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The effect(s) of the visual media upon female body image.

Jessica Mary Elsie. Cummings

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THE EFFECT(S) OF THE VISUAL MEDIA UPON FEMALE BODY IMAGE

By
Jessica M.E. Cummings

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
Through the Department of Sociology and Anthropology
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts
at the University of Windsor.

Windsor, Ontario, Canada
1998

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ABSTRACT

The visual media’s impact upon body image has only recently become an area of study. Research in this area has focused mainly on sports and its emphasis on the female body ideal, and the impact of female body image upon the development of eating disorders. The main purpose of this study was to explore women’s attitudes and opinions concerning the effects of the visual media’s presentations of the ideal female body size. The study was designed using a social constructionist perspective focused on how four of the theoretical assumptions of symbolic interactionism, and central to social constructionism, can help in understanding women’s interpretation of the ideal image presented in the media, and what they do or do not do to emulate this image. Focus groups were used to explore women’s opinions and ideas concerning the visual media’s presentation of the ideal female body. Forty fourth year female students, from the University of Guelph, participated in seven focus groups. It was found that the participants believed that the visual media presentation of the ideal female body image not only impacts upon women’s perceptions of their own body, but also the way they view others. Many participants argued that one's first impression of others is based solely upon appearance. Value is placed upon a person, based upon appearance, and it is this value which impacts many areas of an individual's life, such as employment and relationships. This value is determined by the visual media. It is the media which defines what is ideal or beautiful, good-looking, or average. The need to attain the ideal female body, as presented by the visual media, is an all-consuming goal for many women, and can be a
source of great sadness and frustration when they are unable to attain the ideal look. There were a number of participants who stated that they had gone to the extreme of anorexia and/or bulimia in order to attain the desired image. The participants believed that it was through their university courses that they developed an awareness and an understanding of the effect(s) of the visual media upon women's desire to achieve the ideal image. Although their courses made them more critical and aware, many participants still believed they were affected by the media image.
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To my husband
for his unfailing belief in me,
and my family for their unconditional support.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Hell is having to show up fat when the whole country knows you are supposed to be thin. Obesity is considered a sin by society. One of the root causes of women’s fear of being overweight is society’s negative views of obesity. This is especially true for obese women. Susan Bordo (1993), in her book about why the ideal female body is thin, chose the title *Unbearable Weight* to express society’s unwilling acceptance of those bodies that are deemed clumsy, gross, and “lumbering”. It is important to note that the ideal is a white, Anglo-Saxon female. This societal disgust of the “unacceptable” has existed for centuries, and has been used to discriminate against and control people of a particular gender, race, and class.

We learn to value slenderness at a young age. Rodin et al. have shown that children clearly prefer lean bodies and reject “chubby” or obese ones (Rodin et al. 1984). It has been suggested that children are even less accepting of overweight individuals than of children with a variety of handicaps (Goodman et al. 1961; 1963). The pursuit of attractiveness and the importance placed upon professional success in North American society leads many young women to feel pressured to attain the ideal female body. This pressure forces many young women to resort to starvation diets or cycles of binging and purging to compensate for feelings of failure and body dissatisfaction (Dyer & Tiggemann 1996). This concern with weight extends beyond North America. Obesity was considered so dreadful in the early 1900’s in Sweden that a tax was levied on individuals based on the
number of pounds they were overweight (Rodin et.al. 1984).

This need to attain or maintain an ideal shape and size is neither new nor completely a result of media attention. The visual media is only one way, a “modern” way, of conveying information and exerting influence over what society perceives as the ideal female body. However, women have focused upon the perceived ideal shape and size for many years. Rodin et.al. (1984) raise the possibility that dieting has replaced the corset. Rodin et.al. (1984) and Brownmiller (1984) state that once women were finally freed of corsets, girdles, and stiff bras, internal constraints may have taken the place of the external constraints, in compliance with the belief that the female body is deficient and in need of reshaping. Rodin et.al. (1984) believe that the culture’s beauty ideal of “thinness equating attractiveness” prescribes a body weight that for most women is unrealistically low due to biological factors. This need to be thin is derived from women’s internalization of society’s message that they should care a great deal about how they look. Today the visual media depicts an ideal female body that is tall, thin, healthy, and beautiful. These media images portray a look that is the societal ideal, yet attainable only if women are willing to work hard enough to “cultivate” the body ideal.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to explore women’s attitudes concerning the media and its presentation of the ideal female body size and weight. I focused on women’s interpretation of the visual media’s presentation of an ideal female body image, and what women do or do not do in order to emulate or achieve this female body image. Focus groups with forty female university students from the University of Guelph were used to
explore the ideas and attitudes of women concerning the ideal female body and its presentation in the visual media.
CHAPTER 2
THEORY

This study is set within a symbolic interactionist framework using the work of Berger & Luckmann (1966), Blumer (1969) and Thomas (1928) to explore how women interpret and ascribe meaning to the visual images of an ideal female body presented in the media. Social constructionism, as explained by Berger and Luckmann in The Social Construction of Reality, A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge (1966), was used to help shape the central questions and guide the analysis for this study.

Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue that “reality” is not fixed from one moment to the next, rather it is constructed and modified on an on-going basis. Berger and Luckmann use the phrase social construction of reality to mean “the process by which individuals creatively shape reality through social interaction” (1966). Social interaction then is the process by which each individual negotiates what is real to them and “reality” thus has no concrete, objective, or essential nature. Although “reality” is fluid, constructed, and mutable, it is experienced by the individual as concrete, fixed, and immutable. It is through language that individuals define and internalize social reality. It is this internalization, Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue, that enables an individual to understand others and to ascribe meaning to the world.

A social constructionist perspective is used in this study to examine how women interpret the visual media portrayal of the ideal female body and what influence this media-constructed ideal has on them. Using the social constructionist perspective, we see that
the image of an ideal female body is socially constructed and mutable. However, this image is not experienced as a mere construction, but as a real, immutable female body. Using a social constructionist perspective, it is possible to observe how women define the ideal female body, and whether they perceive the ideal female body depicted by the media as one which should be striven for and which is attainable.

Besides social constructionism, four theoretical assumptions from symbolic interactionism were used in this study. I chose these because I believed they best helped to explain the influence of the visual media on women’s perception of the ideal body size and shape. The first assumption is “if men [or women] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Collins 1988, p. 265). Referred to as the Thomas’ Theorem, this assumption can be applied to the interpretation of media images and their impact upon women’s idea of the ideal body size. If women define the female body image, depicted by the media, as realistic, desirable and attainable, then this image is what they will use as the standard against which they judge themselves. The defining of the visual image as real can be seen in the response to the September 1994 issue of Mirabelle. The cover read “Who is the face of America” and depicted a computer generated image of a woman. The magazine intended this to be a generic image of the American woman. Although Mirabelle put a disclaimer in the issue stating that the cover depicted a computer generated image, a number of leading modelling agencies called requesting the name of the woman whose face was used for the cover (Globe & Mail, 1995). This demonstrates Thomas’ Theorem that if a situation is defined as real, in this case the “woman” on the magazine cover, then its consequences are real, i.e. the requests for the woman’s name by the modelling agencies. Taking this assumption to the level of the general public, there is the potential
that women may judge their appearance relative to Mirabelle's computer generated image.

The second theoretical assumption comes from Berger and Luckmann's statement that language is necessary to define and internalize social reality. Language is the vehicle through which the individual and the social world interact. It is through language, according to George Herbert Mead, that children are able to understand and internalize the culture of the society in which they live (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Language is used by society to give meaning to everything within the world, because language provides us with a window by which to see into our culture. In Ways of Seeing, Berger (1980) brings another perspective to language. Through visual images individuals internalize thousands of messages daily, both consciously and subconsciously. These messages are present throughout individuals' daily lives, providing viewers with insight into their culture. Berger states that these advertising images are not merely an assembly of competing messages, but are a language in themselves (1980, p. 130-131). It is through this visual language that the ideal female weight and size are described. The question for this study was how the media uses language to define this ideal, and what kind of language women use to describe themselves.

The third theoretical assumption is articulated by Blumer in Symbolic Interactionism (1969). It asserts that since everything that acts or impacts upon humans must have meaning, people ascribe meanings to things that act or impact upon them (Blumer 1969, p. 2). What Blumer means in this statement is that meanings are not inherent in things in the world, therefore, people must ascribe meanings to things for them to take on an essence of reality. This identifies meanings that women ascribe to the images presented by the visual media as an important area to elaborate in research on how media images
affect women's self perceptions. Rosalind Coward (1985) states that the meaning women
ascribe to media images is "perfection", and the media promises women that they too can
achieve such "perfection" if only they take their bodies in hand. They are promised ideal
legs, stomach, hair, home, and relationships if only they achieve personal "perfection"
(Coward 1985, p. 13). These ideals are held out to women as a fantasy image which is
presented to them in the monthly photographic image (Coward 1985). However, the
question that I examined was whether women view the visual image as ideal, or whether
through discussion and critical thought women do not view this image as the ideal.

The fourth theoretical assumption, also from Blumer, is that meaning-making is a
collective act (Blumer 1969, p.4). The way individuals interact with each other with respect
to body size and in reference to their real bodies relative to bodies in the media determines
the meaning that is associated with media and personal body sizes.

Social constructionism argues that "reality" is not fixed from one moment to the next,
rather each individual has considerable ability in shaping what happens in everyday life
from moment to moment. It is through social interaction that an individual negotiates reality
in everyday life, and it is through language that individuals are able to define and
internalize social reality. This study examined whether individuals simply accept the image
presented by the visual media as real or whether they actively engage in negotiating its
meaning and potentially discard this image, and form their own. The central questions for
this study are drawn from the four theoretical assumptions:

1- W.I. Thomas' Theorem (1928) which states that situations that are defined as real
are real in their consequences.

2- Language is necessary to define and internalize social reality (Berger &
3- Blumer’s premise that people ascribe meanings to things that act or impact upon them.

4- Blumer’s premise that the way individuals interact with others determines the meaning that is associated with a specific object or “role”.

These four assumptions also helped explain the opinions and ideas expressed by the participants. This study provided new information and research to this area of study by demonstrating the relevance of these four specific theoretical elements to how women interpret the visual media’s effect(s) upon female body image.
CHAPTER 3
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The visual media's impact upon body image has only recently become an area of study. Research in this area has been done mainly by physiologists and psychologists, focusing on fitness and its emphasis on female body ideal, and the impact of female body image upon the development of eating disorders. An examination of the literature which discusses women, their bodies, and how they relate to and interpret their bodies is important to the understanding of what role the female body has played in determining a woman's sense of happiness, her self-esteem, and her role in society. The value and importance society places upon the ideal female body impacts upon women's relationships and attitudes towards their own bodies every day of their lives.

The literature presented in this review is divided into eight categories:
1) presentation of the female form; 2) language of visual media; 3) influence on women; 4) attaining the ideal body; 5) starting young; 6) women's mental health; 7) focus on thinness; 8) class and race.

Media Presentation of the Female Form

In Ways of Seeing, John Berger (1980) discusses how women's bodies have been presented in art, advertisement, and other forms of visual media, using specific illustrations of media images. The media portrays a female image that is glamorous, beautiful, and
perfect, according to Berger. Berger (1980) argues that to attain the ideal female form is to be envied by others, and to achieve a certain form of power. This power, according to Berger, is happiness. Berger (1980) states that the media presents this female image as idyllic and the embodiment of pure perfection. One can neither be happy nor perfect if one does not attain this image.

Several studies (Fulwood et.al. 1981; Hesse-Biber et.al. 1987; Myers & Biocca 1992; Silverstein et.al. 1986) discuss the dramatic “downshift” in ideal size, especially in recent decades. The attention to thinness in the media parallels that of the fashion industry and movies (Banner 1986; Garner et.al. 1980; Silverstein et.al. 1986). Fashion models and movie stars depict idyllic beauties who are taller and more slender than the average female body shape. If the average shape is depicted, then it is done in a negative manner. Gray (1993) demonstrates, in her study on women’s body image, that this depiction of an increasingly thin body ideal has a negative impact upon women’s perception of the ideal body. Gray (1993) also concludes that this “cult of thinness” leads to increased numbers of women suffering from eating disorders.

Several writers observe that the media frequently depicts adolescent, immature bodies as those of mature women (Coward 1985; Daley 1978; Gray 1993; Wolf 1991). Coward (1985) argues that the value that society places upon the immature image is confirmed by such practices as shaving under the arms and shaving the legs in order to render the female body sexually attractive, and to remove any evidence that the woman has reached maturity. The presentation of this immature female ideal is so common Berger (1980) argues, that we scarcely notice its impact upon us. Not only are exceptionally slim, adolescent forms presented as adult women, but Kaufman (1980), in
his analysis of 600 minutes of videotape found that they were often presented as remaining thin despite constant snacking and unbalanced meals. Kaufman concludes that viewers often perceive the images depicted by the visual media to represent social reality when they actually represent an image which is unattainable for most individuals.

This image of the body is also promoted by the fashion industry. In the theoretical work by Berger (1980) and Coward (1985) they argue that the aim of the fashion industry is to present an annual good look which is the “new” acceptable “beauty”. This “new” look is the one fundamental point of agreement in fashion advertising and glamour photography. There is a definite female outline which is considered the cultural ideal in North America. According to Coward (1985) and the editors of Mirabelle (1994) and Options (1982) magazines the “perfect” female body is between five foot five and five foot eight, long-legged, tanned, and vivacious looking, without a spare inch of flesh anywhere on her body, except her breasts (Fallon et.al. 1994; Gray 1993).

Myers and Biocca’s (1992) research also examined the presentation of the ideal female form in the modeling industry. The modeling industry presents an image of women’s curvaceousness which fluctuates from season to season; however, according to several researchers, the weights of these models are consistently well below the average American woman (Gamer et. al. 1980: Myers & Biocca 1992; Wolf 1991). A thinner than average body ideal is also promoted by insurance companies’ weight and health standards, according to Myers and Biocca (1992). Individuals who do not fit into these standards are often penalized financially by paying higher premiums. As well, many individuals follow these standards as a guide for determining their appropriate weight, thus leading many to become underweight and run greater risks of developing health problems.
(Myers & Biocca, 1992).

Tan (1979) concludes, from his research, that the fashion and modeling industry photograph only women who fit the visual ideal. This visually ideal female is presented as healthy, successful, beautiful, and always in control. Gamer et al. (1980) and Kaufman (1980) further conclude that their research showed that words such as “tall”, “slender”, “beautiful”, and “in control” have become synonymous with the socially ideal body. However, Banner (1986), concludes in his research, and Orbach (1978), argues in her theoretical work, that as these positive stereotypes of the ideal woman are being formed by the visual media, negative stereotypes of poor health and a lack of control have become associated with obesity. Together, these positive and negative stereotypes play an important role in the social formation of the ideal body. This ideal body is internalized by young women and becomes a part of their struggle to transform themselves into this internalized body image.

**Language of Visual Media**

According to Berger, advertising images are not merely an assembly of competing messages, but a language in themselves (1980, p. 129-131). In Berger and Luckmann's 1996 publication, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, they argue that language is necessary to define and internalize social reality. The social reality of the ideal female body requires a language. This is the language of advertising, which gives strength to the unconscious message presented (Berger 1980). This “war” on fat and flesh is conducted in a highly emotional language which constructs the meanings, and emotions that surround body image (Coward 1985; Fallon et al. 1994;
Orbach 1978). Coward (1985) argues that words used to describe an average female body shape - "plump", "well-rounded", "full-figured", and "shapely" - all sound like euphemisms for fat and carry negative connotations (p. 43). This language associated with visual media reinforces its messages of "beauty", as slender and desirable, and "average" as fat and undesirable.

**Influence on Women**

Several studies examine how media images influence women's interpretation of the ideal body size (Banner 1986; Boskind-Lodahl 1976; Davis 1991; Hesse-Biber et. al. 1987; Myers & Biocca 1992). Gray's multivariate analysis shows that the media is a major influence in the formation and acceptance of the ideal of thinness. Hesse-Biber et. al. (1987) and Garner et. al. (1980) further argue that weight is the most important and predominant aspect of body image, with the body ideal being related to thinness.

Rosalind Coward (1985), in *Female Desires*, wrote a collection of essays based upon information gathered from friends, family, and personal observations, aimed at understanding how representation of the female body in the media affects women's everyday lives. Philip Myers and Frank Biocca (1992) study the effect of television advertising and programming on body image distortions in young women. In their study, Myers and Biocca examined the impact of the media's emphasis upon a thin ideal body image on women and women's estimations of their own body size. As well, Myers and Biocca (1992) explored the indirect effect this media ideal may have had on increases in anorexia nervosa and bulimia. Although their findings neither proved nor disproved a link between media and increases in eating disorders, they did show that when the actual or
"real" body size of the individual deviates from the visual media's ideal female body image the individual develops a false perception of their own body image. This study was important because it demonstrated that after only 30 minutes of television an individual's perception of self and ideal were affected for a short period of time.

Tan (1979), in his research on how advertisements influence role expectations in female adolescents, observes that the focus of research on mass media has moved away from its effects on attitudes and behaviors towards its role as "cultivators" of audience perception of social reality. Media sets social norms and values including what women perceive as the ideal body. For many women the female body depicted in the visual media is the ideal of female beauty. This ideal beauty is the reality women try to achieve through dieting, exercising, and in some extreme cases starvation (Tan 1979).

John Berger (1980) and Rosalind Coward (1985) address how the ideal image prevents women from looking at themselves as beautiful, seeing themselves as lacking in some way. Berger argues, that our interpretation of these visual images is affected by what we know or what we believe to be real. Berger's argument is similar to the Thomas Theorem which states that situations that are defined as real are real in their consequences. So, for example, if we believe that the women depicted by the visual media represent the desirable and attainable size and shape of women, then we will believe that all women must look like these women in order to be considered average; anything else would be deviant.

This image of "beauty" is the goal for many women who spend hours in the gym sweating and sculpting their bodies in order to fit this culturally accepted ideal. If a woman is unable to get the "female problem areas", such as stomach, thighs, arms, and buttocks
under control then she can always resort to cosmetic surgery, according to Wolf (1991). This need to obtain the ideal image is extremely important to women, because the visual media tells women that a main way to achieve happiness or pleasure is to achieve the ideal body image.

Berger (1980) argues that individuals are confronted daily with hundreds of advertising images, and that no other kind of image confronts us so frequently. Berger (1980) states that though, in the long term, only some individuals remember these messages, everyone briefly takes them in. Several authors argue that the visual media is a continuous flow of messages, which present attitudes towards the ideal female image or shape that are consciously or subconsciously absorbed (Berger 1980; Myers & Biocca 1992; Tan 1979). Berger (1980) argues, that it is not the image that is most important, but the impact that the image has upon what the individual believes or knows. Rockett and Mc minced’s (1990) research supports Berger’s (1980) argument that the media is a major force in the formation and acceptance of the female ideal. Rockett and McMin (1990) found in their study that the average individual is exposed to 1600 advertisements per day. They concluded that the majority of these advertisements promote the notion that "... if you are slim, you will also be beautiful and sexually desirable" (Rockett & McMin 1990, p. 278).

Several researchers demonstrated that there may be a cumulative effect of all these messages upon an individual's self-perception (Atkin 1977; Gerbner & Gross 1976; Myers & Biocca 1992; Tan 1979). Myers and Biocca (1992) show in their research that these body image messages are likely to increase the number of young women developing eating disorders in their struggle to attain the "beauty" ideal.
Attaining the Ideal Body

Coward (1985) discusses the recent development of the concept of the “healthy body” in addition to the “beautiful body”. The “beautiful body” is now the “beautiful healthy body” thus reinforcing this image as ideal. Since the 1980s the beautiful body has become synonymous with the healthy body. Evidence of this shift to health and fitness by the American population was apparent in the early 1980s with women’s magazines, such as Options (1982), running feature stories addressing the importance of health. Women were no longer expected to follow “faddish” diets, such as the grapefruit diet, as the way to transform a woman’s appearance with the new shift in focus to health. Women were unable to make excuses about their bodies, because through constant fitness, the magazines argue, anyone could achieve the ideal body. A woman simply needed to take her body in hand, and develop new attitudes and habits which would lead to a healthy body (Fallon et.al. 194; Orbach 1987). This new level of fitness would be achieved by following the body maintenance plans established by such fitness gurus as Jane Fonda and Richard Simmons. During the 1980s, Jane Fonda and others like her, were able to make the female body a site of particular concern for health and fitness professionals, where areas that were flabby, round, and dimpled became the obsession of the new healthy body. Women were and are expected to become lean and muscular, through constant exercise, and the ideal body was achievable by all who worked hard enough. This is the message which the visual media constantly promotes (Coward 1985; Fallon et.al. 1994).
Exercise.

Berger (1980) argues that media advertisers promise their viewers that they can transform themselves to look like the images depicted in advertisements by showing the audience people who have been transformed. The “spectator-buyer” is meant to envision herself transformed into the glamour image. This is often done, for example, in “info-mercials” selling new exercise equipment. These “info-mercials” depict individuals who were lazy and overweight before buying a new and innovative exercise machine, but in a matter of a few weeks their lives have been completely changed because they bought the exercise machine. These individuals are now fit, healthy, and beautiful. These “info-mercials” promise the viewer that they too can easily achieve the ideal body they have always wanted by simply purchasing the new exercise machine.

Cosmetic surgery.

Coward (1985) argues that women’s beauty books, magazines, and advice columns regularly give information concerning cosmetic surgery, presenting the experience with light hearted comments and funny asides (p. 40). As Judith Long Laws (1977) wrote in Women as Objects, women have always used surgery to fit into the ideal image and this

... reminds one of the familiar image of Cinderella’s stepsisters industriously lopping off their toes and heels so as to fit into the glass slipper... - when of course it was never intended for them anyway (p. 342).

In the United States, there are 1-800 numbers where women can phone to receive information concerning the latest techniques in cosmetic surgery and a price listing for the cost of such procedures. Women are never told that these phone numbers are funded by large advertising corporations since this could possibly affect their decision (Wolf 1991).
Kathy Davis (1995), in her study on the reshaping of the female body and the dilemma of cosmetic surgery, examined data drawn from interviews with 30 Dutch women who had breast augmentation surgery, and a longitudinal study of 12 women before and after surgery. The women, Davis (1995) found, wanted "normality" rather than "beauty". The participants felt they were "lacking" in some way and their desire for cosmetic surgery was not to become more beautiful, but rather to become "just like everybody else". Davis concluded that cosmetic surgery is now viewed as a normal intervention for essentially normal bodies, rather than its earlier role as a means to repair bodily deficiencies. Cosmetic surgery is a new method by which women, usually after exhaustive efforts at dieting and exercise, can manage their appearance through "cultivating" the body. However, there are some women who feel that it is the only means by which they can achieve their goal of perfection.

The effect of media images upon women has been presented in several popular television shows. On December 8, 1995 Barbara Walters interviewed Cindy Jackson, a young woman in her late twenties, to discuss her fascination with "Barbie". Ms. Jackson has undergone 27 plastic surgeries to transform her body to look like "Barbie", and, she claims, she still is not finished. It is through her experiences with plastic surgery that Ms. Jackson is self-employed as a plastic surgery consultant in England, although she has no medical training. Ms. Jackson believes that "life rewards you if you have the right look", and for her this look is "Barbie". Ms Jackson is not the only woman in our culture who has undergone multiple operations to look like the Western culture's idea of perfection - "Barbie", according to Barbara Walters ("20/20", Dec. 1995). In a 1995 episode of "Geraldo" six women appeared to discuss their experiences with plastic surgery and their
desire to look like “Barbie”.

**Dieting.**

The visual media presents the message that the female beauty ideal is attainable for all women who strive to achieve it. Wolf (1991) notes that the visual media never states that only 5% of the female population can achieve this beauty ideal without resorting to such extreme measures as anorexia or plastic surgery. The consistent thin image leaves women with little choice but to accept the one body shape and size as ideal and attain it, or to risk going against the cultural ideal (Gray 1993; Myers & Biocca 1992; Tan 1979).

