ABSTRACT

THINNESS MATTERS:
THE IMPACT OF MAGAZINE ADVERTISING
ON THE CONTEMPORARY BEAUTY IDEAL

By Francesca Albani

This thesis examines how magazine advertising works to frame thinness as ideal beauty in Vogue, Glamour, and Marie Claire, three of the most popular fashion magazines in Italy and the United States. Utilizing Suzanna Danuta Walters’ notion of “Woman as Image”, I turn my attention to eight advertisements that appeared in the issues of the aforementioned magazines in late Spring and early Summer 2004. I argue that these advertisements provide evidence of how thinness is part of a sociocultural system of representation in which ideal female beauty is defined in terms of a narrow range of images of women that emphasize the flawless slender body. I examine thinness as the symbol of bodily perfection through which magazine advertising assigns women’s bodies an exchange value. I conclude by arguing for a multidimensional approach to advertising based in media literacy education and suggest that this education should highlight women’s experiences and draw on interpersonal and social communication as an approach to changing societal and cultural imagery about female beauty.
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Love to all of you.
CHAPTER 1
WOMAN AS IMAGE: THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

1.1 Introduction

The visual impact of an image is one of the most immediate and straightforward influences of modern socialization. It conveys feelings and builds societal and cultural ways of seeing through which people interpret and understand the outer world. Thus, the feelings and the visual response one has to an image may be the result of personal experience, but is also the result of pre-determined, profit-driven marketing strategies.

People are constantly exposed to widespread advertising’s barrage of printed images. Print advertising reaches all in one way or another. It attracts people’s gaze because it is all around. Magazine covers at newsstands, and fashion billboards on buses, cabs, or in subways blink at bystanders and constitute their daily visual background.

Advertising affects everyone. The idea I explore in my work is that advertising images do not simply depict changes in women’s fashion, accessories, or household products. They are also part of a cultural and social system within which femininity and women are defined and constructed into an ideal of female beauty: a young, thin, white, toned, and flawless body.

Ideal female beauty is the indicator of how today’s printed advertising is a system of signs and symbols that position, constrain, objectify, and sell women within a consumerist and capitalist society. In this social and cultural context, capitalistic and economic interests dictate how women should look or not look like by creating, targeting, and marketing false beauty needs or, more accurately, the necessity for a woman to meet society’s beauty standards.

The ideal of perfect female beauty from which one should draw her inspiration becomes, therefore, a consumerist tactic that divides up a woman’s body and targets its different parts: legs, arms, eyes, nose, thighs, belly, breasts, and buttocks. In this way, a woman’s body is the source of a particularly profitable beauty-industry upon which advertising depends.

The questionable power of images is a dangerous and insidious aspect of advertising and so it is part of my study and analysis. The dichotomy fat/thin is the most evident motivator of existential uneasiness that is caused by advertising’s messages to women. Indeed, I analyze and show how ads offer and compare, alternatively, grotesque and distorted fat female bodies against
the ideal perfection of thinness that is not real and does not exist. When overweight bodies are in advertisements, they just keep reminding women how and what they should be. The ideal, perfect thinness does not exist, more often than not, because it is ‘manufactured’ and refined by ingenious computer technologies.

Another point I highlight in my work is the effect that the advertised thinness has on women and men’s view of how female bodies should be. Indeed, the display of computer-enhanced and flawless bodies as an image of ideal female beauty can appeal to insecure or media illiterate women and suggest to them that their unsuccessful social, emotional, and professional life derives from their not being like the perfect bodies on the covers of magazines. Or they can suggest to men that their partner must be flawlessly beautiful.

Imposed images of ideal womanhood and feminine beauty can, in my opinion, be resisted and dismantled by explaining how a true fusion of women’s selves with their look comes from accepting their bodies’ flaws; acknowledging that a certain feminine appearance is not synonymous with perfection; and by cultivating self-love. In this way, women might be able to compare computer-based images of ideal beauty to their real bodily experience positively and to decode messages through the correct lens.

1.2 **Research Questions**

Keeping in mind the dichotomy fat/thin and the manipulation of women’s bodies in ads, it is appropriate to underline how magazines’ advertising socializes people to think that desire to change, renew oneself, be fashionable, and to feel fascinating are innate impulses of feminine nature. This highly socialized process constructed as praiseworthy and innate is also a woman’s Achilles heel, or her weakness, on which advertising bases its appeals to build a perfect body. In this thesis, I examine how print advertising constructs ideal beauty by portraying plus-size bodies as abhorrent while simultaneously reifying and standardizing thinness. Therefore, it is essential to come up with a set of straightforward questions that will guide readers through my work:

1) What value is given to the female body in print advertising?
2) Does print advertising create the norm of thinness? How?
3) What does the elimination and denigration of fatness in advertisements say to viewers?
4) Is fat really synonymous with social rejection and something unpleasant to live with?
5) Is thinness really synonymous with beauty, health, a better life, and easier
6) Are there any alternative and resistant images of the female body?

1.3 Literature Review

Advertising is part of women’s lives. It creates images of women that forge needs and necessities based on false and misleading marketing campaigns. Women’s needs are based on the market’s longing for more circulation of capital and growth in the economic power of major corporations. Thus, one could say that changes in the perception of how women’s bodies should fit into mainstream ideals are simply advertisers’ ideas newly packaged for a profitable market that identifies needs and insecurities of women. These changes advertise and frame the notion of the one body that all women should and want to have. They underscore the notion that a better physical appearance is what women need to pursue a personal and social success.

Today’s advertising shows the twenty-first century woman as someone who has achieved a great deal in terms of social status, public esteem, and beauty power. This woman is clearly and deeply independent from her male partner. However, she is more than ever a slave of advertising beauty standards that come from a patriarchal, male-dominated economy. She is, more than ever before, the reflection of what society, politics, and economy want from her. Jean Kilbourne argues that “advertising is the primary foundation of the mass media” as well as the soul of consumerism and capitalism, whose primary goals are to sell products and make profits; by turning female bodies into some form of currency with an exchange value, women become commodities that can be sold as entities or cut into parts. To do so and to make its strategies successful, advertising uses “values, concepts of love, images of sexuality, romance, success, and most important of normalcy” (“Killing Us Softly” 3).

That is why this thesis focuses on today’s advertising to examine how perceptions of thinness and fatness are the result of marketing strategies and why they do not reflect the reality of real women and their bodies.

These marketed representations of women are what have always been used to imprint in mass-produced culture a vision of the ideal female body; the criteria for feminine identity is constituted both by what is depicted in advertising and the non-questioning acceptance of it. Carolyn Kitch, in The Girl on the Magazine Cover: the Origins of Visual Stereotypes in American Mass Media, and Susan Douglas, in Where the Girls are: Growing up Female with the
Mass Media, emphasize how women’s bodies have become the repository of societal, political, and cultural values and variables. Since the nineteenth century, they argue, magazine covers and print advertising have been creating stereotypical roles for women and values of femininity. Thus, they claim that advertising imagery represents the visual slavery of women’s bodies to advertisements or, more accurately, to an image-based culture.

Kitch and Douglas also point out that the creation of mass-cultural and stereotypical visions about a woman’s body size is the means by which male-female tensions are smoothed over and female upward mobility is sold by the media industry. When in the aftermath of World War II and in the early 1960s the American family and household became the profitable targets of consumerism and capitalism, there was a return to more full-bodied motherly figures that showed more flesh than 1920s flappers. Women were called home from the factories, told that their place was their home and not the workplace, and that they should not break or overturn the equilibrium of a society and cultural system that controlled womanhood through consumerism. The control of womanhood and beauty through a battery of images of pre-determined roles lasted until the 1970s, when advertisers began to understand that profits could come from feminism itself. Indeed, at the same time, advertisers started weakening and capitalizing on the achievements of feminism to show women what to do with their bodies. The new ideal body with little flesh and no curves at all was depicted as the freedom of the newly liberated woman. Susan Douglas notes that women were told by ads that “attractiveness was indeed a way to female success” (192). Being “conventionally attractive” became depicted, she writes, as the only thing to take a woman to the top of the social hierarchy and give her power to act and speak out (191). However, attractiveness turned out to be the enslavement of the modern woman to physical scrutiny and psychological manipulation.

Advertised bodies blur, in a postmodernist sense, the boundaries between the reality inside and outside of an image. This fact makes women unable to see that what an image conveys is not reality at all, but the reality of the product that often computer-generated figures advertise. Thus, it becomes increasingly difficult for women to discern that unhealthy, emaciated bodies do not reflect the average woman and her life-experience. Kilbourne argues that in this way advertised thin bodies reinforce cultural ideals that build up a “toxic cultural environment” and a social system that despises fat, urging women “to adopt a false self, to bury alive their real selves, to become feminine” (Deadly Persuasion 130). Thus, she believes that print
advertisements make unnatural thinness seem ordinary and acceptable. In transforming the unachievable, perfect body into something that really exists, Kilbourne continues, “weightism”, represents a “socially accepted prejudice” (Deadly Persuasion 134). Thus, she underlines that this message says there is nothing wrong in scorning fat women in public or on the covers of magazines. The rare presence of overweight models in ads or their ridicule through representation compel us to control our appetite, starve to death, or shrink one’s curves if the goal is the pursuit of the ideal perfect body, the badge of ideal feminine beauty. Or, Kilbourne observes, the effacement of overweight bodies in advertising “provides a fertile soil for body obsessions to take root in and creates a climate of denial in which these diseases flourish” (Deadly Persuasion 135).

Imbued with notions of beauty, these destructive body obsessions are packaged as the rituals and values promoting today’s ideal physique and women’s life. Naomi Wolf calls these beauty practices “the Beauty Myth or Religion” (10). The “Beauty Myth” (10), through the commodification of women’s bodies, assigns femininity an exchange value that is based upon appearances and behaviors (12). In this way, the new cult becomes, as Lager E. Grace and McGee Brian R. emphasize, “society’s communication practices” through which women’s bodies are disciplined and controlled according to pre-planned standards (287).

It is a true religion, Wolf asserts, because it communicates to women through “a continual comparison to a mass-dominated physical ideal” (14) that beauty “objectively and universally exists” (12). The new ideal body is, thus, Wolf emphasizes, advertised as something that can be bought by purchasing those products that promise the ultimate rewards for the members of the new religion or, more accurately, of the new cult of body reduction. Thus, she argues that the new cult of thinness becomes a “fear-of-fat” culture where plus-size women are seen as monsters and rejected (121). This culture reminds women that they are in constant need of a product to be called beautiful, sexy, or sensual. By surrendering to the rituals of the new religion, women can achieve ideal and perfect thinness. These beauty rituals are what Cathy Schwichtenberg calls “the disciplinary reality” (27) and Vickie Shields and Dawn Heinecken define as “the weight discipline” (88), without which, they argue, women do not feel confident or in the position to be looked at. Therefore, Bordo claims that often fatal cosmetic surgery, strenuous exercise, starvation, diet programs, and the “Body Image Distortion Syndrome—a discontinuity between anorexic and normal attitudes toward weight and body image”
Advertisements construct and frame through the thinness mania those social roles and categories that become symbols of the social status and cultural meanings that women can acquire through bodily appearance. However, Shields and Heinecken argue that these categories neither advance nor enlarge possibilities for women, nor do they reflect the reality of how women’s bodies are positioned within society and culture. Indeed, advertising traps women and their bodies in stereotypical roles and restrictive categories that are disguised by all of the fashionable ways that describe what a body can do or the many places it can fit (19).

Usually, skinny, white, flawlessly beautiful models are in ads for the coolest and most fashionable accessories and clothing. They always represent women having top-qualified jobs such as attorneys, CEOs, and career women. In contrast, fat bodies or the ones that are gently called “plus-size” are kept on the margins of advertising as something that society does not want to see or care about. That is why fat or plus-size models in ads have poses promoting the product and a way of being feminine that does not belong to the new cult. They are made to look like someone who does not want to be in magazines or print advertising and should not be there. Thus, they may reinforce feelings of guilt in readers when they give a different image of female bodies and femininity - - a body that can be appealing even if it is not so perfect as the ideal body of the new religion. They do not represent ideal beauty and they have to be silenced. Thus, Wolf suggests that women are actually invited by the categorization of thinness and fatness to see that “Professional Beauty Qualifications: the perfect look and ideal body” are the key to success at work and that any profession a woman takes up is a display profession where a perfect, flawless body is necessary (27).

The construction of a thin, perfect, and toned body as the ideal body becomes then a normalizing image - - beauty normalcy - - that defines a recurrent pattern of what female bodies should all strive to attain. Advertising is everywhere and affects everyone. People are constantly exposed to it, on their walks to school, at work, when they go to the gym, or in the privacy of their homes. Therefore, advertisements of perfect bodies become powerful for their omnipresence which enables them to become powerful images that women see and look at every day. However, one should look at images not as single images framing one particular body. They
should be looked at as something whose distorting power comes from the accumulation of the same message sold by many different products and apparently by different images.

Kilbourne and Shields and Heinecken argue that the power of advertising lies not in the power of one isolated image but in the cumulative power that comes from seeing images as a whole through which advertisers create, perpetuate, and reinforce the ideal of an unnaturally thin body as being perfect and achievable (“Killing Us Softly” 3; Measuring Up). With the market bombarding us with thousands of images each day, the message that a thin body is the perfect body becomes consistent and normalized when it should instead be seen as unnatural and unreal. This message persuades women that the image of a bony, toned, white body is the right image that mirrors their real bodies and selves. As Ruth-Striegel Moore pinpoints “exposure to a particular image teaches you to like that particular image […] you are led to think this is right” (“Dying to Be Thin”).

In this way, the seductive perfection of a painfully thin body in ads becomes the norm influencing women’s daily experience and knowledge of their bodies. The normalization of the thinness mania and weight reduction can be seen as the outside force that demonstrates to “fat” women that they are wrong and do not fit the mainstream advertised image of perfect female bodies without any fat at all. Moreover, Cathy Schwichtenberg writes that the standardization of beauty can also be read as the effacement of individual, social, and cultural differences. Beauty disciplinary practices, she argues, “do not merely transform, but normalize the subject” and guide women to become one constructed ideal (272).

By framing the unnaturally thin body as physical normalcy for all women, the mass-produced ideal of thinness does psychological violence to women. It detaches their inner world from their outer surface. Bordo states that advertised thinness separates women’s bodies from their real selves. Its “constant element”, she writes, “is the construction of the body as something apart from the true self (soul, mind, spirit, will, creativity, freedom) to undermine the best efforts of that self” (Unbearable Weight 4). That is to say the advertised image of the ideal body type tears apart mind and body by blurring, and transforming what are the real goals and reasons to be a woman. By only focusing on the body, the mind becomes a material entity, a commodity; women’s identities are annihilated and their bodies dehumanized. As John Berger says, the female subject looking at an image is always a “split-subject” between mind and body (qtd. in Shields and Heinecken 77). Shields and Heinecken argue that women are split-subjects because
images are “one-dimensional”. Indeed, they state that women are portrayed in advertisements where thinness is the one characteristic for attractiveness and bodily perfection. That is why women find themselves split between understanding how they look at themselves and how advertising images portray them. The one-dimensionality of advertisements with double-standards, they claim, brings women to have two types of dissatisfaction with their body type. On the one hand, the first dissatisfaction comes from society’s perception of a female body that does not reflect the “normal” ideal body and the female awareness of not being as society wants her to be. On the other hand, the second dissatisfaction created by double-standards is that women’s outer bodies are not the ones that are constantly promoted and reproduced in advertising (77).

