus their attention on the “waif” and “heroin chic.” This movement stood opposed to the fit and healthy look of ‘80s models, instead focusing on thinness alone and a boney appearance (“Women’s Body Image and BMI,” 2018). For example, Calvin Klein’s advertisements featured models like Kate Moss which re-enforced this “ideal” imagery of beauty (see Appendix A). In 2001, model, singer, and actress, Whitney Houston, best-known for her role as Rachael Marron in the 1992 film *The Bodyguard*, performed at Michael Jackson’s 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Tribute (alongside Mya and Usher), appeared emaciated and bony; resulting from her extensive drug use. Moreover, the drugged and haggard appearance also glamorized drug addictions in order to market products to women. The glorification of heroin through the marketing of



women's clothing is not creative fashion, but destructive. As a result of this imagery, a plethora of celebrities overdosed from the use of heroin, for instance, Stephanie Sargent, an American musician and co-founder of Seattle punk band Seven Year Bitch. This style of beauty did not end until fashion designer Davide Sorreti died from an overdose of heroin at the age of twenty-years-old. Furthermore, with the "heroin chic" images constantly in the media, women were once again faced with an impossible standard of beauty to achieve. That is, "celebrities like Tara Reid (17.5) and Penelope Cruz (19.6) showed off bodies that were far below the average of 26.3" ("Women's Body Image and BMI," 2018).

Harkening back to Barbie, the Barbie Girl song was written in 1997 by the band Aqua Veevo. The song was meant to be facetious and expose the silliness of Barbie and her relationship with Ken, but many people, especially young girls, may take it literally. For example, the lyrics that precede Barbie and Ken riding in his car include "I'm a blonde bimbo girl in a fantasy world...dress me up, make it tight, I'm your dollie..." In looking at the lyrics, Barbie is forever a willing participant of whatever Ken wants to do—riding in his car, going to parties, and participating in sexual behaviors. The song also conveys an underlying message that Barbie is Ken's sex object. So, then, what is society telling girls about relationships? And how will these messages impact young girl's body image? Using Barbie as a mascot to convey these unhealthy messages, media demonstrates to girls they are no longer independent and free-spirited, but men's property.

In addition to conveying negative messages, the use of the descriptor “bimbo” suggests women have no intelligence or agency. Thus, if you “look” like Barbie, guys will want to date you. The Barbie song also reinforces the idea that a girl’s life is not her own and she has to look and perform feminine gender roles in order for a man to acknowledge her presence. Additionally, the average woman is incomplete as herself; she must adopt any unhealthy habits and attitudes necessary to secure a lifestyle similar to Barbie, or to be in “Ken’s” world.

Thus, we can see the historical glamorization of what the media deems the “ideal” woman to look like, to the point where a woman was informed to have an emaciated or otherwise unhealthy look about her. I contend the media and fashion system show little regard for women; they instead focus on selling an unobtainable image to increase profits. They value profit over women, who are just there to look pretty and sell things. They use an unattainable body image for women’s’ products so they will continue to purchase items in order to achieve that look, even though it may not be possible. To them, the women are expendable. And this value system of women’s health being less important than looking the part of “pretty” trickles down into women’s lives which will continue to be passed down to future generations.

### **CHAPTER III**

#### **ENGAGING WITH CRIP THEORY, ABLEISM, AND DISABILITY**

In the last chapter, I offered an overview of shifts in feminine body standards and women's fashion throughout the twentieth century. From celebrities like Marilyn Monroe and Kate Moss, the standards of feminine beauty have become ever more difficult for the average woman to achieve. I argued advertisers use marketing ploys with unrealistic female images so women will purchase cosmetics, diet regimens, and other beauty enhancements to "improve" their aesthetic. But in what ways do advertisers marketing ploys affect black women? Using examples from media, like motion pictures and books, and also Crip theory, this chapter studies feminine beauty fallacies and their effect on black women, health, and wellness.

"Mirror, mirror on the wall. Who is the fairest one of all?" Snow White's stepmother, the evil queen, asks this question, and the mirror always responds: "Snow White." The word "fairest" in particular draws attention to skin color—Snow White is of course the palest, sporting additionally the ideal physique. Thus, fairest equates to most beautiful. In 2009, Disney released "The Princess and the Frog," which featured a black princess for the first time. Though the character, Tiana, is black, she's still a Disney Princess, so she still has that ideal, unattainable physique. Tiana is the ninth princess to join the ranks of Snow White, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty, among others. Like Barbie, the Disney princess brand is striving for diversity, yet the label is still

problematic, specifically the messages portrayed to girls on the standard of beauty and that being beautiful is necessary. These stories suggest girls are special or noteworthy because of their beauty. The messages in the films inform girls they should imitate relationships similar to those in the films. One black princess in 2009 does not make up for the years of white princesses. When Tiana kisses the frog prince, instead of transforming him into a person she transforms into a frog. Unlike all of the white Disney Princesses whose problems were solved and who found true love in a single kiss, Tiana is equated with an animal, possibly making crude commentary on black people.

Coupled with unrealistic physiques, the princesses modeled long hair, fair skin, exaggerated eyes and a tiny waist. Since the emergence of the princesses in 1937, six of the eleven Disney princesses' eyes were created larger than their waist, which shows an inaccurate anatomical physique of the characters. Although, "the actual relation between the size of their waist to their breast is physically impossible, their innocent yet sexualized facial features suggest a storyline beyond a pure, child-like storyline as well" ("Body Image—The Deconstruction of Disney," n.d.). The princess' unrealistic bodies are representations of the "ideal feminine subject" where women are often taught to be smaller than men, domicile, and require a lesser amount of space.

All things considered, the princess stories and characters are similar, thus little girls start to believe their "happily ever after" will come if they "look" like the princesses and secure their strong and handsome prince. Therefore, I contend the physical details suggest this is the ideal body type, and all girls should strive for it. As a black viewer, if I believe white, slim, etc. is beautiful, I may do things to become white—bleach my skin or

use make -up, or to become slim—try a number of diet regimens, any of which could cause a number of health or psychological problems.

In addition to misconceptions being illustrated in motion pictures and in the media more generally, women's magazines often show fallacies on their covers related to feminine beauty. For example, until the 1960s, the cover-girls of *Vogue* were all white. Beverly Johnson appeared as the first black woman on the cover of *Vogue*, in the 1960s, however she was extremely light-skinned (see Appendix A). Ten years later, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* was published. The book is told from nine-year-old Pecola Breedlove's perspective, a preadolescent who suffers from a sexual assault and struggles with feminine beauty ideals.