Sharlene Hesse-Biber (1996), in her book *Am I Thin Enough Yet?*, relates women’s drive for thinness, and the extraordinary lengths that women are willing to go in order to attain the thin ideal, to the ritualistic and obsessive behaviors found among cult members. Hesse-Biber (1996) argues that the eating habits many women engage in are similar to the behaviors associated with culthood. Hesse-Biber states that there is an intensive day to day behavior that the pursuit of thinness demands. It was through her extensive interview with a woman named Anna, a former member of a religious cult, that helped her see the parallels between cult behavior and the separate reality women create to achieve the ideal image. Hesse-Biber (1996) argued that women practice body rituals to the extent that they create a separate reality where they are willing to sacrifice their bodies and minds to attain their goal. Hesse-Biber states that all aspects of society undermine young women’s self-confidence, especially families, schools, popular cultures, and the health and fitness industry, as they learn that thinness is equated to beauty and that a woman’s body size is more important than her brain in their view. Hesse-Biber further argues that current
standards of femininity often lead women to engage in eating habits that are similar to cult behavior.

**Starting Young**

Individuals are socialized to accept the societal ideal through family, peers, school, and the media. Every aspect of society affects an individual's interpretation and attitude towards the ideal female body. The impact of the ideal image is seen not only in adult women, but also in teenagers. Geraldine Dyer and Marika Tiggemann (1996) found that the need to attain the ideal body size affected even young girls and was not simply a problem faced by adult women. In their study, girls at a private, single-sex school nominated a thinner ideal figure and displayed more eating disorder patterns than their counterparts at a private, co-educational school. Dyer and Tiggemann (1996) state that although the girls did not differ in role concerns, these had differential impact on the prediction of the ideal figure. In particular, the importance placed on professional success predicted the choice of ideal figure for the single sex, but not for the co-educational school. It was concluded that what motivates the wish for thinness differed between the schools. The need to attain the ideal body leads many young women to resort to starvation diets or cycles of binging and purging to compensate for feelings of failure and body dissatisfaction (Silverstein & Perdue 1988). Streigel-Moore et.al. (1991) found that it is the environments which emphasize more traditional roles for women that result in a higher prevalence of eating disorders in the pursuit of attractiveness or alternately, highly competitive environments might foster not only academic competition but also competition regarding the achievement of a thin body.
Alan King (1996), director of Queen's University Social Program Evaluation Group, has recently completed a World Health organization study. In this study, King found that stress from peer pressures, homes, and schools was a leading cause of headaches, stomach aches, and insomnia among teen girls. King (1996) found that girls aged 11, 13, and 15 are dealing with their stress through high-risk behavior, such as drinking, smoking, and dieting. King states that the girls are "expected to do more than they used to ... it's only in the last few years that that's been internalized by girls who feel they have to be thin and beautiful." King (1996) found that the stresses on girls are particularly severe during the early teen years, but appear to stabilize in the later teen years as they begin to get a sense of who they are and where they are going.

**Women's Mental Health**

Several researchers have found a connection between concerns with thinness and mental health. J. Ogden and C. Evans (1996), in their research on the effects of being weighed on mood, self-esteem, and body images, and Susan Bordo (1989), in her application of Foucauldian analysis to the representation of women's bodies state that body dissatisfaction is often expressed by the individual through discrepancies between perceived and desired body size, and with restricted food intake. Ogden and Evans (1996), and Silberstein et.al. (1987) further conclude that women's failure to match the internalized ideal self with the perceived self is at the core of body dissatisfaction and most likely prompts self-criticism and damages self-esteem. Bordo (1989) writes that the female body is a medium for culture, and is depicted by the media (Ogden & Evans 1996). It is the media's depiction of the stereotypical female body which Ogden and Evans (1996)
conclude creates and perpetuates the association of thinness and positive attributes, such as a sense of control, success, and attractiveness. The media is considered responsible for the association between fatness and negative attitudes of self-indulgence, lethargy, and slovenliness. Ogden and Evans (1966) further find that social norms of thinness may act by increasing the discrepancy between perceived and ideal body size, thereby contributing towards body dissatisfaction and resulting behaviors such as dieting aimed at reducing the gap. Bordo (1989) argues that women are spending more time on the management and discipline of their bodies, through the exacting and “normalizing” disciplines of diet, make-up, and dress.

Rodin et.al. (1984) write that in regards to women’s relationship to their own weight, the results are striking. Women want to be thinner than they think men want them to be, and even their estimate of what men want is significantly lower than men’s actual preferences. Wooley’s (1980; cited in Rodin et.al. 1984) suggests some reasons why weight control has become such an important metaphor in so many women’s lives. The challenge is sufficiently difficult that it commands respect and these effects are visible and highly valued. Indeed, it is the high chances of failure, and the subsequent attribution of personal shortcomings that may reinforce its importance. Rodin et.al. (1984) further argue that one of the basic underlying concerns women have with their weight is that physical appearance matters in society. Society endows attractive people with virtually every character trait perceived as desirable.

**Focus on Thinness**

In *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* Susan Bordo
(1993) develops an explanation of why the ideal female body is thin using mind/body dualism. Bordo states that women are associated with the body and men with the mind, and argues that this association is depicted and reinforced in advertisement and popular media. According to Bordo (1993), the body is depicted as a commodity. Advertising is used to dictate the ways in which the consumer can improve the imperfections of the body. The body is represented as an object which can easily be remolded or reshaped through dieting, consumer products, and surgery.

Susan Bordo (1989), in her application of Foucauldian analysis to the representation of women bodies, writes that society’s preoccupation with women’s appearance, may function as a “backlash” to reassert traditional gender roles and prevent shifts in power-relations. Rodin et.al.’s (1984) argument follows the same line saying attractiveness is especially important for women, since society has always based men’s value upon their success in business and their economic wealth, where as women have only been valued for their physical beauty. It is women’s beauty, Rodin et.al.(1984) argue, which enables women to gain access to a man’s resources. Conversely, men benefit from marrying a beautiful woman, though a woman’s status is not affected by marrying an attractive man.

According to Bordo (1989) the advent of movies and television saw a change in the rules of femininity. Femininity “rules” were presented more and more through standardized visual images depicted by the media. As a result, femininity itself largely became a matter of constructing the appropriate surface presentation of the self. Individuals learn what femininity is through the media images, which tell us what clothes, body shape, facial expression, movements, and behavior are required.

Bordo connects women’s appearance rules to their nurturant roles. These roles
require a woman to learn to feed others, not herself, and to believe that any desire for self-nurturance and self-feeding is greedy and excessive. She suggests that despite changes in gender roles, young women today are still being taught such a construction of the self. Female hunger, Bordo (1989) writes, is always depicted as needful of containment and control, and female eating is seen as a furtive, shameful, illicit act. However, food is not the real issue Bordo states, but the control of female appetite, for food is merely the most expressive of the general rules governing the construction of femininity; that female hunger be contained, and the public space that women be allowed to take up be limited. On the body of the anorexic woman, Bordo (1989) states, such rules are “expressively” demonstrated.

Bordo (1989) writes that women are told by media and societal values that they must reconstruct femininity to embody the “masculine” values which the public work arena values, but not to forget their pursuit of slenderness or their denial of appetite. The equivalence of slenderness and power is represented not only by the superwoman of television, movies, and advertisements in popular fashion magazines, diet books, and weight-training publications, but also by the anorexic and bulimic woman, according to Bordo.

In Unbearable Weight, Bordo (1993) argues that anorexia and bulimia are the means by which an individual can not only critique the “normalizing practices” of femininity, but also see the anguish and stress society’s demand for slenderness forces women to endure. According to Bordo (1993), women with eating disorders are not merely victims of a psychological disorder, but they are women who followed culture’s terms of feminine success to excess, and whose emaciated bodies speak of our culture’s demands for body
beauty. Rodin et.al. (1984) argue that women with eating disorders are simply an extreme extension of women’s “normal” concerns with weight and eating.

Class and Race

Mary Daley (1978), in her book *Gyn./Ecology*, reviews the social pressures, which throughout history have influenced women to accept an image of female beauty that was not always of their own creation, but that women did strive to attain. Those who did not conform to this ideal were often plagued with feelings of regret and remorse. From her critique, Daley argues that the female body has always been altered to represent what males in society have deemed “beautiful”. A hundred years ago in China, the young girls of the upper classes had their feet broken and bound by their mothers in order to attain true “beauty” (Daley 1978). In the Victorian Era, wealthy women underwent dangerous and painful operations to remove their lower ribs, in order to achieve the ideal 16 inch waist (Orbach 1982). The questions and controversies surrounding the issue of a woman’s ideal size and weight have most often been the concerns of the wealthy and upper classes, since the lower classes had to work for a living and women were unable to work if their feet were bound or their movements restricted by a corset (Daley 1978). In the latter part of the twentieth century, women actively seek expensive operations that will bring them closer to true “beauty” by giving them larger breasts, flatter stomachs, thinner thighs, or a younger appearance. Wolf (1991) argues that in this era it is the cost of such operations which has enabled only the very rich to instantaneously attain the goal of the ideal female body.

Since the Victorian Era, western society has praised women for eating as “lightly as a bird” (Orbach 1982, p.182). In that era, the constricting confines of the corset prevented
women of the upper classes from consuming large quantities of food. Today eating as “lightly as a bird” is often a means by which women struggle to attain the media’s ideal female image. Gray (1993) concludes that the desire to be thin and beautiful often leads many young women, especially the middle and upper classes, to develop eating disorders in order to attain the ideal female body image. Once this was a disorder limited only to the upper classes of society. Anorexia and bulimia now affects women from all economic strata of society, although eating disorders are not evenly distributed across all social classes (Gamer 1980). Media presents an image that is meant to be attainable by all women if they only diet enough, exercise hard enough, and want it enough (Coward 1985). No longer is this ideal image only for the very wealthy.

The ideal of thinness does not affect women of all cultures the same way. In an article “She’s not heavy, she’s my sister”, published in the Globe & Mail (April 13, 1996), Liz Nickson discusses recent research which found that there is a strong cultural identity which “immunizes” black teens against the food and weight anxieties that afflict white girls. Liz Nickson discusses body image with several young women, especially Amanda Odei, a fifteen year old African-Canadian. Ms. Odei states that she was taught that being skinny meant being unattractive and not sexy. It is important, she states, to have some “thickness”. Liz Nickson writes that Ms. Nichter, an anthropologist, concludes that for white culture the window of beauty is very narrow. Ms. Nichter’s study found that black girls form a much more liberal interpretation of beauty, whereas, for white girls it is much more restrictive. Liz Nickson writes that in white society, thinness has become the ideal, and as a result many white girls try to attain perfection through excessive dieting. Frequently, they are merely following their mother’s lead. Nichter further concludes that part of the dream
of making it in white, middle-class America is making yourself over. People in the black community realize that they will not be able to move up the corporate ladder as easily as whites. Nichter found that black girls can not afford to think of themselves in a negative way, because it will hold them back. A strong cultural identity “immunizes” the black girl against excessive food and weight preoccupation, as well as a fear of aging.

Conclusion

Women and how they relate and interpret their bodies has been a relationship of self-denial, control, and reshaping according to many researchers and theorists (Bordo 1989; 1993; Dyer & Tiggemann 1996; Hesse-Biber 1996; Ogden & Evans 1996; Rodin et.al. 1984). Studies by Dyer and Tiggemann (1996) and Alan King (1996) found that young girls learn very quickly that society only considers one female body shape ideal, and that a woman can only be beautiful and successful if she is very thin. Women are taught the “rules” of femininity through the media and it is the female body that is a medium of culture (Bordo 1989). Women’s relationship with their bodies are often very negative and critical. Young girls are taught, often by their mothers, to view their bodies as parts which should be sculpted through dieting, excessive exercise, and plastic surgery. As Sharlene Hesse-Biber (1996) wrote in Am I Thin Enough Yet? that in our culture, through popular media, families, schools, and the health and fitness industry has undermined women’s sense of self-confidence through the indoctrination of the idea that thinness is beauty and that a woman’s body is more important than her mind.

Research in the area of empowerment has largely focused upon community health. Although empowerment is seen as an emerging construct, and is being used more
frequently in a number of fields of study such as education, sociology, anthropology, and women's studies it is still not an area of research which sufficiently addresses women and gender. Lauren Shields' (1995) study was the only research I was able to find that examined women's empowerment and resistance to the dominant cultural message. Lauren Shields (1995) found, during her study on women's experiences with empowerment, that despite the fact that women have used the term “empowerment” to discuss experiences in their lives, there is a lack of research on women's experiences of empowerment. Shields concluded that women experience empowerment as a “multi-faceted” process with three central themes: (1) the development of an internal sense of self; (2) the ability of an individual to take action based on their internal sense of self; and (3) a strong sense of connectedness. Shields concludes that this research is essential to the development of the concept of empowerment. This is an area of study which warrants further interest and study by researchers.

Social interaction is the process by which an individual negotiates reality in everyday life and it is through the use of language that individuals are able to define and internalize social reality. Social constructionism argues that “reality” is not fixed from one moment to the next, but rather is shaped by individuals through their actions, moment to moment, everyday. This study examined how women interpret the visual media effect(s) upon female body image. Female university students were asked to give their opinions, ideas, and attitudes on such questions as; whether women adopt media's image of the female body as their own, and what women think of the media images and the influence of these images upon women's lives.
CHAPTER 4
METHODOLOGY

Data - Collection Method

Focus groups were used to examine women’s attitudes concerning the media and body image. Focus groups provided the researcher with an opportunity to observe interaction between group members and to gather a diversity of opinions, ideas, and attitudes (Hendershott & Wright, 1993). Magazines were available during focus groups to set the context and provide reference points for interviewing. All focus groups were tape recorded. Tapes were transcribed into textual form for coding.

Sampling

The participants were drawn from fourth year sociology, psychology, family studies, nutrition, and women’s studies classes. Departments in the University of Guelph were contacted and permission was obtained from the departments to permit the researcher to contact their students and invite them to participate. Female students from specific disciplines were selected for this study, since these students are most likely to have addressed and discussed these issues during their course work. The selection of female students from such homogeneous classes and disciplines will potentially lead to sample bias in the direction of individuals with well formulated views on the topic. The participants provided the researcher with alternative views about the effect(s) of the media upon female body image, since these students had been introduced to information which critiques the effects of the mass media upon the individual. In using and developing a
social constructionist perspective it was useful to sample women who have given some thought to what meaning can be placed upon media’s representation of the ideal body size and shape, and how this ideal could affect women, thus the inclusion of students from sociology, psychology, family studies, nutrition, and women’s studies. These potential sample biases are discussed in the findings chapter.

Forty female students were invited to participate in seven focus groups. The use of focus groups for this study was ideal, because they enabled the researcher to observe controversy within the group, and see how individuals defend divergent points of view. Six focus groups were used for data collection and the seventh focus group for member check.

The goal of this study was to develop a theoretical perspective of how some women are interpreting and relating to the visual media’s depiction of the ideal female body image. As well, this study examined whether women who have been exposed to critical views of the media in their courses can “see through” the media messages, or whether these women are still influenced by these images. The conclusions of this study are transferable to symbolic interactionist theory.

**Areas Discussed in the Focus Groups**

The seven central questions that were examined in the focus groups were drawn from the four thematic perspectives. (For full elaboration see Coding Section)

**Interview Questions.** [See Appendix A]

1. What is the ideal body?
2. What about for you, do you have an ideal weight?
3. Do any of these magazines show the ideal woman?
Question 4 will only be asked if it is relevant:

(4) You seem to see through these media messages - what about other women?
(5) Do you ever find yourself comparing your body to those in the movies/magazines? Tell me about it.
(6) Do you think that other people judge women based on their body size?
(7) What influences your view of your body? Do you ever feel too big or too small? Tell me about it.

Credibility and Transferability

Reliability and validity are the traditional means for determining the adequacy and generalizability of the results for a quantitative study. According to Guba and Lincoln (1989), credibility and transferability address similar issues in a qualitative study. For this study, credibility and transferability were used to examine the processes involved in the method of study.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the match between the constructed realities of the participants, and those realities presented in the findings by the researcher and attributed to the participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Guba and Lincoln (1989) outline four ways to maximize credibility, each of which were followed in this study;

1) Peer Debriefing: In peer debriefing, some of the conclusions and tentative analyses were discussed with a fellow researcher prior to the final write up. In this study, Dr. Moriarty, from the Department of Kinesiology, an expert in the area of body image was invited to discuss tentative findings and conclusions with the researcher prior to final
writing.

2) *Negative case analysis:* It is expected that not all cases will fit into the categories or frameworks developed in the analysis. In negative case analysis, the researcher explores and further explains findings that do not appear to fit. This was done with the help of the "control" focus group and member checks.

3) *Progressive subjectivity:* Here, prior to engaging in any of the focus groups or in-depth interviews the researcher recorded her expectations and beliefs, and saved these records as part of the audit trail. In addition, as new constructions and conclusions were formed they were checked against previous constructions to trace the progress and emergence of the final framework.

4) *Member checks:* The seventh focus group was used as a member check on the interpretations and findings from the other focus groups. This was achieved by representing the opinions and attitudes of the previous participants to the seventh focus group, and determining if this group concurred with their fellow participants.

These four ways, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, progressive subjectivity, and member checks, were used to ensure the credibility of the study's findings and that the findings accurately represent the views and opinions presented by the participants.

**Dependability.**

The use of a dependability audit trail helps to guard against the introduction of researcher bias and oversights in the research conclusions, thus helping to maintain the credibility of the study's findings. A dependability audit trail which lists the methodological shifts and changes that may occur during the study, was maintained throughout the entire
process of the study. This audit trail will allow others to evaluate how dependable the study's findings are by providing outside reviewers with the means to explore the process for shifts and changes, judge the decisions that were made, and understand what prominent factors led the researcher to the decisions and interpretations that were made during the study.

**Confirmability.**

According to Guba and Lincoln (1989), confirmability is the process by which the consistency of the study's findings are ensured through the audit trail. The audio recordings and the transcripts of the focus groups were catalogued and outside reviewers will be provided with access to the transcripts, thus ensuring confirmability of the study's results. Video taping the focus group sessions would have been useful in order to ensure a more accurate impression of "who said what to whom". However, tape recording the sessions provided the necessary content needed for analysis, and helped to alleviate any feelings of shyness or self-consciousness that due to the study's subject matter may have arisen with videotaping.

**Transferability.**

Transferability is the determination of the generalizability of the study's findings to theory. In order to facilitate transferability judgements the central questions for this study were set out, and the time, place, context, and culture in which these questions were found to be salient was outlined. The documentation audit, including both the dependability and confirmability audit trails, enabled this thesis to provide the necessary material to establish that the results are transferable to theory. The results of this study will potentially
help individuals better understand the influence and impact that the visual media has upon a woman’s body size and shape.

**Data Analysis**

Transcripts were coded using Thematic analysis. There were four themes for coding taken from specific assumptions drawn from social constructionism. Transcripts were used to produce operational definitions of the key concepts in these themes as they related to the topic of this research.

**Themes.**

The four themes that were used as the basis for the coding and data analysis are linked to the one theoretical assumption discussed in Chapter 2 - Theory:

1) Thomas Theorem: If situations are defined as real, then these situations have real consequences (Collins 1988).

   A) Is the ideal body size that women see portrayed in the media considered a realistic goal for women to achieve?

   B) Do women (and how do they) strive to achieve the image in the media? How much effort do they put into this?

   C) How do women feel when they can/cannot achieve this goal?

2) Language is necessary to define and internalize social reality (Berger & Luckmann 1966).

   A) According to women, what is the language the media uses to express perfection or ideal female size?

   B) What is the language or words that are used by women to describe their
own size?

C) What meaning do these women assign to these languages?

(3) People ascribe meanings to things that act or impact on them (Collins 1988).

A) Do the women feel that these media images impact upon them?

B) What meanings have women ascribed to media’s image, particularly relative to their own bodies?

(4) The way individuals interact with others determines the meaning that is associated with a specific object (Collins 1988).

A) How do women act towards others who deviate from the perfect female body size?

Coding

Open and axial coding, as described by Strauss and Corbin (1990), were employed in data analysis.

Open Coding.

During open coding the data were broken down into sections that fit the themes. Each theme was given a conceptual label, and similar interactions were grouped to form categories and subcategories.

The process of open coding prompted the researcher to develop generative and comparative questions. These questions were recorded as memos, and were part of the audit trail.

Axial Coding.

At this stage of the analysis the concepts and themes were related to one another,
and these relationships were tested against the data. As well, the researcher continued to look for new concepts and themes. The memos were also reviewed for relationships which were grouped together.

**Ethics**

Consent was obtained at three levels:

1. **Departmental:** Three departments, sociology, psychology, and family studies, were contacted through letters and phone calls to department heads. These letters requested permission to access the professors of the department’s fourth year students and through their courses to seek female students as volunteers to participate in the study. Ethical consent was obtained from the Ethics Committee in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, at the University of Windsor, prior to approaching the various departments at the University of Guelph.

2. **Professors:** The professors of the appropriate fourth year classes were contacted to request consent for the researcher to approach the students in their class(es) for female volunteers. Professors provided verbal consent.

3. **Students:** The volunteers were provided with information sheets and asked to sign consent forms before the start of the focus groups. [See Appendix B]

Confidentiality was maintained through two procedures: *First*, a tape machine was used to record the focus groups and interview sessions. The use of the tape machine, rather than video camera, helped ensure the promise of confidentiality, since identification of individuals is more difficult. *Second*, the consent forms assured the participants that the aim of the study was to examine content, rather than “who said what to whom.” As
well, the researcher explained to each focus group that only first names were used during the session to make discussion easier. In addition, focus group participants were asked to agree to keep all matters discussed in the focus groups confidential. The researcher also assured the participants that no names would be used in the typed transcripts, and the participants were known only as subject 1, subject 2, etc. For each focus group the numbering of the participants started at ‘subject 1’. The tapes of each focus group were destroyed upon completion of the transcribing.

Limitations

Inability to generalize to the population at large is the general limiting factor to this study.

(1) Transferability: The study’s results helped develop an understanding of how some women are interpreting and relating to the visual media’s depiction of the ideal female body image, and whether women who have been exposed to critical views of the media can “see through” the media messages, or whether these women are still influenced by these images. The conclusions of this study are transferable to the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism. The four theoretical assumptions aided in the development of the central questions and in the data analysis. This theoretical perspective was very constructive in exploring women’s opinions, attitudes, and ideas about the effect(s) of the visual media on their perception of the ideal female body.

(2) Researcher Bias: This potential limitation was addressed through peer debriefing, member checks, and the audit trail.
CHAPTER 5
FINDINGS

Introduction

The main purpose of this study was to explore women's attitudes and opinions concerning the effects of the visual media perceptions of the ideal female body size. The study was designed using a social constructionist perspective and focusing on how four of the theoretical assumptions of symbolic interactionism, and central to social constructionism, can help in understanding women's interpretation of the ideal image presented in the media, and what they do or do not do to emulate this image. The participants presented a variety of ideas, opinions, and attitudes concerning the effects of the visual media presentation of the ideal female body size upon women. The participants made distinctions between their personal ideals and the fashion industry's, especially between "beauty" as depicted by fashion and their own interpretations of beauty as "self-confidence" and "inner-strength". The participants identified a wide variety of sources as depicting the ideal female body; such as the visual media, family, peers, school, and the health model. For some participants family and the health model of the healthy body were more important sources of pressure than the visual media.

Sample Profile

The number of participants in each focus group ranged from 3 to 9. The participants were all undergraduate students drawn from fourth year courses in the departments of
sociology and family studies at the University of Guelph. The programs represented were sociology, psychology, women's studies, nutrition, and family studies. Several participants held undergraduate degrees in the sciences, computers, and graphic design. The participants ranged in age from the early twenties to mid-sixties. There were several married participants, as well as some single mothers. The majority of the participants were unmarried. The question of race was not asked in this study, however, several women referred to their race or ethnicity. From these references it is clear that the focus groups included women who were African-Canadian, Asian, and Italian.