By making women vulnerable, media images of thin bodies influence and manipulate both the female subconscious and conscious in many ways. Indeed, Kilbourne writes that the message of advertising is that women “must be flawlessly beautiful and, above all these days, they must be thin” (Deadly Persuasion 132). These words become the familiar soundtrack for the way women judge their bodies and look at images of other women. Women are, she further explains, “affected by the ubiquitous, graphic, and consequence-free depictions of thin/fat bodies […] that surround us in all forms of mass media” (Deadly Persuasion 148). Women pursue, she argues, “the American belief of transformation and ever-new possibilities” (Deadly Persuasion 132). As Shields and Heinecken point out, women do not realize that “part of advertising’s magic is that it offers a continual hope that we can move closer to the ideal if we just purchase this one necessary item” (79). Wolf summarizes Kilbourne, Shields and Heinecken words by emphasizing that the American dream about the ideal body type says that “beauty can be earned by any woman through hard work and enterprise” (28). Advertising images create, thus, illusions that women can improve if they work hard enough. At the same time, it dooms women to fail because they will never be able to achieve the advertised, computer-enhanced body. In this way, Ellen Goodman argues advertising “writes” its “big success story that can make any woman anywhere feel perfectly rotten about her shape” (qtd. in Kilbourne, Deadly Persuasion 135). By controlling the size of women’s bodies, a patriarchal society is not only imposing its ideal of beauty for profit but is also trying to tame and monitor its own obsessions related to femininity. A thin, emaciated body is more easily controllable than a fat body because it plays by the rules of absolute control over female attractiveness. The anorectic body is represented, Bordo writes, as
being attractive because it has a shape that “is dictated by the normative pattern of managing desire in a consumerist society” (Unbearable Weight 203). From this perspective, she uses Foucault’s theory of the body in order to point out that the dominant view about the anorectic body frames it as “the docile body regulated by the norms of cultural life” (Unbearable Weight 165). Even if eating disorders are not accepted behaviors today, anorexia is normalized and conventionally represented in advertisements as not being shocking. Instead, fat bodies represent, Bordo claims, “an extreme capacity to capitulate to desire” (Unbearable Weight 201) or, more accurately, bodies that can overwhelm and overtake a significant position within culture and society. And advertising “cannot allow them, as Bordo notes, “to get away with it; they must be put in their place, be humiliated and defeated” (Unbearable Weight 203). Besides, their unconventional beauty takes up too much space and transgresses the boundaries of normalcy (Coward 85). “The unruly body, Bordo notes, is, therefore, controlled and manipulated through the display of food (Unbearable Weight 149). Advertisements show that food has little value for women. The only value that one sees attached to food is that eating or, more accurately, indulging, is wrong, so that it becomes a secretive activity for women. As Bordo says, the message to women is clear: they can only indulge a little to satisfy their hunger. Only portrayed through bite-size food, minimizing female hunger is appropriate feminine behavior (Unbearable Weight 129). Indeed, in most advertisements, women are never shown eating. From this perspective, Bordo continues, the representation of food can be said to be “the cultural ideological counter-offensive against the unruly woman and her challenge to prevailing arrangements and their constraints on women” (Unbearable Weight 116).

The obsession with thinness can thus be read as cutting girls and women down to size to silence them, in order to suffocate their voices and manipulate their individuality into showing that good girls do not take up too much space in society. It is, Kilbourne argues, “involving girls in false quests for power and control, while deflecting attention and energy from that which might really empower them” (Deadly Persuasion 138).

Overweight women are despised because their hunger for food by extension may feed uncontrollable sexual appetites and desires that threaten masculinity. Women’s bodily appearance is, Susan Faludi asserts, minimized to maximize the male presence and voice (187). In other words, she comments that images of thin women in advertising are seen as sexy because they enforce patriarchy and reproduce in a subtle, glossy way the vulnerability of female objects.
Women are thus told that they have a place within society and are meaningful only if they commodify and shrink themselves through the objectification of their own bodies for male pleasure.

Female bodies in advertising are the objects of a male gaze, not a female one, encoded in the representation of a constructed and reproduced ideal of how women should look or not look like. The way in which images of beauty perfection are mass-produced and reproduced, Shields and Heinecken pinpoint, is the result of a “male gaze” (74) that projects its fantasies of beauty perfection onto the female body. This gaze, as Rosalind Coward says, is “a controlling gaze […] an extension of how men view women in the streets” (qtd. in Shields and Heinecken 74). Mulvey argues that “the sexualized image of a woman says little or nothing about women’s reality, but is symptomatic of male fantasy and anxiety that are projected on to the female image” (“Visual and Other Pleasures”, Preface xiii).

Mulvey uses Lacan’s theory in order to make the argument that the male gaze frames female attractiveness to enforce his sexual identity on the bases that he possesses the phallus and that the female spectator is absent from the viewing process (“Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” 33-38). Indeed, “men may look openly, while women’s perspective or sight, if it exists at all, is hidden” (Shields and Heinecken 83). The male gaze is vigilant at keeping alternate gender roles at bay to be sure that his role within a patriarchal society is still significant. Thus, one could say that advertising is a male domain that needs to represent the female Other in a certain way to define its own realm, characteristics, and to keep its power.

Mary Ann Doane’s work on the feminine grotesque or the monstrous feminine can also be used to underline how fat bodies are portrayed and seen by the male advertising world as abnormal and deviant images. Fat bodies are those who may challenge and disrupt the male power and sexual identity within the realm of advertising. Thus, fat bodies are accepted when they are portrayed as bodies that identify with the male gaze and power within the image. In other words, the fat body is displayed when it becomes a projection of the male ideal of perfect feminine beauty in the representational system. Doane’s idea of the “masquerade” (138) - - “a performing of femininity” as Walters emphasizes, “that reveals its status as construction” (59) - - highlights the desire of the female look to destabilize the male eyes. However, it also points out how the masquerade of the fat body represents a ridiculization, a farce that further reinforce the dominant system of representation. In other words, fat bodies framed as close to the male ideal of
feminine beauty simply produce an excess of femininity and flesh that acknowledges them as grotesque aberrations. It creates a gap between the fat body and the ideal body (138-39). Indeed, Doane explicitly says that “to masquerade is to manufacture a lack in the form of a certain distance between oneself and one’s image […] masquerade constitutes an acknowledgement that it is femininity itself which is constructed as a mask - - as the decorative layer which conceals a non-identity” (138-39).

A close reading of today’s advertising reveals that African-American, Asian women, and other females of different racial background are not represented or mostly excluded from the representation of the ideal body type. If they are present, they are normally displayed as the Other that is being positioned outside the standards of ideal beauty perfection in order to frame and define the characteristics of Western ideals about the flawless thin body. Sarah Banet-Weiser notes that the exotic beauty of the Other is only appreciated by advertising’s “normative framework” when it is deconstructed and re-constructed according to Western white beauty standards (87-122). By doing so, racial differences can be absorbed into the white mainstream advertising system; bell Hooks states that “in order to enter the mainstream media, one must look and sound as “white” as possible, altering voice, diction, and most importantly, appearance to present a close ideological fit with the status quo” (qtd. in Shields and Heinecken 146).

Therefore, the thin body as ideal and the fat body as contemptible are notions and beliefs that have spread, for example, among African-American and Asian women. Women with non-Western racial features feel the need to and must transform their diversity into the Westernized version of the ideal body type - - white, young, skinny, tall, and muscular - - to see themselves represented in the dominant culture.

Despite all these negative manipulations and attitudes that attempt to reduce female bodies and to control all women with one ideal, advertising campaigns seem to have started to produce alternative images that come from and speak about real female experience and bodies. These alternative advertisements wink knowingly at women by showing them that real bodies are beautiful no matter how they look like and what their size is. This positive attitude can also change the broader cultural and societal ways of seeing female bodies; people can see feminine beauty in real terms without idolizing the market’s falsely constructed myths. However, recent feminist scholars have noticed that advertisements winking at women may reinforce and reproduce more than ever stereotypical images of thinness. Shield and Heinecken observe:
The wink is a way of addressing the audience, suggesting that social equality for women has already been achieved. However, closer examination reveals that the wink is one way to look that traditionally conservative ideals are recycled into a more palatable “feminist” or progressive framework, while in fact achieving no real significant change in how women are represented. (175)

Indeed, plus-size models are especially seen in magazines that deal with health issues such as obesity or that only address overweight women. Plus-size models represent the average weight of the ordinary American woman. Why should fat/plus-size models be representative of the feminine body only in magazines that address and are bought by overweight people? Shouldn’t these magazines promote the mainstream idea of “a new discourse of body acceptance” (Shields and Heinecken 163)? These magazines and images cannot be said to be alternatives to dominant portrayals of the perfect body because they do not represent new ways of looking at women. Rather, they are the result of new marketing strategies that have understood how to make overweight people a new domain of easy profits and how to hide them from sight.

Ideal beauty is neither something that all women have and they can acquire with a product nor what is represented in mainstream fashion advertising. When women look at images of the advertised ideal thinness, they go through a process of negotiation with these images. They produce meaning in the interaction with the image to untangle all the ideas and beliefs that extend beyond the life of one image. Women constantly negotiate with what is made to appear as their own reflection and understand it as either just being a reflection and nothing real or as an ideal which they must live up to. Thus, the process of negotiation results in a process of understanding that, as Shields and Heinecken point out, relates to women’s “life, experiences, and ways of thinking” (132). Indeed, the two authors further argue that women can actively interpret today’s weight reduction mania in a variety of ways and “choose to resist, negotiate, or go along with the preferred reading depending on how well the message matches their experiences, beliefs, and values” (133).

By realistically perceiving advertisements as illusions, women feel the pleasure to buy and enjoy the beauty products without developing a sense of inadequacy, lack, or failure. And, as Wolf writes, women reinterpret beauty and body perfection as being “noncompetitive,
nonhierarchical, and nonviolent” (288). By actively reading or resisting, women focus, Shields and Heinecken emphasize, on “their subjectivity, their capacity to be seen as individual and to make individual choices” (167). Women are the controlling authority of their own image. As the authors further argue, the negotiating process also brings to the surface the fact that “a female gaze” exists and that women are not culture and society’s dupes (131). Thus, female negotiation between the advertised body and real mind and resistant readings of advertisements reside upon a foresight and knowledge that perfection does not exist and that nobody can achieve it.

This perspective can also change the way in which social, cultural, political, family, and educational structures see women and can emphasize the right feminine behavior and look. Indeed, women are not the only ones whose visual perception of the perfect body is affected by advertisements and guided to the same dominant idea of what femininity should be like, act, or look. Therefore, cultural ways of seeing, Shields and Heinecken argue, can be changed and transformed, not only on an individual basis but also on a wider societal level (180-86).

By creating new cultural and social ways to look at a female body, women are not solely judged by how they look and by their identity that does not belong to mass produced ideals and ideologies. Shields and Heinecken suggest together with Kilbourne that “media literacy or the alteration of the relationship of the audience members to the message” (Shields and Heinecken 180) and “emotional literacy or the education of the audience members to love flaws of real bodies” (Deadly Persuasion 131) are the means to educate viewers to read computer-generated images and bodies. And, these new ways to see and position women’s bodies constitute alternative corporeal images because they erase restrictive roles and categories in order to create new sizes to measure women’s bodies against. By doing so, the female gaze is taught to respect and value female traits and develop a new way of unwrapping cultural codes: to become aware of the negative and manipulating forces that construct advertising campaigns. It also shows the strength to speak out loud about the female somatic body experience and demand that culture not display them as objects but as rational beings.

1.4 Scope of Study

In my thesis, I focus on the representation, objectification, and consumption of women’s bodies in advertising. I deal with magazine advertisements because, as Kristen Harrison and Joanne Cantor state magazines have more impact on viewers than television advertising. In their article “The Relationship between Media Consumption and Eating Disorders”, the two authors
argue that “the relationship between mass media consumption and women’s eating disorder symptomatology seems to be stronger for magazine reading than for television viewing. Overall magazine reading was significantly and positively related to EAT (Eating Attitudes Test); overall television was not” (60). Therefore, the scope of my study concerns specifically how women’s bodies are represented and “shaped” within the realm of print advertising. It also works towards the idea that thinness and fatness are two highly constructed values in print images that establish bodily criteria for women to measure up to.

I explore the social and cultural meanings that attach to, and are carried by female bodies. In doing so, I do not presume to write a study that is universally valid for each woman and groundbreaking in its field. Instead, I hope that my work is more of an informative prospectus and an invitation for both women and men to read beyond advertised images of thin/fat bodies and to imagine alternative representations for female bodies. Moreover, the intended target audiences of my work are young women - - teenagers and women in their thirties - - from industrialized countries.

Before beginning my research, I carefully considered whether or not I should focus on Italian or American magazines. And I have immediately realized how current images of perfect bodies in both countries are homogenous.

Indeed, the most famous and important fashion designers or brands of beauty products launch the same advertising campaigns and use the same images to appeal to consumers anywhere in the world. As a consequence, these campaigns spread the notion of ideal female beauty and of a perfect body homogenously and globally. In other words, the flawless, thin, white, toned body is as much advertised in the US as it is in Italy.

Therefore, I have decided to buy both American and Italian monthly magazines from which I have selected advertisements to analyze. Magazines are dated between March and June 2004 or, more accurately, in late Spring and early Summer 2004. The Italian and American magazines for consideration are Vogue, Glamour, and Marie Claire. In analyzing these magazine images, I focus on fashion advertising that constructs the ideal body type. This study purposely avoids looking at fashion magazines for plus-size women in order to provide a realistic account of how fat - - thin bodies are positioned and displayed in today’s mainstream advertising. Magazines for plus-size women are, therefore, excluded because they are few in number and address only one segment of the female population.
1.5 Methodology

In order to analyze how fat/thin bodies are represented in the selected advertisements, I employ Suzanna Danuta Walters’ notion of “Woman as Image” (29). I examine how the obsessive repetition of certain textual elements creates the idea of the perfect thin body. In this way, I explore how thinness has become a visible sign and symbol of ideal beauty within the system of representation in print advertising.

The images I have chosen as the basis for my argument and analysis have been selected according to precise criteria: for their significance in the underlying culture; their use of the fat/thin; woman’s body as related to the advertised product; and their reflection of dominant representations of body and beauty perfection. Advertisements I analyze for this study do not belong to a specific advertising campaign or promote the same product. Instead, they communicate the same ideas about a pleasurable life of luxury, love, success, and fun for the ideal body type. These images advertise high-class fashion items: sexy, expensive underwear or elegant dresses.

My textual analysis of the selected advertisements is based on two similar three-step methodologies that Barbara B. Stern and Gillian Dyer have separately elaborated to “read advertisements as expressions of contemporary consumer culture” (Stern, “Textual Analysis Research” 61). First, the analysis starts with an “identification of textual elements” (Stern, “Textual Analysis Research” 61). Those elements of the image “objects, position, people, social class, color, space” that Dyer calls the “denotative” (94-95)). I look at how the selected advertising texts construct “Woman as Image” (Walters 29) by “tracing the connection between social and cultural conventions and meanings” (Stern, “Textual Analysis Research” 66) across images. The second step searches for, as Dyer says, “ads’ relevance to the social and their relation to our culture” (94-95). The third and last step is to deconstruct the meanings and the ideological assumptions of each text to emphasize, as Dyer writes, “underlying principles and attitudes” (94-95). In doing so, I focus on the binary oppositions, gaps, and absences within selected images.