Pecola associated feminine beauty with whiteness because of the perpetuation of white blue-eyed dolls throughout her childhood. She struggles with the idea of ugliness as a result of oppression stemming from having dark skin. The text expands on self-esteem and speaks on behalf of those who did not receive "you are beautiful" comments. When Pecola is sexually assaulted by her father she becomes pregnant, but the child is born prematurely and dies. Later in a flashback, in Pecola's diluted imagination, she illustrates mixed emotions towards the assault from her father, speaking as if her wish for blue eyes had been granted and changed the behavior of others, instead of her father's assault being the cause of her delusion. According to Jimoh (2003), Morrison had embarked upon the task of writing what she has said are the novels she would want to read yet that were not available to her. At the time of the publication of *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison was thirty-nine-years-old. In addition, Morrison's text was written in response to a childhood

friend's wish for blue eyes, "an idea that struck Morrison as a form of violence—that is, her perception of its suggestion of mutilation" (Jimoh, 2003).

Like Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Stephanie Covington-Armstrong's memoir *Not All Black Girls Know How to Eat: A Story of Bulimia* is concerned with sexual assault and beauty standards for women of color. Armstrong shares her struggles with bulimia, sexual abuse, self-insecurities, growing up in foster care, and of living in the inner city. In Armstrong's heart-felt first-hand narrative, she recounts her struggle with bulimia which is normally portrayed as a "white" woman's problem.

Armstrong introduces the reader to her experiences by first recounting her childhood. Growing up in a household where she was the only brown skinned female with a mother and two sisters who were light skinned, resulting in a plethora of teasing. She grew up to struggle with Bulimia, an illness cultivated through a relationship with her mother and other lived experiences (i.e. her mother's horrible cooking and a sexual assault). Often times, she would not eat, and her mom said if you don't eat you need to go to bed which started a sense of control over food, a choice not to eat. Her view and take on Bulimia will be different than that of a white person because her up-bringing is that of an African American.

In addition, Armstrong does not fit the stereotypical woman with an eating disorder. She grew up in poverty in the inner city. Foster care, sexual abuse, and insecurities define her earlier years, all contributing to her bulimia. She never sought assistance for childhood trauma which led to a negative self-esteem. The biggest difference from others with eating disorders is her race. Although eating disorders exist in

the black community, we are taught to deal with it ourselves. Medical professionals did not take Armstrong or her eating disorder seriously because of the color of her skin. She was constantly told she had to fit the strong black woman archetype. Rather than searching inward for self-validation that she was lovable she instead fought to show others she was worthy. She realized that possessions or a significant other would not fill the void. She was looking for other things to fulfill her self-worth and self-happiness when she needed to look inward to realize that she was loveable and beautiful, and not expect for others to find it for her. She created what she thought was self-confidence but when it failed, she had to look inward.

To examine Armstrong's text theoretically, with Crip theory, we can observe ways Armstrong is overlooked by medical professionals and health-care providers due to her race, ethnicity, and gender when she sought treatment for her eating disorder. According to Goodley (2017), crip theory is concerned with the "reclaiming of the disabled body as a celebratory body politics. The arrival of crip studies into the disability domain, some ten years ago, shifted the ways we thought about disability" (p. 194). Crip studies acknowledged the "anarchic potential of disability" to disrupt the heteronormative standards set by society and culture (Goodley, 2017, p. 194). Taking a feminist approach, Allison Kafer (2013) adds "like queer, crip is fluid and ever-changing, claimed by those whom it did not define..." (As stated in Kafer, 2013). Examples of crip studies include the work of Jim Overbo and Amy Vidali. "Overbo portrays his own body as a crip body that sits in direct opposition of those normative bodies so cherished by capitalist societies.

He rejects the hackneyed view of the disabled body as deficient, refiguring it as a place of becoming, reflection, and production...” (As cited in Goodley, 2017, p. 194).

Additionally, “the second approach –critical studies of ableism—sits with crip theory’s critique of the normative (the normal, the usual, the neoliberal, the humanist)” (Goodley, 2017, p. 195). For this, Goodley draws from Fiona Kumari Campbell, who asserts disability studies becomes ability studies because the true origins of oppression can be found here. Campbell’s work turns “gays back onto non-disabled people and other persuasions including white, economically privileged, minority world citizens and purveyors of their cognitive superiority” (Goodley, 2017, p. 195). Although Armstrong is considered “able-bodied,” {Ableism refers to the oppression of people with disabilities (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2017, p. 83)} her personal narrative of struggling with an eating disorder provides insight into the relationship between patient and medical professionals who often ignore/disregard patients, believe “single narratives,” or the historical concept of it being a “white woman’s problem.”

Just like Armstrong, many modern women are struggling with the expectation of what beauty is within the black community. A study examining current body image concerns of African American college women found that “Beauty and African American women can only truly be understood through the framework of the -ism—racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism” (Awad, Norwood, Taylor, Martinez, McClain, Jones, Holeman, and Hilliard, 2016). A total of 31 women on a large southwestern campus participated in one of five focus groups. The researchers examined college-age African American self-image and their perception on beauty ideals, “Themes included sacrifice, ignorance/racial



microaggressions, and validation and invalidation by others, body types (i.e. thick, thin, athletic, etc.), and being thin is for white women” (Awad et al., 2016).

When the students were interviewed, the results were analyzed for similarities and for outliers. Some women talked about, for example, a gym membership. The reason black women are not in the gym as much as other racial groups is because they have to choose between going to the gym and getting their hair done, one participant noted. Black hair is versatile compared to hair in other cultures. Only noticing black women’s hair when it is straight attaches Western values to the hair, which in turn pushes the Western ideal on African American women. For these women there is no winning—if they’re wearing their hair natural people say they’ve “arrived” in accepting themselves but they receive compliments on their appearance when it is straight.

