Fashion industry and its effects on the self-esteem and body image of adolescent girls.

Throughout history it has been an established fact, that the true ideal of beauty associated with a woman is highly unrealistic and implausible hence extremely difficult to attain. Only a cross-section of society would actually be able to conform to these stereotypical standards, as they are the privileged masses. The affluent women would be willing to sacrifice comfort in order to appear fashionable. It has come to light that fashion plays a pivotal part in determining what is perceived to be the norm; it distorts the true image of beauty and young women have to suffer the consequences.

In the society we live in girls are more prone to reading books, magazines and watching, advertisements, television commercials, printed advertisements, movies and beauty contests. This causes a great effect on the impressionable minds of adolescent girls, as they believe that in order to “fit the bill” they have to go to extremes. A lot of research has been conducted to explain as to what is considered beautiful. The phrase “what is beautiful is good” was coined by Berscheid and Walster (1972), it extrapolated the exalted ideals of beauty and it was believed that a physically attractive person was socially more desirable than persons of lower attractiveness. Thus it implies that a person would naturally be more popular, skillful, likable, competent, persuasive, successful, and better adjusted in relationships. The fashion industry highlights the physically attractive phenomenon, which has dire effects on the psychological and social set up of a society.

One more dilemma, which is very prevalent, is the discrimination portrayed vividly by the media towards obese people. Being overweight is taboo; it is intricately woven in the fashion world of today. Across the board it is imperative that women look a certain way without which the perception of beauty will be marred. Magazines like Glamour, Playboy and the like are almost vehement in the way they express the female archetype. Being “stick thin” is the norm whereas fat is out. All the faces in the media are exemplified as being extremely alluring, sometimes unrealistically so. Young girls are extremely influenced by the blatant visualizations on television, which leads to various issues related to low self-esteem and body image issues. Tolmach and Scherr (1984) conducted a research, where girls were asked questions about beauty. It was astounding that almost all of them believed that they had to be thinner. Most of them stated, “I have to lose weight.” This reiterates the criterion media places on what is the conventional form of beauty.

Fashion and its implications on the psyche of adolescent girls:
It has come to light that the fashion world exploits the minds of young girls. According to the current trends it is important that the runway models should appear waif like and emaciated. The relationship between celebrity ideals and body dissatisfaction is disturbing, as many female celebrities and models are considered underweight. This has an indelible mark on adolescent girls, as they try very hard to conform to the stringent stereotype, thus leading them to resort to eating disorders and serious health issues. Furthermore there is empirical evidence for the proposition that glorified depictions of women in the western media have a negative impact upon the psychological set up of both adolescent girls as well as women of a certain age. In one major American survey of 500 girls it was stated that adolescent girls aged 9-16, nearly 70% believed that their body image was to be determined by the magazine pictures, which is why 47% of them wanted to lose weight. The fashion trends make the viewers believe that a girl should be a certain type to appear fashionable and beautiful. Body image and self-esteem is central to a young girl’s definition of self, because they have been socialized to believe what is the prototype of beauty. It is also based on presumptions and evaluations of the society in general.

The media is a powerful tool as it plays on the insecurities and fears of young girls. Films, advertisements, TV, music videos play an integral role in emphasizing the female self-worth. It is incumbent on women to look beautiful; a powerful cultural paradigm of beauty is sought which is soon becoming unattainable. The body size of women is deteriorating rapidly as far as the media is concerned; usually women on screen are 20% underweight. This has exceeded a diagnostic criterion for anorexia nervosa of 15% underweight (DSM-IV-TR: American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Clay et al (2005) tested the impact on the adolescent girls aged 11-16. The test was conducted between ultra thin and average sized female magazine models. It was observed that viewing ultra thin or average sized models led to decrease in body satisfaction and self-esteem in young girls, with changes in self-esteem fully mediated by changes in body satisfaction. These findings highlight the effect of media on the mindsets of adolescent girls. It not only explains the causal effect of media images on the body satisfaction but also highlights the spread of this plague to global self-esteem issues among girls, in this age range over which these variables typically fall most markedly in western cultures.

According to an article written in a fashion magazine, it was said that “big girl in a skinny world: killer heals are fine for tiny girls, but I’m carrying 90 kilos on spikes” (Daily mail, 8 June 2010), it is important to understand the female psyche and specifically the ways in which the female body is constructed. This article formulates the crux of how the fashion world can have serious implications on the psychological and physical health of adolescent girls. Fashion trends in Pakistan are changing rapidly; emulating the west has become the norm. Females absorb TV and magazine messages and try and incorporate the predominant culture in their everyday existence. This not only creates a strong influence on an individual’s attitude, behavior, life
style, thinking pattern, but also has the potential to influence the culture of a country. The media has created a frenzy as to how a woman should look like which is why young females aspire to become the epitome of perfection.

Many studies (Groesz, Levine and Murnen, 2002; Harrison and Cantor, 1997; Morris and Katzman, 2003; Tiggermann and Pickering, 1996) have suggested a link between the thin female beauty prototype depicted in the media with a range of psychological symptoms such as body dissatisfaction and eating disorders. Morris and Katzmann have reported that there has been a significant change in weight and size of female models, shown throughout the media in the western civilization and the theory of the perfect body type has been radically altered. The size and shape has shifted towards leaner and thinner girls almost bordering on emaciation. The image this creates is detrimental for the adolescent girls, as they want to be like the models portrayed on television. This causes many nervous and eating disorders such as Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa. The abnormality of body image is one of the essential diagnoses for these two ailments. Of all the psychological factors that are believed to cause eating disorders, body image dissatisfaction is the most crucial and immediate antecedent. The body image and low self-esteem issues best produce fluctuations in eating disorder symptoms over a period of time in adolescent girls. Furthermore there are other factors, which produce such a devastating effect on adolescent girls. These include psychopathology, stress and family dysfunction. All these are related to the symptoms concurrently, but add less to the eating disorders once body image is controlled.