1.6 Chapter Organization

The present chapter is the explanatory introduction to the frameworks and assumptions that will guide my study of print-advertising. Through a literature review, it also has introduced how print advertising creates the ideal body type and influences female perceptions of their
bodies. Chapter Two traces the history of how beauty standards and feminine icons have changed through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It also illustrates how and why print advertising images have become more and more important in the shaping and representation of ideal feminine beauty. Chapter Three develops a cultural and ideological analysis of the selected advertisements to pinpoint how advertising reifies thinness while it denigrates fatness. In this way, this chapter employs Suzanna Danuta Walters’ notion of “Woman as Image” (29) to underline how thinness is today’s badge of ideal beauty. Chapter Four explores what may constitute various forms of resistance to advertisements and the ways in which women can be educated to perceive the manipulated and distorted images of feminine beauty.

1.7 Conclusion

With this work, I address how the thin body is constructed by intersecting signs and symbols as “Woman as Image” (Walters 29). How do images of thin and fat bodies get produced and come to have a meaning for us? How do a patriarchal society and advertising industry construct a woman’s body and the spectacle of its representation? Which cultural norms and social expectations frame ideal bodily normalcy? Can women resist or negotiate with their visual objectification? These are the questions I address by using major feminist media scholars’ studies and in analyzing the advertisements I select.
CHAPTER 2
CONSTRUCTING AND DECONSTRUCTING THE FEMALE BEAUTY IDEAL

2.1 Typologies of women who have changed and characterized “the Beauty Myth” in the last century

The rules of “the Beauty Myth” (Wolf 10) change in various ways over time and historically by virtue of culture and nation: bodily types come one after the other in concomitance with what is in vogue even during periods of wartime, economic hardship and expansion. Therefore, “the Beauty Myth” is the outcome of the accepted prevailing beauty ideals and practices that standardize body images and define cultural expectations. These elements are not only commercial in origin, but, also derive from the social, political, and cultural environment in times of peace and war. The twentieth century was definitely the time when the term “generation” just as much as ideals of beauty, meant changes in both life and mentality:

Two World Wars, the Sixties, the Vietnam War, the Seventies, the hedonism of the Reagan Era, the influence of TV, and, in general, of consumerism […] the New Age and not to mention “lighter” revolutions following musical waves and rhythms as tango, Charleston, rock, pop or film seasons as the silent cinema, the white phones and romantic comedies. (Babbi 22)

The female figure at the beginning of the twentieth century was shaped by corsets. Women used these “artificial aids to increase the size of their breasts […] achieve a swelling bosom and smooth long hips” (“A Turn toward the Bust”). Corsetry helped to impose on women’s bodies “the S-curve form […] it allowed the bosom to hang low and unarticulated in front while the hips were pushed backwards” (Glasscock, “Twentieth-Century Silhouette and Support”). By 1910 the S-curve form had started its decline. Indeed, designers began to reject “the full-figure with a constricted waist to promote a slimmer, less restricted silhouette” (“A Turn toward the Bust”). Both the First World War and the Second World War hastened these new fashion changes and brought about new ways of seeing the female body. Thus, the two world conflicts marked a primary and fundamental point in the developing image of femininity and of all women. The increasing number of women going out to work or helping with the war effort needed to be able to move freely.
In the United States, right after World War I, silent cinema peaked and “more than five million spectators went to movie theatres” (Calanca 38). In dark rooms, people would see a new ideal of feminine beauty that transformed the women on-screen into “femme fatales” like Theda Bara. Femme fatales’ exotic beauty, whose piercing looks and heart-shaped lips were considered the incarnation of sexual vice and sin, projected onto the screen all the fantasies of a reserved Europe and America. This new type of woman embraced both her angelic qualities and fiendish vices within (Banner 279; Seid Pollack 92).

Right at the end of World War I in 1918, people could breathe a deep sense of relief. Women who had worked during wartime now had an economic independence and vitality new to them. Linda Babbi asserts that “a postwar woman was of a very active and impulsive nature: she drank alcohol quenched her hunger and guilt by smoking opium and cigarettes, and she danced until she fainted” (30).

The prevailing image of the twenties was very thin and free-spirited: the flapper girl. Her body shape or, more accurately, beauty standard became androgynous. Carolyn Kitch and Roberta Seid Pollack describe this woman as missing the typical physical characteristics ascribed to a female body. She had very short hair, and her breasts, belly, and bottom had practically disappeared. Seid Pollack emphasizes how “her serpentine slimness suppressed the female shape [...] exalting instead boyish or prepubescent forms” (91).

If the “flapper girl” (Kitch 122) of the 1920’s danced the Charleston all night and day in her scanty dresses, then the woman of the thirties reasserted female curves - - breasts, waist, and hips. “A woman”, Babbi points out, “had to be thin with feminine curves, sporty, tanned, and have a natural, well-groomed and elegant look” (35). And, Ginger Rogers became the new feminine ideal to imitate (Babbi 35).

Masses of American and Italian women had once again as their frame of reference movie stars and actresses’ natural “total look”, which was created by movie studios and became the beauty style to emulate:

Women used cosmetics like eye pencils to draw eyebrows, Vaseline to give brightness to eye makeup, a lip pencil and a little brush to apply lipstick [...] platinum blonde hair became longer. (Babbi 36)
The boom of the “total look” was mainly due to the immense popularity of two beauty icons of that time: Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich. As Babbi notes, Greta Garbo made fashionable the beauty of a symmetrical face whose big eyes were often lowered and lips half-open (42). On the other hand, Marlene Dietrich in her men’s suits became the role model for those women who could not take any dictates from a patriarchal society, either about dress code or love life (42). And Seid Pollack describes these two icons as “having a slenderness we can still admire today - - but they certainly were not skinny. Their bones did not show through their skin” (102).

As Daniela Calanca and Susan Douglas note, women had to face the necessity of abandoning the caretaking roles that they had held until that time. They left home, the private sphere, to enter the workforce, the public sphere, because their fathers, husbands, and sons were at war defending their countries. Hordes of women, Calanca emphasizes, would pass through the gates of plants and factories, wearing blue boiler work suits vastly different from the frills, long skirts, and corsets they had been putting on until then. Femininity became thus embodied not by a frail, pale-painted woman but by a strong-willed person unworried about fripperies and trifles (35). And so came the phenomenon of Rosie the Riveter. It was a women power campaign. Through this fictional character - - a woman highly sexualized and determined - - “the American government tried to make the idea of working outside the home desirable for women. Songs, posters and Hollywood produced films aimed to promote a positive and patriotic attitude towards the war among women. Thus, many women who had previously been denied employment on the basis of gender entered the workforce” (“Rosie the Riveter”).

The forties and fifties were marked by notable events and changes, the majority of which were induced by World War II. War and sex appeal did not match. The former meant destruction of things and life, while the latter suggested the creation of beauty ideals. As Babi notes “The feminine appearance became a bit more soldier-like for ladies, whereas the look for young women saw the college style as the predominant trend” (55). Seid Pollack highlights how “the sweater girl had come into vogue. She was slender, but she had curves and sweetly rounded flesh” (102). Meanwhile “the image of Rita Hayworth wearing her long evening-gown that left her shoulders uncovered and her long gloves past her elbows while she smoked a cigarette in 1946” became the symbol of what men and women dreamed about after many sacrifices (Babi 53).
When in 1947 Christian Dior presented a woman with a “New Look”, soft curves and tiny little waists made people think about “La Belle Époque”. The new woman was particularly attractive, fresh, and feminine. On the one hand, her appearance had to show she was capable, qualified, and skillful at work. On the other hand, it had to be motherly, feminine, and warmly domestic (MacDonald 197; Seid Pollack 108; Banner 180-81). Her look was mature and sensual but not sexy, alluring, or tempting; or, as Seid Pollack affirms, this new woman represented “softness, femininity, and flowerlike qualities” (108).

In the meantime, make-up began to highlight big wide eyes and a childlike, mysterious female figure whose curves were well-rounded. This woman of the fifties found two icons in Marilyn Monroe and Sophie Loren. In the last eleven years of his fashion empire, Christian Dior shaped women’s bodies at his pleasure with different “New Looks” (Babbi 73). These new styles and forms were a response to war’s desolation; adult women began to change shape and hair-color as fast as they changed make-up and fashions. Sometimes, women wore their hair straight or wavy, and loose to their chin or shoulders; other times, they preferred it to be really short. Regardless, women’s favorite hair color was always blond.

During this same period, the handbag took on the status of a cult/veneration. The icon of ideal feminine beauty of the late fifties became Grace Kelly who had “an elegant, cool composure” (Seid Pollack 108) and she always had with her a Hermes handbag, called from then on a “Kelly Bag” (Babbi 78).

The fifties saw a young America giving the rock and roll tunes of Billy Haley and Elvis Presley to Europe and heralding a new style for males: the Teddy Boys (Un Secolo di Moda 101). However, the fifties also brought along with fashion and music a “malaise” generated by the discontent and hypocrisy of the new consumerist society. Thus, people, especially young men, embarked on long solitary breaks to “find themselves”, the meaning of their lives. The ideal figure of femininity now became a teenager and identified a young woman who had never existed before. She had more free time, more freedom to dispose of her life as she wanted; not least, she had more money to spend as she wanted. Girls went insane for the Marlon Brando and James Dean-type of guy who wore white t-shirts, jeans, and black leather jackets. These girls appeared to have “girl power”. As Douglas asserts their femininity was “popular, cute and perky”. Their image presented teen-age girls who defied accepted patriarchal structures without really breaking them. In the fifties, “perky femininity”, Douglas further explains, “bridged the
polarities of sanctioned masculinity and femininity—it signaled “assertiveness masquerading as cuteness”, and offered “fabulous camouflage” to a girl trying to get her way without abandoning the submissive femininity that earned her the approval of her patriarchal culture” (qtd. in Nash 343). Furthermore, these girls created communities and groups that led, Paula Fass pinpoints, “to a shift from parental to peer influence in the lives of many adolescents during this period […] the peer societies developed by teens in high schools to an increased amount of conformity among teenagers, which in turn contributed to the construction of teen as generational cohort” (qtd. in Kearney 267).

Cocciolo and Sala describe these groups of young women and “desperate” youths as follows:

Girls who jump and somersault when they dance adopt a style of dress that emphasizes their physique but it leaves them an extensive liberty of movement: close-fitting jerseys or blouses, tartan flared skirts long to the knees with tight elasticized belts and different layers of fluttering underskirts, short socks and low shoes. Hair is tied up with ribbons to the back of their head. Guys wear shirts and jumpers, sporty trousers or jeans, and they wear smarmy hair often with gaudy locks on their forehead. (142)

The sixties were a period full of huge political and cultural upheaval that modified the social classes, political power, and women’s bodies. Values of pacifism and non-violence spread paired with a sense of new sexual freedom, and women became masters of their bodies and sexuality with the advent of the pill. Seid Pollack asserts that women now looked young and behaved youthfully. They were energetic, tomboyishly active, and irreverent” (146). London and San Francisco were the capitals of young social, cultural, and political movements of the sixties.

John F. Kennedy was the icon of new America, and his wife Jacqueline became the incarnation of the ideal of femininity of that period (Babbi 97; Seid Pollack 137; Banner 288). On the day that Kennedy was killed in Dallas, she turned out to be an involuntary testimonial for Chanel in her pink dress (Babbi 97). Another event that deeply marked United States history was the Vietnam War (Seid Pollack 144), against which the “hippies” rose up, their Flower Power denoted a will to change the world.

The hippie woman with her multicolored clothes gave life to a new feminine body type that did not stress or take into account thinness and fatness. Her body was her way of expressing
a new freedom of expression and joy and a rejection of bourgeois stratification/class/thought (Babbi 105). The hippie woman

adorns her body as a work of art; she covers it with garlands and necklaces, paints it, decorates it with rainbow-colored dresses [...] And, in her style formed by a jarring mixture of all times and countries, there is no right way to dress, there is no right way to make love. (Babbi 105-6)

In the meantime, Great Britain welcomed the birth of the miniskirt created by Mary Quant (Banner 287); not even in the roaring twenties were the legs of young women so flagrantly uncovered and exposed. This look was sexy and provocative; it asked for very lean physiques and fake, long eyelashes, like those of beauty icons Twiggy and Jean Shrimpton (Banner 287; Seid Pollack 144). Twiggy symbolized “a person not weighed down by stored-up baggage—physical, material, or emotional. It was the body of the romantic gamin cherished by the youth of the period” (Seid Pollack 148).

The sixties closed out with two American astronauts, Neil Amstrong and Edwin Aldrin walking on the moon’s surface. The idea of space, of a universe that was closer to the earth, did not only promote the image of man who could conquer all but, also influenced women’s perception of themselves and fashion in the following decade - - the 1970s. On the one hand, Barbarella, a young Jane Fonda, was the beauty icon of this new trend, and so women strove to become perfect and identical clones of Barbarella (Schwartz 334; Babbi 100). On the other hand, there was Star Trek. Its female characters wore, Sharon Eberson writes, “dynamite costumes [...] from miniskirts to unisex uniforms to reveal-all catsuits”. However, women did not appear as sex objects. Series creator Gene Roddenberry loved, Nichelle Nichols asserts, “women to look like women. He didn’t think it was awful for a woman to be over size 2 or not look like a boy” (qtd. in Eberson).

Moreover, the early Seventies started to seriously question and challenge the Vietnam War, political power, the education system, the family, and consumerism. For their protest, young people worldwide would present their bodies garbed in military uniforms or soldier-like clothing. Folksingers like Joan Baez

engaged in social protest and feminist protest and showed that women could be political [...] They launched a central mixed message about female power. They showed that being female and being political were not mutually exclusive; in fact, they were
complementary. And, they made this critically important, if subtle, link: that challenging norms about femininity itself was, in fact, political. (Douglas 148-49)

If “consumerism prevailed in the Sixties, the Seventies were characterized by poverty”, because the oil crisis dictated uncertainty, economic insecurity, and high unemployment rates (Grandi and Vaccari 97). Moreover, tense international relations and political scandals like Watergate continued to intensify and worsen the economic slump and social downturn.

At this time, the so-called “ordinary, normal” woman wore jeans which had become the emblem of nonconformists and non-conformism. This woman would wear them without worrying too much about her bodily appearance because “unisex fashion trends had abolished those social and cultural boundaries that defined what male and female clothing was” (Babbi 107). A woman felt free and liberated from male eyes and prevailing beauty ideals.

However, once the ideas of “Love and Peace” and “Flower Power” had faded, they left room for more selfish individual interests, and health and wealth became the fads of the late Seventies and early Eighties. As a consequence, a woman would not feel very confident about her body. And Susan Faludi pinpoints that “she would feel low self-esteem and high anxiety about a “feminine appearance […] the individual woman succeeded in fitting the universal standard - - a sickbed aesthetic - - by physically changing herself” (202-04).

Food became low-carb, low-fat, and drinks low-calorie. Further, spas and gyms multiplied, along with aerobics and various schools of dance that capitalized on “the success of Saturday Night Fever in 1977” (Babbi 112). With her lean, supple and muscular body, Jane Fonda returned as a symbol of the perfect thin woman. Seid Pollack describes the new Jane Fonda as “the female ideal of the eighties who now raised her clenched fist, not as a sign of protest, but to show her biceps” (235).