As stated by the researchers, “in the past, and still today, black women bodies and beauty has been devalued by mainstream culture, which overvalues the European aesthetic and undervalues other racial/minority groups” (Awad et al., 2016). That is, black women are observed as ugly, undesirable, and less feminine. In 2013, according to Winfrey-Harris (2015), “two cases of black girls being punished at school for their natural hair made headlines. Seven-year-old Tiana Parker was sent home from an Oklahoma Charter School and threatened with expulsion because her dreadlocks were deemed ‘faddish’ and unacceptable under a school code that also banned afros” (Winfrey-Harris, 2015, p. 19). Similarly, in the 1930s and 1940s Kenneth B. Clark and Mamie K. Phipps Clark conducted the doll test in which children were invited to describe various dolls. Consistently across America, black girls identified the black and brown

dolls as bad and ugly, meanwhile describing white ones “pretty,” “nice,” and “clean.” More to that, Horton Spillers’ 1986 historical analysis of the women in the Atlantic Slave Trade revealed how female slaves were not really seen as women because of their race and ethnicity. They were, however, seen more as equipment. Black women past to present were not seen as beautiful and we still have not fully moved out of that position, as evidenced by mammies, Jezebels, and even Clark’s dolls.

“According to the cult of true womanhood, that accompanied the traditional family ideal, ‘true’ women possessed four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Propertied white women and those in the emerging middle-class were encouraged to aspire to these virtues. African-American women encountered a different set of controlling images” (Collins, 2000, p. 35-36). The first image to be applied to black women was the “mammy,” who was considered to be a faithful and obedient domestic servant. The image of the mammy, according to Bogle (2000), “is usually big, fat, and cantankerous” (p. 9). Pecola’s mother, Pauline Breedlove, typifies the internalization of the mammy image, who neglects her own children, preferring to lavish her concerns and attention on her white charges (Collins, 2000, pp. 94-95).

In contrast, a jezebel is considered to be impudent, shameless, or a morally inhabited woman. In other words, a woman who is sexually liberated, hypersexual and promiscuous. Winfrey-Harris (2015) provides a modern image with her examination of Nicki Minaj’s summer music video to her 2014 song, *Anaconda*. “It features a jungle theme, suggestively positioned bananas and oozing coconuts, a gold-chain bikini top, and lots and lots of ass. Over the hook to Sir Mix-a-Lot’s 1992 ode to “back,” Nicki bounces

her chassis, while rapping: ...'By the way...what he say. He can tell I ain't missing no meals. Come through and fuck 'em in my automobile...' "(Winfrey-Harris, 2015, pp. 28-29).

Thus, we can see the many misconceptions involved in black women's beauty ideals, health and wellness, and medical care. The European aesthetic, tone, hair, body type, and facial features can influence black women's self-image. By viewing this aesthetic, black women come to feel that as they are, they are not enough. I believe Sojourner Truth's 1851 speech, "*Ain't I a Woman*," which was delivered at the Women's Rights Convention, best sums it up. Truth says, "...That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And Ain't I a Woman..."

## CHAPTER IV

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter provides an outline of previous research concerning women's self-image and the "perfect" feminine aesthetic that is depicted in the media. Introducing various frameworks, such as foundational, theoretical, scientific, and psychological, the literature review provides insight on the previous research conducted on feminine beauty ideals and its influence on women's body images. It also demonstrates that there is a gap in the research concerning the self-image of women with visual disabilities and the media's images of the "perfect" feminine body.

Both Brumberg and Douglas provide us with a foundational framework for analyzing women's bodies in cultural society. Brumberg focuses specifically on adolescents whereas Douglas's research primarily interacts with more mature women. Brumberg (1997) uses excerpts from young girls' diaries, as well as images from the nineteenth-century to the present, to answer the question: Why are girls dissatisfied with their bodies? To investigate this question, historian Brumberg traces girls' attitudes on sensitive topics, including breast size, menstruation, hair, clothing, and cosmetics. By tracing these attitudes, she further exposes the transition from the Victorian era, with its focus on women's inner morality, to today's focus on female outward appearances—specifically, the desire to become model-thin and sexy. Brumberg's text, *The Body Project*, examines the gains and losses young girls have inherited since transitioning from

the restrictive corset to a modern society of sexual freedom. An example is the “important and satisfying gains women have made in achieving greater access to education, power, and all forms of self-expression (i.e. sexuality) ...” (Brumberg, 1997).

Similarly, Douglas (1995) studies how today’s media has portrayed women over the past fifty-years. She believes the generation of women born as baby-boomers (1946—1964) were raised to envision themselves as bimbos yet find their voice in feminism. During the 1990s, when the book was written, women had more opportunity to see powerful, inspirational female leaders like Hillary Clinton. However, she suggests modern women have been shown a plethora of conflicting images of their desires, aspirations, and relationships with their partners, families, and one another, which is the result of women becoming cultural “schizophrenics” (Douglas, 1995, p. 8). With so many messages, Douglas offers, women have a harder time discerning societal expectation and their own personal needs and wants. For example, there are images and messages from advertisers that are harder to ignore, such as the insistence that a forty-year-old woman should have thighs like a twelve-year-old boy or no self-respecting woman should ever have wrinkles (Douglas, 1998, p.16). Again, these ads reaffirm the notion that older women should strive for a youthful appearance because “beauty” only exists while one is an emerging adult. Thus, the media appears to be liberating because the woman believes she has choices, but it is really an oppressive force because she is told what she must choose.

In addition to providing historical perspectives, Naomi Wolf (1991/2002) provides a theoretical framework for analyzing women’s bodies in society. Her classic

text, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*, redefines views of the relationship between beauty and female identity. Specifically, Wolf refers to this relationship as the beauty myth, the obsession that traps modern women in an endless spiral of hope, self-consciousness, and self-hatred. Simultaneously, women are trying to constantly fulfill society's current idealistic form of beauty while also disregarding their own authenticity and power. As stated by Wolf, "during the past five years, consumer spending doubled, pornography became the main category of media, ahead of legitimate films and records combined, and 33,000 American women told researchers that they would rather lose ten to fifteen pounds than achieve any other goal" (p. 10). Although modern women have more power, money and legal recognition, their thought process about their beauty is not liberating when compared to their grandmothers.

