Impact of Modern Society and Western Culture of Female Beauty: Analytical Essay

As you know, summer is usually the time when people spend more time outdoors, doing a variety of activities such as sports and travelling to the beach. An advertisement, particularly the one shown above, made big headline as it showcased, arguably, an innocuous question: Are you beach body ready? The launch of this advertisement came backlash and controversy, resulting in the ad itself being banned in the UK. The main criticism surrounding this ad was the promotion of an unattainable, unrealistic and unhealthy beauty standard, making people even more self-conscious of themselves. Given the large responsibility and massive influence food industries have, creating an image with this message can foster a toxic culture surrounding body image.

The ad features a fairly thin woman, with a flat tummy, small waist, long hair, and full lips, which already promote an unattainable, and unrealistic beauty standard. The main question of the ad is then followed by an image of a weight loss collection on the side, implying that you probably need them to lose weight. The aftermath of this ad left many individuals wondering if they were up to the standard that Protein World (the company) set, and obviously many were disappointed in themselves for not being “beach-body ready”. The phrase could also mean that a certain body shape is meant for bikinis, and that people should try to assimilate the fairly thin women in the ad if they want to be happy, which of course can lower self-esteem and body image for women. Body image disturbance is a common feature of eating disorders and is likely to be the driving force for it. Ads that depict unattainable and unrealistic beauty standards, like the beach ready ad, may have individuals engage in poor eating habits, ultimately leading them to develop eating disorders, insecurities, body dissatisfaction, and other issues. Additionally, a study of the relationship between eating disorders and media among students have found that “media exposure predicted disordered eating symptomatology, drive for thinness, body dissatisfaction and ineffectiveness in women, and endorsement of personal thinness and dieting in men” (Morris, A. M, & Katzman, D. K., 2003, page 1). In short, the cultural standards set by media may explain in part why young adults are more dissatisfied with their bodies and are more willing to try a variety of dangerous weight-loss practices in their ultimate pursuit of the “perfect body”.

TLC’s music video, “Unpretty”, released in 1999, features a group of girls expressing their message about the struggles of body image, and the unrealistic and unattainable beauty standards society sets that women have to confront daily. Throughout the music video, they present us with scenarios where some girls are pressured into changing their body and others not being satisfied with themselves. For example, in the video, we see the first girl wishing that her partner would understand how it feels being constantly critiqued about her body. The phrase, “I wish I can tie you in my shoes”, is repeated throughout the video and means that she wishes that her partner could feel the enormous pressure that is placed on her. The second girl in the video is being pressured by her boyfriend to undergo breast implants to enlarge them, and it’s evident that he is influenced by the media because he is shown looking at a magazine, with an image of a girl with unrealistic and unattainable body standards. I believe the overarching theme of this music video is that true happiness and beauty starts from within, and not from society’s perceived vision of what beauty is.

The last girl in the video is struggling with her body image and she is worrying whether she suits or fits the ideal image of a supermodel. She is seen placing a cutout paper copy of her head on an image of a supermodel on her wall, and we can interpret this as her not being satisfied with her body image but wanting to achieve something unattainable and unrealistic. She changes her eating habits, but, this makes her even more unhappy and she forces herself to vomit as a way of not getting bigger. Because of this, her constant binge-eating and purging of food drives her to the point of becoming bulimic, which is an eating disorder marked by bouts of overeating, followed by fasting or vomiting. This is a clear representation of how society and the media can trigger poor body image and low self-esteem in woman, causing disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa. Young people, especially young girls, are susceptible to the media and can cause them to take extreme measures in trying to meet these unattainable, unrealistic and unhealthy beauty standards.

The role that western culture plays in the prevalence of eating disorders among many people has been studied by researchers from many fields. The ubiquitous messages for eating behaviours and beauty portrayed by both the media and advertising may lead to body confusion and dissatisfaction among many young people. One prominent issue that faces contemporary society has been the impact of media in western culture on eating behaviours among many young people. The media serves as a powerful tool and structure between people and their bodies by conveying a very strong message to society: only a certain body type and physical appearance is valued and sought after. Repeated by many others, such as families, and friends, many young women take this idea seriously. This paper will explore the relationship between eating disorders and western culture at large and how certain agents, such as the mass media may contribute to the development of eating disorders among males and females in particular.