From the beginning, the eighties brought to the limelight a new and completely different generation from that which had preceded it. The eighties’ young generation had a new concept of beauty and femininity concerned with both the body image cult and the confusion of sex roles that the new figure of the businesswoman had generated for family and society. Madonna and Michael Jackson became the symbols of eighties’ transformism, a phenomenon that Ann Kaplan states “saw the blurring of distinctions between a “subject” and an “image”- or the reduction of the old notion of “self” to “image” […] postmodern transformism would eliminate gender and
race differences as significant categories, just as it swept aside other polarities” (qtd. in Pribram 196)

Besides Jane Fonda, the perfect examples of feminine beauty were the ravishing and powerful female protagonists of the early and very popular soap operas such as *Dallas* and *Dynasty*. These fascinating women would wear jackets with padded shoulders to emphasize their tiny and svelte hips (Babbi 114). “Power suits” indicated money and power for women. However, they framed a highly sexualized woman by bringing attention to certain parts of her body like hips, bosom and breasts. Furthermore, Susan J. Douglas remarks how:

> These shows were the disintegration of the American family, of course, of America itself. They objectified, ridiculed, pitted, and crushed women against each other yet they resisted patriarchy in some ways […] female competition was entirely within the domestic sphere and consumerism was central to the contest. (243)

The public sphere - - work and society - - was split between the male sphere of the yuppies and the career women who had left home. Calanca emphasizes that “Rolexes, Cartier jewelry, and high-fashion clothing gave evidence to the fact that the Eighties were a time of great wealth” (76). Female equality and economic independence brought up for question what the roles of the two sexes should be within the home. As a consequence, the divorce rate rose incredibly along with single-parent households and the alteration in roles increased conflicts and confusion between the sexes.

While girls modeled themselves on male bodies and clothing, quite a few males did the opposite. For example, Boy George became famous for his skirts, makeup and braided hair. The new model of feminine beauty was thus an androgynous and muscular body; catwalks were dominated by beauty icons of the time such as Naomi Campbell, Claudia Schiffer, Linda Evangelista. They all were very tall women who had long legs and perfect curves (Babbi 120). Movies of this period such as *Working Girl, Baby Boom, Flash Dance, Dirty Dancing, and Fame* also promoted “the compelling standard of female beauty - - a thin, firm, and beautiful body - - that locked women into a war with their own bodies” (Seid Pollack 211).

However, in 1985, HIV was officially classified by the World Health Organization as an epidemic, and, the October 1987 market’ crash began a period of economic downturn. These events, together with the nuclear disaster of Chernobyl in 1987, marked a sudden awakening from a golden existence centered on sexual freedom, hedonism, and luxury. Consequently, a new
ecological awareness made its way through and the culture of excess and high-class fashion ended.

Advertising, and particularly Oliviero Toscani’s campaign for United Colors of Benetton, shocked the public more than once or, more accurately, on a regular basis (Frillici and Mazzarelli 64-66). Indeed, cities, buses, and magazines were covered with advertisements that were halfway between reportage and fiction and they touched on “hot topics” such as HIV, racism, and war. The eighties ended with the welcome fall of the Berlin wall, and the nineties opened with an attempt to go back to the carefree world that had preceded crisis, building on a new ecological awareness and sense of spiritual conscience.

Regardless of social efforts to eliminate them, drugs spread and caused the death of famous persons. Advertisements did not fight back against the “drug culture”; instead, they used it to create a new ideal of feminine beauty and fashioned it to sell products. Thus, the new icon of perfect and acclaimed beauty was a woman with a “heroin-worn look” (Babbi 118): emaciated bodies, pale faces, livid expressions, and dark, sunken eyes.

New technologies made giant steps towards advancing a notion of a beautiful, perfect body conceived in laboratories. Indeed, after the mid-nineties, female beauty became a real science delivering plastic surgery for profit. However, the more body trends changed, the more the beauty market also offered provisional solutions to perceived flaws: wonder bras, silicone implants, and botox injections.

This excessive and frantic search for an ever-new ideal of perfect beauty caused skinny but curvaceous top-models to be substituted with very young, emaciated, pallid, and frail girls who became the example to imitate in a flash. Thus, catwalks were invaded by baby-models like dolls or romantic nymphs. Beyond ideal beauty, they personified and symbolized the modern search for “perverse” innocence and the desire for eternal youth that is deep-rooted throughout Western society.

Close to the turn of the century, new trends in virtual reality also came into being and so did Lara Croft, the heroine of Tomb Raider, the new Play station game, who jumps, shouts, swims, and skis, appears to be very sexy and sensual. Her lean, muscular body with a prominent bosom and wearing close-fitting and sheer dresses can be considered the icon of the ideal woman of the nineties. (Un Secolo di Moda 151)
The Pepsi advertising video broadcast during the 2002 Super Bowl was emblematic of this succession and variation in body typologies and female beauty images linked to social, cultural, and political changes. In a handful of seconds, Britney Spears appeared in multiple outfits and make-up that followed those serial fashion/body changes and trends found in the US and worldwide during the twentieth century.

2.2 The Beauty Ideal in Contemporary Visual Culture

Today, we live in the epoch of so-called visual culture where images have become the main elements that constitute and influence people’s thoughts, societal trends, cultural beliefs, and patterns of representation. Images mirror piece by piece what people are and what they love and like in current society (Jhally, “Image-Based Culture” 79-82).

In reflecting consumers’ lives, magazine advertising’s visual reality defines the identity of people as individuals or social actors in terms of what they possess, buy, or look like. Visual reality or, more accurately, what one sees and “admires” in advertisements, tells a woman, for example, who she has to be and how she can embody a particular look. As McLuhan writes, advertising reflects society, its collective mind, and it enters people’s minds to dictate and normalize social behavior or cultural norms. He also emphasizes that “ours is the first age in which many thousands of the best-trained minds have made it a full-time business to get inside the collective public mind […] to get inside in order to manipulate, exploit and control” (qtd. in Lazier and Gagnard Kendrick 200).

The world as “text” has been replaced by the world as “image”. Therefore, images have started a process, as Gail Dines specifies, in which today’s culture is moving from being “book-based to be image-based” (“Beyond Killing Us Softly”). Here, words co-operate with visual images to create a virtual reality through which magazine advertising offers models of bodily imitation to “teach” women how to experience life and make choices. Within this context, visibility and absence have acquired a great significance. Visibility is equated with a white, beautiful, thin woman who uses her look as a springboard for social recognition and success in postmodern culture. Absence is what society neglects, and it does not deserve to be shown. Absence is, thus, synonymous with a fat woman who does not fall within cultural expectations for proper femininity. Or, if she is shown, she is portrayed as a freak.
Creating a form or a model in magazine advertising means overstimulating one’s mind until his/her visual field is saturated with images. Thus, visual tricks and devices are used in magazine advertising to convince consumers/viewers that what they see and view is real, achievable, and the best that can be offered to them.

A shiny, made-to-measure appealing reality in magazine advertisements coincides more often than not with virtual dimensions - - a reality that does not exist. This aspect is particularly evident when unachievable goals such as unnatural thinness are displayed for a public which is not media-educated or has little critical consciousness and knowledge of how advertising images are produced. In this way, advertisements socialize women into thinking that to have a more glamorous and perfect body, it is enough to buy and possess the diverse values and role models that the products merely represent. Therefore, in order to sell their items, manufacturers and fashion designers embark on advertising campaigns that associate body lotion, spas, and dresses with positive and desirable images. As Kathy Peiss points out the thin, perfect body suggests that a better physical appearance is what women need to pursue personal and social success and “achieve the feminine ideal” (248).

A valid and recurring concern of media scholars such as Susan Bordo, Jean Kilbourne, and Vickie Rutledge Shields and Dawn Heinecken is that images mirroring a virtual dimension will erase in people’s minds the existing distinction between an “unmediated” reality - - what people actually see - - from a more and more “mediated” and artificial culture and reality - - what people are made to believe they see.

The effacement of boundaries between nature and culture is mostly evident in the metamorphoses of today’s advertised female bodies into goddesses. The body was once considered an inseparable union between the inner soul and the outer body (Davis 33). Instead, Judith Williamson emphasizes, current times and advertising images frame the body as similar to any other cultural product or item subject to change and manipulation. In other words, a woman’s body has become “a naturalized mediated entity that carries off the social and cultural meanings” (“Woman is an Island” 385). Or, as Bordo writes, the body “has taken up residence [in culture] […] along with everything else that is human within culture […] the body we experience and conceptualize is always mediated by constructs, associations, images of a cultural nature” (Unbearable Weight 33-35). Advertising images of thin physiques as badges of bodily perfection become, in this way, “cultural stores upon which both the advertiser and the audience
[participate] in the construction of commodity meaning for the whole female body or its parts” (Shields and Heinecken 40).

Thus, we can see that there is no opposition between the “real” and material body and the various cultural and historical inscriptions — advertising images. These cultural images, Elizabeth Grosz remarks, literally form bodies and help to manufacture them as such. It is an essential condition of humanity to be subject to the influences of culture, to conform to society’s dictates as a survival mechanism and to see social norms as producers of meanings and reality. Part of our nature becomes, thus, to be dependent on the fulfillment of societal expectations and respect of social hierarchies (qtd. in Calefato 70).

From these premises, one can easily understand how advertising images meet few obstacles on their way to imposing their ideals and perspectives on bodies, products, and society. A woman’s body is continuously called into question by the “adjustments” made to her physique in advertising in such a way that women always feel compelled to adapt so as not to be left out. From this perspective, advertising campaigns become social projects that change according to the time period to which they belong. Shifts in systems of representation change with popular culture imagery, generating confusion about how ideal female bodies and beauty should really be. What stays fixed and unquestioned in advertising and current visual culture is that beauty is only expressed through the body. Images change all the time, but what never shifts is that the myth of perfection is achievable.

Television presents advertising images in fast-paced sequences that offer viewers what they apparently do not have in an uninterrupted barrage of stereotypes featuring desirable products. Nevertheless, it is print advertising that influences people most profoundly. Print advertising does not flash by people’s eyes and minds. It can be looked at for as long as women want. It does not fade away in an instant. Accordingly, this aspect of print media creates the illusion that images of perfect, thin bodies are there to be critically judged and gazed upon. In “The Relationship between Media Consumption and Eating Disorders”, Kristen Harrison and Joanne Cantor argue, indeed, that “mass media, especially magazine advertising, have important influences on disordered eating through their impact on the values, norms, and aesthetic standards embraced by modern U.S. society” (41). Even if television shows “an increasing preoccupation with beauty, thinness, and food”, the two authors observe that “it is exposure to and consumption of fitness and fashion magazines that foster the drive for thinness and body
dissatisfaction” (60-61). In “The Body Electric: Thin-Ideal Media and Eating Disorders in Adolescents”, Kristen Harrison writes that the body-improvement magazine content and the exposure to its thin ideal socializes people, especially women, to think about dieting and exercise as ways to achieve thinness and stick to a body-surveillance and scrutiny regime (137-41).

Magazine images literally play with the ambivalent representation of female bodies as subjects that are constructed as objects of the male gaze whenever advertising business needs to promote an item. Women’s bodies become objects to be dismembered and capitalized on by prevailing beauty standards of the flawless female body which is in contrast to fatness and flabbiness (Coward 44). That is why current advertisements offer close-ups of perfect, thin, toned figures in order to highlight how a female’s body must be flawless in every single detail to be fully recognized as beings within society and culture. Gloria Steinem underscores this idea by saying that “the general message that advertising gives women is of constant imperfection that products can fix up” (“Beyond Killing Us Softly”). In other words, advertising images keep women on a never-ending search for the right product that can change their bodies and lives. They display and package perfect computer-enhanced and air-brushed thin bodies as “real” and available through the purchase of the right product (Kilbourne, “Killing Us Softly” 3).

Indeed, print advertising offers continuous images of improvement - - of how women can be if they only try hard enough - - and they do not fail to follow advertising’s advice:

Female desire is courted with the promise of future perfection i.e., ideal legs, eyes, butt […] Female dissatisfaction is constantly recast as desire, as desire for something more, as the perfect reworking of what has already gone before - -dissatisfaction displaced into desire for the ideal. (Coward 13)

Therefore, an advertisement may be nothing more than female desire sought, packaged, and consumed under an illusion, a promise of future perfection that allures and flatters all women:

Changes in ideal female body types […] trends in ways of seeing the female body are cultural. They are closely tied to the gender politics, economic conditions, and popular culture of an era. The mass media continue to play a pivotal role in reflecting and promoting gender ideals. Representations of idealized bodies and gender roles always have been available through advertising and across the mass media […] Much of the female bonding in this culture occurs in the exchanging of discourse over how others see
us [...] The way we each thought “others” saw us has been a defining component of our relationships our entire lives. (Shields and Heinecken, Introduction xii-xiv)

Men and women read the messages of advertising in a different way. Men do not see themselves as being influenced by glossy messages and words, while women admit that advertisements have a great impact upon them, the perception of their bodies, and defining the space given to them within a masculinist society (Shields and Heinecken 28-29). Indeed, the stereotypes through which female bodies are portrayed are examples of all the social roles and ideological visions of gender to which women are subjected. In magazine advertisements women “are perceived between a male fantasy of ideal femininity as projected in advertising images and the ideal female who is fit to marry in real life” (Shields and Heinecken 33). Advertisements become, therefore, “familiar ritual-like displays […] ritual-like bits of behavior which portray an ideal conception of the two sexes and their structural relationship to each other” (Shields and Heinecken 37).

Thus, part of the significance of magazine advertising in the shaping of ideal female beauty lies upon those dominant patriarchal ways of looking that display female bodies for male pleasure. As Suzanna Danuta Walters argues, it is important to understand advertising imagery as structured by the context of male dominance: “the ability to scrutinize is premised upon power” (65-66). In her article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” Mulvey analyzes the process through which the male gaze - - the active subject of narrative - - looks, spies, and stares at the female object in order to stabilize his dominance in the whole system of representation. Her essay uses psychoanalysis to trace how male eyes subject women to a controlling and dominant gaze within narrative threads. The author points out that, in this way, the male gaze takes a woman’s body as erotic basis for his pleasure. The phallus is not simply identified with the penis. Phallic power is a kind of mirror that reflects male anxiety about acquiring and maintaining more and more control over women. Thus, one can say that women are made passive objects in terms of social power and sexual dominance within images. Male scopophilic pleasure comes, thus, from looking at a female body as object of the gaze (31). In advertising images as well as film scenes, male pleasure comes, in other words, from a woman’s body or body part as object of sexual stimulation through sight (32).

Through this process, the male gaze may transform the object of looking - - a woman’s body - - into a fetish substituting, as Kaja Silverman points out, “either one of its parts or the
whole for the missing phallus” (224). “This mechanism”, Silverman emphasizes, functions to reassure the male subject that the woman to whom his identity is keyed lacks nothing” (224). In other words, the male gaze watches the erotic object - - woman - - to stabilize his identity and reassure himself of still having the phallic power. In Material Girls: Making Sense of Feminist Cultural Theory, Walters acknowledges that “this fetishistic look is also closely a part of representation of women in advertising, to the point where a woman is represented only as a body part […] Women are signified by their lips, legs, eyes or hands, which stand, metonymically - - the it for the whole - - for, in this case, the ‘sexual’ woman” (55). The female body highlights, in other words, the ever-present and ubiquitous scrutiny of the “male gaze” that goes beyond voyeuristic pleasure in magazine advertising. As Rosalind Coward points out, it is a male gaze that controls and it is coded in photographic images in such a way that is an extension of how the perfect bodily appearance and sex-appeal are the cards to play to win male attention (qtd. in Shields and Heinecken 74).

John Berger agrees when he says “a woman turns herself into an object and most particularly an object of vision: a sight”. The fact is, he goes on to say, that looking at and scrutinizing a woman’s body has always been set up according to “patriarchal ways of seeing that approve of and define the feminine ideal” (qtd. in Shields and Heinecken 74).

The image of a perfect female body is thus defined in male terms and through the traditional conventions of a patriarchal society that are neither progressive nor representative of today’s woman’s achievements. The modern woman on glossy covers and pages does not challenge or subvert the power imbalance between men and women. Advertisements always portray women having plenty of choices and positions; however, these advertised choices never frame a woman in a more powerful situation than a man. They support “the ideological gender divisions of “male-work-social”/man-in-culture (public sphere) and “female-leisure-natural”/woman-in-nature (private sphere)” (Shields and Heinecken 25).