Besides historical and theoretical approaches, a couple of researchers have favored a more scientific methodology for understanding body image and media. Psychologist Nancy Etcoff (1999) takes a scientific approach towards research on beauty, and postulates that beauty is an essential and acceptable part of human nature. Etcoff suggests that every human civilization has revered beauty, pursued it at innumerable costs, and endured both the tragic and comic consequences of that pursuit. The author reveals all aspects of human beauty—including why people devour fashion magazines, monitor waistlines, and gaze at objects of their desire. Etcoff also explains how sexual preference is guided by ancient practices—people are most likely to reproduce with those whom they find attractive. Thus, *Survival of the Prettiest*, uncovers why gentlemen prefer blondes, why high-heels are still in style, why eyebrows are plucked, and why hair is cut

or trimmed, by analyzing theories of the mind. To do this, Etcoff calls attention to beauty as an existence of the mind rather than the flesh. Etcoff explains people judge others' appearances on a beauty standard in their mind, and although they may never encounter such beauty, they believe they would recognize the ideal beauty in its presence. To illustrate her argument, Etcoff refers to Emily Dickson's quote, "I never saw a moor, I never saw the sea, yet I know how the heather looks, and what a waif must be" (pp. 10-11).

Blood (2004), however, takes a psychological perspective to demonstrate how experimental psychology research into body image found by the press can be misused. Specifically, experimental psychology has recently become more influential through media outlets like women's magazines. Through these outlets, experts provide readers "facts" about "body image problems" and offer medical advice and treatments. To examine this media misuse, Blood draws on her experiences as a clinical psychologist to highlight the damaging effects of untenable views of body image.

Gunter and Wykes (2005) have a different take on media's impact on women. More specifically, the researchers discuss the lack of research on medias' representations of the body, or the ways audiences interpret and use images in modern America. Yet, both society and researchers blame the media for reproducing unrealistic images of female bodies. An example includes: the effect media images have on women's health and wellness while influenced by media images. To put it differently, when trying to emulate the idealistic images, women may resort to drastic measures such as starvation, which puts them at greater risk of developing eating disorders. Comparatively, Parloff

(2014) investigates social media's causation on young girl's body image and self-perceptions. Although social media is heavily relied upon, particularly by women, there has been little research on social media's impact on women's self-concept. To expand on the current findings, Parloff draws from communications and social psychological theories to present a series of ideas along with a framework to guide the impact social media has on young girl's body image. Parloff (2014) proposes a model which emphasizes the predisposal, the use of social media, and mediating psychological processes on body dissatisfaction and eating disorders. Furthermore, the study confers on social media's effect on male self-image, intersections with ethnic groups, and strategies for improvement.

A few researchers have developed texts that provide women with a step-by-step guide explaining how to resist society's body ideals. Psychologist Sabin Wilhelm's (2006) *Feeling Good about the Way You Look*, for example, offers readers who struggle with dissatisfaction in their appearance alternatives to break free from the mirror. Focusing in today's society, where a blemish or "bad" hair day can ruin otherwise a "perfect" day and/or airbrushed abs dominate images in the media, Wilhelm's text is constructed in a step-by-step program to help one to fight the urge to spend hours "fixing" skin and hair, working out, and/or shopping for flattering clothes. The book further offers reality-check exercises based on cognitive-behavioral therapy which illustrates how to identify unsubstantiated beliefs on body image. After reading this text, women will understand (and be more aware of) their inner negative thoughts and feelings, thus shedding the lengthy grooming routines and embarrassment that keeps



women from living life. Ultimately, after successful completion of Wilhelm's program, women will be able to replace self-doubt with self-confidence. In creating another possible resource, Cash and Smolak (2012) alongside their contributors wrote a handbook that presents evidence-based assessments, treatments, and preventions on body image concerns within its fifty-three chapters. To address their concerns, the researchers examined established and emerging theories/ findings and inquired on culture, gender, health, and psychological and eating disorders.

Furthermore, Sarah Grogan (2017) is an inclusive summation of research on body image in men, women, and children. To examine this research, Grogan draws from a plethora of disciplines—psychology, sociology, apparel, and gender studies. Grogan affirms this research through the inclusion of data analysis from interviews and focus groups with men, women, and children. Results from the women's studies showed “many women experience levels of dissatisfaction with weight and body shape and of their bodies, suggesting a problematic relationship” (Grogan, 2017). Methods for these studies included: figure rating, questionnaires, interviews, and body size estimation techniques.

As we can see, these studies largely build on each other, but few people research self-image as it relates to women with visual disabilities. Of the few, Sivyer and Towell (1998) focus their study on the correlation between media's images, specifically the thin ideal, women's self-image, and their eating mindsets. To address this concern, researchers administered questionnaires to 60 participants—20 who identified as abled-bodied, 20 who identified as blind from birth, and 20 who identified as acquiring vision loss later in life. The results from the study showed that women who identified as blinded

from birth had lower body dissatisfaction scores and more positive eating mindsets, when compared to women who acquired vision loss and who were able-bodied. In addition, the results showed able-bodied women's scores were positively correlated with each other.

Although there has been past research on eating disorders and society's impact on women's self-image, there has been a lack of research on media's, specifically the thin ideal, impact on women with visual disabilities. Fannon (2016), for instance, examines what it means to be a young woman with a visual disability while living in a society that is visually-reliant on appearances. To analyze this relationship, Fannon draws on qualitative data from personal diaries and in-depth interviews with seven blind or visually impaired Irish women and uses a feminist disability model that is reinforced by sociology of the body, gender theory, and visual studies.

Prior to the interviews, participants responded to open- and closed-ended questions in an electronic diary with the use of assistive technology relating to the research. To organize the entries, Fannon first uses an open-code system to search for emerging themes. Next, Fannon practices Corbin and Strauss's (2007) approach—the entries were organized numerically based on three guiding questions based on beauty ideals and self-image. The information was later manually categorized in one of the following: “discursive understandings of the feminine ideal; actions associated with it; and personal/body self-effects” (Fannon, 2016). Entries were also marked for clarification if deemed unclear to the researcher and later used in the interview process. Fannon also investigates interpretations and expressions of femininity and beauty, and the sometimes-complex relationship between the body and the self, and practices linked with

managing appearances all the while having a disability. Like Fannon's, my research will examine the influence of the media's thin idealistic images on women who have visual disabilities, specifically, American women who are blind or visually impaired. Additionally, I will analyze differences between racial groups among those studied.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **METHODS**

This chapter discusses the procedures used in order to investigate what aspects of women's lives are giving them negative self-concepts (family, society, media...). I postulate family is the most likely cause due to the level of exposure to the participants. Additionally, this chapter provides a description of participants, methods in which they were recruited, and an explanation of the instrumentations used in order to conduct the study.