Although it is difficult to pinpoint the exact cause of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating, there is evidence to suggest that the media plays a pivotal role in the increase in disordered eating and body dissatisfaction. The thin ideal which is promoted very heavily by the media, can cause body dissatisfaction and eating disorders among women. These standards are grossly unrealistic and unattainable. I believe it is these standards that are contributing to the increase in eating disorders and changes in attitude in body image, while also impacting their mental health in particular. In short, perhaps the media reinforces certain cultural stereotypes and enables behaviour patterns among people.

An explanation for eating disorders can stem from sociocultural factors, and there is evidence to suggest that gender and sociocultural influences play a distinct role in disordered eating. There are many reports and studies documenting the prevalence of eating disorders in western countries, and the results show that those who have eating disorders were mostly white women, and interestingly, there have been a few cases surrounding the increase in eating disorders in non-Western countries, such as the Middle East and Japan. These recent reports suggest that there is an increase in eating disorders in non-Western countries, however, the factors relating to it may differ completely from Western norms (Makino et al., 2004). Of the many explanations regarding the development of eating disorders among western women are the social pressures resulting from the standards that are set by modern society or western culture of female beauty. Hollywood is a great example of the social pressures that are placed on women as movies, music videos, and dieting fads place a very heavy emphasis on thinness and beauty, which encourages young girls, directly and indirectly, to try to achieve those body ideals, while at the same time being the catalyst for eating disorders in the western culture. Many sociologists who have studied the phenomenon of eating disorders across a period have noted that the body

ideals of contemporary society haven't always been static, but rather dynamic as curvy bodies were the ideal body image of before. An average child today watches many hours of television per week and is swamped with thousands of advertisements per year (Cultural influences, n. d.). In these advertisements, it depicts girls as being underweight, enticing them to believe that being thin would make them happier and more popular than before, while it depicts men as being robust, strong and powerful (Cultural influences, n. d.). These images are then ingrained in our minds and can, therefore, create a false image of what reality really is. Thus I believe the media creates a highly idealized and very unrealistic and unattainable body image to people, making them vulnerable to eating disorders.

The media are also a platform for advertising foods and weight loss products, and celebrities are notorious for this as some promote their diet aids to their fans which are both ineffective and sometimes harmful. Advertisements try to promote the message that life will be better if you buy what they are selling. The message of not being adequate enough or needing to improve oneself can have a big impact on a child's self-esteem. Children, for example, are highly susceptible to this marketing because they cannot distinguish from what is the truth to what is not the truth. A child may believe that those advertisements are based on reality and they, therefore, strive to achieve those unattainable, and unrealistic body ideals. Weight loss products and diet aids are a massive industry that targets those with low self-esteem, and I believe that children and young adults can be victims of such ploys, which can lead to eating disorders such as restricting or purging to lose weight and feel better about themselves.

Aside from the sociological factors, it's important to note that eating disorders are a multi-faceted issue covering also the biological, and phycological side of it. For the biological factors, something as simple as your history of diet, and having a close relative with an eating disorder can increase a person's risk of developing the disorder, and there are many more. For the psychological factors, body image, anxiety, and behavioural inflexibility also increase the risk of developing an eating disorder. Despite all that, the sociocultural factors still play a much larger role than expected. As aforementioned, the media places a heavy emphasis on thinness and beauty, and studies show that exposure to this kind of message can increase body dissatisfaction, which can then lead to eating disorders. Peer pressure and or bullying also play a critical role in how young people view themselves and are also an emerging factor in the increase in eating disorders. As shown in the song, "Unpretty", young people are pressured by their friends or partners to undergo drastic bodily changes which can affect them physiologically. The song also shows how girls are discontent with their bodies and wish to become like supermodels, something which is unattainable and unrealistic.

In summary, I believe eating disorders are largely a sociocultural issue in western culture and the media and advertising may be the driving force for eating disorders. Although it is difficult to pinpoint the exact cause of eating disorders, there is evidence to suggest that the media plays a pivotal role in the increase in disordered eating and body dissatisfaction. The social pressures resulting from the standards that are set by modern society or western culture of female beauty can be the catalyst for eating disorders as they will try to achieve those unattainable, and unrealistic body ideals. Advertisements which present weight loss products can be harmful to individuals and engage them in poor eating habits, ultimately leading them to develop eating disorders, insecurities, body dissatisfaction, and other issues.