For the abovementioned reasons, the representation of the ideal thin body becomes in advertising images the exchange value of any advertised product. In “The Beauty Match-Up Hypothesis: Congruence between Types of Beauty and Product Images in Advertising”, Micheal R. Solomon and Richard D. Ashmore assert that “a persuasive ad presents a good Gestalt: a model type of beauty and associated image that matches the product with which it is paired will provide a coherent message, which […] may enhance acceptance of the advertisement” and its
ideals (24). The ideal body and advertised products sell each other. Indeed, the flawless body attracts attention to the form and shape of items. Products become, in their turn, the key to a perfect physical appearance promoted as easily achievable. Shields and Heinecken underline that “the transfer of codes of ideal female beauty or attractiveness to commodities has today become common sense” (71). They further emphasize this idea by arguing that “the naturalness of highly sexualized images of women standing for commodities like beer goes largely unquestioned in our culture” (71).

How can it be otherwise when ads for bathing suits do not promote the quality of the items (their waterproofing) but only make evident the thin flawless body that is wearing them? Shields and Heinecken point out that it cannot be different because “for most women the cultural artifact ‘bathing suit’ makes no immediate referent to swimming but instead is a sign for body imperfection, a sign of vulnerability […] its function is to display in public female perfection in minute detail, from head to toe” (72).

In this way thinness is always beautiful, of prime importance for achieving the perfect body that is established and framed in advertisements through male eyes and for male pleasure. Indeed, today’s society despises, discriminates, persecutes fat and portrays it as unattractive. This tendency to diminish and humiliate the fat/obese is shown by “the absence of depictions of overweight persons as idealized objects in popular iconography” (Shields and Heinecken 89).

This trend is very dangerous because women, men, and society lose sight of what really is or should be a healthy weight for a woman’s body. Moreover, the absence of fat bodies from mainstream magazine advertising tells society how images have become the means of establishing, assessing, and judging aesthetic and ethical values of perfect thinness. These values are, then, displayed through the media as universally valid for anyone anywhere.

Fat bodies are neither appreciated nor accepted by mainstream society and magazine advertising. Rather, they are further exploited and framed as negative because, as Kim Chernin says, they do not belong to “a cultural norm” of thinness or what is considered appropriate behavior (qtd. in Malson 132). Fat or bulging parts are, consequently, outside the social and cultural norm of the proper female weight; they are transformed into negative representations that an “anti-fat culture” hates and erases from magazines, TV screens, and billboards (Malson 132; Rutledge and Heinecken 91; Unbearable Weight 145).
Plus-size bodies are seen as out-of-control, transgressing, incapable of self-disciplining themselves, and of saying no to “temptations”. From this point of view, one can clearly understand Kathleen Rowe’s argument that female fat is hated in part because:

It signifies a disturbing unresponsiveness to social control. In today’s culture, body fat may be read, albeit unconsciously, as a sign of women rebelling against the male gaze by refusing to conform to standards of beauty […] Female fat also signifies a woman’s ability and desire to consume for herself as subject - - rather than to merely exist as object and for pleasures of others. (qtd. in Shields and Heinecken 96)

Fat is not only unattractive but also unhealthy. There is no doubt that the advertising industry has been associating weight with issues of health. Therefore, today’s advertising campaigns stress the significance or, more accurately, the necessity of a flawless thin young female body to achieve a hypothetically appropriate physique that “reconciles” body and mind. But advertising notion of healthy weight - - thinness- - is unrealistic and unachievable by most women from all countries. Women are pushed to pursue “thinness at a level impossible for many women to achieve by healthy means […] the gap between the average woman’s body size and the ideal is now larger than ever before” (Tiggeman and McGill 23).

This seemingly new figure is actually the old, well-known, social and cultural ideal of beauty perfection in advertising, and it can be defined as the binary opposition between weightiness or fatness (disease) and thinness and fitness (health) (Shields and Heinecken 100). The “new” body, therefore, does not make any difference to women in terms of boosting self-confidence and self-love:

Women are socialized to view the ongoing surveillance of their bodies as a form of empowerment that arises from self-love. The newly slender woman purchases a new wardrobe, presumably, because she likes herself now that she is thin: when fat, she did not like herself and consequently did not give adequate attention to appearance. (Spitzack 35)

The search for perfect slenderness is not “gender-neutral”. The majority of people who suffer from eating disorders are women who are unable to see their body as anything but too fat. They perceive their bulging parts as disturbing presences that limit their possibilities in today’s patriarchal society. Therefore, they devote all their time to “chiseling out” a body that is too bulky to represent an appropriate feminine identity and impedes their selves from acquiring a
social and cultural identity (Bordo, Unbearable Weight 155). By mutilating her physique, a woman will cut down to size her social, cultural, and sexual power and control. She will not be as “dangerous and aggressive” to male authority and sexual dominion as when she took up “too much space” within society (Bordo, Unbearable Weight 160-62). By shifting female attention from the search for social, cultural, and sexual control to pursuing the mastery of the body, advertising may annihilate women’s subjectivity, discipline their bodies, and subdue them into moral numbness. Thus, thinness in print advertisements means shrinking a body, burning off calories, and taking off the excessive flesh to take control over a body that does not “play by the rules” (Bordo, Unbearable Weight 203).

Apropos of obesity being the disease of wealthy Western society, I have already referred in this thesis to the vulnerability of women as the objects of fierce weight-loss advertising campaigns. Here, danger lies in that psychological enslavement and entrapment in which women are caught when they are told emphatically to improve their bodies and achieve a computer-enhanced body/thinness.

Anorexia and bulimia are the most common and initial temptations that women fight in their search to adjust to the body ideal: the white, skinny, flawless, and toned body. Even if both diseases are medically recognized as being unhealthy and deadly, anorexia receives much more sympathy in society and culture than bulimia does. Indeed, anorexia is seen as the female body’s way of striving towards a social and cultural norm, while, bulimia is portrayed as being abnormal and subverting the rules of society:

Neither anorexia nor obesity is accepted by the culture as an appropriate response. The absolute conquest of hunger and desire (even in symbolic form) could never be tolerated by a consumer system—even if Christian dualism of our culture also predisposes us to be dazzled by the anorectic’s ability seemingly to transcend the flesh […] If cultural attitudes toward the anorectic are ambivalent, however, reactions to the obese are not […] As Marcia Millaman documents in Such A Pretty Face, the obese elicit blinding rage and disgust in our culture. (Bordo, “Reading the Slender Body” 483)

Death as a consequence of bypass surgeries, and extreme weight loss, and burn-fat pills underscores the fact that women are willing to risk their lives or to damage their body for their image. This phenomenon is the outcome of the lack of positive images of overweight women both in advertising and people’s mind. Fat has to be put in the “closet” and cut off from a
woman’s body. Only in this way, a woman will see herself mirrored in the promoted ideal
“slender body” (Bordo, “Reading the Slender Body” 467; Kilbourne, “Killing Us Softly” 3). For
all of these reasons, one comes to perceive “fat as unpleasant and ugly”. Being fat automatically
relegates one’s body and mind to a role of lesser importance in life (Kilbourne, “Killing Us
Softly” 3).

Building from the idea that female bodies must reflect social and cultural images, one can
understand why African-American models appear in mainstream magazine advertising only if
they resemble white Western physical features. African-American models are not, Lerone
Bennet JR points out, absent when they “construct their body according to white beauty
standards and look like some white model” (49). In other words, their faces and bodies must not
recall unique black beauty attributes (larger nose, bottom, and breasts). Consequently, African-
American models are asked to erase their cultural, ethnic and social heritage through their
bodies. If black models fall outside an accepted notion of advertised African-Amricanness, Sue
K. Jewell argues that their media images or representations reflect stereotypes linked to the black
woman: “the Mammy figure or Jezebel, the bad-black-girl” (46).

Last, but not least, the significance of magazine advertising also relies upon the fact that
the advertising industry spends billions of dollars on special effects of all kinds to make viewers
of any culture and country open their eyes wide and remember a certain product or face. In this
way, advertising executives try to capture the public’s attention profitably and ‘universally’ - -
for anyone, anywhere - - and to ‘globalize’ cultural trends through distributing products
worldwide. In their article “Chinese Consumer Readings of Global and Local Advertising
Appeals”, Nan Zhou and Russell W. Belk affirm that there is “a positive connection between
global appeals and the advertised products in most of print ads”:

For most participants, and especially for women, products related to fashion and
beautywere seen to be more fashionable and more beautiful when they were associated
with Western models. Global brands, advertising techniques, brand names and models
were effectively associated with status, modernity, cosmopolitan sophistication, and
technology. (6)

As a consequence, today’s magazine advertising is the result of global interaction
between distinct geographical cultures and peoples as well as the economic strategies of
multinational corporations. That is why many advertisements for fragrances, high-fashion, or soft

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drinks are identical worldwide. Sometimes advertisements even have the same slogans in English - - global language - - or in the idiom of the country where they have been produced. Images are such powerful conveyors of meaning that translations are not always needed.

2.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have written about how and why magazine advertising expresses “beauty” only through body images. Body types, icons and standards of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, I have emphasized, embrace the culture and style of the prevailing beauty ideals and practices of mainstream print-advertising. By doing so, magazine advertisements standardize body images, define cultural expectations and sell the myth of perfection to us. In the next chapter, I will attempt to address how selected ads - - magazine advertising - - construct a woman’s body, set up the spectacle of its representation and frame ideal bodily normalcy. Do advertising images socialize women into thinking that only thinness promises a wonderful life? How do these images normalize, target and market female bodies? Which meanings are given to ideal beauty and plus-size bodies? What does the absence or the grotesque portrayal of overweight models say to us? Do these ads lock female bodies - - thin and fat - - into particular portrayals of appropriate femininity? The next chapter aims to answer these questions.
CHAPTER 3

BODILY PERFECTION AND DEVIANCY IN MAGAZINE ADVERTISING

3.1 Introduction

The construction and deconstruction of the ideal female beauty in print-advertising alternates numerous typologies of bodies and body parts with ever-increasing frenzy. The images of advertising campaigns all seem different at first glance. However, a closer look reveals that today’s print-advertisements of ideal female bodies label and group women as either being extremely thin or overweight. As Martin P. Davidson states “images are…constructions designed to communicate, and consolidate ideological truths” (113).

One single image is worth more than a thousand words. As a consequence, advertisers use images to appeal to viewers, especially women, and convey to them the meanings and values of a perfect body (Kilbourne, “Beauty and the Beast” 121). It is by associating thinness with products that advertisers drive consumers to “buy” into the idea that thinness is a sign of the perfect and ideal woman. It is the expensive article of clothing or the famous designer’s tag that determines whether the body is an image of perfection or bodily flaws that need to be improved. In this way, fashion magazine ads represent unrealistic goals that many women cannot hope to attain. Thus, print-advertising becomes, as Marika Tiggeman and Belinda McGill claim, a model of social comparison that fosters body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behavior. The two authors observe that women accept and internalize the advertised ideal. As a result, women believe that through the consumption of the advertised object it will be possible to achieve the appearance - - the thin, young, white and toned body - - that the model possesses (23-44).

None of the following analyses of the selected images pretends to deal with every aspect of the representation of women in print-advertising. Instead, each description of the selected ads aims to illustrate different recurrent representational patterns of magazine advertising. By doing so, this chapter’s goal is to provide an overview of how magazine advertising frames the myth of bodily perfection (thinness), assigns female bodies to categories of normalcy or deviancy and turns them into objects with an exchange value.
3.2 Power and Looking Relations in Magazine Advertising

Most of the power of magazine advertising in the construction of bodily perfection resides in societal and cultural ways of seeing that display a woman’s body according to dominant patriarchal beauty standards. Fashion advertising is not made for male viewers but this idea does not imply that there is no male spectator. By looking at fashion advertisements, women internalize male ways of seeing female bodies and identify with the male gaze. In other words, women assume male ways of representing ideal beauty when they look at fashion images, top-models, their bodies and other women’s bodies. Consequently, the female gaze imagines herself being looked at in the advertisement. Women project their fantasy onto the female figure they see in magazine advertising through the lenses of an ideal spectator - - a spectator that “is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him” (Berger 64). Women are displayed as the passive object of the male look and come to internalize this look:

She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life […] Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relationships between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. (Berger 46-47)

If we apply this notion to advertising, we see how “there is no space […] for an authentic female gaze, because the spectator is inevitably addressed as male” (Walters 58). Further, Rosemary Betterton underlines that “woman as spectator is [indeed] offered the dubious satisfaction of identification with the heterosexual masculine gaze” (qtd. in Walters 59).

The Just Cavalli ad in Vogue (Italy), May 2004, presents viewers with a young skinny model sitting upright on a small stool. Regardless of the fact that she is wearing a gray silk dress, most of her body is uncovered and displayed. She wears high-heeled shoes and a beret. With one arm she holds up her face; with the other one, she reaches out to touch the young man lying beside her on the floor. He wears denim jeans and a striped silk unbuttoned shirt. The background is dark and lets the gaze guess where the young woman and man could be. The Roberto Cavalli woman’s eyes seem to defy the male viewer within and outside the image. She is trying to establish power relationships on her own representational terms, but she fails in doing this because she is, using John Berger’s idea, not acting but simply appearing for the male
presence (47). The eye of the viewer is clearly drawn to the crotch of the female model, her genital area. The spread legs of the model frame her groin as the focus of the gaze and, consequently, of the image. The trajectory of the eye underscores how she stands for sex and the body. By following where the eye goes, the female gaze transforms herself into “the object of the sight for someone else’s pleasure” (Shields and Heinecken 74-75).

The male model who seems to have succumbed to the woman’s eroticism is, indeed, an active presence. He is a disinterested presence who has just probably used or will use the woman for his own pleasure. The darkness of the picture and the shiny dress make the ideal male spectator think that he is really subjecting the objectified Other - - the female model - - to his control and dominance. In this way, the female viewer identifies with the male model and “feels” that she might possess the body too. The male hand’s grip on the woman’s calf expresses how the female body is the object possessed or the thing to be consumed by consumers.

Like in the famous movie 9½ Weeks, the man of the Abercrombie and Fitch fashion ad is the master and dominant force of the scene who “stuffs” his ego with food and sex as natural acts of his supremacy over the reclined woman. Moreover, his masculinity is stressed by his tanned skin and dark hair that recall a type of Mediterranean or South-American virility such as that of Antonio Banderas. In comparison, the girl, with her long curly blond hair, her emaciated curves, white skin, and naked breasts, embodies the perfect example of a sixteenth-century ephemeral beauty. As in many films, the picture depicts a sexual intercourse on a kitchen table full of vegetables, fruit and other food. What seems to be left unseen in the image is the advertised product. At a first glance, the spectator is confused and thinks of a series of advertised products: kitchen, food, and tablecloth. At a second glance, he realizes that what stands out in the whole picture and leads him to signs of masculinity (muscles and biceps) and symbols of femininity (perfect legs and breasts) are a white singlet, a pair of white underpants and denim shorts. It is by scrutinizing the outfits that the viewer ends up scrutinizing the two bodies and finally finds the brand’s name: Abercrombie and Fitch.

The woman’s defenseless pose suggests she is the food for the man’s sexual appetite. Her supine position, closed eyes and bent knee are three elements that highlight the woman’s submission to the male figure. Gender is expressed by what Erving Goffman calls “function ranking because the man is shown as being likely to perform the executive role” (32). However, it can be argued that the woman’s raised right leg does not demonstrate a complete abandonment
to male desires and to a situation that sees her as the dominated object. The right leg - - the bent knee - - is not a reaction to the male power, but it is an indication that the “sex-typed subject is not so much involved” (Berger 45).