**Theme 1: Thomas' Theorem - situations that are defined as real are real in their consequences**

The first assumption, known as Thomas' theorem, is "if men [or women] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Collins 1988, p. 265). Thus, in this study, if women understand (or define) the image of the female body depicted by the media as achievable or desirable for 'real women' then this image will represent the norm or the body that women strive to achieve.

In the focus groups I identified four situations that the women addressed as situations that had been defined as real. The first was that the women presented in advertisements, movies, and magazines portray an achievable ideal weight. The second related to the messages used in the advertisements. The third defined as real was that there are some objective criteria other than appearance upon which an ideal weight for women is based. The fourth was that if one is not the ideal weight then they are overweight. The consequences that resulted from these four perceptions of reality were
that women were pressured to be thin in order to be happy and successful, women were required to work to achieve or maintain the ideal weight, and if they were not the ideal clothing size then they did not go out. Each situation and consequence will be addressed individually below.

**Situation 1: Women in the Media Portray an Achievable Weight.**

The first situation defined as real by the focus groups was: women in the visual media advertisements portray an achievable ideal size and weight. This ideal, as discussed in the literature review, is one of an exceptionally slim woman. As Thomas’ Theorem predicts, defining or perceiving the women in the media as a realistic ideal produces a pressure to be thin among women. Participants discussed this pressure to be thin as produced by a variety of factors, all related to the media. This pressure comes not only from the visual media, but from society, especially peers, family, and ourselves. Participants argued that the ideal presented by the visual media advertisements has been taken as an ‘average,’ or norm for women. It is very important to be considered average, according to the focus groups.

I think a lot has to do with the media. And then that, in turn, is transferred into what we think is the ideal weight. And what other people think is average, and so that people compare themselves to this average,... and so it really perpetuates itself. And then we buy magazines that say that this how it should be, so I buy *Shape* so I can look like the woman on *Shape* and it perpetuates...

Many participants state that the pressure to be “ideal” or average comes from their families, especially their mothers. The participants also argue that observing their mother’s own struggle with weight and their dislike of certain body types led them to be overly critical of themselves.
I think sometimes mothers ... I was over at my girlfriend’s house the other night. And she is 40 and has two kids, you know about 14 and 16 and I heard her in the washroom, she’s like ‘Oh, look at my hips. Look at me, ... she’s like, oh, look at my hips, I’m gaining weight.’ And I thought you know, you’ve two young kids like just down the hall and ... they look up to their mother and here they are, teenagers and they hear their mother’s reaction and they start to gain the least little bit of weight they will start dieting because of what they are hearing.

I don’t know. Like I know I grew up and my mom was always doing her Scarsdale diet. Like she totally would make fun of it and say, ‘this is really silly and I know that’, but she still used to want it. You know once a year, or something like that, and so I sort of got that message. And I have a friend at home whose relationship with her mother is basically, conditional on her weight. And it’s horrible. Like I remember in high school, her mom like would get on her and on her and on her .... keep going on a diet and do all this stuff and she eat some of the most horrible things. Like her mom and her would eat like a bag of like, microwave popcorn for dinner ... like it was ridiculous. And like she went to university and started living, and like working out and making all the more healthy stuff and she lost weight and ... Everything was all great with her mom and all this stuff. And ... like of all her parents’ friends would compliment her on that and all that stuff, and I don’t know, it’s so ... so like ignorant.

According to some participants, the need to be accepted forces some women to struggle to attain this ideal. These participants state that to be accepted by peers and to be attractive to men they must look like the ideal.

Yes I definitely think from men. If you want to be attractive to men, then you think, ‘Okay, I have to look like that’. And they don’t have anything because if you are not interested in a guy and your friends come in and he’s telling you this thing and you think, God ... he thinks this way ... do the other guys think this too, maybe I’d better start doing more ... well I have to look like this, or I’m not going to get ... This is the same guy that you think is good looking or something like that and you think I would like to have a guy like that interested in me’. And then you think, oh well.

I think the problem is that men create the fantasies and then women have to live up to the fantasy that men create.

Participants expressed different opinions about whether they compared their own
bodies to those in the movies or magazines. Several wished that they could look like the models in the magazines and movies. Others stated that they compared their bodies to each other, rather than the models or actresses. One participant commented that she had difficulty adjusting to her “new” appearance now that she had lost a lot of weight, due to a medical condition. She stated...

Well, I personally, I'm having a problem right now comparing myself to myself. Because this summer I discovered that I have a health condition that means that I am basically allergic to a whole bunch of types of foods. Like it's not medically serious or anything like that but I'm much more happy if I don't eat that type of food. And so I had to radically change my diet. You know, I lost like almost 20 pounds over the summer. Like it was really a huge change. And I'm having a problem seeing myself as I was, like last winter versus over the summer, and then when I came back to school, people made comments, and I still, I have this problem because now, I'm like closer to what I originally thought was my ideal body weight and I'm realizing that doesn't mean anything. Because that hasn't, like even though I am closer that my life hasn't changed. I don't, you know I'm still single, I don't you know go to parties every day then ... It's like it's ... I'm having a real struggle with my own self perception.

Another participant stated ...

I was always on the other end. Where my friends would always like, "Oh, you're so thin, oh, please eat a doughnut." They don't know but I eat like the biggest pig in the world, but I do exercise, like I dance, you know, and how dare they tell me, 'Oh eat a doughnut and do all that stuff' when they don't even know me and they don't know how much I dance. I don't dance to stay in shape, it's the love of my life. And that's all I've known, and I've worked hard at trying to be the best dancer I can be and how dare they say, 'oh, look at your waist, you're so skinny, eat a doughnut. Do something'. You know, how dare you, okay. Because you know. It really really bugs me and I work late and I also hate when people call me skinny, because I am not skinny. I have a lot of muscle. Like a lot of muscle and that's from dancing. And I've toned and, you know, everything like that, but don't call me skinny and don't say eat something, you don't know me.

Whether the participants stated that they compared their own bodies to women's bodies in movies and magazines or to their peer's bodies, a number of participants agreed that
they compared their own body to someone who fit the ideal.

Participants all agreed that it was unusual for them to compare the bodies of women they saw on the street to those in the movies or magazines. The participants stated that this occurred infrequently, and only if the individual stood out because they were so attractive. Participants commented that it was depressing to look at magazines, because the participant’s did not look like the ideal. The participants commented that the magazines affected their perceptions of themselves and that they tried to achieve the ideal look. As can be seen in this statement ...

... especially with these magazines, I used to think the media had no effect on me. And then I would look through those magazines and every picture the girls were beautiful and I put it down because it does affect me ... it is depressing. Like I would never look like that and all these girls are so beautiful and you would like to look one day like that.

Or as another participant stated “... [she’d] love to have a day where [she] looked that way and had the face of the model... .”

**Consequence: Pressure for Women to be Thin in order to be Happy and Successful.**

The pressure that individuals place upon themselves to be thin comes from many different factors. The women referred to achieving the ideal weight as an emotional need, as well as a mind set. They further explained that personal body image and the need to be successful were factors which all placed pressure upon them to fit the ideal. The participants' belief that being thin would make them happy added to their emotional need to achieve the ideal look.

You also have the question about this body image, what are they trying to sell and one thing that I think is that we view these women that are accepted and
are successful and ... and then successful women, I mean look at [this] you know, she's got all the men and, you know, it just keeps going all the way through, so to be a success in our society you have to look this way ...

Several participants from the nutrition programme stated that their professors placed pressure on them to be thin.

...they are afraid they won't get hired. And you won't get people to take you seriously or any of that. People would be like, 'If you are someone that just says that, you know, you are nutritionist and you are overweight. And you go to someone, Okay. If someone is obese and you say 'okay you should be doing this, this, and this'. And like why should I listen to you. You obviously don't listen to what you're saying so why should I do it? And then like you should know better. And you should be able to do it because you have all this information and all these things at your disposal and you can't do it, so why would you think I could do it, sort of thing.

A few participants did not feel the pressure to be thin or they did not respond to that pressure. These participants stated that they felt it was more important how they felt about themselves personally, and their inner self was more important than their appearance.

I have never had to deal with ... weight has never really been a big thing for me. Like I have always been kind of thin, although I'm still not the ideal either. I've always eaten a lot of stuff, so I've never really had a real problem with anyone ... but like my self esteem is always very low, so I guess the way I kind of dealt with it was, just talking to other people, realizing like how dumb everything is, and then I turn it inwards, kind of focusing on that. The inner me not my inner beauty, but I mean I am looking more at my like personality and spiritually. And stuff like that. I mean change the focus from outer to inner.

The common responses expressed by the participants to the pressure to be thin were very similar. They stated that they became more rigid in their exercise routine, and followed a stricter diet.

I watch what I wear. Yes. I watch where I go too. I don't think I go to just any club, you know, on any Saturday night if I'm not feeling especially attractive. But ... I try to do the "Y" when I am losing weight.
They also commented that at times when their weight wasn't perfect they had low self esteem. There were a number of participants who commented that they would not eat at all or would binge and purge at these times:

Probably exercise more. And watch what you're eating. ... Or don't eat at all. ... I get a really vicious habit ... I binge eat and then I do something else. It can be a vicious cycle.

With the exception of one participant, who expressed a desire to gain weight in order to achieve the ideal image, all participants stated that they had felt the pressure to be thin. The participants stated that this pressure to be thin not only came from the visual media, but also from themselves. Several participants, who were older than the average participant stated that not only was there pressure for older women to remain thin, but also to stay young.

... pressuring the older woman who's ideal to be young. So they are under pressure to keep, to stay young ...

They further commented that society's ideal female body was not just very thin, but also very young. The one participant who contradicted her fellow participants explained that due to her medical condition, which made weight gain extremely difficult, she did not feel the pressure to be thin. However, she did feel this pressure from others.

No, no, no. But I feel the pressure from everyone else. I mean I've had countless other people say,'Well if I could only be like you'. My one room mate tells me that every day ... and then when I'm eating something she says, 'every time you eat I feel compelled to eat too' but she doesn't want to because she doesn't want to gain weight.'If only I could eat like you'. And gets really tiresome after a while when people say that because of course, I don't feel that way. And to hear it all the time, and I know they don't mean it, in a cruel sort of way they are saying, 'You know,... But I've had several comments over the years, especially when I've been down to about 93 at one point ... you know a big traumatic event. But at certain times in my life people
have come up to me and said, 'Are you okay? We're worried you might be anorexic'. And that just passes me off when people say that because I'm healthy, I'm proportionate for my size, I'm tiny, I can't help it if my metabolism. Things like that really bother me a lot. And maybe I get over ... you know over angry when I shouldn't but when you have people come up to you and say that to you and you can't help being that thin. I can't help it ... you know I haven't felt pressure to be thin, but I feel the pressure with everyone else wanting to be thin and saying things like that ...

The pressure to be thin works in a number of different ways, according to the participants. Several participants commented that when they were given compliments about weight loss it increased their desire to lose weight.

I don't know whether it's necessarily a pressure thing but ... or maybe it is ... just, you know if you do say lose weight, it's the compliments that you get for it which induces you to put pressure on yourself to keep doing it because everyone likes to be complimented. So in that sense, you know, pressure is being put on you by your friends and people around you ... And you don't want to stop it because then you are afraid to disappoint them.

Other participants expressed feelings of guilt over not looking like the ideal and expressed a desire to devote their lives to exercise and healthy eating.

...like 5 times a week doing aerobics, 3 times a week doing weight training, and 3 times a week doing the treadmill. Yeah, like if I could devote the rest of my life to working out

Other participants explained that when they felt they were larger or fatter than their friends or family members they would go to extremes by refusing to eat because they feared gaining weight. Overall, there was an express desire to be accepted by friends, family, men, and themselves for their body size whether it fit the ideal or not.

Situation 2: Messages in the Visual Media are Real.

The focus groups defined the messages in the visual media advertisements as real.
The participants of the focus groups stated that it was almost impossible to fight the influence and power of advertisers and the media. Several other participants stated that although they were no longer purchasing magazines, it was impossible to remain unaffected by the media messages.

As much as you can try to get away from it and you still understand like there is a logical level on them ... but still make you feel and that doesn't seem to change even when you ... like you have to force yourself not to try and attain this. You know what I mean, rather than it being forcing yourself to attain this, like, you know forcing yourself to say, `okay, you know, I don't need to look like that, and I can't look like that, and that's fine'. And as much as you can say that logically and still, you know you feel guilty if you get dessert or you feel guilty if you don't look like these women and then I think that is just something that you have to kind of work on.

When the focus groups were asked "What do you think about this?", participants declared it was important for them to help educate the younger generation not to accept one body type as ideal. The participants argued that the best way to make such a change was to encourage their own children to accept themselves for who they are, and to empower them not to feel pressured to accept the ideal as normal.

And I was thinking that there's maybe a way to try this. The fact is a lot of it I think comes down to self image. And I think it is more like it's parents, or more of us adults can be aware of how it affects kids that we should be more careful with what we say, so that we don't affect their self esteem in a negative way as much as we can. I mean, because this is going to be out there ... the media. But I mean, like the people that you are around, they can be more aware of it, then maybe that would be a significant help.

Women also spoke of how it was important for the individual to educate themselves and continue to find ways to love herself. Many focus group participants commented that it was important for all departments at the university to examine the influence of the media on an individual's life. The participants further argued that many science students were
unaware of the media's impact upon their lives.

I have a science degree and that's what I would have said. I took the one ... I took a lot of different courses ... I didn't just stick with the pure sciences. I took a general relations course and after that I started noticing all these things I hadn't seen before. And I think if you stick with pure science by being ... yeah, you are not going to see this stuff because you are so like focused now that you don't go beyond that. But when you take some other courses, like Sociology and Psychology, Anthropology, Philosophy, you start noticing these things. You know they have a different way of learning I think ...

The overall conclusion, from the participants, was the importance of individuals accepting themselves for themselves and fighting the pressures of fitting the ideal.

**Situation 3: There is an Objective Ideal Weight for Women.**

The third situation defined as real: was there is an objective criterion, other than appearance, that determines the ideal weight for women. When the focus groups were asked if they had an ideal weight, all participants answered yes. Several participants felt that it was more important how you looked in clothes, rather than the weight, however they still felt that they would be concerned if they were overweight, i.e. over their ideal. It was very important to be physically healthy, and this was connected with the ideal appearance, according to several participants. A few participants commented that their ideal weight was dependent upon their reference group. Each of these quotations is illustrating something different about reference groups:

**Speaker #1:** But recently, just in the last 4 months or so, I work with a few girls who are really very slim and I have noticed how it has really affected me. So I work out every day and you know I watch what I eat, and you know I don't eat when I'm hungry ...or I do eat when I'm hungry but not when I'm not hungry. So I can see how it affected me.

**Speaker #2:** I'm conscious of that too like within my own family setting. My family has always, you know a rather large family anyhow and no-one has ever been skinny in my family, and so I'm looked upon as the thin person in
the family, so when I think things like: Oh, I think I weigh too much, or I'm sick of being fat ... and people kind of ... in my family though, you're not and you know I agree with you and accept that but once I got out of that context and . .. I'm also in a program where we do things like: "okay, what's your percent body fat?" Okay the average could be between 14 and 20 percent for women but if you are 24, you might have a problem, well. So I have become more aware of it and I am conscious of it and it has to do with the people I hang around with, they are all like "I just went and ran 30 miles and I'm like "Shut up ... I don't care, you know". And I feel horrible and it seems they are holding up, going 'Look at me, I'm great because I have done this'. Well I can't identify with that .... and I can't run 30 miles, I won't. So, I mean I guess my point is, it changes with my reference group.

This quote demonstrates how the same person can feel “good” about her size in one reference group, and “bad” about her size in another.

Speaker #3: I was just going to say that was ... for me what we've just been talking about, because 4 summers ago I worked with some girls, and a whole bunch of girls and most of the girls were saying "Oh! My thighs" or you know ... and either go for a run or go for a walk or do whatever. But this girl wasn't particularly muscular, she wasn't tall, or anything like that, she was just regular. And she never ever commented on how whether or not she thought she was fat, or skinny or anything. And because she didn't do that, we didn't perceive her as fat or skinny, or anything. She was just... was really happy with who she was and we could tell that she was because she didn't care. Even with all the pressure of the five of us saying other things around, that sort of subject, she just didn't care, it wasn't even a concern for her, and she was the happiest one of all of us. So it was just like that ....Over the summer, and it was just like everyone caught onto that ....stopped saying anything ... and to realize that well, we were kind of happy too, with the way that we are...

Reference groups do not influence everyone, here it seems this woman is influencing her reference group's value of her. All participants stated that they felt happy and confident when they were at their ideal weight.

Consequence: Women must Work to Achieve and Maintain the Ideal Body Size.
The consequence for defining a certain weight for women as desirable is working to achieve it. When the participants were asked how they achieved their personal ideal size, they fell into two groups. One group of participants stated that they often made plans to start an exercise program or to take better care of their diet, but never seemed to follow through with their plans.

No, well I talk about working out all the time. At least once a week I have made plans to go to the gym or do something with somebody. Sometimes they pan out, sometimes they don't. But my new thing is that I am seriously going to do it. So like this week, I am really dead serious about working out for sure. We'll see next week how serious ... All talk no action!

The second group of participants were very conscious of what they ate and followed a strict exercise program. They tended to read about nutrition, and healthy eating.

For me, too, I think when I think about exercising I think about eating ... like I'm in a nutrition field, so I try and think about health as opposed to what I look like. So for me, exercising is more of a ... it's like, not more of, but I say it's equally to do with how I feel like healthy and it's not just for a focus, I'm trying to lose weight. It's for health.

Yes, it's a combination of both. I work out every day and I am also in nutrition so I eat fairly well and it's just always been part of my lifestyle to be like that. So I don't know whether it is more habit or, you know, and I always maintain like around the same weight so it's not a problem.

One participant explained how returning to university helped to improve her self-esteem, and this helped motivate her to join Weight Watchers.

With me, the only thing that made me decide to go and do something about my weight was because I was feeling sick. My health was paying for it. And I was always, always tired. My aching joints, you know at the time, like, 28 or something feeling like I'm 65. Thinking, you know, Jesus, I'm still young, you know, why am I feeling so old. And so I decided that I would do something on my own and I did get the first 15 lbs. off on my own by the exercising and buying a bicycle, and cutting back. So by the time I [was] through that program, I was already used to these portions because I had slowly weaned myself down. And the thing is, as far as Weight Watchers is concerned you
don't go hungry. In the program, because it gives you so much. It's not ... you can eat all food groups, they don't tell you to just eat fish or something, you can eat all food groups. So it was my health that made me do it, not anything that I had seen in the reflection or what I saw in the media. I was just sick and tired of being sick and tired. So I wanted to do it for me. But the university was very important part of this life story because with my academic achievement I have started to feel better about myself. And I started to think that maybe I am worth a little bit more. And why I am treating myself so shabbily And you know, you have something to contribute to the world and, you know, I feel so crappy, I don't have any energy to go and contribute anything, you know. All this knowledge that I have learned, and so university has been beneficial in helping my self esteem and then in turn, I have given myself a break by treating me better. Because I feel better about myself.

The one participant who was interested in gaining weight stated that she had a great deal of difficulty gaining weight for medical reasons.

There was no consensus among the participants about whether it was easy to maintain or achieve their personal ideal size. Each participant expressed a different opinion. Several participants felt that it was easy to maintain their ideal weight, often through physical activity, such as dancing.

I'm not, for me personally, I'm very ... I dance live every day and I don't know what it would be like to not be dancing and like put on a lot of weight. I have no idea, I have been dancing since I was very little and I've always had that exercise. But I don't know how I would feel if I wasn't dancing at all anymore. And just had to .... not watch what I eat and stuff like that. I just don't even know the concept of what I'd have to do there.

Others stated that body weight remained the same no matter what their level of physical activity was or what their diet.

At this point I don't budge past 142. I could completely pig out for a month straight and I would stay the same. Or I could almost starve myself for a month straight and still stay the same ... Eventually I have come to this weight now and I have been the same for a few years now, so regardless of what I do, I know that 142 lbs.

Other participants expressed a great deal of difficulty achieving or maintaining their ideal
size, and one participant explained her use of medication to try and achieve her ideal size.

But just from own experiences myself and not ... like I know that I am semi-biased but my body just wants to be a certain weight and it does it. Like I was on thyroid medication for a period of time and I lost quite a bit of weight. But as soon as I went off of it, like it took, like 3 years but I am back to the weight I was before I went on it. And, Okay, well I guess my body wants to be.

The participants who had no trouble achieving or maintaining their ideal size expressed a lack of concern or interest over one's ideal size.

Like I feel like as long as you feel that you are healthy, and you're happy with the way your body is, that is more important. Like I've shopped with some people who are, Oh, you know, I'm a 27 now I ought to be a 26, and I'm like, What's that inch really matter going into a 26 or a 27 jean. As long as you feel like you think you look good then that's all that matters. And not even that you look good, but you are healthy, you're eating right and you're exercising once in a while. And I think that it is more important, but I think it is your individual perception of how you feel like you should look. A lot of times it is influenced by the magazines we read and the pictures and what everybody else thinks. Which is unfortunate.

It appears from the participants' comments, that those who struggle to achieve their ideal size constantly think about it, while those who do not face this struggle are unconcerned with the issue.

There were varied responses from the participants when asked if they tried to achieve or maintain their ideal size "at any cost." The participants appeared to go through stages of trying to achieve the ideal look at any cost, including anorexia, while at other stages the individual tries to reject the ideal and accept themselves for who the are.

I know for myself, I've done the full spectrum ever since high school. I went traveling for a year and I was in Germany, and that area with beaches, the whole bit, so I had to start losing weight before I go. And I did and I completely got carried away to the point where ... down to I guess I was about 105 lbs. Just really thin. But then, you know in my deviance courses I learned a lot about anorexia. So I was aware of the things, I was doing and, you know, I would look at myself but I'd still see a plump girl and not being able to realize
what I really looked like ... so I went from this feeling fat at 105 lbs which I still did, to ... although my body was still messed up I guess, that started eating and eating and eating and lost control and before I knew it I was about 165 lbs. and feeling like, you know ... a lot of weight to go from in a couple of months.

I think ideal the weight, to me the ideal weight, is the weight that I'm happy at, the weight that I've, you know, I don't get sick easily. Everything runs my way. That way is where I can eat comfortably and not worry about gaining weight or lose weight. I think the ideal weight for me is the weight that I am happy at, like in all aspects of my life.

Several participants stated that family history of heart disease, due to obesity, has led them to maintain a weight that is below normal.

I was just going to say and H mentioned about her mother and my mother was really sick when I was younger. And that always plays on me, like that's not what I want, I don't want to stay thin because of the magazines. Well I'm sure that plays a small part, but to me, like my mother was very overweight and I was thinking about the heart problems were attributed to that a little bit, and I was thinking that's why I would like to stay underweight is because of that. So that's more of it and then all the classes that we take, I think that's important. They say that you should exercise one to 3 times a week and so forth ...

They expressed a fear of becoming obese and felt the need to maintain a low body weight.

There were a number of participants who stated that they were concerned about exercise and maintaining a certain weight. However, they were unable to answer whether they tried to maintain their ideal size at any cost through such means as excessive exercise or dieting.

There were very few participants who claimed to be able to eat whatever they wanted and were unconcerned with exercise. The majority of participants tried to maintain a healthy diet by following the Canadian Food Guide, and tried to follow a regular exercise program. When the focus groups were asked the question “how often do you exercise a week” the common response by those participants who had a regular exercise program
was daily. These participants stated that exercise was an excellent form of stress release and that it made them feel better and healthier. It was an important part of their everyday activities and their emotional state.