In a research conducted in the US the effects of advertising on body image factors were tested in both black and white college age women. The conclusion that was drawn was that fashion promotes racism, black females identified with their counterparts whereas the whites with their respective race. Thus this reiterates the fact that, the young are greatly influenced by the media, which is why attempts should be made to abolish such advertisements which create resentment and dissatisfaction. Fashion should follow healthy dictates so that the adolescent girls do not suffer severe bouts of depression when they cannot fit or conform the prototype.

Self-esteem and image issues prevalent in adolescent girls:

Body image and self-esteem are the two most important factors, which determine how an adolescent girl would perceive and evaluate her worth. The growing discrepancy between the actual size and shape of women being portrayed in the media and fashion industry plays an integral part in affecting the adolescent girls psyche. They are under the false pretense that women are supposed to look a certain way. This is done in such a conspicuous manner that it leaves a very strong mark on the impressionable minds. It has been recorded that adolescent girls are consistently more dissatisfied with their bodies than adolescent boys. In a survey conducted in a high school it came to light that 70% of the adolescent girls wanted to be
thinner as compared to a 34% of boys. Furthermore evidence was obtained which stated that out of 869 schoolgirls aged 14-16, one third (36%) had adopted one form of extreme dieting method or another. This included using laxatives, crash dieting, fasting, slimming tablets, diuretics or cigarettes. An Australian study revealed that 13003 women in the age bracket of 18-22, 74% wanted to weigh less than what they actually were. It also highlighted that 48% had already dieted to lose weight the previous year. These studies highlight an important aspect, as it is believed that in order to attain the pinnacle of perfection and beauty one has to weigh as much as a feather.

Van-de-berg et al (2010) mentioned that adolescents who have a low self-esteem and body dissatisfaction are more prone to developing various health issues in the latter part of their lives. These may include unhealthy weight control behaviors, eating disorders, depression, general psychological distress, mental ailments and many other negative outcomes. It is therefore correct to state that self-esteem is a propulsive and dynamic construct, greatly influenced by childhood and adolescent experiences, body image and personality. Bachman and O’Malley have come up with an apt summation as to what exactly is self-esteem; it is a term, which defines “individual self-evaluation or judgment of her own worth.” A logical conclusion can be derived from the above-mentioned terminology; negative thinking is the key, which leads to the loss of self-esteem in adolescent girls. This in turn leads to the eating disorders and rapid weight loss programs, which cause the deterioration of health in young girls. The idea that one has to conform to a certain criteria to be accepted in the society is the root cause of this menace. Gilbert and Meyer (2005) feel that low self-esteem produces an increased rate of body satisfaction and negativity that eventually leads to depression. Blaase and Elklit (2001), highlighted that women suffering from an eating disorder would be prone to a lower self-esteem and would feel more stressed out and worried about their appearance than those who were content with the way they looked and adopted a healthier lifestyle. According to Jade (2002) it is important to note that media plays a crucial part in determining and promoting “thin” ideal images of women as a way of gaining respect, love and acceptance. Kim and Lennon (2007) reported that eating disorders were predominantly associated with self-esteem, overall appearance and body dissatisfaction. Another factor, which predicts the increase in body image, is the BMI. This is directly related to image concerns and self esteem issues prevalent in college students (Frederick et al., 2007). Research indicates that adolescent girls with a normal BMI still feel the need to lose weight and become thinner. In order to find the relationship between the variables Tiggemann(2003) took the BMI as a moderator for the internalization of thin body types and body dissatisfaction along with the self-esteem, and came to the conclusion that there was a direct and proportional link between the two.

The analysis of BMI, body dissatisfaction plays a dual role, at one end it helps in the development of the eating disorder and on the other it decreases the self-esteem of the
adolescent girls. It is imperative that young females are trained to comprehend the implications of body dissatisfaction and self-esteem so that they can deal with themselves in a positive way. Studies need to be conducted so that medical professionals and policy makers can address the key issues. If these issues are tackled appropriately prevention of psychological, physical ailments and death can take place. According to a leading health expert, David M. Garner eating disorders are the root cause of all evil. This in turn leads to low self-esteem and body image issues in adolescent girls. In order to obliterate these problems a policy needs to be adopted so that the media is curbed from falsifying images just to increase sensationalism and viewership. Women need to told to maintain an aura of self-confidence and should adopt a healthy lifestyle instead of trying to conform to the “so called” media hyped form of beauty. The fashion trends should not depict rail thin models as the various programs and advertisements cast a negative light on the adolescent girls. Policy makers should step up and protect the interests of young females as they formulate the majority of the audience. Right information should be provided to the audience so that the “size zero” complex can be overcome. This would only lead to body dissatisfaction and eating disorders, which would exacerbate the situation further and cause the adolescents to grow up with severe complexes. (Harrison and Cantor, 1997).

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