Even if the two protagonists have closed eyes and appear to leave viewers out of the scene, their actions and frontal position changes the way of looking at the image. Indeed, the frontal position offers the scene to the ideal male viewer and takes him directly into the picture. In this way, the spectator “will fantasy oust the other man, or else identify with him” (Berger 56). As a consequence, the spectator becomes the protagonist and his gaze the controlling and dominant force of representation. Women internalize that their life must be dedicated to the satisfaction of male pleasures and vices and the fulfillment of household and motherly duties.

The Nef ad also belongs to that magazine advertising imagery that positions the model as the object of the ideal spectator’s gaze according to male-oriented society’s standards. The Nef ad portrays a skinny model at the edge of a desert road. Mountains are visible at a distance and their grey profile contrasts with the green color of the cacti and the clear blue sky. The model wears light green pants and an immaculate top whose bright colors - - yellow, fuchsia and white - - show up well on the extremely pale model’s complexion. Her long, black straight hair also stands out against the clear blue sky. Her eyes are heavily made up, fully closed and appear sunken. The model’s gaze is focused on nothing apparent, suggesting “psychological removal from the social situation at large” (Goffman 57). She is not really engaged with the viewer. Her psychological withdrawal leaves her “dependent on the protectiveness and goodwill of others” (Goffman 57). This aspect of the ad is also reinforced by her knee bent and her head lowered backwards. Consequently, in the Nef ad, the ideal male spectator - -the bearer of the dominant gaze - - becomes the saviour, the one who protects the woman.

Therefore, how does the female gaze internalize the representational politics of this ad? The message is quite clear. The model is attractive to the ideal male viewer because he “saves” her from her frailty, her incapacity of being alone and the savageness of today’s world. She is in danger without a strong masculine presence. Consequently, women may interpret this ad as an image that persuades them to be flawlessly beautiful because therefore the man protects her. It is as if women were told that they must pay back the male ego and desire for its protectiveness by achieving ideal beauty. Christine Gledhill claims that “pleasure is largely organized to flatter or console the patriarchal ego and its unconscious” (65). “Female representations do not”, she
believes, “represent women at all, but are figures cut to the measure of the patriarchal unconscious” (66).

Magazine advertising is connected to “the gender/power axis” along which gender roles are produced and defined (Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* 154). Through images, women learn to restrain and contain their impulses (Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* 129-37). As a result, female power is “confined to the realm of emotional control, not real political or economic power, the type of power that might lead to equality in relationships in the long run” (Andersen 232). It is a way to minimize female gender and maximize male authority according to precise social and cultural expectations (Faludi 187). Alice E. Courtney and Thomas W. Whipple refer to these expectations as “women dependent upon men; women do not make important decisions; women are shown in few occupational roles; women view themselves and are viewed by others as sex objects” (qtd. in Lazier and Gagnard 202). The Abercrombie and Fitch advertisement is a clear example of how femininity is submitted to patriarchal representational structures of gender and power. Indeed, this ad shows that the right place for women is the kitchen, which stands for home. What the viewer is made to believe is that this picture captures a candid moment that divides up the woman’s sphere - - private - - from the man’s one - - public. It is a distinction “that was from the start profoundly ideological […] the bourgeois discourse thought men ‘naturally’ occupy the public arena, women the domestic and the private” (MacDonald 48). This ad suggests, therefore, that women are not granted any advancement or progress in the representational advertising system. Jean Kilbourne addresses this point when she writes “images do not represent any real progress but rather create a myth of progress, an illusion that reduces complex sociopolitical problems to mundane ones” (“Beauty and the Beast” 125). In other words, the Abercrombie ad literally encourages the female to believe in a femininity whose values rely exclusively upon her outer body and the performing of household duties.

The analyzed ads give women the illusion that the female gaze can be the controlling force of their image. In fact, they position the models’ bodies as the objectified Other. In this way they drive the woman to function “as a sign for patriarchy […], its spectacle and its subordinate thing” (Attwood 7). Robin Andersen, using the ideas of Laura Mulvey and Rosalind Coward, argues that “the legacy of patriarchy meshes with cosmetics and fashion because they both judge women by virtue of their appearance, not by their success or merit” (227). The cultural and social context for the development of these images taps, therefore, into a patriarchal
culture that, Andersen notes, “constantly reminds us that we will be judged on the way we look” (228).

Using sexuality is another of the main tactics of magazine advertising to sell products and images of ideal beauty. Berger points out that “publicity increasingly uses sexuality to sell any product or service. But this sexuality is never free in itself, it is a symbol for something presumed to be larger than it […] [buying] is the same thing as being sexually desirable […] with this you will become desirable” (144). The sexual portrayal of the female body has been a representational technique of all the ads discussed so far. However, in the Luca Luca picture and the Just Cavalli ad in *Marie Claire* (US), March 2004, the use of sexuality and fetishism deserve particular attention. Within these two images, it is how the eye travels that draws the ideal male spectator to find pleasure in scrutinizing, possessing and imagining himself having sex with the three female bodies.

The Luca Luca ad shows two female bodies touching each other. Their stomachs and pelvic areas stick out and the two women hold one another’s backs with one arm. Despite their exaggerated movement, perhaps intended to mime fat bodies, these two bodies appear to be strikingly thin and toned. The two similar dresses - - one beige and one white - - glide on the two bodies, enhancing their curves. The erasure of the two faces is an indicator of how today’s magazine advertising does not represent women for their mental acuity or merits. Andersen argues that in this way “it is easier to objectify a fragment of the body. It is no longer a person able to express humanity […] becomes simply an illustration of an objectified physical feature […] to be emphasized to sell the product” (232). Being detached from the whole body, the torsos of the two women becomes the object of male passions and desires. In this way, the male gaze keeps under control a sexuality that may threaten his power. Suzanna Danuta Walters writes that he leads women to “think of their bodies as ‘things’ that need to be molded, shaped and remade into a male conception of female perfection” (56).

The two women are presumably looking outside the picture. They might be gazing upon viewers to invite them to get closer and discover their bodies. What this ad projects is a form of fantasy and pleasure through which women wish to become the image they see. Female viewers will observe the female form in the ad and then scrutinize their body parts. As a result, women see the model’s body as their own reflection and the thing they can also possess. Advertisements, Berger argues, make women envious of how they could be. The female consumer “is meant to
imagine herself transformed by the product into an object of envy, admiration, “for others” (134). In this way, Douglas Kellner notes the body “is no longer a form of individual expression and uniqueness but a standardized manufactured product” (“Advertising and Consumer Culture” 253). The advertised item represents, thus, the promised ideal beauty and male attention that are achievable through the Luca Luca dress. It does not matter whether the women are straight or lesbian - - the two bodies seem to mime a sexual intercourse between two women - - men will look at them if they wear Luca Luca.

In the same way as the Luca Luca ad fragments the two women’s bodies and sexualizes them, the Just Cavalli ad in Marie Claire (US), March 2004, frames the breasts of the model as the focus of the gaze. The male gaze powerfully dominates the image. The eyes of the captain identify with the ideal male viewer and lead him to scrutinize the woman’s body and make it an object of eroticization. Indeed, the captain’s line of sight follows a trajectory that brings the breasts to be the “object of vision” (Berger 47). They also draw the viewer’s eyes to the breasts. Thus, the spectator is invited to look with the sailor. His pleasure arises from using the woman’s body “as an object of sexual stimulation through sight” (Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” 32). The fetishization of the breasts - - the only thing “allowed” to be big in magazine advertising - - works within the image to reassure the male that she is a woman after all. The woman is signified by her breasts, which come to stand for the whole body. It might be suggested that, at the same time, her breasts substitute for the missing phallus. The erotic object of the gaze - - the breasts - - thus become the figure for the sexualized woman and stabilize male sexual and social power within the image by presenting him with a substitute for “the lack.” In other words, the pirate’s breasts do not simply substitute for the phallus, but they also mirror male fear of losing control over women and their bodies. The ideal male spectator is safe because the pirate does not imply “a threat of castration and hence unpleasure” (Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” 35). The captain remains the subject of control and dominance within the representation. The female gaze is not absent, but, through the identification with the ideal male spectator, it passively accepts her own representation through male lenses. The female gaze reads the ad resigned to her destiny of sexual exploitation and objectification by men. Therefore, she subjects herself to a masochistic pleasure that comes from scrutinizing and objectifying her own body. The message that female viewers get is that female sexuality is vulnerable, accessible and available.
The ad does not say so explicitly, but it glorifies a culture and society where women are sexually assaulted daily, battered and sexualized through aggressive acts. The violence in the Roberto Cavalli ad addresses those issues of female sexual objectification that are “pornographic in advertising because”, Kilbourne observes, “it dehumanizes and objectifies people, especially women, and because it fetishizes products, imbues them with an erotic charge” (Deadly Persuasion 271).

In this image, a dark-haired man - - the captain - - appears about to force a woman - - the pirate - - to have sex. The pirate’s pale complexion, the red-colored wig and the golden patch she wears to protect her right eye enhance frailty and submission. The woman’s garment appears very light and about to fall exposing her body to the captain’s gaze and action. Her delicate and colorful dress contrasts with the green leather jacket, the denim jeans and the half open shirt that recall strong masculinity and sexual power. The captain is taller than the female model who appears slightly bent and looking away from him, the assaulter. What Goffman calls “head/eye aversion” (63) is here an indication of how the woman “withdraws attention from the scene” and conceals her feelings (63). The postures of the captain and the pirate make it clear that “the main goal of the pornographic image is to exercise power over another […] either by the physical dominance or preferred status of men or what is seen as the exploitative power of female beauty and female sexuality” (Kilbourne, Deadly Persuasion 270).

In this way, the Just Cavalli ad shows another myth of today’s culture of pornography: women want to be forced to have sex with men. As a result, Gail Dines argues that rape is trivialized and violence glorified (“Beyond Killing Us Softly”). Ads like the Roberto Cavalli one are “not the cause of violence against women […] but, at the very least, they help to create a climate in which certain attitudes and values flourish” (Kilbourne, Deadly Persuasion 290). Consequently, the message of this ad may be that there is nothing wrong in cutting and beating the woman because she wants it! This is a message that becomes pervasive because magazine advertising obsessively glamorizes and helps to construct violence as a pattern of normal behavior towards women.

The Diesel ad recreates a modern urban jungle where an African American woman and a young white man stand out over a background of cacti and darkness. The African-American model is wearing a red vest, a very short denim skirt, a studded bracelet, long earrings, and a pair of dark sunglasses that do not show her eyes but reflect the wilderness
she is enjoying. She has a luxuriant head of hair as wild as the nature which surrounds her. As Berger asserts, “hair is associated with sexual power, with passion” (55). The model’s position suggests that she is not the controlling look within the image. She is squeezed to the left margin of the ad. Therefore, the female presence is here as in the other analyzed ads, minimized to highlight the white male presence and ideal male spectator. The young, white male wearing a safari jacket over a blue, white, green, and brown long-sleeved t-shirt is not afraid to fall into her sexual trap. He shows his boldness by caressing and licking a cactus too. He is the hunter and the girl is the prey.

In the ad, the black model caresses a cactus between her legs. The cactus appears to be a penis and an especially dangerous one. The phallic shape of the cactus draws the eye to the crotch area of the black model. By doing so, the sexual imagery of the ad frames the black woman as the animalistic presence within the representation. Here her image becomes problematic. Her sexuality is something terrifying where human desires and urges are mistaken as the tempting evil that drowns morality down the sea of muddy vices and dirty perdition. At the same time, the sexuality of the white man is depicted as the “proper expression” of erotic human passions. As Patricia Hill Collins writes “the controlling image of the Jezebel, whore, or sexual aggressive woman” is central to “elite white male images of Black womanhood […] to control Black women’s sexuality […] Black women’s oppression” (77). Since black sexuality has always been depicted in popular culture as animal-like, the black model is associated with the lowest brutish aspect of human nature. She signifies what Judith Williamson calls “wildness and exoticism, making them appear natural and connecting her sexuality and availability with the natural instincts of the beasts” (“Woman is an Island” 387). “Defining people of color”, Hill Collins pinpoints, “as less human, animalistic, or more “natural” denies African […] people’s subjectivity” (69).

Within this fantasy of Otherness, hooks argues that fascination and consumption become what seemingly dehumanizes black femininity and grants whiteness the power to exploit the culture and the bodies of a specific ethnic group (61-77). The dehumanization of black womanhood is “a major instrument of power” of elite white men “designed to make racism, sexism […] appear to be natural, normal, and an inevitable part of everyday life” (Hill Collins 68). In the Diesel ad, black womanhood has been packaged and commodified in a manner that
broadens multicultural representations while enhancing traditional hierarchies of a white patriarchal society.

3.3 The Narrow Range of Images Separating the “Ideal” From the “Deviant”

By pursuing the slender body, many women strive to achieve an image that is now considered ideal within most cultures: extreme thinness. By visually reducing the representations of a woman’s body to one prevailing image, magazine advertising socializes women to think that bodily subtraction is how they must meet the expectations of cultural and social ways of seeing the female physique.

By looking at the Marina Rinaldi and Fruit of the Loom ads, one is led to believe that there are finally brands and ads that care about real women with real curves. The Marina Rinaldi model is white and tanned. Her healthy curves and long black dress are emphasized by the beige-colored bed. She wears a long, black dress that leaves uncovered part of her legs and shoulders. She is lying on a bed and looking outside the image. Her legs form a triangular shape that becomes the focus of the representation. It is as though one’s attention is drawn toward looking up her skirt, and the image stimulates the implied male spectator’s imagination about the purpose and explicitness of her pose. Goffman links this sort of supine position to what he calls “the ritualization of subordination” in magazine advertising (40). A female body lying on a bed, the author argues, sustains the idea that femininity is on sale and displayed for sex and male pleasure (41).

The Marina Rinaldi model looks out to the viewer to establish the defiant gaze and the power relationship with the viewer. Her eyes are focused on the viewer. Thus, the model here appears and transforms herself into the object of the male gaze outside the image. She internalizes the male gaze and how it scrutinizes her as “object of vision” (Berger 47), to determine how others will look at her. In this way, the Marina Rinaldi model gives the impression of controlling and containing male ways of seeing her body. However, she does not control the gaze of the image. Indeed, her image is constructed upon the assumption of an ideal male spectator. It is the male gaze that controls the representation in this ad. The absence of men from ads does not, as Marjorie Ferguson asserts, “necessarily signify their lack of importance here. It may be that being heterosexually attractive is so culturally important that it goes without saying that women’s beautification is for men” (qtd. in Malson 112).
The idea of female beauty constructed to please the male gaze is also made evident in the Fruit of the Loom ad. Her curves and clothing (a white shirt, a black bra and a pair of brown floral panties) are highlighted by her serpentine posture and the brown plain background. And, the first page of the ad shows an open drawer with folded colorful underwear. In this way, her body, attitude and the product she is wearing become the protagonists of the image. Her smile seems to demonstrate that women are worth a look even if they are not like the ideal body.

The overall impression is that the two women of the Marina Rinaldi and Fruit of the Loom ads have a positive self-image. Consistent with Vickie Shields’ and Dawn Heinecken’s suggestion, these two ads can be interpreted as “those prescriptions women see in the media” that persuade them to accept themselves as they are (54). The two models do not have the starving appearance or the “heroin chic” (Pearce 85) looks of today’s fashion models. This fact constitutes here the main force for generation of meaning. Indeed, it is the difference from today’s fashion models’ looks that assign the Marina Rinaldi and Fruit of the Loom models, as Gillian Dyer claims, “to a ‘group’ of women with certain characteristics” (qtd. in Pearce 84): plus-size women. Thus, the two advertisements recall and derive meaning from other cultural texts that construct the imagery available to spectators.