#### **Participants and Recruitment**

This study was conducted in the spring of 2019 at a large public university in a medium sized city in the southeastern part of the United States. Participants were recruited through local organizations that provide services to the blind through verbal communication following ethical clearance. Services provided by the organizations include: mobility and career training, assistive living, assistive technology etc. Nine women responded with interest to my call for participants and in the end six were able to volunteer their time. The six volunteers were African American/Caucasian college-aged women between eighteen and thirty with a visual disability

## **Instrumentation**

To investigate the ways media influences women with visual disabilities, a semi-structured in-depth interview was used. The interview consisted of ten questions that inquired about the women's sense of body image and reactions/emotions towards the media's portrayal of women. Some of the ten in-depth questions also included follow-up questions in order for the participants to elaborate on their experiences (see Appendix C for survey). An understood follow-up question is "can you tell me more about this?" if the interviewer feels the question was not answered thoroughly. The participants responded to the questions based on their lived experiences and exposure to the media (for example, audio or e-books, magazines, newspapers, television, films, etc.). The race of the participants was included for use in later analysis. Before the in-depth interview, participants read an informed consent and acknowledged that their participation in the study served as their consent on the form. (Consent forms were provided in an accessible format via participants' preferred e-mail.) This informed consent instructed participants on the focus of the study, including benefits, risks known to participants, compensation, and the benefits of being a volunteer.

Additionally, in the same e-mail, participants were informed of the consent of their interview being recorded, the use of a pseudonym, and the location of the dialog, which was conducted via phone and lasted approximately thirty to sixty minutes. Following the in-depth interview, each participant was sent a debriefing e-mail, which included contact information to local and national crisis hotlines.

## **Convenience Sampling**

To recruit participants for the study, I used convenience sampling—a type of non-probability sampling which “includes participants that are readily available.” A Limitation to a convenience sample is the inability to “calculate if a particular case will be chosen for the sample,” resulting in the inability “to calculate the error of estimation to determine precisely how representative the sample is of the population” (Leary, 2012, p. 109).

## **Methods and Coding**

The recordings of participants’ interviews were kept on a file on a password-protected computer and deleted within forty-eight hours of the interview. The transcriptions of the recorded interviews were also kept as a Microsoft Word file on the same password-protected computer and will be deleted six months after the interviews. (The transcribed interviews were notated within forty-eight hours after interviews). Responses from the surveys were compiled into six separate word documents based on the participant’s chosen pseudonym. Later, before the analysis, participant files were transferred to a chart in Microsoft Word. Using convenience sampling, I observed and examined where participant survey responses converged and diverged based on their lived experiences and exposure to the media.

## **CHAPTER VI**

### **PARTICIPANT PROFILES AND RESULTS**

The previous chapter outlined the methods (recruitment process) used in order to investigate the influence media has on women with a visual disability. This chapter reviews the participant profiles and the outcome of the study. (Note: At the time of the study, the participant's preferred pronouns were unknown.).

#### **Participant Profiles**

Ava is an African American eighteen-year-old college student studying Business Administration who plans to start her own cosmetic and body-care company after graduation. She has been classified as legally blind since birth. More specifically, Ava can see colors, shapes, and people; however, her far sight vision is blurry.

Miracle Child Walking (MCW) is an African American twenty-eight-year-old totally blind college student earning her bachelors in Media Studies with a goal of hosting her own show. She obtained her associates from a local community college where she was the first blind student to attend. MCW lost her sight ten years ago to an allergic reaction to penicillin. MCW is currently collaborating with faculty to create an organization which brings awareness, advocacy, and promotes an inclusive environment for people with disabilities.

Happy is an African American twenty-one-year-old legally blind college student studying Social Work with hopes of finding employment within the same field. She loves

to encourage and motivate others, especially people with a disability, hence her reasons for studying social work. She became legally blind ten years ago due to an illness called Neuromyelitis Optica (NMO) – inflammation and demyelination of the optic nerve. She is totally blind in her left eye; however, she has some vision in her right. According to Happy, the vision in her right eye is similar to looking through a fog.

K is a Caucasian thirty-year-old student who is currently studying for her National Sonography Certification. As explained by K, this program has a ninety-five percent dropout rate, however she plans to successfully complete the program. She earned a Bachelor's of Arts in Communication Studies from a local university. She has been classified as totally blind (with light perception) since birth. Specifically, K has the ability to distinguish when lights are on and off. Along with her studies, she advocates for disability rights, enjoys reading autobiographies and crime mysteries, and watching crime television shows/documentaries.

Cat is a Caucasian nineteen-year-old freshman studying Political Science and Special Education. She enjoys art, sculpture classes, and reading, especially Sci-Fi and Fiction. She also enjoys playing Gold ball—a sport usually played on a volleyball size court that consists of two teams with players who are blind or legally blind. Each team has three players on the court at a time (center and left and right wings). More information on Gold ball's rules and regulations can be found at the IBSA website. In high school, Cat participated in the Molly Renian program which influenced her academic choice of Political Science and interest in International Relations. Additionally, she is also considering obtaining her certification as an Orientation and Mobility



Instructor for the blind, hence her studies in Special Education. Cat was classified totally blind at birth; however, she regained some vision between the ages of two and twelve. Since then, Cat's vision has been decreasing in both of her eyes. Previously, according to Cat, she could see large print, but now she can only see lights and shadows.

Vontini is an African American twenty-eight-year-old adaptable Cosmetologist in training. As a child, Vontini enjoyed music and was heavily active in sports. She has been totally blind (ninety percent) since 2016. During that time, Vontini, began to lose her sight due to an unknown medical illness, which initiated with blurry vision. However, later, a medical professional realized her symptoms were due to cerebral sudo tumors—an increase in cranial pressure—the fluid which protects the brain and spinal cord was higher than normal, resulting in a damaged optic nerve. To alleviate the pressure within the cranial cavity, Vontini had corrective surgery: the insertion of a shunt within the brain. According to Vontini, medical professionals consider her totally blind (although, she has ten percent of sight) because of the significant amount of vision that has been loss.

### **Results and Analysis**

Earlier, I postulated there would be a negative correlation between the presence of family and the body image of women with a visual disability due to their close proximity, strong influence, and assistance with daily living. Results of the study indicated the hypothesis was not supported. That is, participants had a positive self-image which was influenced by their family, friends, and/or partners.