I don't know, I just feel kind of more of if I'm feeling healthy. Sometimes I feel really, you know, awful, gross and you know maybe a jog helps that and if not I don't look in the mirror and say, 'Oh I feel gross', obviously because of that. You know maybe it's just that I need to go for a walk or something. So I think it's my feelings, and I kind of ignore it because they are stronger than when I look at the mirror.

... I mean I do stuff like justify it as being the ultra break and a stress release and stuff like that too, but I know it's also right that if I didn't work out for a couple of weeks, I would probably feel bad and I'm thinking: 'Oh my God, you know, that's so bad.' And you know, I can't eat this, if I'm not .... I think there's still a certain part of it that is ... doing this every day ... and just feeling like you have to measure [up] to something whether or not you do. At least you are making the attempt ...

There was only one participant who described herself as obsessive about physical activity and did it more than once a day.

All participants claimed to eat a nutritious diet. They expressed their concern with eating too much fat and they followed the nutrition guide. There were quite a few participants who were from the university's nutrition program, and they stated that it was important for individuals to only eat when they were hungry. Several participants commented that although it was very important to eat a healthy diet and to follow the nutrition guide, it was also important as one participant said ...

I think most people, it seems they go through a stage of that. Because even when I was talking about it with a bunch of other women and most of them had said that oh, at one point they had gone through that where they didn't want to eat any fat. And like, no salad dressing, no mayo, no anything and then you kind of get to a point where you realize you needed a little bit of fat in your diet and do you want to avoid some things because they are bad for you, you keep eating them, especially when you get older, but, you know, you have kind of let yourself live a little bit.
The question “How do you feel when you aren’t at your ideal weight?” was discussed at length by the focus groups. The participants all expressed the same opinions and attitudes about how they felt. Words such as “blah”, “crappy”, “sluggish”, “bloated”, “miserable”, and “guilty” were commonly used to express the participants’ feelings. The participants commented that when they were not at their ideal weight they would wear baggy clothes, such as overalls.

Speaker #1: I feel more self conscious. I can’t really walk on campus, with like a glow or just the confidence that I would normally have. If I wake up and I’m feeling sluggish and bloated or something, I’m, you know, I’ll maybe wear a different sweater or something and I won’t be downright depressed but you just don’t have the confidence that you would, you know ...
Speaker #3: I definitely agree, especially when it comes to choosing your clothes because I am going out like on a Thursday night or something and I’m really bloated, that’s exactly what I’m going to wear. But I mean ...
Speaker #1: A shirt that covers!
Speaker #3: Yes, it does, it really affects how ... what you are going to wear and it depends how you feel that no matter how hard you try to do your hair right, or put your makeup on properly, you still don’t ... it does affect ... it affects my mood definitely.

They also expressed a lack of interest in going places.

Even then, when I get to that point that I have to wear that, or I just don’t want to go out. Don’t want to talk to anybody. I don’t want to be seen. Don’t ask me to go out, don’t ask me for coffee, I’m not going anywhere. That’s why I used to have a boyfriend that literally had to pull me out of the room, out of the closet. Because on my worst morning, that’s it. I could spend an hour and not find anything to wear and not put anything on, start crying, getting in a hissy fit and that’s it, I’m not going anywhere. I don’t know anybody.

Speaker #1: If I’m feeling really good about myself, something great has happened and I look in the mirror, I’m going to look good. But that time, like I’m in a crappy mood, I don’t want to go out tonight ... I put on the clothes, I won’t look good no matter what. And I have, may have, looked good in that pair of jeans two days ago. But I’m not going to look good in them no matter what, I think its just mood.
Speaker #2: I know, I’ve felt the same as you. If I’m in a bad mood, there is nothing that satisfies me. But another thing I’m thinking I know all the time, I
happened to be around friends who are ... I guess because they fit the ideal more so than I think I do, then I notice it and so I start looking at myself more critically. And I start thinking, you know, wow, you know ... it would be nice to be that size naturally you know. You know ...

One participant said she felt like “crawling into a closet and not coming out” when she was not at her ideal weight. Another participant made the interesting point of “Why am I treating myself so shabbily. And you know, you have something to contribute to the world and you know, I feel so crappy.”

**Situation 4: If One is not the Ideal Weight then One is Overweight.**

“If I am not the ideal weight then I am overweight” was the fourth situation defined as real. The biggest influence on how the participants view their own body was clothes shopping. Several commented that the ideal clothing size is expected to fit all women regardless of age, ethnicity, or body shape. An example of this difficulty was expressed by one participant when discussing her difficulty in buying jeans that are not designed for the African-Canadian female body type.

Well, I don't know. I'm kind of iffy on that because I ... okay, for instance my example whenever I go and shop for jeans okay the waist never, ever fits me, yes I can't buy small size jeans because of my thighs. You know. Or the waist is always, always, always floating in the back, yet I can't get the pant legs on. So I'm saying a lot of black women have this body type where they have bigger thighs and bigger butts. And jeans, in no way ... can't buy jeans, like a lot of black women can't buy jeans without like getting a belt that like squishes your jeans, all bunched up here and yet your thighs are like ... squeeze out of your jeans. And when you say an ideal weight, or an ideal size, like, I don't think there is an ideal size to every culture.

Another participant stated that she often bought clothes to look like the models, but felt that the clothes never look the same.

Although, I think of what happens is you see that dress and you think maybe
I can look like this if I put it on. Like I think the reason that models are used is because there is a certain amount, of that you suggest that maybe you could look like that. ... So I'm going to buy the thing that is going to make me look like her... I mean we do it, we look at it and say, 'oh she's beautiful, I bet that will tell me how to do that in here'. And you know what I mean, and buy it rather than ...

Participants also complained about the aggressive nature of sales clerks who often imposed their view upon the customer.

Speaker #1: I always start big ... Although I have a saleswoman that implies it, that I had a huge problem with the perception of my body. ... But they can be really! I don't know, she implied that I had a perception problem with my body ...

Speaker #3: I had sort of the opposite happen to me because I will try something and I will say, okay, I just hold it up and watch them go, I think this will probably fit me, you know. And if it's a medium, I'll be like: Woohoo, it's a medium. And if it's an extra-large I'll be like, well I'm an extra-large person, that's fine. But I have had, you know I'll pick up something that is medium, and I'll look at it and I know what I look like. I know what fits me. And I've had saleswomen go, well that's the medium, would you like to try the large or extra-large. Would you stop imposing your opinion upon me. I don't like that, I think it will fit me and in the end I'm right because I've like, I've picked up something and it does fit me, and in the end, I'm like, well do I look like I'm that big. I don't think I am, but ... and then I start wondering.

Several participants stated that they disliked clothes shopping so much that they either order their clothes through catalogues or refused to try clothes on in the stores.

I like to order from magazines. Yeah, instead of going in and trying on. Because then you don't have that feeling that 'oh no!, it doesn't fit.' Because if you know your sizing and you know what it is from a certain magazine then its o.k. "Yeah, then you know its going to fit really good when you get it home.

**Consequence: If One is not the Ideal Clothing Size then One does not go out.**

Participants felt fat or overweight if their clothing size changed. Many of the participants stated that if their clothing size was larger than an 8 then they refused to buy
the item and would begin a diet immediately.

Speaker #3: I was going to say, yes. I feel pressured to be a certain size and if I go out of that range then it's diet time.

Moderator: What size? Do you mind if I ask what size?

Speaker #3: I'm an 8.

A number of participants explained that they had "test" items in their closets. If they were still able to fit into these "test" items, such as a mini-skirt, then they felt that they were at their normal size.

Speaker #1: "Yes, I don't really know my size. I never know my size, but I did recently pull out that bag of clothes from the basement and ... that didn't fit me, and was ... but I got, to feel worried. And not I guess, I mean because I couldn't believe, I didn't understand, I didn't realize and then I was like, 'Oh, my goodness'. And ... with this ..., because up to that point I had been thinking I look fine and as soon as that happened and suddenly I wasn't fine any more. I must be bigger. Even like, you have certain clothes that if you still fit into them then you are okay. Like even just, I mean ...like I said, logically I know that I pretty much stay the same weight most of the time and so I'm like 'Hey, this is what I'm supposed to be.' But I have, you know, like this one skirt that I wore in high school and it was tight. And I remember at the end of high school it was loose. And I was, you know: "Woohoo, I'm so excited". And so every once in a while I still try on that skirt and if it's loose then I feel good but if it's tight then I think, oh, you know and it's ridiculous, like it's so stupid this one skirt that I don't even wear it, but it's as though ..."

Speaker #2: It's a try-on skirt.

Speaker #1: Yeah, it's just like the benchmark of where I'm at and whether I'm okay or not.

Speaker #4: I have three level clothes. I have my skinny clothes, my medium clothes and what I call my fat clothes. I finally got rid of the skinny ones because I thought there's no way I will ever be 115 lbs..... but, yeah, I finally got rid of them. Funny isn't it, I'll hang onto the other ones just in case. I'm allowed to go back and forth, but I don't even step on scales any more.

For all the participants fitting into their normal clothing size or fitting the "test" items helped determine their self-esteem and their mood. If for any reason they did not fit the same size
as usual they felt ugly, self-conscious, and unhappy.

That puts me in a bad mood. If I go to a store and that happens, I'm done shopping for the day. I'm not going into another store I'm out of here. My mother gets very angry with me. She won't go shopping with us any more!

The participants of four of the focus groups also commented about the negative attitude clothing stores have towards women of larger size.

Speaker #5: I think that's one of the reasons why they put more mediums and smalls, that those are the sizes that buy clothes and like to shop, and there not making anything else in 14, not as much. It's not worth it to them.

Speaker #4: I think it must also be frustrating because overweight people are completely isolated in a store. Plus sizes are at the back of the store in their own little section and then there's normal sizes. Well it must be pretty discouraging walking into the store and knowing that as soon as somebody sees you at the back, you know, I think they shouldn't isolated on their own, or made to have their own store.

They stated that these clothing stores often penalized individuals of larger size financially by charging more for the same item as carried in a "regular" clothing store.

The other thing too, is that ... like I know people who are of a larger size, like, and if you go into Cotton Ginny, they now have their Cotton Ginny Plus and their Cotton Ginny regular. They have the same shirts, but the larger sizes are always $10 more. Oh, and they admit that they are always $10 more and I know that both my sister and my mother are like of larger sizes and they vary a bit. You know, it's, 'I'll go and look for a shirt in one section'. And I'm just on the borderline of it you know. The normal size section if you want to call it that. But, you know you go into the other sizes and, why is this $10 more, you know. So I think they penalize people who are of larger size.

As well, the participants argued that these stores were also very limited in number and in fashion styles. There was one participant who felt her body was too small. She did not express pleasure with being small, but rather wanted to gain weight in order to look more like the ideal body size. She was often frustrated because she could not gain weight, due to her medical condition.
The focus group participants stated that clothing size was very important to how they viewed their bodies. It was very important to them to buy the smallest size possible, even if it didn't fit correctly, because they always planned to diet until it fit.

Because that's all you inquire about, a 14 or a 16, or you know, a 12... and, 'Sorry, we don't have that'. Like I really want to wear Le Chateau clothes, I really do! Like just, like one night, and there is no way I am going to get into it. They have some of the best skirts. But NO!

Speaker #1: Yes, I am just going out and I'm just buying everything else too and then I'm going to go out and party.

Speaker #2: Guess what I got into a size 4 and it was big.

Many stated that they cut the labels out of their clothes so that no one knew what size they wore. The participants all expressed concern about fitting into the ideal size, and their desire to one day achieve that size. When they do not fit into the clothing size they believe they should, they commented that they often felt unattractive and overweight.

You really do feel bad but you make excuses, 'Oh, it's cut really small', and 'Oh, it's, well you know that style of clothes.' If I go into a store and I will buy a size 10 or a size 12 in one store, it's not the same size in any other store. And going back to what I was talking about, like having your own ideal weight, I think that you know, you can read all this stuff and you try to be as objective as possible, but still underlying you feel sometimes the pressure to be a little bit closer to the norm. Like the further you get from the normal, like well I'm going to be 5'9" any time soon, but that small kind of really nice very feminine looking women, the further you get from that, the more pressure you feel to go back to that. You know, even when you say, 'No, no, I'm myself but I look good the way I am, but ...' There's something underlying that's telling you 'Wait a minute, that's still not traditionally beautiful, per se'. And you are feeling pressure.

Yes clothing size is everything. I think you can get so depressed when you go to the mall.

One participant stated that she would ideally like to fit a larger size, and she explained that she found clothes shopping frustrating and depressing, and believes that
it is a “waste of time”. Her need to attain the ideal image was as strong an emotional need as the other participants who desired to lose weight, rather than gain weight, in order to fit the ideal.

I get that way too sometimes, opposite degrees again. When I go into a store, some of my favorite stores are. I am a size 3-4, that is as small as they get, and I noticed that they started bringing out a 1-2 in one of the stores. And I found it really frustrating when I could fit into it. And I think it is Banana Republic where I think I would be a size zero there. Like a zero, why would you make a zero. I don’t want to feel like a nothing. But I’m usually like a size 3-4 and there’s times when I go in and I try a 3-4 on and it’s kind of loose, and I get so frustrated. I just went shopping with my mom recently and it happened and it ruined my entire day. I was cranky. I said, ‘I want to gain weight.’ This is really frustrating, you know, and I always hope sometimes I will buy a size 5-6 or something ... but ... and then a couple of months or a week, I’ll gain the weight and I will be a 5-6. But it totally ruins my day to go in a sale and I’ll go in and 3-4 is loose on me.

There were two main responses to the question, ‘How do you feel when someone says you are a size bigger than usual?’ The participants either tried to deny the change in clothing size and rationalized it by thinking that the manufacturer had made a mistake when cutting the material, and would try to keep a positive attitude.

I think I put it into perspective. It is usually those stores that are like, the little teeny bopper stores. Whatever stores where most people are a size 2 and 3, like, I kind of try and put it into perspective thinking that the size 8 in this store is different from any other normal size 8.

... if you are going for sizes 14 and 16 which is where I am at, like in a 14, 16 and I vary a lot so I go into a lot of stores and find that some things will fit but others won’t. And it’s like I go into a store and say I hope they have a size 14 that will fit and they do. Well, even if it doesn’t, than you are like, ‘Okay, what do I do now?’ So, like I need clothes same as any other person that ...

Sometimes it’s the style of clothes. I know I’ve done that. I’ve, said, ‘Oh its just the styling.’

The other response was one of anger and loss of self-confidence. This would usually end

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the shopping day, and the participants would go home and check the scales. This often
made the participants begin diets, and they would have feelings of being unattractive,
guilty, not sexy, and fat. Many participants said they often became extremely upset and
would leave the stores crying.

Neither do I. I don’t go by my weight either. But the size [six] does affect
people and even just ... my friend went to get a white blouse for her grad
photos. And she is a really tall woman and she’s ... I think she’s very
proportional for her height. She’s ... I mean I tell her she’s thin. I think she’s
thin but she’s not. Like she’s not a rake, she still has ... she has broad
shoulders and stuff. And so she went and the only place that she could find
one that fit her and that had a style that wasn’t grandmotherish, was out at ...
something like the Plus Sizes. And you know, she ... when she got home she
was in tears. She was so upset that she couldn’t find one anywhere. And so
it was ... she was saying ... it was because it was a plus size you know and
to me she is not a plus size and because ... and you know, she’s tall and
she’s broad, but there’s no way that she should be feeling guilty about the
size she is. And I kind of tell her that but you know, hearing it from your
friends you just kind of say, ‘oh you have to say that’.

When told that they are a size smaller than usual the participants stated that they
experienced feelings of joy and happiness. One participant described it as “like stepping
on the scales ... it’s the numbers. ‘Like, the smaller the better, and it makes you feel good.’
Participants further commented that it gave them the license to go out and buy more
clothes, even if they did not need the clothes. It also improved their self-esteem, and made
them feel happy, excited, and pretty.

Yes, it reinforces the idea that you should be in that category of average.

You always want to buy the lowest size. Like I remember trying once on a pair
of jeans ... well I have a pair of jeans that is a size 7. And I don’t usually wear
a size 7 and I tried it and “Wow, we’re a size 7!” And you know it made me
want to buy it just because it’s a size 7 and, meanwhile, I mean, whether or
not it looks good on me, let’s do it. Underneath, it ... a size 7! And I mean my
body hasn’t changed since I tried on the size 9 and fit that too, or whatever.
But it’s wholly mental, and I mean I know, I mean even just the fact that the
people cut their sizes out of their clothing so that people can’t look and see
what size they are, ...

**Theme 2: Language is Necessary to Define and Internalize Social Reality**

The second theoretical assumption comes from Berger and Luckmann’s 1966 publication *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. In this work they stated that language was necessary to define and internalize social reality. This assumption states that language is the vehicle through which the individual and the social world interact. Language is used by society to give meaning to everything within the world, because language provides us with a window by which to see into our culture. John Berger (1980) in *Ways of Seeing* writes that through visual images individuals internalize thousands of messages daily, both consciously and subconsciously. Berger states that these advertising images are not merely an assembly of competing messages, but are a language in themselves. It is through this visual language that the ideal female weight and size are described.

The participants used verbal descriptions to describe the ideal female body presented by the visual media. They used language to define our culture’s reality of average, good-looking, and beautiful. It is the visual media that sells a look, which the visual language depicts as ideal. The participants argue that this image of perfection is the only look accepted by society as attractive. The focus groups stated that the visual media presents both verbal and visual messages of the ideal body or society.

The participants agreed that there is an ideal female body in society, and they used such language as well-toned, thin (100-110 lbs), tall (5'5" - 5'9"), large breasts, long hair, blue eyes, Barbie doll looks, and definitely white to give meaning to the visual images.
presented in the media.

I think it's more to do with proportions. I think the way it's portrayed in the media is, you know, the thinner the better and physically in good health like musculature, define it this way, then if you are slim, you are set kind of thing.

I personally don't think that blonde hair is that ... you know, my ideal would be to have blonde hair, but I think in society it is. Because that is the Barbie figure, which is pretty popular.

Although the focus groups believed that there is an ideal female body, this ideal is not real, in that it does not represent all women, all ethnicities, or all body types.

Yes, ... I think it is definitely a thin person and sometimes ... I don't think it's an emaciated person, but not necessarily a muscular person, but .... I was going say it's a standard thin person and even going so far ... because I am sensitive to it, I'm tall, not even tall people but just certain people that they think that those ... the manufacturers or whatever, think that the skinny person ...

We see predominately white women on the magazines. And so it doesn't represent the whole population.

The participants further argue that the ideal female body does not depict the average woman in society, because it would never depict an overweight or obese woman.

Yes. A normal kind of body image thing, because people think that obese is abnormal and they ... and thin, really thin is abnormal as well, so I would say that the ideal body in our society is somewhere in between ... it certainly would never go towards overweight but it could possibly go towards very thin. It might ... that's my opinion, it's somewhere in fairly thin.

Speaker #2: I think it puts a lot of pressure on people. I mean there is the stuff you see in magazines. I mean look around the room, I mean, no offence, but does anybody look like [this]. I mean, you know and I would say that we are likely an average group.

Speaker #3: But even in the fact that I didn't want a date square says something doesn't it really. You know, hello. I mean we are talking about exercises already, it's funny we should be talking about this.

When the participants were asked what makes the body ideal, they described the ideal as that which the fashion industry demands. Several participants felt that the fashion industry
was trying to present society with an androgynous look; a young girl who is physically and sexually immature, hairless, small hips, yet has large breasts.

Speaker #3: Good hanger for clothes.
Moderator: Okay.
Speaker #3: Well that's where it comes from really. She looks good in clothes.
Moderator: So she looks good in the clothes, okay.
Speaker #3: From the runway. It's the runway and that's what people want ... you can hang anything on a rack.

Speaker #1: I think in a lot of ways, it's child-like too. I guess it might be a taller woman but it is still, like very hairless and know, soft, smooth skin and, it's hard to explain but it's almost you know like an immature like 14 year old models. You know, grown women don't really look like that you know, they have hips and more curves, but these women are usually very...
Moderator: Androgynous in a certain sense?
Speaker #1: Androgynous, yes. A little bit of hips but, you know, not too much where you would be a grown woman.
Speaker #2: I mean it says something when a model is old if she's in her twenties ...

They also felt that the models today were still presenting the starved waif look of the 1960's "Twiggy".

Berger and Luckmann (1966) state that language is used by society to give meaning to everything within the world, because language provides us with a window by which to see into our culture. The language that the participants used to describe an average, good-looking, and beautiful woman is very important to understanding how society defines the ideal woman. The participants were asked the question “what makes one good-looking”, and they described a good-looking woman as someone who is “well put together” or “takes care of her appearance,” of average weight (120 lbs) and height (5'4"), toned muscles, has “Christie Brinkley” or “Julia Roberts” hair, wears the right clothes, and fits the cultural trend.

Speaker #4:“Well, somebody who is well put together. Muscle tone. Some form of ... and you are not skinny so that you are ...
Moderator: Kate Moss?
Speaker #4: Yeah. I mean you are not overly heavy either. I mean if your weight is sort of in the middle, with muscle tone and whatever it may be, like we're used to big build, that's fine. That's what generally people would look like on as attractive. You might be awesome looking that's when people like you the most I've noticed that.

Speaker #2: We've got real Christy Brinkley hair. It's seems like every major cover model, was, you know ...
Speaker #1: Or Julia Roberts with the red hair, and the curls

By cultural trend the participants meant a woman who looked like they should be on the cover of fashion magazines. One participant described an incident that occurred shortly after she cut her hair extremely short.

I think, I just cut all my hair off in the summer and ... then ... although the women were like, 'Yeah, way to go, you know, you did it!' And a lot of men were like, you know, 'Wow, what did you do. You know, I'm like ... what do expect me to do ride around on a horse naked with my hair flowing?' But even myself now, because I don't look like these people, or at least I don't look as much as I could look like these people if I had longer hair, I felt so really, really androgynous.

The participant stated that she was made to feel unfeminine by her male friends simply because she choose a hair cut that was not the fashion ideal. However, she was also praised by her female friends for the same reason; for going against the cultural ideal by cutting her hair.

The focus groups were asked how would a woman know that she was good-looking. The participants answered that it was a matter of one’s self-esteem and self-confidence, rather than how others responded towards them as individuals. It was important to the participants that they felt confident about their looks, that they had self love, and felt attractive. Several participants felt that it was important to them that their husbands or boyfriends gave them compliments, but most felt that if they did not feel that they looked
pretty then it did not matter what others said about their appearance.

Speaker #1: Our perception is validated by others around us. So we were going out one evening with, I think it was with another couple. And I walked out of the bedroom and he said, 'oh, you look gorgeous'. Right. I think that's one way in which you know it. Also I think it comes from inside yourself as well. If you love the inside of yourself and it radiates outside and you are definitely validated by others around you. By the way they look at you, the things they may say around you, how they act.

Speaker #3: I don't know, I agree with you. If anything I felt like I'm like ... even when I hear people say something and things, and I don't know, but I just immediately get all you don't know what you are talking about. Oh! You look nice today. I'm like oh! Thanks, whatever ... or if people look at me, when I walk into a room. I immediately think oh, my God, is there something wrong with me...like I don't think oh, you know, I'm ... I just think, Oh, I don't want their attention.

Speaker #2: So even if people do tell me. I still .... I still would look inside, and if I don't think so then I don't ... I don't care what ... they say.

It was not only physical appearance alone that was important to whether one felt that they were good-looking, according to the participants, but whether they smiled, had a good personality, walked with confidence, believed in themselves, and loved themselves for themselves.

Well it depends on the person. Like I would be able to tell, I don't care what anyone else thinks about it. You know, if they have nice muscle tone and if you know. And if they are just appealing.

Speaker #2: It's how she presents herself too, I think. You know, if she seems confident and by the way they walk or how ever they hold themselves.

Speaker #3: I think smiling is important. If somebody is not smiling, then they are not attractive.

It's not necessarily that they are wearing clothes that are in style, or they are wearing a hair style that's stylish. They wear clothes that are for their body type, that looks good on them and they have a hairstyle that flatters them or whatever. It's not that they have the latest hair cut or something like that.