The Marina Rinaldi ad emphasizes that “Style is not a size…It is an attitude! Size 10-22”. But, the ad does not represent a larger body image for women. She does not appear to be plus-size at all. Perhaps, she is a size 8/10 (US sizes). Being under size ten does not express the average size of women. Indeed, W. Charisse Goodman points out that “increasing numbers of American women […] wear a size 14 or over” (16). Anne Telford writes that “the average American woman’s dress size is sixteen”. Telford further asserts that “there are 62 million American women size 12 and up, although one rarely glimpses them in fashion advertising” (84). Jacqueline C. Hitchon and Shiela Reaves claim:

Even women recognized for curvier figures than catwalk models have become progressively thinner. Meanwhile, the average weight of women in the general population has risen. Women appear to be combating these contradictory trends by striving to become thinner […] Ads may reinforce a culture that values and rewards appearance over skills producing incentives for young women to cultivate a particular look rather than developing and expanding their talents”. (73)
Moving to the verbal text of the Fruit of the Loom ad, one can see how it refers to fashion and society’s contradictory trends. Guy Cook discusses “iconicity by letter shape” suggesting that associations can be drawn between qualities of lettering and products or other elements of imagery (qtd. in Pearce 85). The words “full-figured, fashion, squeezing, bunching, drawer” reproduce the serpentine pose of the model. By doing so, they emphasize the significance of not seeing any threatening body parts bulging out. In addition, they link the body size of the model to what society has constructed as ideal beauty. Her smile and pose of abandonment do not, indeed, portray a woman who is fiercely proud of how she looks. Her arms lying at her sides and contained smile are two factors that “seem more the offering of an inferior than a superior” (Goffman 48). In other words, the model abandons herself to the judgment and scrutiny of others who see her not as an idealized version of appropriate femininity. Therefore, the words together with the image frame as problematic a female figure that does not have that much space in magazine advertising.

This ad offers to the eye of the overweight woman a version of her future self transformed by the product and closer to ideal beauty. Seeing means possessing the object of the gaze (Berger 83-84) and situating yourself in relation to it (Berger 18). In this way, the female gaze turns herself into the object of an appropriate bodily image. Plus-size women are presented as having an exchange value that is quantified by virtue of how many products they can buy to get closer to the ideal thin body. Consequently, the female consumer of the image assigns her appearance an exchange value that stands for male attention and the desire to achieve ideal beauty. It is at this point that the beauty of the model becomes competitive and hierarchical. Indeed, beauty means here to conform and internalize patriarchal, societal and cultural expectations about the female look to achieve success and visibility. Thus, the Fruit of the Loom ad does not expand the visual landscape of female bodies; it just drives them to the same bodily standard. This ad convinces women that fat and flesh are beautiful as long as they are kept under control with “curve-friendly fashion, softer openings […] without squeezing”.

The Fruit of the Loom and the Marina Rinaldi ads help us to see how the two models’ bodies barely diverge from the ideal of thin perfection. Doane notes that when women’s bodies are represented as something that they are not - - ideally perfect and thin - - they “simply reinforce the dominant system and inevitably signify the reverse of the representational mechanism itself” (134). By masking themselves as a thin body, the two models reflect a body
that is a construction of femininity or a “masquerade” of the ideal self of magazine advertising (131). Their body manufactures a lack of ideal beauty that distances their image from mainstream bodily perfection. The advertisements highlight what their bodies are not.

Therefore, the Marina Rinaldi and the Fruit of the Loom ads show that what changed in the perception of female beauty is an ideal that got thinner and thinner. Once compared to mainstream fashion advertising, these sorts of images impede, as Bordo argues, “any departure from social norms”. These two ads foster, using the author’s words, “physical transformation when directed to self-monitoring, self-disciplining […] and self-improvement” to achieve the “conventionally attractive body shape” (“Reading the Slender Body” 469).

A second look at these ads reveals, thus, how they, as Ernesto Laclau affirms, “set up difference […] to contain difference or antagonism” (qtd. in Williamson, “Woman is an Island” 383). The plus-size body is defined by its difference from the trendy emaciated look. The question becomes which image is really deviant? Is the sick look of emaciated bodies deviant? The Marina Rinaldi and the Fruit of the Loom models’ deviancy is expressed by what Andersen refers to as “images of women […] a body of representation that continually reinforces a set of social assumptions about the way women should look” (230).

These two ads offer the right look for plus-size women that a patriarchal culture and society consider acceptable. They embody a glamorous “large-size” femininity that is within a “confined allotted space” and “flatters the male ego” (Berger 46). If we consider these two images of “deviant” beauty together with the glamorous and flawless femininity of the Abercrombie and Fitch, the Roberto Cavalli, the Diesel, the Nef, and the Luca Luca ads we understand how the male eye frames ideal feminine beauty in magazine advertising based on female subtraction, submissiveness and subordination. Kilbourne sees the tendency to measure and weigh women as a patriarchal way to put a halt to feminine power, self-love and sexuality (Deadly Persuasion 132-33). The effacement of any symbolic and significant characteristic of sexuality from female bodies deprives women of “adult female physical power” (Andersen 231) to assert control over men. Therefore, plus-size bodies in magazine advertising are represented as “contained and bound” as a metaphor of curtailed female sexuality and authority.

Moreover, the false distance or narrow range between the ideal body of the Abercrombie and Fitch, Roberto Cavalli, Luca Luca, Diesel or Nef images and the “deviant” physiques of the Marina Rinaldi and Fruit of The Loom ads creates, as Laclau further specifies, “a simple dualism
between dominant and dominated groups” (qtd. in Williamson, “Woman is an Island” 383). In other words, it normalizes and naturalizes the existence of two categories of judgment for bodily appearance. It is through the positioning of a woman’s body in either one of these two categories that magazine advertising creates bodily norms and identities for women.

The fashion ads of Luca Luca, Nef, Diesel, Abercrombie and Fitch and Roberto Cavalli targeted to female consumers represent the signifier of thinness – the emaciated look – through woman as image. William Leiss, Stephen Kline, and Sut Jhally’s idea of totemism indicates that “the things represented as totems are thought to stand in some intrinsic relation to each other, and, as emblems for interrelationships, they can be ‘read’ for what they signify about social interactions among those who are divided by and grouped under them” (344). They further state, “Today’s totems (product images) themselves are badges of group membership, which also entails self-administered codes of authority for dress, appearance, popular entertainment, customary places of assembly, behavior rituals, and role stereotyping” (344). Paired with patriarchal consumerist ways of seeing and compared with the Marina Rinaldi and Fruit of the Loom images, ads like these widen the gap between thinness and fatness, ideal self and real bodies.

Women are told that they deserve a place, an identity only when they really compete and measure their beauty against others. If they fail to reflect perfect thinness, it is their fault because fashion always makes them look beautiful. These fashion ads put a great deal of pressure on oversize bodies whose genetic history does not allow them to achieve a certain weight or image. Heidi D. Posavac, Steven S. Posavac and Richard G. Weigel stress this point by saying that “individual genetic realities limit the amount that body type can be altered and highlight how the majority of women are genetically predisposed to be heavier than fashion models” (329).

The thin body featured in fashion images such as those of Roberto Cavalli, Abercrombie and Fitch, Luca Luca and Nef as opposed to those for Marina Rinaldi and Fruit of the Loom becomes an “arena for human excellence […] the pursuit of an idealized physical weight or shape […] a project in service of “body” rather than “soul” (Bordo, “Reading the Slender Body” 467). Consistent with this notion, the perfect body of the abovementioned ads is “not born […] in fact made by culture” (Bordo, Unbearable Weight 288) and “regulated by norms of cultural life” (Bordo, Unbearable Weight 165). That is how the hegemonic representation of beauty “is being achieved by imposing a false standard of what is and what is not desirable” (Berger 154). In this
way, magazine advertising reduces the possibilities of representations and tends, as Umberto Eco asserts, “to anchor meaning and rigidly delimit the range of interpretations” (qtd. in Hay 139).

The Nef, Luca Luca, Roberto Cavalli, Diesel, and Abercrombie and Fitch logos (usually positioned on the right side of the images) represent, thus, not only a brand or product. They assume the status of what Foucault calls “the intelligible body” and “the useful body” (qtd. in Bordo, “Reading the Slender Body” 469). “The representational or intelligible body” is what we actually see as the one image of female ideal beauty (Bordo, “Reading the Slender Body” 469). It is this body that then transforms itself into the “mastery of the body” that means a capacity to regulate, contain and discipline the female body according to precise criteria, rites and norms (Bordo, Unbearable Weight 151). In this way, the body becomes, Foucault argues, “the useful body” (qtd. in Bordo, “Reading the Slender Body” 469) that converts, Bordo notes, “culture into automatic, habitual bodily activity” (“Reading the Slender Body” 469).

Thus, the analyzed advertisements produce the female body and ideal beauty through specific visual and social practices. As Bordo points out, using Foucault’s theory of the body, these practices are “not only the interrelated modes by which power is made manifest. Equally, if not more important […] are the institutional and everyday practices by means of which our experience of the body is organized” (Unbearable Weight 291). Bodily authority within these ads resides, therefore, in how male authority is made manifest through “institutionalized monitoring, normalizing examinations” of a patriarchal and capitalist society and representational system (Bordo, Unbearable Weight 292). In this way, the male presence transforms female beauty into the “commodity self” (Kellner, “Advertising and Consumer Culture” 248). For example, the two cropped bodies of the Luca Luca image link the ad to a social, cultural and patriarchal context where it is all right to divide up women into as many components as advertising wants to sell. This image makes it perfectly “ordinary” for all women to hate those parts of their bodies that do not allow them to resemble the ideal body. Furthermore, the Marina Rinaldi ad displays as overweight a body that in fact is not a large woman. This image narrows down ideal beauty to “a standardized manufactured product” (Kellner, “Advertising and Consumer Culture” 248).

As a result, magazine advertising fosters anxiety over the female body. It tells women to shrink, not to eat, and to be fashionably emaciated. In this way, thinness is linked to today’s society’s desire to minimize the female body, to erase its sexual power. “Female hunger”, Bordo argues, “accounts as a cultural metaphor for unleashed female power and desire […] the act itself
when initiated by a woman is seen as itself an act of eating, of incorporation, and destruction of the object of desire”. Thus, the author further claims, “women’s sexual appetites must be curtailed and controlled, because they threaten to deplete and consume the body and soul of the male” (Unbearable Weight 116). The message to women is that they can only eat a little and must learn how to feed the male appetite. That is why in advertisements such as the one for Abercrombie, female hunger is only shown through bite-size food. What the female model has in her hands shows women what they are allowed to indulge in. Celery is a low-fat food that will keep the woman within the boundaries of an ideal thin body and appropriate sexuality. She will not endanger her lean figure and, consequently, she does not threaten to become larger and more powerful than the ideal male spectator. Another aspect of food representation in magazine advertising that is evident in this ad is that women are portrayed to manage large quantities of food only when they are preparing meals for their beloved ones (Bordo, Unbearable Weight 99-130). Food becomes a “private, secretive, illicit activity for women” and a feast to be enjoyed alone (Bordo, Unbearable Weight 126). The female model of the ad was probably caught while she was abandoning herself to a secret pleasure.

The obsession with thinness and ideal bodily curves also reveals a tendency of contemporary popular culture to erase difference. Most mainstream magazine advertising contains ethnic characters rather than display them. Today’s society and market work to glorify a “non-threatening mystique produced by dominant definitions of race and ethnicity” (Banet-Weiser 104). Popular cultural representations are not mediators of ethnic identity. They represent “the dilution and obfuscation of identifiable specific ethnic characteristics, in the constitution of a self who is usually white and middle-class” (Banet-Weiser 104).

As well, the Diesel ad suggests that the attractiveness of women of color is being measured in magazine advertising according to “white” standards of beauty. These standards consist of smaller noses, smaller buttocks, a lighter-colored complexion, thinner lips and straighter hair. Moreover, as Linda Lazier and Alice Gagnard Kendrick claim, “the models of color must still be consistently thin, young and perfect” (217). Therefore, as Williamson writes “primitive women [in magazine advertising] are robbed of their own meanings and speech”. “We are”, the author emphasizes, “the culture that knows no “other”, and yet can offer myriad others, all of which seem to reflect, as if they were merely surfaces, our supposed natural and universal qualities […] to have something “different” captive in our midst provides a way of re-presenting
real difference in tamed form” (“Woman is an Island” 395). Thus, the Diesel ad shows how now race and ethnicity are defined by the pressure to conform to ideal beauty and a thin body.

3.4 Conclusion

The advertising texts that I have analyzed reinscribe bodily appearance as the main element for judging female beauty. They also increase pressure to achieve the perfect look. In the final chapter, I address what may be forms of resistance to mainstream magazine advertising and the ways in which media literacy might help women to read the illusions of advertisements. Are there new and progressive images of the female body? How might women come to understand and negotiate their visual objectification? These are the questions that I will address in the final chapter.
CHAPTER 4

BODY IMAGE: EDUCATION, NEGOTIATION AND ALTERNATIVES

4.1 Implications, interventions and changes

Magazine advertising finds its lifeline in the creation and manipulation of new ideals to achieve. On the one hand, advertisements create ever-new wishes about ideal beauty - - the thin body - - that can be seemingly fulfilled by ‘possessing’ and purchasing new products. On the other hand, magazine advertisements cast women’s dissatisfaction as the unfulfilled desire, the impossibility of being flawless like fashion models. As Jean Kilbourne asserts “advertising confers upon women an unfulfilling power […] a power based on guilt and shame for not achieving the promised results - - ideal beauty” (“Killing Us Softly” 3).

Advertising creates, thus, ever-changing images of an ideal body by putting enormous pressure on appearance. Dorothy Schefer acknowledges that today’s magazine advertising goes along with the changing portrayal of beauty:

To ask what beauty is today is to come face to face with the changing definition of beauty. Perhaps more than any other time in history, we are preoccupied with even confused by beauty: its power, its pleasures, its style, and its substance. Beauty may not be the most important of our values, but it affects us all; today more than ever, because we live in a Media Age where our visual landscape changes in seconds, and our first reaction to people is sometimes our last. Given this reality, the so-called “triviality” of beauty suddenly seems not so trivial after all. (9)

As noted in the video documentary “The Persuaders”, advertising forges a real connection with women by emotionally, optimistically and stereotypically addressing their vulnerabilities. Advertisements give women what they want by making them feel good. Then it takes their self-confidence away by making them feel inadequate. Advertising leaves out what the product does in order to center on what it means and for what it stands. For example, a stylish dress must be bought not because it is comfortable, but because it is equated with the achievement of beauty perfection, success, and male attention. In other words, advertising images create an identity - - the thin body - - that persuades and induces women to think that they need that elegant dress to be perfectly beautiful (“The Persuaders”). Indeed, as Kilbourne writes “advertising performs much the same function in industrial society as myth performed in ancient and primitive societies. It is both a creator and perpetuator of the dominant attitudes, values and ideology of the
culture, the social norms and myths by which most people govern their behavior”. She further asserts that “advertising helps to create a climate in which certain attitudes and values flourish and others are not reflected at all” (Deadly Persuasion 67).

