The Fashion Industry Should Not Be Held Responsible for Eating Disorders


"The notion that the fashion industry should endure government meddling because its products or marketing techniques may [promote] an unhealthy desire for thinness seems dubious at best."

In the following viewpoint, Michelle Cottle argues that the fashion industry has no obligation to change its practices, including using ultra-skinny models. It is not in the business of promoting healthy body images, Cottle suggests, just as fast-food restaurants are not in the business of selling healthy food. Michelle Cottle is a senior editor at the New Republic.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. To what other industries selling risky products, but nevertheless not subject to regulation, does Cottle compare the fashion industry?
2. What two criteria, in Cottle's view, would constitute grounds for intervention in the fashion industry?
3. What does the author say will eventually happen to resolve the issue of ultra-thin models on the catwalk?

Call it Revenge of the Carb Lovers. While much of the Middle East continues to devour itself, the hot controversy to come out of the West [in September 2006] is Madrid's decision to ban super-skinny models from its fashion week, the Pasarela Cibeles, which begins on September 18th. Responding to complaints from women's groups and health associations about the negative impact of emaciated models on the body image of young women, the Madrid regional government, which sponsors the Pasarela Cibeles, demanded that the show's organizers go with fuller-figured gals, asserting that the industry has a responsibility to portray healthy body images. As Concha Guerra, the deputy finance minister for the regional administration, eloquently put it, "Fashion is a mirror and many teenagers imitate what they see on the catwalk."

Activists' concerns are easy to understand. With ultra-thinness all the rage on the catwalk, your average model is about 5'9 and 110 pounds [7.8 stone]. But henceforth, following the body mass index standard set by Madrid, a 5'9 model must weigh at least 123 pounds [8.8 stone]. (To ensure there's no cheating, physicians will be on site to examine anyone looking suspiciously svelte.) Intrigued by the move, other venues are considering similar restrictions—notably the city of Milan, whose annual show is considerably more prestigious than Madrid's.

Industry Opposition

Modeling agencies meanwhile, are decidedly unamused. Cathy Gould of New York's Elite agency publicly denounced the ban as an attempt to scapegoat the fashion world for eating disorders—not to mention as gross discrimination against both "the freedom of the designer" and "gazellelike" models. (Yeah, I laughed, too.) Pro-ban activists acknowledge that many designers and models will attempt to flout the new rules. But in that
case, declared Carmen Gonzalez of Spain's Association in Defense of Attention for Anorexia and Bulimia, "the next step is to seek legislation, just like with tobacco."

Whoa, there, Carmen. I dislike catwalk freaks—pardon me, I mean human-gazelle hybrids—as much as the next normal woman. But surely most governments have better things to do than pass laws about what constitutes an acceptable butt size. Yes, without the coiffed tresses and acres of eyeliner, many models could be mistaken for those Third World kids that ex-celebs like Sally Struthers are always collecting money to feed. But that, ultimately, is their business. These women are paid to be models—not role models. The fashion world, no matter how unhealthy, is not Big Tobacco. (Though, come to think of it, Donatella Versace does bear a disturbing resemblance to Joe Camel.) And, with all due respect to the Madrid regional government, it is not the job of the industry to promote a healthy body image.

Indeed, there seems to be increasing confusion about what it is the "responsibility" of private industry to do. It is, for example, not the business of McDonald's to promote heart healthiness or slim waistlines. The company's central mission is, in fact, to sell enough fast, cheap, convenient eats to keep its stockholders rolling in dough. If this means loading up the food with salt and grease—because, as a chef friend once put it, "fat is flavor"—then that's what they're gonna do. Likewise, the fashion industry's goal has never been to make women feel good about themselves. (Stoking insecurity about consumers' stylishness—or lack thereof—is what the biz is all about.) Rather, the fashion industry's raison d'être is to sell glamour—to dazzle women with fantastical standards of beauty that, whether we're talking about a malnourished model or a $10,000 pair of gauchos, are, by design, far beyond the reach of regular people.

This is not to suggest that companies should be able to do whatever they like in the name of maximizing profits. False advertising, for instance, is a no-no. But long ago we decided that manufacturing and marketing products that could pose a significant risk to consumers' personal health and well-being—guns, booze, motorcycles, Ann Coulter—was okay so long as the dangers were fairly obvious (which is one reason Big Tobacco's secretly manipulating the nicotine levels in cigarettes to make them more addictive—not to mention lying about their health risks—was such bad form). The notion that the fashion industry should endure government meddling because its products or marketing techniques may pose an indirect risk to consumers by promoting an unhealthy desire for thinness seems dubious at best. More often than not, in the recognized trade-off between safety and freedom of choice, consumers tend to go with Option B.

Of course, whenever the issue of personal choice comes up, advocates of regulation typically point to the damage being done to impressionable young people. Be it consuming alcohol, overeating, smoking, watching violent movies, having anything other than straight, married, strictly procreation-aimed sex—whenever something is happening that certain people don't like, the first response is to decry the damage being done to our kids and start exploring legislative/regulatory remedies.