They all believed that it was very important to have self love and not to focus on the negative.
When the focus groups were asked to describe an average woman, a good-looking woman, and a beautiful woman, each group had a great deal of difficulty describing an average woman and a good-looking woman, yet had no difficulty describing a beautiful woman. It was interesting to note that the description of a good-looking woman was almost impossible for the participants to give, and it was by describing the differences between an average woman and a beautiful woman that the participants were able to give a description of a good-looking woman. The participants used such words as plain, average height (5'6") or short (5'4"), brownish hair, 140 lbs, size 11/12, medium length hair, “never give a second look”, indistinct, “Just background”, wall flower, sort of pretty, no confidence, and non-ideal to describe an average woman.

When you say average it can be someone who doesn’t have any of those characteristics. Doesn’t have anything that we would consider ideal. Nothing stands out about that person, they don’t carry themselves with confidence, they just... you know, they are there, but they are just in the background and you don’t notice them. And because they are average. Because they are a wall flower.

Someone that you would hardly give a second look. She is that, you know, oh, she’s sort of pretty or good-looking but you would never give a second look.

The description the participants gave for an average woman was of an individual with no importance or significance in a society which bases one’s worth on one’s appearance. It is through language that an individual and the social world interact, and language is used by society to give meaning to everything within the world. It is through the language that society uses to define average, good-looking, and beautiful that an individual learns what value is placed upon a woman’s appearance. By learning what is beautiful, good-looking, and average a woman learns what is valued in our society, and helps determine her self-
worth. Language is necessary for individuals to internalize our social reality.

Although the focus groups were asked the question “what makes one good-looking” only moments before being asked to describe average, good-looking, and beautiful women, the participants had a great deal of difficulty describing a good-looking woman. A good-looking woman was described as a woman with internal beauty, good personality, self-confidence, good self-esteem, happy, and few facial flaws. The language used by the participants was:

Yes, a good-looking person could have some flaws but, overall it looks really good, you know. May have a crooked nose but you don’t notice it because the other parts are beautiful ....A beautiful person, everything is perfect.

Think its both because, if you are healthy and strong then you are good looking more than if you are tall and thin doesn’t mean you’re happy and have good self esteem. All part of being good looking.

A possible reason for this difficulty in describing what makes one good-looking, by the participants, could have been that the description of a beautiful woman fits the social ideal, and the description of an average woman is the exact opposite of the social ideal. However, a good-looking woman has certain qualities of both an average and a beautiful woman, and is more of the cultural norm, yet is not the socially acceptable ideal. Several of the focus groups were unable to answer this question, nevertheless, the language that they did use to describe a good-looking woman was very similar to the language used to answer the question what makes one good-looking.

None of the focus groups had any difficulty describing a beautiful woman. A beautiful woman was seen as the ideal. The participants used such language as interesting features, exotic dark features, captivating, striking, beautiful face, personality, ideal, great hair, attitude, light up inside, whole package, natural beauty, physically
attractive, fit, eyes, energetic, smile, perfect, confidence, proud, happy, presence, and self confident to describe a beautiful woman.

Speaker #1: Well, I know I can look across the room and see a beautiful woman. Like I do think that in kind of like who I like to be friends with, beauty is within, but I think there are definitely physical features of someone that makes them beautiful. I don't know that I could classify them, I don't know if I have any one set of things that make somebody beautiful ...
Moderator: So it's not a type?
Speaker #1: No. I guess to me the biggest thing would be eyes, or beautiful skin. Are things that strike me right away, when I think of that. But I do think that there is a certain amount of physicalness is beautiful.
Yes striking. You see that person and you go, "Oh, my God". And not because of anything else that they might be wearing. It's just like their face alone is captivating.

One participant stated that "people want to be the ideal; they want to be more than average, above average." From their description a beautiful woman was not only physically beautiful, but also beautiful on the inside. For many participants the inside was more important than the outside.

Because I think personality really changes how people look at others. Like you can say initially they are really good looking but it could change ... and you can really see them, once you get to know them. One way or the other. You never say one was beautiful according to everyone else and you really don't like them.

... I think self confidence has a lot to do with beautiful but so does the actual ideal physical qualities. But I mean, to make an average woman. Everyone's average. I mean, it's not ... because you are saying average, there isn't one ideal because there is this ideal that is beautiful and then there's everyone else.

The description of an average woman was usually given after they had described a beautiful woman, and the average woman was the exact opposite of a beautiful woman.

The question, why do magazines depict this type of woman was answered simply; it sells. The participants argued that the magazines present a woman who is the societal
ideal, because the magazines are aware that the best way to sell their product is to use models who depict the ideal body image. The participants further stated that not only are we consumers of the product, but also body consumers because it is this ideal body that we want and are willing to do almost anything to obtain.

This is what sells, this is what they would like to look like. They buy the products hoping that they will look like that. That's what the guys look for too, so they compare society with someone who has had photo adjustments, and body makeup and all that...

Speaker #1: You are not normal unless you are this. So that's the major message, that a lot of people take from it.
Speaker #2: You should strive to be like that.

But I think, we buy these magazines. I think that the interesting thing is they often say it's the media's fault. But we are the consumers of that stuff. And that's where there's the issue, right there.

Several participants argued that it is not only women who view the female image depicted by the magazines as ideal, but it also represents the "look" that men find attractive and desirable. Several participants had seen a recent "Date Line" and "OPRAH" show where the October 1996 issue of *Cosmopolitan* was discussed. On the cover of this issue was a picture of the super model Cindy Crawford, and these two programs discussed the techniques used by computer graphic artists to alter the picture or image. For this particular cover, one and a half inches were taken off Cindy Crawford's thighs and hips, her legs were lengthened, her waist trimmed, and excess skin removed from under her arms. The computer graphic artists also raised her breasts and gave her a more rosy complexion. What several participants found astonishing, after seeing those programs, was that although Cindy Crawford represents the ideal female body in our society, even her body is not really the ideal, otherwise all the changes made to the cover photo would
not have been necessary.

Speaker #2: For me, you know, because Cindy Crawford and you know, everyone says she is more like the average woman, but yet why would they do that then if that’s what they are supposed to be portraying they take off an inch and a half of her legs?

Speaker #2: Like this one, it is Cindy Crawford. This one, she is supposed to be the ideal, she is so skinny like she's more voluptuous, she's not too too thin like other models.

The participants argued that if they were not made aware of the changes to the cover, then they would have looked at the magazine and thought “Wow, isn’t she gorgeous. I wish I could look like her.” They further argued that the “OPRAH” and “Date Line” programs made them more aware of society’s acceptance of models, such as Cindy Crawford, as ideal.

Several other participants raised an interesting point during the discussion of why magazines depict this type of woman: the magazines contradict themselves by presenting articles which often discuss self improvement and self love, yet the magazines continue to depict women that are either extremely thin or extremely muscular.

Do you consider it ... controversy because they talk in their articles about, you know ... love yourself, be yourself. But show ... but yet ... All their models are either really muscular or very skinny.

I mean you are hoping that if you look in here you can find something that is going to make you look just like them.

The participants argued that it is impossible to absorb the message “Love oneself”, when the only female image depicted in the magazines is an unrealistic ideal image. The participants argued that the real message that the magazines were sending was that one can only love oneself if they looked like the ideal.

... another way to kind of keep us as consumers, and keep us buying these
things and keep us insecure, is that ... then ...like if you have read Naomi Wolf ... what she says then they turn to the body because you ... not all of us will ever all look like this, it's impossible so that's why ...

Speaker #1: Like it's still in the media and it's still shows us that's what the ideal should be but I don't know how many people today that I talk to every day, feel that way.
Speaker #4: It seems to me ... I mean, firstly are you saying we as the media or we ... Speaker #2: No the population has said, 'Here media, and you present this as the ideal. And I don't think that's it, I think it's people in the media think 'Hey this is all we are going to sell so they are going to think 'oh, I have to look like this'. And there are more people now in the media selling this image. And that's letting people know that it's okay.

Several participants with children also stated that it was upsetting to see the effect of the teen magazines upon their young daughters. These individual's described instances where their daughters or friends of their daughters were obsessed with their appearance, their weight, and whether they looked like the girls in the magazines.

... oh some of them are pathetic ... And you know these magazines are ... pretty gross, but my daughter has Seventeen magazine and those girls are like ... bone, with skin on it, and I'm like ... and they are really tall, like I don't know maybe because they are really young, the girls in there, and I am always pointing them out to my daughter and going, 'you don't want to look like this, this is not appealing.' I mean it doesn't look cuddly and soft, it's just like, bone cold.

... God some really really young girls that are dieting in like grade 3. I wasn't dieting in grade 3 ... but I mean that's really ... it's actually not doing anything, its being obsessive about weight.

The teen magazines, according to these women, depicted models that were even skinnier than the models in the adult magazines, and several individuals were concerned about the effect that these magazines were having on their daughters' self-esteem and perception of their bodies.

The thousands of messages presented daily through visual images are internalized
by individuals consciously and subconsciously, according to John Berger (1980). These advertising images are not only an assembly of competing messages, but also a language in themselves. Berger argues that it is through this visual language of media advertisements that the ideal female body is depicted. "What are the messages that these magazines are presenting." initiated an interesting discussion on the importance of these messages. The participants used words such as: no other beauty, one look, one race, consumerism, goal, not real, body most important, happiness, and ideal to describe the messages that the magazines and the media present.

We're not good enough unless you are that way. You're not pretty enough.

There's no other beauty ... unless you look like that. Well, so far, every like the magazines that I have seen here, none of these magazines in any way, the only way they are representing me is that, it's a woman and that's all. That's all I see there. They did not represent me or anybody of my race. I mean anybody and three, two other three races. There is only one race there.

One participant shared a personal instance after reading Shape magazine.

I think there are definite messages being sent and I mean indirectly. You can go back to the conspiracy theory, or whatever you want .... and I think it is really depending on how you interpret it as an individual. Because I would look at the cover, I would get SHAPE and in my mind I'll view it. I'll look at the person on the cover but then I'll be looking through it ... and ... oh wow, I'd like to be in shape. Not necessarily utterly gorgeous and thin but I know, even so it would be nice to keep in shape because I used to be and I'm not any more. So for me, that's what I focus on, oh you know, I should be healthy I should keep my body.

This participant used the term "conspiracy theory" to describe the power and impact of the media messages on society. The participants argued that women often feel this subconscious need to conform to the media message that if you have blonde hair you will be happy like her, that if you buy that outfit then you will look like her and be happy, if you
smoke then you will be thin, cool, and calm, or "wow, if I could look like that, I would be happy."

I'm seeing too many cigarette ads. They always look ... and it's like ... and I think people do say, 'Oh if I smoke, I will look as calm and cool as those people are, you know.'

Speaker #1: Where they make the models look unbelievably tiny.
Speaker #3: ... and the people in those ads ... they usually smoke.
Speaker #2: But that's the worst of it, I think it does give the sense of "Wow, I could just look like that, I would be happy."
Speaker #4: ... or is it just kind of ingrained into them eventually and they said doing different things ..
Speaker #1: Oh, I don't know if they would know it consciously, but I think subconsciously they think that somehow ...
Speaker #5: But I think it's when it's taken to the extreme, a lot of anorexics and bulimics do that and not ...

They argued that the message, "happiness is only attainable if one looks like the ideal", is ingrained into our subconscious, through the media, and that some women take it to extremes by developing anorexia or bulimia.

They are trying to conform to society I think. You know, what society wants to see and so when women look at that say, "Oh, that looks good", and then thinking about it get all distressed.

The message presented by the magazines is that this is the only image sold, the only acceptable ideal, and the only acceptable look. The participants argued that the message presented by the media was that one's happiness rests entirely upon one's appearance.

**Theme 3: People Ascribe Meaning to Things That Act or Impact on Them**

The third theoretical assumption asserts that since everything that acts or impacts upon humans must have meaning, people ascribe meanings to things that act or impact upon them (Blumer 1969). What Blumer means in this statement is that meanings are not inherent in things in the world, therefore, people must ascribe meanings to things for them
to take on an essence of reality.

It was found that the participants ascribed meanings to six things that acted or impacted upon them.

1) women ascribe the meaning of ideal or perfection to clothing size 6
2) society ascribes a value to women based upon appearance.
3) the ideal female image is ascribed the meaning of gorgeous.
4) society socializes individuals to accept the ascribed meaning given the ideal female body.
5) media messages are seen as real, because they impact their lives.

These will be discussed individually below.

6) the participants remained affected by the meaning ascribed to the societal ideal, regardless of their increased awareness of the media's effects as presented by their university courses.

Women Ascribe the Meaning of Ideal or Perfection to Clothing Size 6.

The participants ascribed meaning to women's ideal clothing size. Many participants stated that the ideal size for women was no more that a size 6, but could possibly be smaller. There were a few participants who felt that a size 6 was too large for the ideal woman and believed that a size 4 was more accurate.

Speaker #4: ... the ideal size.
Speaker #2: Because of my height, I would never fit into like a two, four or five, you know. Someone said six, seven. Well that's pretty large but it's all relative, right?

Speaker #2: Probably a size 6.
Speaker #4: Or lower, depending on ... oh some of them are pathetic ...
When asked if there was an ideal weight, as presented in the visual media, the responses ranged from 90 lbs for a woman who is 5'4" to 120 lbs for a woman who is 5'10". Several participants felt that the weight to height ratio was disproportionate, and that the ideal look for a woman was “bone with skin on it”, and “not cuddly and soft”.

Speaker #3: Not even ... no more than one 120. (All Agree)
Speaker #1: Like they'll say in the magazines, they'll look at the model and look at how tall they are and stuff, and most of them like, ... that's what Cindy Crawford is like. She's like 5'10 something like that but she is like 120 lbs. Speaker #1: And so for that height, 120 is, like, that makes "that" skinny.
Speaker #3: That's right, it means someone is healthy but that is basically what they seem to do. They are all that tall and about 120, or less than that even. Some of the really waif ones.

Speaker #4: The waif that goes down the runway. You know, this waif look.
Speaker #1: But they have to work at it so hard. I think the ideal weight...
Speaker #2: I think that is underweight though ...
Speaker #1: When they are about 90 lbs. Yes.
Speaker #3: And about six feet tall.

The ideal weight lent itself to the waif look, according to the participants.

Society Ascribes a Value to Women Based Upon Appearance.

The focus groups examined what value society ascribes to women. The participants answered the question “what is most important about a woman?” on two levels; cultural and personal. What the participants felt was important about a woman culturally, was she must be thin, tall, young, beautiful, look fit, intelligent, career oriented, and be super woman.

Several participants stated that if a woman was the cultural ideal then the woman was not expected to have a strong personality.

... Yes, but I also don't think ... no I think that a woman can, if she .. if the woman is beautiful by these standards, that a lot of things don't have to be ...
you don't really have to ... you are not expected to prove yourself by your personality as much, or by what you do, or how great your grades are, or how friendly you are. I mean, right now I am dealing with a friend of mine who is a male who is dating with a woman, who is just mean to him. She's mean to him. But she's gorgeous and he won't.... he doesn't want to not be with her.

The most important issue for a woman is her appearance. However, the most important aspects about a woman personally was her inner self. The participants argued that one's appearance was not as important as one's personality, goodness, and caring of others.

I think ...important for myself, and I don't know that I would say this is what is important of a woman, so much as a person,...I don't think that there is any one thing that strengthens them. A woman I guess for me, would be like someone's inner personality and caring for other people.

Yes it's got to be your personality, like the person that you are. I mean each person is different and you know you appreciate different things in different people ... like at different times you know, ... Someone comes in and I think pretty much, I mean I think you realize even when ... even people that are obsessed with the way they look, they still know that ... if they still hang around people that they like because of the person that they are, most of the time, and ... but I mean, our culture I guess, the most important thing would be to have it all, rather than just one or the other. You've got you know, you should be the super woman type thing.

The Ideal Female Image is Ascribed the Meaning of Gorgeous.

The focus groups were asked to describe a gorgeous woman, and what specific aspects make a woman gorgeous. Coward (1985) states that it is by ascribing certain characteristics to a specific body shape and size that defines one as beautiful and by learning society's definition of beautiful, an individual learns what is ideal. The participants responses were very similar to their descriptions of a beautiful woman, however they argued that in addition to depicting the cultural ideal one also had a strong personality (See Theme 2). A woman was considered gorgeous if she looked confident, happy, and carried herself with pride. A woman is gorgeous if her inner beauty and goodness shined through,
and was demonstrated in the way she cares for herself.

Speaker #2: I would be saying ... more personal things. I'd want to ... You know, looking at many things. Wow, that person looks really happy, they look confident, they look ... I don't know ... look confident enough to take care of herself. She likes how she looks ... she sort of walks around with the confidence. She knows she's a good person no matter what other people tell her. She has faith in what she does.

Speaker #1: The goodness inside shines through. You know.

The participants felt that this ideal look comes from all aspects of our society and is presented in the magazines, on television, and in the movies, but it is our parents, friends, and peers who reinforce this ideal.

_Society Socializes Individuals to Accept the Ascribed meaning Given the Ideal Female Body._

When the focus groups were asked where one learned what society described as the ideal body, the participants' responses were more varied and descriptive than their response to where this ideal came from. However, the participants still responded that the media, television, movies, and magazines depicted the ideal female body as the role model that all women should strive towards. A number of examples are:

I think it is ingrained in our society and it's been that long. I mean it's thin is in and young and beautiful is it for so long has been the norm and you can all sit [and] say, 'well it shouldn't be and we should accept each for what we are and whatnot, but as much as you say that it's still such a large part of society, it's more than the media, friends, and family and in everything that we do. And we can't escape it even if you know that that's not right even if you try to change, or whatever, it's still there.

I think it's like a combination of when you are school, and when you are younger and, you know, you seem to be growing just a little bit faster than the other kids in your class and they think you are a freak of nature. I don't know ... Oh, yes. You're tinier, and you're bigger, and you know, you can also it's strange, you can go from being the smallest in your class to the biggest in
your class in just a short span of time that, I don't know, I think little kids are mean. Little kids say what they want to say and, you know, somehow and somewhere they have been taught that like, 'big is bad' or 'fat is bad' and, you know, they ...

Speaker #3: In my family, they are very cruel. My family. Like I have a couple of cousins the exact same age. One of them has just progressively gained weight and there is not one time when you walk in to a family gathering, and they don't comment on her gaining weight. And I just say, have you nothing better to say to her? Or my dad, he will be joking around with me, saying, 'Oh Nicole, you have big fat butt.' It's a joke and I mean I can take it as a joke, but now my sisters are real young, like one is 9 and one is 14 and I see that they hear that and they don't understand that's a joke and ... so I think definitely the family has something to do with it.

Speaker #2: I remember I was a big eater when I was little. I would always remember, 'You don't need that. I have had enough of that you don't need'. And it was never, ever, outright said you are going to get 'fat' ... it was 'you'd better stop eating now, because you have had enough ... you do make a connection.

As well, the participants stated that families had a large impact upon one's perception of the ideal, and that one's mother was especially influential. Several participants described instances where their mothers would comment about their personal weight and about the need to diet.

I think that it has a really big impact. I mean with my own mother, that she was very down to earth and not concerned about her weight and not wearing makeup and things like that. Because that very down-played in my family. But I think if she had been, and I think that my mother had a large impact on my life and the way I think about things. Like and if she had been that way it probably would have made a big difference.

And for me, my father couldn't care less what I look like. And my mom would walk down to a department store with me and she ... 'you really shouldn't be wearing those pants, they make your butt look big'. And I'm thinking 'Mom, you're like twice the size of me. But that was my ... mom wasn't that size, so I needed to be that size, I needed to look like that. And I never, like, that is one thing that she said to me that has always stuck in my head. But it was more that I was angry at her for saying it, more than, 'Oh, I should get a smaller butt', it was more 'how dare you say that to your own child!' And I think family can be around you every single day and they see you in worst conditions in the world. They are going to say honest comments and you don't
take them to heart.

These participants felt that their own mothers’ issues regarding weight and looks affected their opinion about their own body and their need to attain the ideal look. Several participants argued that women are socialized to focus upon their appearance from the time that they are young girls, through such toys as Barbie:

But, so, like right from the beginning, I think it’s something like ... and you know our parents play with our Barbies as well. You know, do their hair and put makeup on the Barbie. You know, this is making her look more beautiful.

I often wonder if it’s a female genetic trait ... like we are actually born with it. From a very young age I mean we socialize pink for girls, blue for boys. Girls have a focus on their appearance. When I was little my favorite toy was the Barbie head. And I would comb her hair and I would do her hair up, I spend hours with it. Putting makeup on and nowadays, the girls are putting makeup on themselves at 6 years of age. You know, play makeup, but you know, I think maybe your family .... maybe not your family necessarily because my mother, she was really good with me. My father was hard on me, but my Mom was good with me. You know, she loved me no matter what. You know. Unconditionally, but ... I think your family does have a strong influence...."Are you sure you want that gravy on your potato?" You know. Yes. I think we socialize within the family.

Other participants, from the nutrition program, stated that the medical profession also pressures women to obtain the ideal look, because many medical professionals follow outdated height-weight charts as a guideline for healthy weight, rather than using the BMI (Body Mass Index).

Speaker #3: I think it's even the medical. Like the whole way the professionals began to look at weight and what's healthy and what's not really affects us. We were talking in one of our classes about the B.M.I. ...

Speaker #2: The BMI ... we were talking about .... the fat that you could be, like you can have a certain weight to be healthy. And then we were talking about how many women who were forced to lose weight over 4 lbs. to lose weight ... their doctor gives them hell. So I think it is ingrained in ... not only through media, ... societal and family, but also through professionals.

These height - weight charts only allow for one body size, and do not allow for different
bone densities or muscle mass, therefore they are not accurate guidelines for weight measurement for all persons.

When asked what is most important about a woman's appearance, the participants stated that it was a woman's personality. The participants argued that one's appearance was not as important as whether the woman smiled, carried herself with confidence, and had a positive "aura."

I think, well, for me, I think when a person is confident in themselves they are more attractive. Like if they have to airs to be attractive ... and it comes out on everything else. A confident, like an attitude that, you know, it isn't anything you do.

Speaker #3: The way they carry themselves ...
Speaker #1: Yes, how do they walk. Do they walk tall, do they look healthy?
Speaker #2: They look happy with who they are.
Speaker #4: ... and there's a smile on their face ...
Speaker #1: ... and their eyes are smiling and they just have this positive [aura] ...

.. to me ... it comes down to know what she really looks like. Like I think I might be struck by her looks, like how does she look, etc., but when it comes down to it I am far more interested in who she is and if I talk to her and I think she's a bitch, well then she's a bitch, but I don't look at her, you know, more ... Because I think I have some times said "Oh, she's beautiful, she must be a bitch ..." but I mean for me I think I am more interested in who she is than, boy she's got great hair, or she's got awesome legs, or something like that.

Several participants stated that it was important for a woman to be physically healthy and energetic, but not necessarily skinny. One participant commented that "appearance is very important to us in today's society, but [she] thinks that if one gets past that, it is really what's inside that matters....". This was a common sentiment among the participants that society focuses upon looks, but they personally believed that one's personality was what was important. Previously when discussing what was important about a woman's appearance the participants focused upon societal ideal, rather than describing their
personal ideal.

Speaker #5: The guys just loved her because her personality was ... she just glowed. She was just had really good confidence ...
Speaker #2: I really don't think it comes from .... I guess that overall it affects what you look like ... physically think. I'm not going to say, well you know, the hair needs to look like this, the face needs to be symmetrical ... I think it is one thing that makes a woman a woman. You know.

The participants stated that their ideas about what was important about a woman's appearance came not only from the visual media, but also from their families, friends, and peers. Several participants commented on the pressure placed upon them by their parents to look a certain way. It was important to many of the participants' parents that their daughters were neither too thin nor too fat, and would often comment upon their style of dress and their body size. Several participants stated that this pressure did not just come from their mothers but from other family members, such as their fathers.