Directly after the demographic inquiries, the first question I asked respondents was whether they felt the media created an unrealistic body image for women.

Ava commented, “Yes.” She then elaborated, “The sizes of clothes are zero up to five. And that’s so not me. Or anyone in my life. You cannot be over a five.”

K commented,

I would say previously yes. I feel like now-a-days women are becoming ‘more mainstream’ if you will. But just like with disability, the media still can marginalize women to an extent. But I think image may be changing based on politicians... I think women are becoming more prominent.

Cat commented,

Yea, I would say so. Well, between magazine ads and kids toys like Barbie. That is a standard that nobody can live up to. If kid’s play with Barbie they will think that is normal (like size, shape, form).

Vontini commented,

Yes, I do. I think it is false advertisement. Vontini then elaborated that we {consumers} are bribed with things we cannot see in order to purchase items. Yet, the items are not what they seem from the advertisements. For example, advertisers show women in a beautiful dress, yet other women {average women} may feel disappointment if the dress does not fit the same way. So, it is all about marketing and promotions.

Of the six respondents, Ava, K, Cat, and Vontini stated media creates an unattainable body image for women. Similarly, participants from Fannon’s study “were unanimous in thinking that media and consumer culture profit from setting unrealistic, unattainable beauty standards that exploit women’s insecurities...” (Fannon, 2016).

Respondents from both studies also recognized that women are often scrutinized based on their body type, size, and shape. For example, respondents from Fannon's study use descriptors like "thin," "tone," and "fashionable" to describe the ideal feminine beauty.

In addition, Ava, MCW, Happy, and Vontini, like Armstrong, who are all African-American, will perceive media differently because of their culture, race and ethnicity. That is, black women have a limited viewpoint on their beauty. For example, "in all of the commercials I can think of, the black woman is never of a dark complexion, she never has her natural hair, natural has in a perm, it's usually that the woman is of the lighter side with naturally curly hair" (Awad et al, 2016). Participants from my study either acquiesced or challenged this viewpoint.

I next asked participants to describe their thoughts on African-American beauty.

Ava said, "We have our own thing to me, but the media still has the coke bottle shape. The coke bottle with the small waist, big butt, boobs, but some of us do not have that."

MCW said, "There is a lot of glamorization of men and women who live certain lifestyles." She further explains the media glamorizes men who sell drugs on the streets and women who get pregnant and later drop out of school.

Vontini said,

I say appreciate what we have. And then we see all that stuff on TV that we do not need. I feel like it manipulates our culture and our true naturality. We are naturally beautiful people inside out.

And so, we can observe the points-of-view the participants had on African-American beauty. Vontini re-enforces the idea of loving oneself despite society's standard of iconic beauty. Meanwhile, Ava and MCW discuss stereotypical bodies and behaviors associated with African-American men and women. Stereotypical behaviors include the mammy and jezebel as discussed by Winfrey-Harris (2015), Collins (2001), and Bogle (2000). This is also noted by participants in Awad et al (2016). One participant noted that although there are more representations of black women in media, they are objectified and sexualized more often in comparison to white women.

The third question I asked the women was whether they engaged in any type of media, and if they could remember the last advertisement they witnessed.

MCW recounted, "Yes. I heard about a little girl who was in elementary and she got beat up and she died."

Happy recounted,

Yes. Not that I can remember. But I do remember a video. It was a Cardi B video (I do not have anything against Cardi B), but I do not think I want a stripper saying 'I am the baddest' or 'I am sexy' or take my clothes off to prove a point to people. And I do not want to be naked in front of people to be told I am gorgeous.

Vontini recounted,

Yes...I do not listen to the radio. When I go on YouTube, I listen to some of the bloggers because it is hard to keep up with things going on these days. But I am more on the reality side of things. I can name on one hand the number of shows I watch—The Have and the Have Not'..." Vontini then explained the last advertisement she remembers which focused on the unobtainable body for women was the weight loss commercials. Vontini said while listening to the same

commercials, she thought about how it is false advertisement (the commercials contain actors to sell the product and they have not lost a lot of weight).

Vontini further stated that they {advertisers} should market exercise and healthy eating versus the easy way out.

We can grasp in the women's responses how media can be both informative and destructive simultaneously. For instance, women who often try to emulate fictitious beauty standards often shown in digitized photos. Happy's comment also re-enforces the jezebel stereotype and the ways images from the media past to present continuously control black women.

Following that, I asked the interviewees whether they had a positive or negative self-image, and who influences this thought process. All six interviewees answered that they had a positive self-image; however, their influencers differed. For Ava, Happy, K, and Cat, family influenced their positive self-image. Conversely, MCW influenced herself, while Vontini's partner contributed to hers. Hence, the closer the influencer is to home (parents and friends), the more positive on one's self-image; in contrast, the further out the influence (social media), the more likely it is a negative influence. Because of this, I am labeling the scope of focus for Ava, K, Happy, and Cat as their families, while MCW is herself and Vontini is her partner.

I then asked the respondents if a family member or friend ever mentioned their body size.

Happy mentioned, "No, because I was always small."

MCW mentioned, “Yes. I have people say I am still in good shape (athletic build).”

Cat mentioned, “In middle school, but middle schoolers are horrible. At the time it did bother me, but looking back it is not a big deal.”

Vontini mentioned,

Yes, as a child and even when I got older and even now. Now, I can take it. It does not happen as much because I am going to talk back. Growing up, I did not say anything. I used to let people run over top of me.

Of the six respondents, MCW mentioned others have spoken positively about her body size. Happy shared no one has regarded her body type because she has always remained small. However, Cat and Vontini commented someone (family or peer) had mentioned their body size at some point. Respondents demonstrated the results of various remarks one can receive about their body, whether positive or negative. Cat and Vontini, who both received negative comments, demonstrated how family and peers scrutinize one’s imperfections in relation to body size.

I asked participants ways, if any, society has influenced their thoughts on their body image.

K said,

I think I would say...yes obviously, society has its standards. But as I have grown up, and especially more recently, I would say I have had to shift my thinking in the sense that yes, ok, I am blind and I’m going to have to do things differently.

Cat said,

Well, I would say to some degree. Because if someone tells me my lipstick looks great then I am going to continue to use it. So, their opinions would matter if I am getting compliments...if I wear a certain top versus another one (just because I do not know how I am looking all the time).