**The Fashion Industry Should Be Left Alone**

But here, again, the fashion industry's admittedly troubling affinity for women built like little boys doesn't seem to clear the hurdle for intervention. It was one thing for R.J. Reynolds to specifically target teens with its cigarette advertising. And, while I disagree with the attempts to make the war on fat the next war on smoking (for more on why, see here and here), you could at least make a similar argument that junk-food peddlers use kid-targeted advertising to sell youngsters everything from cupcakes to soda to french fries. But there's a difference between industries that specifically go after young consumers and those that happen to catch their eye—like, say, the fashion industry or Hollywood.
So let's give all those chain-smoking, Evian-guzzling, "gazelle-like" human-coatracks a break. In another couple of years, their metabolisms will slow down or they'll accidentally ingest some real food, and they'll be unceremoniously tossed off the catwalk like a bad pantsuit. Until then, in the name of personal choice, they should be allowed to strut their stuff—no matter how hideously skinny they are.

**Further Readings**

**Books**


**Periodicals**

• BBC News "Crohn's 'Mistaken for Anorexia,'" March 20, 2005.


• University of Pittsburgh Medical Center "Specific Regions of Brain Implicated in Anorexia Nervosa, Finds
Univ. of Pittsburgh Study," July 7, 2005.


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The Fashion Industry Promotes Eating Disorders

Eating Disorders, 2007


"The fashion industry, from designer to magazine editors, should not be making icons out of anorexically thin models."

In 2006 the organizers of the annual Cibeles Fashion Show in Madrid took the unprecedented step of banning significantly underweight models from participation, sparking international debate over whether the fashion industry's use of emaciated models encouraged anorexia and other eating disorders in the general population. Professor Janet Treasure and forty of her colleagues at the Eating Disorders Service and Research Unit (EDRU) at King's College, a well-known British eating disorders treatment clinic, applauded the Spanish authorities' decision. The following viewpoint is an open letter from the EDRU group to the international fashion industry urging similar actions to discourage the glamorization of anorexic imagery in the media and modern culture.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. According to the authors, what critical effects do disrupted eating patterns have on physical development?
2. What percentage of models fell below the minimum weight for participation in the 2006 Madrid fashion show, according to Treasure and her colleagues?
3. According to the authors, what is the normal body mass index (BMI) range? the BMI cutoff for the Madrid fashion show? the BMI cutoff for clinical diagnosis of anorexia?

TO THE FASHION INDUSTRY AS REPRESENTED BY THE BRITISH FASHION COUNCIL

Eating disorders, anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa are common disorders found in nearly 10% of young women. There is a large range in clinical severity. Some cases are mild and transient. However in the clinic we see the dark side whereby the quality of life of the individual and her family shrivels away and the shadow of death looms. These disorders have the highest risk of physical and psychosocial morbidity than any other psychological condition. The costs for the individual, the family and society are huge. Therefore research has focused on trying to prevent these disorders and to identify the factors that cause or maintain them.

Anorexia nervosa has a long history but bulimia nervosa was rare in women born before the 1950's. The incidence of the binge eating disorders like that of obesity has rapidly increased in the last half of the twentieth century. Most experts agree that cultural factors in terms of eating behaviours and values about weight and shape are important causal and maintaining elements in the bingeing disorders. The internalisation of the thin ideal is a key risk factor. Dieting to attain this idealized form can trigger an erratic pattern of eating especially if it is used in combination with extreme behaviours that compensate for overeating.

Studies in animals suggest that persistent, changes in the brain and behaviour like those seen in the addictions result if the pattern of eating is disrupted in critical developmental periods. The paradox can be that a desire to be thin can set in train a pattern of disturbed eating which increases the risk for obesity. So how can this society protect young people from these consequences?
Interesting work in colleges in the USA reported this year has shown that an educational web based intervention promoting a healthy relationship with food and body image can prevent the onset of an eating disorder in those that are at highest risk. Such use of the web can act as an antidote to the pro-ana (pro-anorexia) web sites which foster toxic attitudes and unrealistic body forms.

Public health interventions may also be warranted. Spain has taken the first step. The Health Authorities of the Region of Madrid and the Annual Cibeles Fashion Show (Pasarela Cibeles) banned extremely thin models from participating in this year’s event. Models with a Body Mass Index (BMI) below 18kg/m² (30% of the participants) were offered medical help rather than a position on the catwalk. To put this in context, the average BMI for a healthy woman is between 19 to 25kg/m². To be clearly diagnosed with anorexia nervosa a BMI of less than 17.5 is needed although in most treatment centres people with a higher BMI have levels of clinical severity that warrant treatment.

The issue is not whether we should place the blame of unhealthy eating behaviours on the Fashion Industry or on anyone else. The issue is that Spanish Health Authorities have decided to intervene in a health issue, which is directly affecting the well-being of models as well as affecting the attitudes and behaviours of many young girls and women who may strive to imitate and attain these unhealthy pursuits.

Adopting what Madrid has done is a good first step but the fashion industry, from designer to magazine editors, should not be making icons out of anorexically thin models. Magazines should stop printing these pictures and designers should stop designing for these models. People may say that clothes look better on skinny models but do not forget there was a time when smoking looked good too.

Janet Treasure and EDRU Team

Further Readings

Books


Periodicals

- University of Pittsburgh Medical Center "Specific Regions of Brain Implicated in Anorexia Nervosa, Finds Univ. of Pittsburgh Study," July 7, 2005.


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