Speaker #1: I mean my dad if he is going to be out of town then he looks a certain way. My mom, she's working and she's doing her business stuff. And then there's a very prescribed kind of role that she plays and the clothing goes with it. And then I guess it's also pressure from parents through TV. Depending on what your family is like. Like for me my family's always been my Dad has always liked seeing my mom in heels and dresses ... instead her putting on a track suit. It is absolutely ridiculous. But she would do that to us too, right. If we went out and wanted to watch our brother row or with somebody else, well we had to be all dressed up. We would have to wear the, you know, usual little girls' clothes, dresses and nice patent leather shoes and the whole nine yards worth. They couldn't tear my overalls off. I wanted my overalls and that's how I've always been but you know my mom had to fight with me consistently to put me in what she wanted me to look like. And that does affect me, because even to this day if I come home and I am dressed one way, you know, it's like: 'What's wrong with you? Can't put yourself together properly?' And then if I come home dressed another way and I'm together with, you know, a blazer, blouse and nice shoes and nice pants, it's: 'Wow, you look great, the bees knees.' But the other way is not good enough.
Moderator: So we learn this from our parents ...?
Speaker #1: Yes, parents, friends, you were always supposed to be thin ...
Other participants stated that they often envied their friends’ tiny body shape, and would sometimes try on their friends’ clothes to see if they were the same size.

You know if I am not happy with and see someone that I think is extremely attractive, and you know, and then it isn’t something that you can pinpoint on, it’s just an air about them. You know, I want to mimic them, but they are not petite. That doesn’t seem to be what I pick up on, I still think that I can achieve the same level of happiness, if I make myself small. If that makes any sense at all. And I guess one of my first best friends now, is an extremely splendid woman but she is really small boned. Really small boned, and I don’t ... you know I want to attain her happiness and her self esteem, but I’ll try her jeans on, you know, and if I can’t get her jeans on. I really don’t want to go out, like, but how on earth am I going to have a good time and how are people going to think I’m attractive because I’m smiling and happy and feel really good about myself, if I just don’t want anyone to see me ...

One participant stated that this need to look like her friend was in the hope of attaining her friend’s happiness and self esteem, but that she usually ended up feeling depressed, ugly, and fat. The participants also commented on their university courses, and the pressure placed upon them in the nutrition program to attain a certain ideal look. Several participants stated that acceptance of their own bodies meant gaining self confidence, and that they tried to fight feelings of unattractiveness, unworthiness, and the desire to fit the ideal. One participant commented that it was by attending University that she was able to gain self-confidence.

You are accepted by your parents, or your siblings whatever. You are accepted by your siblings and your parents and everybody around you. They give you all that confidence all your life. You can walk with confidence for the rest of your life. And a university career will increase that. But if when you are a child you are always told, ‘Oh, this doesn’t look right, or you should do this’ well you are ... your confidence is not going to be there. And coming to university, the only way when you see other women walk around saying, ‘I’m comfortable with who I am at this point in my life.’ But it’s hard to accept that ...

Media Messages Are Seen As Real, Because They Impact Their Lives.
By ascribing meaning to the visual media's images they are seen as real and can impact upon an individual's definition of what is ideal. The participants were shown a wide selection of current magazines, and asked if any of the magazines showed the ideal woman. Several participants stated that the magazines did not show "real" women, but rather the ideal. These participants stated that the women in these magazines were all the same; the same age, the same body, the same ethnicity, and described the women as tall, thin (some felt culturally too thin), blonde, large breasted, and perfect. Although these participants appear to "see through" the media they previously expressed contradictory views. They stated that their ideal size was 4 and felt awful if they did not attain the smallest size possible (theme 2).

If we have five [magazine cover models] that are blonde. They have a tall thin a blonde with fairly long hair.

I think sometimes they [models] are a little ... but for the most part, they have breasts, some of them. They have waists and they have hips. So that's pretty good.

Oh yes, yes. There are a lot of people that spend a lot of [time] trying to portray the images they see in magazines, and I'm just as guilty of that. I'm sure I am.

One participant further argued that she wished that the magazines would show pictures of these models at the time that the layout pictures were taken, and "how many had excruciating headaches because they were hungry, and did they feel exhausted and lethargic and just, like they feel like crap," so that consumers would get a realistic view of these women. Several participants stated that there were very few women in the magazines that represented them, as individuals, other than that the models were women. Many participants believed that it was important that more ethnic minorities be depicted by
the magazines, and that more magazines dedicated solely to ethnic minorities be published. However, these same participants further stated that the magazines depicting ethnic minorities, such as Ebony magazine, still present the same ideal female image as other magazines.

Speaker #2: I think there are some. There aren't a lot, but they still have the characteristics of being tall and thin. Part of this is .... The racial boundaries which are ... totally understated ....
Moderator: The height and the thinness and stuff?
Speaker #2: But maybe it's the marketing maybe they know who they are dealing with, either dealing with, I mean I usually see these magazines in the grocery stores....
Moderator: ... I got the issue from the bookstore actually ...
Speaker #1: Oh, did you? They are trying to affect us and maybe they've done some research and found that ...50 percent of our readers are white and we want to have some sort of affect on them. I don't think that's like their goal, like to screw us up, but they just think that we want to be really skinny ... but anyway they think that, we will find more in common with certain look ... on the cover ... then we will ... If Naomi Campbell was on the cover. I don't know if that's really ... I don't know. Like I kind of agree with you but ...

Speaker #4: They have black hair magazines and fashion and everything ... because if you look at it, it's almost like the same thing, and the only difference is that long hair and a lot of black women have long hair. You know, it means that if you want to be the ideal woman, you have to have long hair and you have to be light skinned.

But I think, something really important that I ask .... I talked to one of my friends about. She is of Asian descent ... and she is shorter than a lot of us actually, and we talk about it... like she doesn't see anyone that looks like her really in the popular, like society, in the magazines. ... Some of my other friends from different backgrounds ... like they are not portrayed as the ideal image, as well, but .. It goes beyond weight and height, although that's part of it ... but because even like she said, that even Asian women portrayed in "this" stuff are tall and thin ...

Even the ethnic magazines, which are supposed to depict a particular ethnic group, impose the white ideal shape upon their consumers by choosing models that closely depict the white ideal.
Various focus groups discussed the need to develop an individual sense of a “healthy attitude” and to define their own world, therefore ignoring the attitudes and opinions expressed in the magazines.

Speaker #3: I guess that used to happen to me when I was younger. But I've kind of passed all that now. I think that's such nonsense.... I go to the gym to work out because it feels good. I like to be there. And I also eat crap and everything like.... and I figure I'm going to do what I want that makes me feel good. I want to eat 3 chocolate bars in one day, I'm going to do it. If I feel like going to the gym today I go, but if I don't feel like it I don't go. But it is just completely generated by what feels good to me.

Speaker #1: Here's something to think about. Like last night, a friend and I both struggle with this issue. And we sort of support one another. She said how she really feels.... if she had not like if they didn't have so many skin magazines... like magazines that like *Shape*, that show so much skin.... but it's still not normal, it's not standard, you know that we've got to judge ourselves in this light. And we had never seen it we wouldn't know to judge ourselves against it... you know that we didn't know it was an ideal. And I think that that really clicked with me and I said 'Yeh!'....

A number of participants commented that the visual media influenced their own attitude toward eating and exercising and that they were more concerned with feeling “good” rather than weight-loss.

Can I say something, first though we have to keep in mind these women don't look like this.... Like I agree with that and I would think that sometimes but more often than not I don't go, 'that's a computer generated thing'. Like I look at that and go, 'Oh, my God, that great abs! Or like you've gct fabulous thighs or whatever, and you know and I don't think it's that, like immediately.... I mean it takes me kind of like feeling bad about myself, going .... 'Oh, I'm so fat ... ohh ...' but then, once I've like beat myself up then tried to make myself feel better, then I go, 'But that's a computer generated image'. So I'm not as bad as I think I am. That happens to me sometimes.

Well, I have to add, I never really thought, like after you look a certain way you feel a certain way ... and then I went through a period where you have to accept yourself where you're at ... like that, and you think you are going to appreciate that and then a little while ago, I lost about 5 or 10 pounds for a very short period of time .... but I know that I felt better. I did I felt better, not only physically but I felt better emotionally. About ... like I didn't want to be emaciated or anything like that, but that extra 5 or 10 pounds that I lost, made
a big difference in how I felt. And it didn't matter whether other people noticed, it didn't matter what other people thought; it mattered what I thought and I felt better. And I kept thinking, `Okay, this totally goes against my thought ... what do I do now, you know!' Like ... but yet I know to maintain ... that loss of 5 or 10 pounds, I had to reduce my eating and I know that's not healthy ... you know this struggle between doing good and feeling good.

One participant argued that advertisers believe women want to be really skinny, and an important issue is that a lot of women will spend a large amount of money to look thin every year. It is this need to look thin that is making business for the magazines, and enable the advertisers to continue to sell their products, such as beauty creams and hair products, because women provide a market for these products.

I think what it comes down to is that a lot of women will spend a lot of money to look thin. And that is what is keeping the magazine up, is the advertisers for beauty creams and hair products ...

The focus groups differed in their answers to the question “do you think these images are pretty typical of women, and do they look like women you know?” Several participants felt that there were women that they knew who tried to portray the images presented in the magazines, they wore the latest fashions, the latest hair style, and tried to maintain the physical ideal image.

But as you go with the hip fashion or the hip hairstyle. You know because even a hairstyle ... that Beverly Hills 90210 thing, it took about two or three years and then the necklaces came out and all of a sudden you could buy them everywhere. The hairstyles and you saw a lot of people get into it.

The participants believed that more women who fit the ideal are more readily seen in Toronto, than in Guelph.

And you know a lot of people don't look like this in their everyday life. I mean you might see it more if you were in Toronto or something and I think people tend to dress up more there if they are working downtown or something like
that. But for seeing around school, I mean people, particularly in Guelph, people don't dress up. So you can have, like you could have a woman who has [her] dimensions, [her] proportions or whatever, but she won't be all made up and she won't have her hair all done and she will be in track pants or something like that and a pony tail and you wouldn't even know, I mean you wouldn't even think of her as ... you wouldn't say, that she, you know she wouldn't be one of your ... beautiful people.

A number of other participants stated that the image presented in the magazines was unrealistic and not typical in society.

Speaker #1: I think they aren't real. They are retouched.
Speaker #4: The models don't look this good.

Most participants stated that it was rare to see women who fit the ideal and that even the models do not fit the ideal, since the layouts are often airbrushed or enhanced through computer graphics.

Speaker #3: Very few.
Speaker #1: And when they do, it's like, what's wrong. Wait a minute, how did they get that way. There's a few people are looking and I think, she looks fake. And it's not fake. It's who she is. But I just see this as someone ... like I'm never going to meet these people so if I finally do, I think ... why does she want to look like that?

You can probably count on just one hand how many people you have come across that look like that.

You know women who sit there and eat carrots and lose 20 lbs in two weeks. They may look like that, but all they can think about is airbrushing ...

These participants also stated that women who are trying to look like famous models, such as Cindy Crawford or Elle McPherson, are trying to attain a fake image, and they further commented that why would some women try and obtain an image that is not real.

... somebody told me they ... saw this on a show somewhere. They showed how they fixed up Cindy Crawford. Like they took off like a good inch off her legs and they like took all the wrinkles and everything. Like not even Cindy
Crawford is the ideal woman. When I comes down to it. I've seen of all, I can't remember which model, Elle McPherson. This is terrible anyway, I saw her on David Letterman, and she crossed her legs and you know the little dents that you get with cellulite and on TV you could see a whole mass of it right [here]. I've never seen that on top in the magazine. I'm not saying that she's bad or anything, but she does have cellulite. Everybody has cellulite, every woman has cellulite.

Several participants stated that the media presents the message that if one looks like the ideal body in the pictures, then one will also be happy and perfect. The focus groups all stated that they felt it was very important for individuals not to judge themselves against the image presented in the media. As one participant said “if we had never seen [ the ideal image] we wouldn't know to judge ourselves against it, ... we wouldn't know it was ideal.”

Although most of the participants appeared to see through the media messages, some still felt that they were affected by the media.

I think it still affects, still in there, but on the surface I can tell more that you know, I know that this picture has probably been retouched and she has probably had, you know, an inch cut off her thighs or whatever and I know that, and so you know I would never go to ... you know that I know it would be silly to go to drastic measures to try and portray it. But it is still in there, it's still ...

When asked if other women saw through the media messages, the participants discussed friends and family members who were and are greatly affected by these messages.

And another thing it does, it makes women really competitive. I mean even, like one of my house mates is really bad for that. If she is watching TV and if she is watching FRIENDS the thing she comments on is always appearance. 'Oh, my God, she's so skinny. Oh, God I hate her, she's so skinny.' It's always 'I hate her, she's so skinny' like "I hate her, look how beautiful she is.' It's so ... and I've said stuff before, and I mean she kind of dances around if I say something, like ".." but 'Well you know she's aiming for that.' And I know she's trying to aim for that and I'll tell her, like I try and tell her that, you know I try and say things to her to tell her, well you don't need to look like that. Not even
that model looks like that, you know what I mean, if she is looking at a picture. But she still aims for it and even she knows it's not real but she still does it, like. And then you ... just, like that's why there's so many people with low self esteem because, you can't meet that and you feel like that you should and the only time you will be a success or if you will be able to do all these things is if you are beautiful.

Participants explained how for many of their friends and family members attaining the ideal look was an all-consuming goal. They stated that their friends and family members were aware that the ideal image is an unrealistic goal and that the images presented in the magazines are not real, but they still aim for the ideal. Many participants felt that these women have low self esteem, are insecure, and believe that being thin and beautiful equals success.

I was just going to comment on the fact that she was saying that she was happier when she lost weight. That's like the whole thing - like all these girls are like smiling - like the whole modeling thing that if you are this way you'll be happy and happiness is the ultimate goal.

I have a friend who's living with a household of guy friends ... and they live together and they buy these magazines and they buy them for the bodies on the front. And when I see that, even though I will yell at them, like 'what are we doing? You are ... this is totally not real'. And I'll pounce on everything that I know is true but when it comes down to it, I'm hurt by it. Like I can't even speak for anyone else. I'm know that I'm hurt by it ... I don't look like that. Like they just see me as like someone to make fun of, someone who comes over and hangs out with, but I'm not beautiful, I'm not pretty. I don't have an ideal body. So ... I don't know .... I was thinking about other of my friends too, that feel the same way.

Several participants described their friends as being obsessed with the need to attain or maintain perfection.

I know of one of my friends [who] is totally obsessed with her weight. She was very thin in high school and then she gained weight in university and she relates her whole university experience as being horrible and traumatic because she was overweight. When she loses weight or has a period when she is thinner then she is happier. She is just totally obsessed with it. Finally she is coming to terms with it - but she is not the only one she is the average.
She is totally obsessed by it - her whole life is dictated by what she eats, by exercise.

Speaker #4: I found that my friends that ... I have two friends that are very, very insecure and they can't comment, they can't talk to you about commenting on other people's looks and ....oh, does she look fat, and you know, 'How do I look, how do I look?' And it's annoying and I say,'do you have anything better to talk about than that'? The same girls, I said, I tell you the names it's the same girl that do it over and over again.
Speaker #3: We see it's affected us and we have seen it affecting other people and stuff like that. And comments.

These women have allowed their lives to be dictated by this ideal image and believe that the reward is thinness. One participant stated how her sister's moods are controlled by the scales and for her what she weighs means either happiness or sadness.

In two focus groups participants stated that they knew women who deliberately went the opposite way of the ideal. These women purposely tried to look unattractive. These participants stated that these women were trying to close themselves off from the negative comments because of their weight and appearance.

I have one friend that she totally does the opposite very deliberately. She will not do anything for looks ... she actually tries to not look attractive. And it isn't that she's a ... strong, wonderful woman going against the grain, I think it's that she really hurts because she doesn't come close to the standard. And so its sort of like a closing off ... So it's not just people trying very hard to fit the ideal. Like it's just totally rejecting themselves because they don't even come close to the ideal ...

By ascribing a meaning to the ideal image presented in the visual media, this image impacts on the individual's perception and attitude towards her own body. When asked how this ideal has affected them, the participants commonly expressed a desire to look like the ideal and it hurt that they did not. The participants discussed issues of self-esteem, and explained various ways, such as compliments, that they try to build their own self-esteem especially when they realize that their bodies have changed since they were
teenagers.

I was thinking about ... trying to run through my friends ... we are a pretty good group of friends and I find that a lot of us are aware of it how ... will come up in conversation. And I find that I will try and say something to somebody ... like give them a compliment because maybe people don't give compliments any more to anyone .... and so we are not used to ... we are kind of not getting compliments, we are getting "this" thrown in our face and so it's because there are people needing compliments which I think a lot of our friends, my friends, my group, we do try to build each others self esteem up .... I don't find that I really get affected by this.

Speaker #2: What a lot of them don't realize is the same thing to me I was in high school I was really thin. But my body changed. My hips grew, I mean you don't realize that it's just fat you are putting on.
Speaker #3: Your bone density changes.
Speaker #2: Yes, I found for me, when I was about 18-19, that's when it changed. And I can't go back to that weight. If I went back to the 21 weight I was before that, I'd be probably not, you know, I mean unhealthy.

The Participants Remained Affected by the Meaning Ascribed to the Societal Ideal, Regardless of Their Increased Awareness of the Media Effects as Presented by Their University Courses.

An important area explored was whether the participants' university courses altered the meaning they ascribed to the social ideal, or whether the visual media still influenced their interpretation of the ideal female image. The question, do you think your university courses affected your interpretation of these media images, brought a strong "yes" from all the focus group participants.

Well, for the past three years I have been in Women's Studies and before that I was in Computer Science. So in computer science I learned how to airbrush and do good things with a picture. And in the graphics labs. And in Women's Studies, they don't pay any attention to them anyway and so, I would say yes, definitely.

It depends on what program you are in. I mean I am in Women's Studies as well, four years of women's studies. You sit back and you really see who is
trying to control what and what image. And also in general you also try to see all the ethnocentric things that are being brought forth in media and tend to pick up on it quicker.

However, there were several responses to this question that were unexpected. The participants, who were from the nutrition program, discussed their impressions that pressure is placed upon them by their department to maintain a certain look and body size.

Only in our degree we had one prof that said that if you gain too much weight you will never get a job in your field. And I find there is a lot of pressure when going into the field. You know you have got to reach an ideal goal/weight or you can't give nutritional advice.

It is almost contradictory to all we have learned about the healthy body. Other participants described how they were told that a size 8 was the largest size a nutritionist could be, and still work. Another participant stated that in a nutrition class which discussed anorexia and bulimia, six students out of thirty openly admitted that they had an eating disorder.

I think it has helped me to see how prevalent it is that I can take 4th year courses with like 30 people and have discussed issues like, the effects of the media, you know anorexia and bulimia ... and I mean out of a class of 30 I have like about 5 or 6 come up and say what an impact it had on them and they had gone through anorexia or gone through bulimia when it would to have ... it helps you see how prevalent it is ... it hits home more.

The comments expressed by the other participants all demonstrated how the pressure to maintain or attain the ideal look has affected their everyday life. Participants talked of maintaining a certain weight, working out, watching what they ate, and being very critical.

Well there are number of us are in Human Nutrition and know it is a kind of a function of the professional trying to go into being aware of it. There was a social-psycho aspect of a nutrition course that we took. Why people eat, how
people eat. And a number of things that people just don't think about. Like the social aspect of eating and ... it's funny, because my attitude has changed but I think that for everybody else who has changed 'Yes, that's no problem'. But every once in a while for myself, I'm still my own worst critic and I'm, still going, 'Ohh, I should be thinner than this.' Everybody else is fine, it's just me that's weird.

It's really scary. Like I'm in Women's Studies, I mean, like I'm extremely critical of these things. Like I sit at home with my room mates, and we totally, tear apart commercials and like, you know ... like say how ridiculous it is and yet I still have, you know issues about weight, about how I look, about whatever, and I like ... I don't know .... and I'm the one with the university education, with the focus on women's issues and all this stuff and I totally, like, it scares me how this must affect other people, especially like young girls.

But I'm saying before that ... I never used to give a shit about all this stuff ... but ever since I started, I become friends with this ... this one girl who lost 50 pounds and she looked like this. She had this body. So now, I'm like ... 'Oh, it's possible, it's possible' ... but why has she affected me so much ...

Although very few of the participants openly admitted the pressure that they placed upon themselves in order to look like the ideal, it was present in the underlying comments about how often or how much they worked out, the amount and kinds of foods eaten, and the fear of putting on one pound or going up one dress size.

Several participants stated that the university's influence upon interpreting the media images was program dependant. There were several participants who held degrees in the sciences, and believed that it was not until they had taken sociology, psychology, family, or women's studies courses that they became aware of the impact of the media images upon their everyday lives. It was through their respective programs that the participants realized what media messages were being presented. The participants argued that their programs have made them more critical and less accepting of the media messages. Nevertheless, these participants still felt that they were affected by the media images.

So you might be able to rationalize and ... well, yes I know that the media is
trying to sell this and sell that, or yes, I know it shouldn't be that way or, whatever. But it is still, I think, regardless of that knowledge, has a great deal of success on how people think and act.

Say you see through the pictures now, but they still affect you, you know, we are still to a certain extent concerned about, you know, how we look and our exercise, and stuff like that.

Several other participants felt that the influence from their university courses was one aspect of their increased awareness, and it was through their experiences at university that helped to make them more aware of the issues and the effect of the media images. The participants argued that although the university was a place where ideas were explored, and where they had matured from “young teenagers” over the past four years, the university population has a large majority of women who are anorexic and/or bulimic.

But interestingly, the university population is one that has the most women who are anorexic and most women who are bulimic. And among university population ... and that comes to my mind as being an issue where for the first time in your life you are in your 20's and you are realizing that this is your body shape. Because up to that point you keep thinking that ... your body does go up and down and all around, because you are growing, but at 20 you do start to get your size ... or the shape that you are to have in your life. And it is at that point that people start, although they do realize that ...

Speaker #4: I don't know, it's for me just university or just ... I'm maturing. I mean, I'm completely different than I was when I was 18, five years later, or 6 years later.
Speaker #2: It's a combination of both.
Speaker #4: It's a combination of just growing up so I can establish who I am as a person rather than trying to figure out ... you know ... if I fit into.
Speaker #1: ... everybody else's image ...

I think it's a combination of university and then learning courses, the media affects me and I just supposed I've learned more about the whole context than about dynamics and a few more things that contribute to overall health, or your overall feeling about yourself, that are more than how you look. There are more things that come into play. As you mature, I think both of those things come into with how you feel about how you feel. I mean we learn about self esteem. You learn about feeling good, you know.
Through the focus groups it was interesting to find that every participant knew at least one person who suffered from an eating disorder, and in each of the focus groups there were at least two people, in some cases three, who described themselves as having an eating disorder or were in recovery.

**Theme 4: Meaning Making is a Collective Act**

The fourth theoretical assumption is that meaning making is a collective act. (Blumer, 1969) The way individuals interact with each other with respect to body size and in reference to their real bodies, and in reference to their real bodies relative to bodies in the media, that determines the meaning that is associated with media and personal body sizes. When forming a first impression one is often judged by physical appearance alone, according to the participants. Several participants commented that men judged women based upon their appearance, and they believed that men felt it was their right to judge women this way.

But I've noticed, I guess, like with my friends and their friends, and stuff like that, yes, guys do look at the girls and look at their bodies. But then everybody, like I've noticed with my friends that, okay they meet a guy at the bar ... a guy's looking at their body and everything, they find out about the person and then they're off to the next girl. It's like ... Yeah, first impressions it is your body but ' what really does matter is who you are, you know.