Vontini said,

Unh-Unh...I would say my family did. Because everyone in my family was big. So, growing up, you are going to do what you see everyone doing around you. Even {if} you told 'oh do not do that,' but how are you going to tell your kids do not smoke when you are smoking around them? And then you wonder why they smoking. That was the same very reason.

Of the six participants, K, Cat, and Vontini comment on how society can influence one's self-image. For K, it is overcoming challenges and obstacles in societies that are designed for the able-bodied. Challenges include traveling to coffee shops and purchasing personal or household necessities. "Those who fit the social 'norm' can transition through entire days, weeks, and months having not to consider (for example, the physical) barriers that limit access to our environment" (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2017, p. 83). Cat, on the other hand, found messages from society on her appearance (clothes and cosmetics) useful due to her visual impairment. Similarly, participants in Awad et al (2016) also reported receiving societal messages on their appearance; however, the messages received were in relation to their achievements. For instance, one participant recounted their mother instructed them to "always look your best" because people base

opinions on appearances. Yet, if they did not look their best, people would think they were incapable of completing mundane tasks.

Participants from my study also reported receiving societal messages about their behavior. Often times, elders in our families tend to inform children, “Do as I say, not as I do.” For Vontini, these intolerable actions were smoking and overeating. Although elders instruct children to not indulge in undesirable behaviors, the warning goes unnoticed because we have the tendency to want to try what our elders prohibit.

I asked the women whether they felt depressed in any way about their body. Ava stated, “Yes.” She explained she felt uncomfortable due to her size and felt like others stared at her for unknown reasons.

Cat stated, “Occasionally, but nothing lasting.”

Vontini stated,

Oh, absolutely for years, since I was a child, I have been dealing with depression. I grew up in a lot of chaos, domestic violence, sex, and drugs...It took me a long time to get over the low self-esteem {as far as my body goes}. Like I said, I guess I had to grow up at some point in time and realize...like I said find strength within myself to love myself.

Of the participants, Ava, Cat, and Vontini shared that they have felt depressed about their body. Culture and its traditions can be conducive to (and resistant to) one’s self-image.

I asked the interviewees whether they had changed themselves because of someone in the media. All of the interviewees agreed they had not used body modifications (plastic surgery) or enhancements (cosmetics) in order to mirror a



celebrity. Ava further added the images are unattainable to achieve, and K said she is more focused on becoming a certified court reporter.

I asked the respondents did they compare their bodies to that of women in the media.

Ava commented, “No.”

MCW commented, “I never done that, even when I had sight, and I still do not. I am not trying to compete with those celebrity girls. Everybody cannot be Beyoncé. I am just trying to be me.”

K commented,

I don’t know if I really compare myself. I think sometimes I can identify with women in the media. For example, if I read a story, I find myself relating to something in the story or a concept or on the struggle, especially if it’s with a woman with a disability.

Happy commented, “NO.” She explained she does not compare herself because she cannot relate her personality to someone else. That is, others haven’t experienced the situations she has been exposed to (and vice versa).

Cat commented,

Occasionally, but then I would look at it more closely and think it is a ridiculous standard. Like when you see the models who are super skinny because they do not ever eat. That is not a standard that everyone can live up to. And it is not healthy.

Vontini commented,

Yea, I have, Queen Latifah. For a long time, I thought I was Cleo in Set it Off. But she's like the only one. Other than that, I have never really compared myself to anyone within the media.

Of the six respondents, Cat and Vontini shared that they have compared their body to images in the media. For Cat, the comparison was temporary; however, Vontini found herself emulating a character within a motion picture. The other respondents shared they did not compare their bodies to images in the media, instead referring to ideas of self-love and self-acceptance.

I asked the participants how their experiences differed from that of other groups.

Ava answered,

Some women are comfortable in their own skin and some are not. I know some who go to crazy measures, like starvation, to attain the body...people on the internet and in my personal life (like my sister). I don't know what you call it, when they stick their finger in their throat to vomit...when compared to her, I am not that extreme.

Happy answered,

Being that I am a person with a disability and African-American, I have to be strong because my ancestors were strong. And because I love myself too much... I see other cultures—Caucasians or Hispanics—I look at their bodies and because they are of different cultures, they have a different way of eating. I am from the south and I eat a lot of greasy foods. But it really does not matter about the skin tone as long as you love yourself.

K answered,

I definitely know the sense of disappointment and rejection based on disability. I've had several experiences in life where I've been told that something, I want to do would not be possible because of disability. I have had experiences where I don't disclose my disability ahead of time because I don't think it's relevant. I show up to whatever it is (job interview) and people are very surprised and out of their element. I've had other experiences where you come up against those proverbial walls and you can't change anyone's mind about the situation.

We can see how the participants' experiences diverged from other groups, which is also in accordance with crip theory. For example, K discussed the challenge of disclosing her visual disability to an employer prior to a meeting; the probability the employer will be bias towards people with disabilities. Similar to K, women with disabled bodies have also been excluded in the media. "Mintz (2002) a body that 'suffers,' (or, perhaps more accurately, a body perceived to suffer) may not inspire the kind of celebratory rhetoric bound up with the average westerner's commitment to instrumental self-discovery and feeling fulfilled (As stated in Fannon, 2016). To put it differently, fashion and cosmetic industries tend not to use disabled bodies promising to transform the body as an instrument of self-improvement. One participant from Fannon's study noted images in the media often exclude disabled bodies and the lack of representation is seen as deviating from what is "normal" or "attractive." The beauty of people with a disability are rarely recognized and are almost never portrayed as sexual. This ultimately draws a gap between the able-bodied and the non-able-bodied.

The last question I asked the women was whether they had any further comments or suggestions.

Ava suggested, “I just want people to be comfortable in their own skin and not apologize for what they look like and not let the media have such a heavy impact.”

Happy suggested, “just love yourself... Stop wanting to be like Cardi B and Nikki Minaj. They are not even positive role models and just be yourself.”

K suggested,

I feel like women can do...I do not want to say everything a man can do... but if there's a goal that you have in mind, and you know it's achievable for you to strive for that and to not let society or the media or to not let it become an impossibility.

## **CHAPTER VII**

### **CONCLUSION**

The previous chapter presented profiles of the participants and the results of the study with an analysis. The final chapter looks toward the limitations, conclusion, and final remarks.