Every day. Even little things. Just comments ... even friends that ... male friends of mine used to go out somewhere, or you are looking at a picture, and you say,... I mean the people that they notice are the ones that sit there kind of culturally cultivated look of, you know, think beautiful women. Of course that's the one in the pictures they will point to ... 'Who's this? Oh, who's this?' Like even just last night I was looking at pictures with my housemate. And one of my house mates, who is a guy, was looking at it ... 'Oh, who's this woman?' You know in a couple of the pictures and I just noticed, I mean he doesn't know any of the women there, but he points to the one who is the most beautiful and, you know wants to know about her because that's the most intriguing one ...
The participants stated that the comments strangers make about women of larger size demonstrate how individuals judge women based upon their body size.

My sister's been judged on it. Like I don't know that she's been judged but she's a lot more ... like she's bigger than I am and I know that she's in a co-op program and she's always conscientious of it and like she always feel the need to like, 'Okay, I've got to do this to minimize my body size ... I'll wear this ... I'll wear black. And I'll wear, you know, very business like.' Like she always feels that she has to overcompensate. I don't think she's thinking, 'I'm a bigger person than the average so I have to hide that'. But she's always conscientious of it and she feels that she is judged by it. Like she says to me, I think she will just look at me and see a body. They don't see my intelligence, they don't see my caring nature, they don't see anything like that. And I don't know if that is an exact. I don't think that's .... a definite example where someone has been judged, but I know that she has felt herself that she has been judged. And I think, where does that come from. It comes from somewhere ...

I had something like that when someone was turned down, specifically because they were heavy set. But it would be hard to pinpoint I think. But I know my sister is really overweight and I think she is about 200 lbs. I mean she is really big.... the other day and she said she went out one night with a whole bunch of people from work. And not that anyone was that great but she was the biggest person and she said the guys danced with all the girls except her. And she said, I'm sure it was because of weight, my weight you know. Just because,.... they were just all friends, but it was just her weight.

And I think when people think of overweight, they tend to ... they think that if you are overweight that means you don't know, you are lost with a health thing comes in, like you don't know how to take care of yourself. Or you know, this new health weight has come out and you are totally ignoring it. I think people tend to think, or put that judgement ... you know, you know the health risks that are associated with obesity so why don't you do something about it? I think it's just the attitude.

Several examples of the comments made by friends of the participants, male and female, about women of larger size were: if they wanted to, they could lose the weight; they have no self control; and she has such a pretty face, but she's an awful size.

Speaker #1: In general ... yes, first impression. If someone sees someone

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who's bigger, a lot of people that's bigger they think, `Hmm so do you know that she's bigger and do you like being that size or ...'
Speaker #4: Or no control over what they put in their mouth. If they really want to, they can lose it.
Speaker #2: It's easy, isn't it? Don't eat!
Speaker #1: They always make comments like, `she has a pretty face, but she's an awful size'. And, 'she'd be really pretty if she'd only lose some weight, you know.'

The participants were able to describe numerous instances where women were being judged based upon their body size. Several participants described occasions where women's attractiveness was openly discussed by male employees at work, for example:

I worked over at the Keg, prime for an example, and two bartenders were male and two of the wait staff were male and the two managers were male, and I was the female. And then this, I guess attractive woman comes over and she is sitting down at ... and one of the guys comments he goes: `You know, I don't really know why everyone is so hot and heavy over this one woman because apparently she's, you know' all these guys, all the friends of this one guy, all have it for this one woman. So, you know, all six of these men proceeded to go and check her out. 'Yes, she's got nice eyes, she's got a good body', and that's just about it. And she was, you know, busty, she was busty for sure but she'd got this great little figure, you know bra top ...

In several of the focus groups the participants discussed their beliefs that there is a weight requirement that many airlines still require their female flight attendants to maintain. The participants explained how several airlines still required them to be weighed in before flights by management.

I have a friend who is an airline stewardess and she said that they have to even go on the scale before they fly, or at a certain time, certain number of weeks and she's got to the stage where she is peeling off her nylons and her underwear and standing there naked, just to make the weight because they get put on suspension until they can make the weight. And the weight isn't even a healthy weight.

If they were over the weight requirement then they were suspended from duty until they met the weight requirement. This requirement is much lower than the medically
recommended weight for women. This weight requirement is not applied to the male attendants, who are not required to maintain a certain weight, nor is it applied to pregnant attendants who are allowed to perform their duties until the seventh month of their pregnancy. An explanation for this weight requirement was presented by several participants who wondered if this requirement was due to planes maintaining a certain weight ratio in order to ensure safe flying.

But when they ... it might have something to do ... and I don't know if like, little fluctuations in one person's weight would make any difference, but there's a weight balance that they have to fill out for any aircraft and if it's overweight they can't fly.

I understand that some of the stewardesses were flying like. I have my pilot's licence and there is their weight and balance requirement but I think that is ridiculous.

However, other participants raised the argument that if ensuring safe flying was the reason for this weight requirement, then male attendants should be required to maintain a specific weight, pregnant attendants should not be allowed to continue working, and passengers and pilots should be required to weigh in before boarding the plane. Other interesting points were raised by the participants concerning female flight attendants:

Well I know for airline stewardesses, that they have to be a certain weight and they have to fit into. I heard from someone that they have to fit into the uniforms which are only one size. And people that can walk well with heels and you know, look.

In the first focus group a participant described how the placement agency, Quantum, judged potential employees on looks and appearance. There was a specific dress code for the men and women, which was much stricter for the women.

I think Quantum does the same thing though. It's not so much weight but I used to work at Quantum and Quantum's a placement agency. And when we interview possible people that we are going to replace there, just to know what
they are like, what their job experience is, how they handle themselves in an interview, etc. We will be sending them out to employers who are looking for a temporary secretary, temporary accountant, temporary whatever. At the bottom part of our cardboard sheet that we sit there with in our paper clip, whatever, we have to write what they wore, what they look like, were they in a suit, what color, did it suit them, did they put themselves together well, was she wearing makeup, was she not wearing makeup. Were her earrings appropriate, was she too gaudy, was she too cheap looking. And we had to make these judgement calls. And then write it on the file and put it in. And then they would pick up a file and go, 'Oh, God, no she is kinda cheaply dressed we can't send her to this guy, he is not going to accept her.' That's pretty scary.

The ranking of a person's appearance was left entirely up to the interviewer's judgement and was not based upon any particular criteria.

Several other participants discussed instances where their children or children they knew felt that they were being judged based upon their appearance. One individual commented ...

And they can be younger than that, because when I was discussing my part thesis, that I was working, this man that I worked with, he's niece is six 'I have to go on a diet.' Because, with her it comes from her mother, always dieting and binge dieting and so it's now part of her lifestyle.

Another individual described an incident with her teenage son ...

And I think it starts really early. I have a 13 year old son and I remember last year, when he had just turned 13, he had girls phone and want to go to a movie and this one girl called him up one night and he was taken aback, but he was very nice, which surprised me considering he was a teenaged boy and he was not used to these things, and his comment was: 'No, I don't think so. But thanks anyway, maybe another time'. And I thought, 'What a nice kid.' And I was going to compliment him on it and he gets this look on his face and he seemed very, very upset, and he said, 'No, no, I don't think that way at all. No, No.' Anyway he hangs up the phone and I said to him, 'What's the matter?' And I said 'You handled that really well'. I said, 'I'm really proud of you.' And he said, 'Oh, Mom, she is some upset. 'And I said, 'Why?' He said 'As soon as I said 'no, I don't think so', she said 'What's the matter, do you think I'm fat?' This kid was 12. And I said, 'Oh, Alex', I said, 'Well have some of the boys teased her that she is chubby?' He said, 'No, Mom, she's so skinny when you look at her sideways she disappears.'
There was one participant who admitted to judging a woman based on her appearance, and was angry and shocked when she realized what she had done.

Yes. At work. My one boss, she’s of average height, but a little bit more weighty. And I know that she’s ...overweight, but she is just a little bit chunky. She has a little bit more too her, and she doesn’t treat me well, she is a little bit mean to me, and she has said things to me that would lead me to believe that it has more to do with that I am tall and thin rather than ...like the whole idea that you should hang out .... and if you are 20 pounds overweight ... People that are 100 pounds overweight, then you are going to feel thin. So I think ... that ... whether it happens or 10 not, I became more aware of the issue and it really woke me up and to how I judge other women unfairly and that sort of thing. It made me more aware ...

Another participant commented ...

Another thing, too, and I guess I'm guilty of it as well there's a fairly decent looking guy, you know, his girlfriend is overweight and What does he see in her? Look at her. What a waste.

Several other participants examined instances where they felt that they had judged other women based on their appearance. They explained that this was on particular occasions when they had gone into stores for women of larger size; either to purchase clothes for someone else, or because they saw an item in the display that interested them. They each stated that they felt happy that they did not have to purchase clothes in the store themselves, and that they shopped at the "normal" clothing store. There was a feeling of relief to be "normal" or average.

About the kind of attitude is in larger size purchase is kind of funny because I remember when I was younger and we going to buy my mom stuff for Christmas, and my Dad and I was going, and I was really excited, because I got to spend money. But anyway, I went in there and apparently they said, `You realize this is a larger store, and I went `Yeah, this is for my mommy', you know and that kind of thing. And ... but it was weird because I felt good because I wasn't buying clothes for myself in that store. Only it was this weird kind of `Whoa, I'm excited about buying clothes for my mom but they don't think I'm large size I was really excited ...
Several participants stated that they were made to feel unwelcome in the stores for larger women, and a few had been asked to leave because they were making the other customers feel uncomfortable. The participants were angered by the requests for them to leave and felt that the managers were negatively judging them based on their body size.

I've gone into them, and I get strange looks, like I'm not really welcome in there. Like I'm sort of in the 14-16 and if I go up, like if I go into the store in Toronto, it's 'oh, you are not big enough, or you are not that size,' so they make you feel bad.

I did that once. And I went into the Plus clothing store by accident ... Cotton Ginny, because I saw a really nice jacket. And when I went in there and the lady goes, 'you'd better leave'. She goes, 'you know, your store is downstairs'. And I'm like ... I just want the ... 

These examples demonstrate how the public's opinion of women is based upon appearance, and it is one's appearance that society values. A woman must have the ideal look if she is interested in having a relationship or applying for a job, according to the focus groups.

In one of my classes there was a presentation and they gave a case study, which was a true one, where two people went in for a job interview and this one person was extremely skilled and had all this experience and education, and was totally made for the job. The other person was not so experienced and not really with it, I don't want to say ditsy, but that kinda was how she was. The one with the experience was overweight and the other one was skinny and the skinny girl got the job because they went by looks.

Oh, no, I think in the end that basically, you know they do think that you know .... you know ... they automatically think that the person who was thinner ... has the qualities that they are looking for.

The participants argued that women were and are judged unfairly, and that the stereotype given to overweight individuals is often applied to women as seen in this comment ...

Also my mom has, like had some health problems and she is a large woman and she has been her whole life a large woman, and there are heart problems
like run really heavily in my family, and her doctor had the gall to say, "You don't have heart problems, you are just overweight." Well, my mother was in the hospital for 3 and a half weeks with like really bad angina and you know, then they did the angiogram and then they did the angioplasty and she needed it, it wasn't something that she was making up, but the doctor had the gall to say that. "You're overweight, so that's what your problem is.'

They concluded that overweight women are seen as lazy and unhealthy, and are often ostracized by society.

... they come in and you think, like kind of associate you know, beautiful with good, you know what I mean, that they must be, mean sure those kind of beautiful women who are stupid, but you associate that with good things rather than ... you know someone comes in and they are overweight and you think, 'oh they are lazy' and ... they overeat, they're slobs, and obviously they don't care about themselves.

Everything good is associated with being beautiful, according to several participants, especially one's feelings about themselves, and only negative attitudes are applied to overweight individuals.

In one focus group the participants commented on a television advertisement where two women sat criticizing another woman whom they perceived as "perfect". The two women in the advertisement were so upset by the woman's ideal looks they felt that they must find something wrong, and decided that the "perfect" woman had fat ankles because they were unwilling to accept her as the ideal.

Don't you remember a commercial where there were two ladies sitting there having coffee and this really beautiful woman walks down and can't find anything happening and say, ... swollen ankles or something ...

Several participants stated that if a woman is seen as perfect or ideal then she is often considered a "bitch". The participants stated that women will often imagine an imperfection or flaw in woman who is considered ideal, in order to compensate for their
own feelings of inferiority or shame for not being the ideal. The example of the media’s judgement of women’s bodies led many participants to argue that they believed women are their own worst enemies, and that it is the individual’s choice to buy the magazines, therefore, they are subscribing to the messages presented by the media.

Speaker #4: Most are critical of other women, more so than men.
Moderator: Any instances again?
Speaker #4: None that I can say ... I mean I think most of us and most of my friends you see them in here every day. And I can't point out this day and the time it happened. But I mean, house mates and I do it all the time. Even we don't mean anything by it but it is just how it is, or someone walks down the hall and someone makes a comment and we are our own worst enemies, I think, when it comes to making judgements.

Speaker #1: Don't you think women tend to make more comments about food choices. I don't know, like if you are sitting with women, they are more apt to comment on what other women are having to eat.
Speaker #3: I would just think that. Like if you see someone who is overweight, you know who is having a bag of chips, you know ...

Several participants made the interesting point that society often views the thinner person as confident, and to have all the qualities that society desires in an individual.

... and the skinny one is carrying herself better because she has more confidence in herself because everyone said, 'you look good, you look great'. But the person who is a little overweight is often going to go in to that interview and not have ... may not have quite as much confidence. That's going to affect it. I mean I have a feeling that you look at the body weight and you think, 'Oh, she's slim, she takes care of herself', you know, stuff like that. But it's also going to be, if everyone is telling this girl, 'Oh you are a little overweight'. And she is going into this interview and she wants to be confident that she is not really. That is what you look for, when in a job it ...

The thin women in society are viewed as ideal, however a few participants commented that their immediate reaction to a woman who depicts the ideal look is that she must be a "bitch".

People judge beautiful women, the ideal ... You know, oh, what a bitch. You
know why does she have to do it she's just a bitch. And after getting to know some of them, I realize that they are people too ... and it really hurts them that they get judgement that way, because they aren't happy because they look that way, because they don't see themselves that way.

The examples and comments presented by the participants demonstrate that society only places values upon women who depict the ideal female body and those who do not depict this ideal are treated as outcasts.

Many participants told of personal instances where they had been judged based on their body size. One participant described the pressure placed upon her and other dancers by cruise lines and the theme park Canada's Wonderland to obtain a specific weight. They threatened termination if one did not lose weight or maintain a set weight.

I'm in the group business of that because I'm a dancer and I dance at Canada's Wonderland and I get that ... And it's like on cruise lines and if you are not the weight they will ask you to lose that weight and they will fire you if you are not that weight. And like not even thinking about anything. They'll say, 'hey, sorry, lose 10 lbs. If you don't lose that 10 lbs., sorry, you don't have this job.'

Another participant explained ...

There were a lot of people that I've known, you know, different acquaintances, you know and I would go out socially when I was bigger. And everywhere I went I listened to the small talk. And when I lost the 40 lbs., no more small talk, let's get to know her. And I've known them all along, and that was hurtful. That was really hurtful. That was very painful to me. All of a sudden they want to know me and I was there the whole time, no changes, I'm a little happier, feel a little better and I'm more energetic, I might get up for a few more dances, but where were you?

Another participant explained that due to a medical condition she lost a great deal of weight over the four month university break. At first her friends were congratulating her on how wonderful she looked, but after a while several friends and complete strangers were asking if she was anorexic and giving her pamphlets about eating disorders. One
participant described her recent experience of celebrating Thanksgiving at a friend’s home.

Well, I had an instance when I went to a friend of mine's house for Thanksgiving. And we all sat down to eat and some of her cousins came in and sat down and they were bigger than me and they all started to put each other down as to how big they were, and then one of them ... then said, 'You've got to eat more, why don't you eat more. You are making us all feel bad about how much we weigh, so go and have a second helping.' And it was really uncomfortable because I didn't know the family and they were just literally attacking each other for their own weight and then sort of ... and I felt there was a sort of ... I don't know ... to excuse them when I was like ... oh, I didn't know what to say. It was an odd experience for me.

Another participant described the reaction of others to her recent weight loss.

I personally I was at friend's who lives at home with her mom. It was her birthday and her parents always have a couple of friends over and we have dinner ... every year. And so there are a couple of adults who, like I see them every year. I have seen them for the last, I don't know how many years, right. And so I was sitting next to one of them, and we were passing around a picture that was taken of me and my friend and another friend ... and this was last winter when I was heavier. And this woman was looking at this picture and she turns to me and says, "Oh, my God don't you look so fat in this picture'. And I was horrified and she saw absolutely nothing wrong with like totally putting me down. And it was ridiculous and I said, "Well I don't think that ... I looked that horrible.' And she said, 'Oh, well but you don't look like that now. Like I wouldn't tell that to you to your face if you looked like that now.' And she thought absolutely nothing, I mean my personality hadn't changed. Like nothing about me had changed, and yet she totally, I don't know she felt like I was a different person or something. Like. It was incredible. I totally was horrified.

A participant in the fifth focus group described an incident when she and her cousin were walking down a street in Australia.

One of my cousins, she's extremely obese, like really obese. Probably one of the biggest women I think I have ever see. Anyway, we were walking through one of the cities in Australia and there was a Japanese tourist bus and the bus stopped and everyone got out just to take ... they stopped because she was there... like (squeal of brakes) stop the bus, and then 54 people jumped out with all their different cameras and she just stood there... and it had happened to us before and the thing it hurt too ...

This participant was shocked by this incident, but her cousin said that this was not
the first time that people had taken pictures of her or stopped and openly made comments about her weight, what she was eating, or expressed concern about her health. The participants of the focus group could not believe that people would be so rude and forward to openly accost a complete stranger about their weight.

Another example of society judging a woman based upon her appearance was when a participant attended her high school graduation ball alone, and this action was only deemed acceptable by her friends and other classmates, because she looked great.

... things like, someone thinks of the way you feel better is to tell you you look good. If you are having a bad day, or if ... or even, I guess, I went to my high school graduation with my [friends], but I went stag ... and so it was supposed one of those things where everybody was going to go stag but then ... on the day they'd all got dates and I was just like 'Oh! Well I wasn't going to ask anyone so I just went by myself. But I remember the people would say to me that night 'you know, who are you with?' and I said, 'Oh, I came by myself'. And no way they would make me feel better to say, 'Oh, but that's okay, you look great'. You know what I mean, I was just like ... well, ... the point is I was having a good time. Like it's just the way people focus on that with 'Oh, you looked great' and that was all the justification like its okay if you go by yourself if you look great. But if I looked like crap, then they would look ... and it would be like, 'Oh, that's why she's here by herself, you know!'

The comments and examples presented by the participants show that an individual's size and looks determine whether one's actions are accepted by society as appropriate. As well, many individuals determine another's acceptability as a friend based upon their appearance. The examples presented by the participants show that our society judges an individual's worth solely upon their appearance, and that individuals who do not represent the ideal look are made to feel inferior. As well, many focus groups concluded that prejudice against individuals of larger size is the last acceptable prejudice in our society.

CONCLUSION
The use of four theoretical assumptions, drawn from social constructionism, aided in understanding how media images influence women. The focus of this study was to examine the ideas, attitudes, and opinions of fourth year female students from the University of Guelph, regarding the effect(s) of the visual media upon the ideal female body image, and whether or not they tried to achieve this ideal.

Four situations were defined as real by the participants: women presented in the visual media portray an achievable ideal weight; messages used in the advertisements are real; there are some objective criteria other than appearance upon which an ideal weight for women is based, and if women are not the ideal weight then they are overweight. There were three consequences which emerged as a result of defining these situations as real: pressure to be thin; work to achieve or maintain ideal weight; and if not the ideal clothing size then they do not go out.

As expected based on the second assumption. The participants used language to define the social reality of what is an average, good-looking, and beautiful woman. It is the visual media that sells a look, which the visual language depicts as ideal, and the participants argue that this one image of perfection is the only look deemed attractive by society. The focus groups stated that the visual media presents both verbal and visual messages of one ideal body for society.

As expected from the third assumption, there were six things that the participants concluded acted or impacted upon them. First, participants ascribed the meaning of ideal to the clothing size 6. Second, society ascribes value to women based upon appearance. Third, the ideal female image is ascribed the meaning of gorgeous. Fourth, society socializes individuals to accept the ascribed meaning given the ideal female body. Fifth,
the participants' university courses had an impact on the meaning given to the societal ideal. Sixth, the media messages are seen as real.

The way individuals interact with one another in regards to body size, and in reference to their real bodies in the media, determines the meaning that is associated with the visual media and personal body sizes. This finding was expected based on the fourth assumption.
CHAPTER 6
DISCUSSION

Introduction

This study examined women's attitudes and opinions concerning the visual media and its presentation of the ideal female body size and shape. This thesis focused upon women's interpretation of the media's presentation of the ideal female body image, and what women do or do not do in order to emulate or achieve this female body image. Forty female students from the University of Guelph participated in seven focus groups aimed at exploring their ideas and attitudes concerning the ideal female body as presented in the media. The participants provided many personal thoughts and ideas which provided excellent information for analysis.

Women have been taught the social reality that society applauds female thinness and places expectations and pressure upon women to attain the social ideal. However, while female thinness is applauded and awarded positive values such as beauty, intelligence, and success, female obesity is seen as disgusting and viewed as taboo. The pressure to attain or maintain the ideal female image plays an important role in the negative self-image many women believe, and also increases the extreme measures some women will go to to achieve this ideal.

This study was set within a symbolic interactionist framework using work from Berger and Luckmann (1966), Blumer (1969), and Thomas (1928), to explore how women interpret and ascribe meaning to the visual images of an ideal female body as presented
in the visual media. There were four theoretical assumptions drawn from social constructionism to help shape the central questions and guide in the analysis for this study.

Social constructionism argues that "reality" is not fixed from moment to moment, but rather each individual has considerable ability in shaping what happens in everyday life. It is through social interaction that an individual negotiates reality in everyday life, and it is through language that individuals are able to define and internalize social reality.

The four theoretical assumptions were:

**Theme 1: W.I. Thomas' Theorem which states that situations that are defined as real are real in their consequences**

Thomas' theorem "if men [or women] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" aided in data analysis (Collins 1988, p.265). This theoretical assumption helped the researcher to understand the data. It was found that the participants of the focus group defined the media's image of the female body as real and was the norm to be achieved. The participants defined four situations as real: the women presented in the visual media portray an achievable ideal weight; messages used in the advertisements are real; there is a real objective weight for women; and if a woman is not be ideal female weight then she is overweight. There were certain consequences that emerged from the data as a result of defining these situations as real: women were pressure to be thin; women must work to achieve or to maintain the ideal weight; and if a woman is not the ideal clothing size then they did not go out.

Berger (1980) in *Ways of Seeing* argues that an individual's interpretation of what is beautiful or ideal as depicted by the media, is affected by what the individual knows or
believes to be real. Berger (1980) and Coward (1985) state that the ideal image presented by the visual media prevents women from seeing themselves as beautiful, but rather lacking in some way. Berger's (1980) argument is similar to the Thomas Theorem which states that situations that are defined as real are real in their consequences. It was found that the participants believed that the women depicted by the visual media represent the average woman. The participants further argued that all women are expected to attain the ideal in order to be considered average; anything else would be deviant.

The participants stated that there is an ideal weight for women and if one does not depict this ideal then they are pressured to be thin. The participants referred to achieving the ideal weight as an emotional need, as well as a mind set. The women stated that personal body image and the need to be successful were factors which all placed pressure upon them to fit the ideal. The participants' beliefs that being thin would make them happy added to their emotional need to achieve the ideal look. Gray (1993) concluded, in her research, that the media was a major influence in the formulation and acceptance of the ideal of thinness. The body ideal is related to thinness, with weight as the most important and predominant aspect of one's body image (Gamer et. al. 1980; Hesse-Biber et. al. 1987). Over the past several decades there has been a dramatic downshift in the size of the ideal image. The fashion and movie industry purposefully depict idyllic beauties who are taller and more slender than the average female body shape, while the average shape is depicted in a negative manner (Gamer et. al. 1980; Hesse-Biber et. al. 1987). Gray (1993) concludes that this depiction of an increasingly thin body ideal has a negative impact upon women's perception of the ideal body, and may increase the number of women suffering from eating disorders.
Anyone can achieve the ideal body if a woman simply takes her body in hand, and
develops new attitudes and habits which would lead to a healthy body (Fallon et. al. 1994;
Orbach 1987). This supports the finding that there is a real achievable size and weight
for women and women must work to achieve and/or maintain this ideal weight. Women
were and are expected to become lean and muscular, through constant exercise, and the
ideal body was achievable by all those who worked hard enough. This is the message
which the visual media constantly promotes (Coward, 1985; Fallon et. al. 1994).

The messages presented in the visual media were defined as real by the
participants. Wolf (1991) argues that the visual media presents the message that the
female body ideal is attainable for all women who strive to achieve it. The consistently thin
image leaves women with little choice, but to accept the one body shape and size as ideal
and attain it, or to risk going against the cultural ideal (Gray 1993; Myers & Biocca 1992;
Tan 1979). Rodin et al. (1984) believed that culture's beauty ideal of "thinness equalling
attractiveness" prescribes a body weight that for most women is unrealistically low due to
biological factors. This need to be thin is derived from women's internalization of society's
message that they should care a great deal about how they look.

When the participants felt that they were not at the ideal weight they were
overweight. Consequently they experienced feelings of shame and body dissatisfaction.
Ogden and Evans (1996), in their study, found that the social norms of thinness may act
by increasing the discrepancy between perceived and ideal body size, thus contributing
towards body dissatisfaction and resulting in behaviours such as dieting aimed at reducing
the gap. Bordo (1989) argues that women are spending more time on the management
and discipline of their bodies, through dieting, make-up, and dress. Rodin et. al. (1984)
write that women want to be thinner than they think men want them to be, and even their estimate of what men want is significantly lower than men's actual preferences. Weight control is such an important goal for many women because the challenge is sufficiently difficult that it commands respect since the effects are visible and highly valued (Wooleys 1980). Rodin et. al. (1984) further argue that one of the basic underlying concerns women have with their weight is that physical appearance matters in society. Society endows attractive people with virtually every character trait perceived as desirable.

**Theme 2: Language is necessary to define and internalize social reality**

Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue that language is necessary to define and internalize social reality and it is through language that the individual and the social world interact. John Berger (1980), in *Ways of Seeing*, states that advertising images are not merely a collection of competing messages, but are a language in themselves. This theoretical assumption was very helpful in defining the ideal female weight and size. It was through the use of language that the participants defined culture's reality of what is an average, good-looking, and beautiful woman. It was found that the participants defined one image as perfect and argued that this was the "look" deemed attractive by society. The focus groups concluded that the visual media presented verbal and visual messages of one ideal body for society.

The body ideal is depicted as healthy, successful, beautiful, and always in control, and it is this stereotype which is the cultural and media message presented to all women (Tan 1979). Garner et. al. (1980) and Kaufman (1980) concluded in their research that words such as "tall", "slender", "beautiful", and "in control" both have become synonymous
with the socially ideal body. Although positive stereotypes of the ideal woman have been formed by the visual media, negative stereotypes of poor health and a lack of control have become associated with obesity. These positive and negative stereotypes help form the social reality of the ideal form which is internalized by women and becomes a part of their struggle to transform themselves into this internalized body ideal (Banner 1986; Orbach 1978).

The healthy beautiful body ideal is promoted by the fashion industry, according to Berger (1980) and Coward (1985). The aim of the fashion industry presents a “new” acceptable “beauty” annually. The participants argued that the fashion industry’s ideal image is androgynous; presenting an image of a young girl who is physically and sexually immature. Coward (1985) argues that there is a definite female outline which is considered the cultural ideal in North America. This “perfect” female body is between five foot five inches and five foot eight inches tall, long-legged, tanned and vivacious looking, without a spare inch of flesh anywhere on her body, except her breasts (Coward, 1985; Fallon et. al. 1994; Gray 1993). This need to obtain the ideal image is extremely important to women, because the visual media tells women that the only way to achieve happiness or pleasure is to achieve the ideal body.

Berger (1980) argues that images are not merely an assembly of competing messages, but a language in themselves. Berger and Luckmann (1996) argue that language is necessary to define and internalize social reality, and it is this social reality of the ideal female body that requires a language. Berger (1980) states that this is the language of advertising, which gives strength to the unconscious message presented by the visual media. This “war” on fat and flesh is conducted in a highly emotional language
which constructs the meanings, and emotions that surround body image (Coward, 1985; Fallon et. al. 1994; Orbach 1978). Coward (1985) argues that words used to describe an average female body shape - "plump", "well-rounded", "full-figured", and "shapely" all sound like euphemisms for fat and carry negative connotations (p. 43). This language associated with visual media reinforces its messages of "beauty", as slender and desirable, and "average" as fat and undesirable.

The focus groups were asked to describe an average, good-looking, and beautiful woman. The participants had no difficulty describing a beautiful woman as she depicted the social ideal. Each focus group had a great deal of difficulty describing an average and a good-looking woman. It was only by describing the differences between an average and a beautiful woman that the participants were able to describe a good-looking woman. The description the participants gave for an average woman was of an individual with no importance or significance in a society which bases one's self worth on one's appearance. However, the participants did not use the vocabulary of Coward.

**Theme 3: Blumer's Premise that people ascribe meanings to things that act or impact upon them**

The third theoretical assumption was very helpful in aiding in the data analysis. This assumption asserts that since everything that acts or impacts upon humans must have meaning, people ascribe meanings to things that act or impact upon them (Blumer 1969). There were six things that were found to have acted or impacted upon the participants.

1) Women ascribe the meaning of ideal or perfect to the clothing size 6.

2) Society ascribes value to women based upon appearance.
3) The ideal female image is ascribed to the meaning of gorgeous.

4) Society socializes individuals to accept the ascribed meaning given the ideal female body.

5) Media messages are seen as real, because they impact upon their lives.

6) The participants remained affected by the meaning ascribed to the societal ideal, regardless of their increased awareness of the media's effects as presented by their university courses.

Media sets social norms and values including what women perceive as the ideal body. For many women the female body as depicted in the visual media is the ideal of female beauty. This ideal beauty is the reality women try to achieve through dieting, exercising, and in some extreme cases starvation (Tan 1979).

The participants argued that it is the visual media which frequently depicts adolescent, immature bodies as those of mature women. (Coward 1985; Daley 1978; Gray 1993; Wolf 1991). The value that society places upon the immature image is confirmed through such practices as shaving under the arms and shaving the legs to render the female body sexually attractive, and to remove any evidence that the woman has reached sexual maturity (Coward 1985). Berger (1980) argues that the presentation of the immature female image is so common that we scarcely notice its impact upon us. Kaufman (1980) concluded that viewers often perceive the images depicted by the visual media as representing the social reality, when they actually represent an unrealistic image which is unattainable for most individuals. The participants stated that the visual media depicted the ideal female body as the role model that all women should strive towards.

Berger (1980), in Ways of Seeing, argues that individuals are confronted daily with
hundreds of advertising images. Berger (1980) states that though, in the long term, only some individuals remember these messages, briefly they take them in. The visual media's continuous flow of messages, which presents attitudes towards the ideal female image or shape, are consciously or subconsciously absorbed (Berger 1980; Myers & Biocca 1992; Tan 1979). Berger (1980) argued that it was not the image that was most important, but the impact that the image had upon what the individual believes or knows. Research by Rockett and McMinn (1990) supports Berger's (1980) argument that the media is a major force in the formation and acceptance of the female ideal. Rockett and McMinn (1990) found that an average individual is exposed to 1600 advertisements per day, and that the majority of these advertisements promoted the notion that "... if you are slim, you will also be beautiful and sexually desirable" (p. 278). The participants stated that their ideas about what was important about a woman's appearance came not only from the visual media, but also from their friends, families, and peers. Several participants commented on the pressure placed upon them by their parents to look a certain way. It was important to many of the participants' parents that their daughters were neither too thin nor too fat, and would often comment upon their style of dress and their body size. Other participants stated that they envied their friend's tiny bodies, and would feel depressed and angry when they were unable to fit into their friend's clothes.

There may be a cumulative effect of all these messages upon an individual's self-perception, as demonstrated in several studies (Atkin 1977; Gerbner & Gross 1976; Myers & Biocca 1992; Tan 1979). Myers & Biocca (1992) show in their research that these body image messages are likely to increase the number of young women developing eating disorders in their struggle to attain the "beauty" ideal. Participants in the focus groups
commonly expressed a desire to look like the ideal and it hurt that they did not. The participants discussed issues of self-esteem, and explained various ways, such as compliments, that they would try to build their own self-esteem especially when they realized that their bodies have changed since they were teenagers. Although participants stated that they tried to maintain a positive self-esteem, they demonstrated how the pressure to attain or maintain the ideal look has affected their everyday lives. Participants talked of maintaining a certain weight, working out, watching what they ate, and being very critical. Through the focus groups it was interesting to find that every participant knew at least one person who suffered from an eating disorder and in each of the focus groups there were at least two people, in some cases three, who described themselves as having an eating disorder or were in recovery.

**Theme 4: Blumer’s Premise that the way individuals interact with others determines the meaning that is associated with a specific object or role**

Blumer’s (1969) premise that the way individuals interact with others determines the meaning that is associated with a specific object or “role”. This assumption was very helpful in showing how it is through an individual’s interaction with others, with respect to body size, and in reference to their real bodies relative to bodies in the media, that determines the meaning that is associated with media and personal body sizes.

A woman’s value or importance is determined by her appearance, and whether she depicts the social ideal. The participants argued that a positive value is placed upon women who depict the ideal, and a negative value upon those who least represented the ideal female form. In *Gyn/Ecology*, Mary Daley (1978) reviewed the social pressures,
which throughout history have influenced women to accept an image of female beauty that was not always of their own creation, but women strove to attain. Those who did not conform to this ideal were often plagued with feelings of regret and remorse.

Susan Bordo (1989) stated that the female form is a medium for culture which is depicted by the media. Women internalize this ideal image and their failure to match the ideal image to the perceived self results in increased body dissatisfaction and creates self-criticism and damages self-esteem (Ogden & Evans 1996). Rodin et al. (1984) argue that one of the basic underlying concerns women have with their weight is that physical appearance matters in society. Society endows attractive people with virtually every character trait perceived as desirable. The participants argued that one’s appearance is so important in our society, because when forming first impressions one is often judged by physical appearance alone. It is possible that something as hard for most women to achieve as the thin ideal comes to be more valued precisely because it is so difficult to attain. In a time of affluence, thinness has become a status symbol for women (Rodin et al. 1984).

Bordo (1993) argued that the female body is depicted as a commodity, which society dictates rules for and uses advertising to dictate the ways in which the consumer can improve the imperfections of the body. The body is represented as an object which can easily be remoulded or reshaped through dieting, consumer products, and surgery. Bordo (1993) states that women are required to learn to feed others, not the self, and to believe that any desire for self-nurturance and self-feeding is greedy and excessive. Female hunger is depicted as needful of containment and control, and female eating is seen as a furtive, shameful, illicit act, according to Bordo (1993). Attractiveness is
especially important for women, since society has always based men's value upon their success in business and their economic wealth, whereas women have only been valued for their physical beauty (Rodin et al. 1984). It is women's beauty, Rodin et al. (1984) state, which enables women to gain access to a man's resources. Conversely, men benefit from marrying a beautiful woman, but a woman's status is not affected by marrying an attractive man.

CONCLUSION

The use of the symbolic interactionist framework helped to explore how women interpret the visual images of an ideal female body as presented in the visual media. It was found through exploring women's interpretations, perceptions, attitudes, and opinions that women believe that the visual media's presentation of the ideal female body not only impacts upon individual's perceptions of their own body, but also the way they view others. Many of the focus group participants argued that one's first impression of others is based solely upon appearance. Society places a value upon a person, based upon appearance, and it is this value which impacts many areas of an individual's life. The need to attain the ideal female body is an all consuming goal for many women, and can be a source of great sadness and frustration when they are unable to attain the ideal look. There were a number of participants who stated that they had gone to the extreme of anorexia and/or bulimia in order to attain the desired image. The participants believed that it was through their university courses that they developed an awareness and an understanding of the effects of the visual media upon women's desire to achieve the ideal image. Although their courses made them more critical and aware, many participants still believed they were
affected by the media image.

I think it's ingrained in our society and it's been that long. I mean it's thin is in and young and beautiful is it for so long has been the norm and you can all sit [and] say, 'well it shouldn't be and we should accept each for what we are and what not, but its more than the media, friends, and family and in everything that we do. And we can't escape it even if you know that that's not right even if you try to change, or whatever, it's still there.

An unexpected finding was that the participants from the nutrition program claimed that pressure was placed upon them, by their professors, to attain the ideal image. The participants expressed concern of not finding employment as a nutritionist if they did not present the ideal female image.

Only in our degree we had one prof that said that if you gain too much weight you will never get a job in your field. And I find there is a lot of pressure when going into the field. You know you have got to reach an ideal goal/weight or you can't give nutritional advice.

It is almost contradictory to all we have learned about the healthy body.

The participants expressed a diversity of opinions and ideas concerning whether women are critical of the media image, or whether they are affected by this ideal and strive to attain this image. Many of the participants appeared to view this media image as unrealistic and unattainable, yet still tried to achieve the ideal. For some participants the need to attain this ideal lead them to extreme behaviour, such as eating disorders and excessive exercise. This diversity of opinions and attitudes was primarily due to different personal and educational experiences.
CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSION

My aim was to explore women's interpretations, perceptions, attitudes, and opinions about the effect(s) of the visual media on their perception of the ideal female body size and shape. I gained a better understanding of how women are interpreting the visual media and how this interpretation affects their self image through such questions as: How do women feel the media has impacted upon their lives? Do women strive to achieve this body ideal? By what means do women try to achieve this ideal? How do women feel when they do not or can not achieve this ideal? I came across a wide range of opinions, perspectives, and attitudes about this problem. These differences were primarily due to different personal and educational experiences. This variation was most likely because students from various departments have varying degrees of background on the effect(s) of visual media upon female body image in their classes, since some departments covered the media's effect(s) in their course work; as well, their personal experiences were different from one another. I examined the diversity of responses and identified the common concerns as they emerged. This information was applied to ways of helping individuals further understand the powerful influence of the visual media on our everyday lives was applied. Although this study focussed upon the influence of the visual media upon women's opinions and attitudes it is important to note that the visual media may also impact male viewpoints. The use of focus group interviews for this study helped stimulate discussion about this topic and gain an in-depth understanding of how people feel. The
flexible nature of this method allowed me to discover the diverse range of opinions and perspectives that people construct, and helped me to understand how they conceptualize and explain their concerns.

It was found that the participants believed that the visual media presentation of the ideal female body image not only impacts upon women's perceptions of their own body, but also the way they view others. Many participants argued that one's first impression of others is based solely upon appearance. Value is placed upon a person, based upon appearance, and it is this value which impacts many areas of an individual's life, such as employment and relationships. This value is determined by the visual media. It is the media which defines what is ideal or beautiful, good-looking, or average. The need to attain the ideal female body, as presented by the visual media, is an all consuming goal for many women, and can be a source of great sadness and frustration when they are unable to attain the ideal look. There were a number of participants who stated that they had gone to the extreme of anorexia and/or bulimia in order to attain the desired image. The participants believed that it was through their university courses that they developed an awareness and an understanding of the effect(s) of the visual media upon women's desire to achieve the ideal image. Although their courses made them more critical and aware, many participants still believed they were affected by the media image.

An unexpected finding was that the participants from the nutrition program stated that pressure was placed upon them, by their professors, to attain the ideal image. The participants expressed concern of not finding employment as a nutritionist if they did not present the ideal female image. There was one participant who presented an alternative viewpoint to the other participants. This participant wanted to gain weight rather than lose
weight. This participant wanted to achieve a weight closer to the ideal weight, but found it difficult to gain weight, due to a medical condition. She expressed feelings of anger and unhappiness, because she viewed herself as too thin. Although this participant expressed a desire to gain weight rather than loose weight she, like the other participants, expressed a desire to attain the ideal weight.

The conclusions of this study are transferable to symbolic interactionism. There were four theoretical assumptions that helped the researcher in the understanding of the data.

(1) W.I. Thomas' Theorem which states that situations that are defined as real are real in their consequences. This theoretical assumption helped the researcher find that the participants of the focus groups defined the media's image of the female body as real and was the norm to be achieved. Four situations were defined as real: women presented in the visual media portray an achievable ideal weight; messages used in the advertisements are real; there is a real objective weight for women; and a woman who is not the ideal female weight is considered overweight. Several consequences emerged from the data as a result of defining these situations as real: women were pressured to be thin; women must work to achieve or to maintain the ideal weight; and if a woman is not the ideal clothing size then she did not go out.

(2) Language is necessary to define and internalize social reality. The second assumption helped define the ideal female weight and size. It was through language that the participants defined culture's reality of what is an average, good-looking, and beautiful woman. It was found that the participants defined one image as perfect and
argued that this was the ‘look’ deemed attractive by society. The focus groups concluded that the visual media presented verbal and visual messages of one ideal body for society.

(3) Blumer’s premise that people ascribe meanings to things that act or impact upon them.

This assumption was very helpful in aiding in the data analysis. There were six things that were found to have acted or impacted upon the participants: women ascribe the meaning of ideal to the clothing size 6; society ascribes a value to women based upon appearance; the ideal female image is ascribed the meaning of gorgeous; society socializes individuals to accept the ascribed meaning given the ideal female body; media messages are seen as real, because they impact upon their lives; and the participants remained affected by the meaning ascribed to the societal ideal, regardless of their awareness of the media’s effects as presented by their university courses.

(4) Blumer’s premise that the way individuals interact with others determines the meaning that is associated with a specific object or role.

Blumer’s premise helped show that is through an individual’s interaction with others, with respect to body size, and in reference to their real bodies relative to bodies in the media, that determines the meaning that is associated with media and personal body sizes. Symbolic interactionism helped in the formation of central questions and in the analysis. The four theoretical assumptions helped in the understanding of the ideas, opinions, and attitudes presented by the focus groups.

The influence of the visual media upon female body image is a potentially serious problem causing some women to develop eating disorders, such as anorexia or bulimia, in their quest for the ideal shape and size. To date, previous work has largely neglected
the issues surrounding the influence of the visual media upon female body image, including the effect of the media upon eating disorders. Recent interest in this area has led to new approaches in the treatment of eating disorders by therapists in Australia (BANA House 1995). The results of this study will contribute to further research development and will help extend our knowledge of the effect(s) of the visual media upon body image and how these effect(s) are interpreted by women.
REFERENCES


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Options. (1982).


APPENDIX A:
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1) What is the ideal body?

   A. Can you describe the ideal female body?
   B. What about this body makes it the ideal?
   C. What makes one good-looking?
   D. How does one know they are good-looking?
   C. Can you describe average? Good-looking? Beautiful?

2) What about for you, do you have an ideal weight?

   A. How do you achieve your personal ideal size? Tell me about it.
   B. Is it easy to achieve or maintain your personal ideal size
   C. Is it something you try and maintain at any cost?
   D. Do you exercise, watch what you eat? Tell me how.
   E. How often do you exercise a week?
   F. What kind of things do you eat?
   G. How do you feel when you aren’t at your ideal weight? Tell me about it.
   I. What size is the ideal?
   J. What is most important about a woman? Tell me about it.
   K. Describe a gorgeous woman. What makes her gorgeous? Tell me.
   L. Where did this ideal come from?
   M. How did you learn this? Tell me about it.

3) Do any of these magazines show the ideal woman?

   A. Why do magazines depict this type of woman?
B. What are the messages that these magazines are presenting?

C. How would you say these images compare to your personal ideal?

D. Do you think these images are pretty typical of women? Do they look like women you know?

E. Tell me how they are the same or different.

Question 4 will only be asked if it is relevant:

4) You seem to see through these media messages - what about other women?
   A. How does it affect other women? Tell me about it.
   B. How has this ideal image affected you?
   C. Do you think your university courses affected your interpretation of these media images? Tell me about it.

5) Do you ever find yourself comparing your body to those in the movies magazines?
   A. Tell me about it ... when does it happen?
   B. Do you ever feel pressured to be thin?
   C. How does that work?
   D. What produces that pressure?
   E. What have you done when you felt that pressure? Tell me about it.
   F. Do you ever find yourself comparing your friends' bodies to those in the movies or magazines? Tell me about it.
   G. What about the women you see on the street - do you ever compare their bodies to those in the movies or magazines? Tell me about that.
   H. Take a look at these magazines - do you find yourself trying to fit your body into any of these images? Or do you have a different goal for you body?
6) Do you think that other people judge women based on their body size?
   A. Do you have any examples of this?
   B. Any personal instances where you have been judged based upon your body size or judged another woman because of her body size? Tell me about it.
7) What influences your view of your body? Do you ever feel too big or too small? Tell me about it.
   A. When you felt you were too big what made you think this?
   B. When you felt your body was too small what made you think this?
   C. When do you think this of other women?
   D. Does clothing size affect how you view your body?
   E. What do you think is the ideal clothing size?
   F. How do you feel when someone says you are a size bigger or smaller than usual?
   G. What is most important in a woman’s appearance?
   H. Where do you think your ideas come from?
   I. What do you think about all of this?
APPENDIX B:

THE EFFECTS OF VISUAL MEDIA UPON FEMALE BODY IMAGE.

INFORMATION SHEET FOR FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

My name is Jessica Cummings and I am a graduate student in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Windsor. Currently, I am conducting a research study to explore the effects of visual media on female body image. I will be holding group interviews with fourth year students, from the University of Guelph, to explore their views and opinions concerning the influence of visual media upon their own and other women's perception of body image.

As a student, your perceptions and opinions would be very valuable for the purposes of this research. The group interview will last approximately one hour, and it will be tape-recorded to help me organize the information I receive. Participants will be asked to discuss their personal feelings and opinions about how women's bodies are presented in visual media. As well, participants will be asked to discuss the influence of visual media upon their own body image, and their own images of their individual bodies. Should you decide to participate, at no time will you be required to discuss anything you feel uncomfortable talking about. There may also be others participating in the group interview whom you know. All interview discussions will be kept confidential and participants will be asked not to identify individuals or any opinions that are raised in the interview group should they talk about this study with others. Please be aware that participation in this study is voluntary and if you decide to take part, you have the right to withdraw at any time throughout the group interview. The findings of this study will be used for my Master's thesis. I will not use participants' names in the reporting of the results, but pseudonyms.

This research has been approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Windsor's Department of Sociology and Anthropology. If you have any questions or concerns regarding the ethics of this study, you may contact the Chair of the Committee, Dr. Alan Hall, at 253-4232 ext. 2202.

______________________________
Jessica Cummings
M.A. Student
University of Windsor

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APPENDIX B:

CONSENT FORM FOR "FOCUS GROUP" PARTICIPANTS

THE EFFECTS OF VISUAL MEDIA UPON FEMALE BODY IMAGE

I have read the information about the study on The effect(s) of visual media upon female body image. I understand that I am being asked to participate in a group interview to discuss issues and concerns around the influence of the visual media upon female body image. I understand that there may be people I know participating in this group. I also understand that my participation is voluntary, and that I can withdraw at any time throughout the group interview, and that anything that I say will be treated as confidential.

DATE:____________________

_________________________________________
NAME (please print)

_________________________________________
SIGNATURE

In the event that it is necessary to gather more information regarding your responses in the focus group: (Please indicate your answer)

_ I may be contacted in the future for a brief interview.

   My phone number is: (_____)________________

_ I may not be contacted in the future for a brief interview.
VITA AUCTORIS

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