This study's limitations include sample size, device malfunctions, a lack of prior research, and time constraints. Because of the small sample size, it was difficult to find significant trends and/or meaningful relationships which ultimately limited the scope of the results. Additionally, the lack of prior research on this topic makes it difficult to construct the literature review, which is the foundation for the research problem I sought to investigate. Twice there were equipment malfunctions: during the interview with MCW the recorder stopped recording which led to my paraphrasing her responses. Vontini's cell-phone also malfunctioned during the time of the interview and ultimately was rescheduled. Finally, because of the limited amount of time, I was unable to examine the participants' change in self-image over time. Despite the many limitations of this study, I was able to investigate my hypothesis and contribute to the literature in this field.

To sum up, the main purpose of this study has been to investigate the ways, if any, media outlets influence the self-image of women with a visual disability. In particular, media that depicts women with a "perfect" body. Looking back, we can see over the course of the nineteenth century, the beauty standards for women (from full

figured to an emaciated and bony appearance) and the mental/psychological damages media has caused. We can also note the lack of literature on this subject. In doing this research, I hope to contribute to the literature and refute any single-narratives and bring awareness.

In addition, the main themes discussed were the women's positive self-image, the interpretations/responses to questions, culture, race, and religion. The women's enriching responses on their lived experiences could relate and/or encourage other women who are blind or visually impaired. By using semi-structured interviews with a small sample size, the data collected was more so organic. In other words, this approach granted me the flexibility to adapt to the quality of information that was collected. The women's similar and different lived experiences made for a unique way to find common themes. It would be interesting to investigate this study for six months to a year and analyze participants responses for similarities and differences due to life's constant shifts and changes. I also wonder would women's responses change if religion became a theme to be analyzed. And so, it would be interesting to expand this study into a doctoral dissertation.

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**APPENDIX A**  
**IMAGES FROM TEXT**



1900s – 1910s Gibson Girls



1920s – The Flappers



1930 – 1940 Fashion and War Time

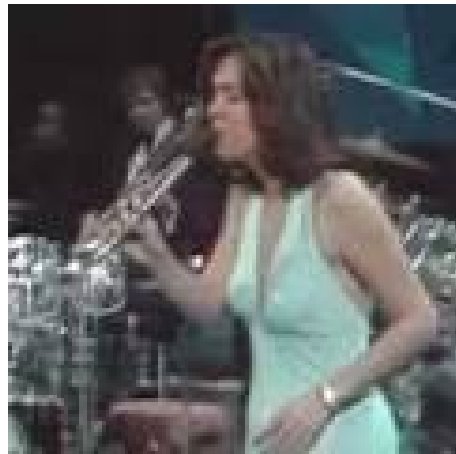
Lena Horne



1950s Post War  
Marilyn Monroe and Barbie



1960s Twiggy



1970s – Thin is In  
Karen Carpenter



1980s Supermodels and Hardbodies





1990s – Heroin Chic and Baywatch

**APPENDIX B**

**CHAPTER III FEMININE BEAUTY IDEALS CHART**

Domain	Theme	Illustrative	N = 233
Hair	General	--	62
	Versatility	“It’s just, our hair has such variety. And other cultures, for the most part, is the same...”	18
	Sacrifice	“So much of why black women are not in the gym, or like maybe fitness level isn’t has high like other groups is because of their hair. Its either, do you pay for the gym membership or do you pay to get your hair done?”	19
	Personality	“I feel like for some women that go natural, at least for me, I always hear people say I have arrived, but it’s not really I have arrived, it is one of those things where I’m finally at the point I can let go of the relaxer and how my hair is supposed to be and I’m finally embracing how I want my hair to	12

		be.”	
s	Ignorance/Microaggressions	“I feel there’s this fascination outside of the black community, like if one day your hair is natural, and the next you got it relax, and then people are like, ‘Oh my God, that’s amazing, can I touch it?’ And...it makes me like, think about hair more than I probably would otherwise.”	22
	Total	--	233

**APPENDIX C**  
**BODY IMAGE SURVEY**

Demographics

1. Which category includes your age?

18—20

21—29

30—39

40—49

50—59

2. What is your race/ethnicity?

a. Black/African American

b. White/Caucasian

c. Native American/American Indian

d. Latino/Hispanic

e. Asian/Pacific Islander

f. Middle Eastern

g. Other (Please specify)

3. What is your vision status (i.e. blind, legally blind, etc.)?

4. How long have you been \_\_\_ (i.e. blind, legally blind etc.)?

5. What is your marital status?

Married

Widowed

Divorced

Separated

Never married

6. What is the highest level of school you have completed or you have received?

High school or equivalent (GED)

Some college but no degree

Associate degree

Bachelor degree

Graduate degree

Doctoral degree

### **Media and Body Image**

Do you feel the media creates an unattainable body image for women? Can you tell me more about this? Do you know any of these women personally who have been influenced?

Can you describe a few of your thoughts on African American beauty?

Do you watch (or listen to) media (i.e. television, music, magazines, et.)?

- In watching (or listening to) \_\_, have you seen (or heard) advertisements focused on women's "ideal" body, whether explicitly or implicitly?

- What do you remember about the advertisement?
- How did it make you feel?
- Do you think the advertisement influences you in anyway (i.e. body image)?

Do you think you generally have a positive or negative sense of body image?

- Who or what influences this sense of body image?
- Are others' opinions of your physical appearance important to you?

Growing up, has a family member/friend ever mentioned your body size?

- How did this make you feel?
- How old were you?
- What did they say?
- How often did they mention it?

How has society influence your thoughts on your body image?

Have you ever felt depressed or upset in anyway about your body?

- Can you tell me more about this experience and your feelings?

Do you ever compare yourself to other women within the media?

- If yes, which media has the most influence on you (i.e. magazines, film/television, internet, etc.)?
- Who/What influences the comparisons in your immediate circle?

Have you ever changed yourself because of someone in the media?

- Who or what influenced this change?
- What did you change about yourself (i.e. hair, clothes, body size)?  
What steps did you take to enact this change? I.e. diet, exercise, makeup
- How did you feel after this change? More like yourself or less like yourself? Happier/more fulfilled or less fulfilled?
- Were you committed to this change or did you revert back to how you were before?
- How does this consistency/non-consistency make you feel?

How do you feel your personal experiences differ from that of other groups?

Is there anything more you would like to add?