Consequently, slenderness becomes a beauty ideal which each woman internalizes and takes as a measure of bodily comparison. Indeed, fashion images repeat over and over the need to change and fit into mainstream image bodily perfection. Kevin J. Thompson et al. argue that the ideal body becomes the “unreal ideal” to which women compare as “a standard of acceptable appearance”. The authors further claim that ‘feelings of dissatisfaction or being impossibly flawed occur as a result of comparing oneself with this unrealistically standard of perfection” (138). This bodily comparison represents, as Kilbourne notes, “an absolute ideal that does not represent the reality of whom women are. It dehumanizes them because it makes their bodies the objects of pleasure for someone else and not for themselves” (“Killing Us Softly” 3).

Print advertising may alienate women from each other and their bodies by discouraging their capacity to judge images critically and blurring reality with images that come to be reality. Women “learn from images of bodily attractiveness what is expected of them” (Kilbourne, Deadly Persuasion 138). Therefore, the language of magazine advertising can be what George Steiner defines as the “anti-language, that which is transcendentally annihilating of truth and meaning” (qtd. in Kilbourne, Deadly Persuasion 74). Novelist Jonathan Dee, applying this concept to advertising, writes that “the harm lies not in the ad itself; the harm is in the exchange, in the collision of ad language, ad imagery, with other sorts of language that contend with it in the public realm” (qtd. in Kilbourne, Deadly Persuasion 74). Thus, words can assume any meaning that fashion advertising and culture convey about ideal beauty. At the same time, the significance of words is obscured by the visual representation. Thus, as Richard Polloy argues, our visual culture is:

without a reliance on words and a faith in truth. It lacks the mortar for social cohesion. Without trustworthy communication, there is no communion, no community, only an aggregation of increasingly isolated individuals, alone in the mass. (qtd. in Kilbourne, Deadly Persuasion 74)

Thus, women may be alienated from each other and their bodies because our visual culture weighs female worth according to an image-based ideal beauty. Female relationships and forms of sisterhood are substituted with superficial judgment, scrutiny and an overinvestment in
perfect appearances. As a consequence, the risk for today’s women of worsening their mental and physical health is greater and greater. We live in a society where people “have given up the control of real world and immerse themselves in the ultimately illusory world of appearances. Surfaces - - style and appearances - - have triumphed over substance where real power rests” (Jhally, “Image-Based Culture” 85). Women are led to think as Catherine Steiner-Adair affirms, that “what you weigh determines your worth. So girls are directly brought to weigh their self-esteem and social value”. She further claims that “girls know it is crazy-making but they are scared not to do it because it is set as a cultural norm” (“Beyond Killing Us Softly”). And ideal beauty as cultural norm, Vickie Shields and Dawn Heinecken emphasize, “fosters the dehumanization of the female body in which the female becomes separated from her body” (167).

The dichotomy thin/fat, then, detaches the inner self from the outer body. In this way, magazine images better persuade women that physical perfection means a happy and successful self. Susan Bordo pinpoints that “mind/body dualism is […] practical metaphysics deployed and socially embedded in popular culture and advertisements” (Unbearable Weight 13). It is this mind/body dualism, Carol Gilligan notes, that threatens women’s psychological resilience and strength or, more accurately, their subjectivity and capacity to make individual choices. She further observes that consuming images induces women to modulate their voices and selves according to the social and cultural assumptions that thinness is ideal beauty. Therefore, the author argues that self-esteem is getting so thin that a balanced idea of the female body is impossible to have when compared to advertising images (“Beyond Killing Us Softly”).

From this perspective, no popular culture images are progressive or alternative in the representation of a woman’s body. No effective change is taking place to change cultural ways of seeing female beauty. The manipulation of the female figure or its body parts exceedingly commodifies beauty in fashion advertising. Oftentimes, a woman’s body is divested of its worth by the qualities of the advertised fashion item. Consequently, the product may seem to have more value than the body. As Shields and Heinecken point out “ads that currently fill mainstream media are so confining and restrictive that very small changes may be noticed and seen as signs of improvement” (185). Similarly, Kilbourne claims that there is little space for betterment because advertising is propaganda, a kind of propaganda “to which some of the most talented and creative people in the world are dedicated” (Deadly Persuasion 27). Their job, the author
observes, “is very specific: they are to use all of their powers of persuasion, explicit and implicit, to sell a particular product”. Therefore, she further pinpoints that they feel they have “no moral, no obligation to any other set of values. They just have to use their wits to put together a hip, funny, seductive, persuasive ad campaign” (Deadly Persuasion 28).

Even if women today take part equally and actively in the creation of magazine advertising, they themselves are not helping to influence and set up positive images of a woman’s body. Indeed, they know all too well that the image of ideal beauty affects the social collective and the female psyche considerably. They use sexism and a feminine impulse to improve in order to design strategies that are the most effective:

Many people say the recent slight improvement in representation of women in advertising is the result of more women in ad industry. While more women enter the advertising industry each year it is important to caution against the assumption of a direct cause and effect relationship. Not all female doctors have good bedside manners and not all female ad executives are feminists. For most people in creative fields, these stock images of objectified female bodies continue to play themselves out consciously and subconsciously. (Shields and Heinecken 184)

It is clear that female advertising executives do not hesitate to exploit female vulnerabilities and desire to change. Indeed, more often than not they package fashion images as advancements in the status of the modern woman or the plus-size body. They create images that wink at women.

The new attitude in the magazine advertising field is to launch ads that seemingly resist the commodification and exploitation of female bodily attractiveness. This type of new ad features fashion and products for plump women by lauding the beauty of overweight bodies. However, these ads show top-models who do not reflect typical plus-size measurements and are actually well under the average weight of the average overweight woman. Wink ads reinforce beauty stereotypes. Indeed, they further ridicule those female subjects who cannot even mirror themselves in the rare advertising image of a plus-size body. Shields and Heinecken write that:

In the past 15 years or so marketers have made a concerted effort to develop ad campaigns that seem to speak directly to female experience. Advertisers have also tried to capitalize on the fact that women are more conscious than ever that blindly striving toward the idealized body in ads, film and MTV shouldn’t be their raison d’etre, that the rewards are hollow and the time and effort lost could be put to more meaningful and
sustaining use. Advertisers have also picked on the fact that women are tired of the size-4 body being presented to us as “everywoman”. (153)

These new ads do not really set up new ways to look at plump bodies or body parts; instead, they divide up women into two groups: the perfect and the deviant. By addressing themselves to overweight women, wink ads do not promote self-esteem and “self-images of women of all sizes” (Shields and Heinecken 157). But, they do underscore “the idea of size as a label” (Shields and Heinecken 160).

Wink ads normalize and homogenize plus-size women according to mainstream fashion images. They teach plump women how to hide their bulging parts or disguise them in beautiful and expensive fashion. And, as Mary Ann Doane observes, they transform fat bodies into a masquerade of themselves and their own femininity (131-46). Sometimes, wink ads use celebrities such as Queen Latifah to portray positive bodily images. However, these ‘progressive’ ads forget to mention that not all women have the same time and financial resources to look good and buy expensive dresses. As Amy Richards notes “what women do not often realize is the amount of makeup that these women are wearing on TV […] they have gone through a makeup session” (“Beyond Killing Us Softly”).

Therefore, more and more media scholars and feminists promote the need to educate women to read beyond magazine advertising in such a way that they can debunk images of the computer-enhanced ideal beauty. It is by stimulating female critical thinking that women can finally see advertisements as social constructions and advertising as the socializing agent of modern society. Shields and Heinecken affirm that “changing imagery is not enough”. The two authors agree that “the culture itself must change, from being one in which girls and women are devalued to one in which they are cherished” (153). Kilbourne, Margaret Lazarus and Pratibha Parmar see media education as the bridge between women and their real bodies. By knowing what magazine advertising wants them to do, to buy and be, the three authors argue that women can resist magazine advertising illusions (“Killing Us Softly” 3; “Beyond Killing Us Softly”; “The Righteous Babes”). By doing so, bodies considered too fat or wrinkly have meaning on their own terms and are valued as well. And, women are able to define their identity and look at their bodies through a more positive lens than that of magazine advertising. However, education does not free women from the influence of advertising campaigns because as Jhally claims “to
not be influenced by advertising would be to live outside culture. No human being lives outside of culture” (qtd. in Kilbourne, *Deadly Persuasion* 64).

However, media education can help women to resist the messages encoded in the image of ideal beauty that are all around us. The capacity to read images critically brings into focus how perfect beauty is a product of today’s consumer ideology. However, these few words do not imply that media-literate women stop using their personal and emotional baggage as a basis for interpretation of advertisements. As Christine Gledhill states “meaning is neither imposed, nor passively imbued, but arises out of a struggle […] between competing frames of reference, motivation and experience” (68). Rosemary Betterton notes that a new consciousness and “ability to read beyond images empower the female spectator to take up a critical position of looking” (qtd. in Shields and Heinecken 136). Furthermore, women develop, as Shields and Heinecken argue, “their own ways of looking that cannot and should not be defined only as a result of seeing representations through a masculine lens” (131).

Media literacy becomes the way for women to counter attack the magazine advertising mirage of ideal beauty. But what is media literacy? How can it improve women’s understanding of images that demean them? And, what will an increase in media education bring about? Through media literacy, women can redefine, Kilbourne points out, “the crucial concepts - - love, rebellion, sexuality, friendship, freedom - - that advertising has corrupted and take them back for their own health, power, and fulfillment” (*Deadly Persuasion* 32). That is why the author sees media education as “the tools […] that enable us to understand, analyze, interpret, to expose hidden agendas and manipulation, to bring about constructive change, and to further positive aspects of the media” (*Deadly Persuasion* 305). For his part, Jhally stresses more that “the issue of literacy in an image-saturated society is connected to the knowledge of how magazine ads are produced”. The author further claims that “while we can read images quite adequately for the purposes of their creators we do not know how to produce them” (“Image-Based Culture” 86). In other words, women should be taught on how to discern the modes of image-production to understand what guides them towards a certain reading of ideal beauty rather than another one. Indeed, Justin Lewis and Jhally believe that media literacy is a critical contextual approach to media. It studies, the authors write, “the media text as a stage in a process of ideological production” and it can be looked at as a 360-degree circle. Lewis and Jhally
further argue that this approach helps “to understand the determinations and connections between the production of the text, the text itself, and the reception of the text” (110).

Therefore, media literacy’s goal is to help people acquire a critical mind, subjectivity and free choice. Only in this way, women may not feel dissatisfied or unhappy about the way in which they look at themselves or other bodies. Only through media literacy women are able “to examine and excavate the origins of our most celebrated rituals” (Jhally, “Image-Based Culture” 77) or perhaps of the practices of the “Beauty Myth” (Wolf 10). Consequently, media educational programs’ scope, Lewis and Jhally pinpoint, “is to help people become sophisticated citizens rather than sophisticated consumers” (109). And, Douglas Kellner agrees when he states that “the goal to teach a critical media literacy is to empower individuals to become more autonomous agents […] to emancipate themselves from contemporary forms of domination […] to become more active citizens, eager and competent to engage in process of social transformation” (“Reading Images Critically” 126). In this way, it is possible a democratization of the media place where democracy of representation means going beyond dominant advertising images and messages. Media literacy is, therefore, “a way of extending democracy to the very place where democracy is increasingly scripted and defined” (Lewis and Jhally 114). Indeed, Noam Chomsky notes that “citizens of the democratic societies should undertake a course of intellectual self-defense to protect themselves from manipulation and control, and to lay the basis for meaningful democracy” (qtd. in Lewis and Jhally 119).

Media education should be based on a variety of programs to understand and discern the imagistic modes of production. Moreover, the 360-degree approach reveals those mechanisms through which women are socialized into thinking of thinness as ideal beauty. Shields and Heinecken find it useful to introduce basic media courses in elementary school. Similarly, Jacqueline C. Hitchon and Shiela Reaves believe that technological literacy is the fundamental step “to educate the audience on technological deception” (73). Indeed, Jhally argues that media literacy must be “functional”. And, in order to be functional, the author asserts, people should take “basic coursework in photography, videoproduction and the political economy of the media and advertising industries” (“Image-Based Culture” 86).

Other scholars see that women can be inoculated against the current sociocultural ideal of beauty through different approaches that are not contextually based. Thus, these methods do not approach media education on the basis of modes of production. But they focus on certain aspects
of the ideological, personal and emotional implications of magazine advertising. Barbara Stern and Jonathan E. Schroeder write about an increase in visual literacy - a text-centered approach - in order to develop a greater ability to read visual meanings. Indeed, they stress that basic visual elements - color, shape, lines, and postures - have symbolic meanings that affect communication through images. The two authors note the significance of visual techniques to persuade consumers to consume goods and services by associating signs and symbols of all kinds (114-32). And, Heidi D. Posavac, Steven S. Posavac and Richard G. Weigel base their program to reduce the impact of media images on women at risk of body dissatisfaction on three targeted interventions. Indeed, they argue that exposure to the thin ideal can be fought by “the Artificial Beauty Intervention”. Through this approach, the authors affirm that advertising “images are shown to women as inappropriate targets for comparison because the model’s beauty is artificial”. The second program is called “the theme of the Genetic Realities”. It dismantles, they write, “media images of female attractiveness as inappropriate targets for comparison” because the majority of fashion models are genetically predisposed to be thinner than the majority of women. Lastly, “the Combination Intervention” includes the first two approaches “to maximize”, the writers point out, and “the likelihood of women defining media images as inappropriate for social comparison” (329).

Interventions are numerous but few of them, Kilbourne argues, focus on “emotional literacy of women” (Deadly Persuasion 131). Media education and primary intervention programs should not just study mainstream advertising. But they should also focus on the concurrent pressures for bodily perfection - thinness - from family, peers, co-workers and boyfriends. What other people say about a woman’s body may have a deep and negative impact on her perception of her appearance and weight. Indeed, body image disturbance is also related to family and other social groups’ acceptance of the magazine advertising beauty ideal. Body image dissatisfaction leads “to schematic beliefs about the importance of thinness that are developed and maintained by teasing and by family and peer modeling of weight concerns” (Thompson et al. 104). Thus, there is the need of intervention on a broader level rather than a focus only on single woman with eating disorders. Feminist approaches, Thompson et al. highlight, focus on how “the influence of society and women’s roles in society are important aspects in the etiology of body image and eating disturbance” (231). Feminist scholars, the authors write, “provide essential information for a
multidimensional analysis of women’s experiences of their bodies” (231). Kilbourne advocates an approach “which recognizes that dynamic interactions occur, not only between the individual and the environment, but among various levels of the environment”. The single woman, she writes, “is viewed as part of a complex social, physical, and political web - - family, school, community, workplace, state - - […] single approaches to prevention are bound to be ineffective” (Deadly Persuasion 299). Thus, we need to educate social and family structures to transform a culture that hates women’s bodies into a body-loving culture. Treatment must be inclusive. It should not deal with body image dissatisfaction and family and societal ways of seeing as separate issues. That is why Kilbourne and Margaret Lazarus highlight how consciousness-raising groups or camps where girls learn about “getting real” and develop perspectives on what really matters are ways to improve cultural ways of seeing the female body (“Killing Us Softly” 3; “Beyond Killing Us Softly”). Richards asserts that school and family should encourage women “to do things in an urban setting with other women not in terms of competition but to learn to value their own bodies and reality” (“Beyond Killing Us Softly”).

In this way, communication wins over competition. Women are not alienated from one another and the environment by the lack of interpersonal and intimate relationships. Consequently, women become interested in broader societal ways of looking at female beauty as well as in social change and female fulfillment. By doing so, cultural influences on bodily perception can be directed towards “alternative conceptions, enabling emotional fulfillment and more authentic and equitable gender practices” (Andersen 238). Thompson et al. note that societal attitudes towards body image can have a positive influence “through the provision of social support”. “Although there are many definitions of social support”, the authors argue that “most definitions reflect a process in which interpersonal exchanges give people a sense of companionship, attachment, and acceptance”. “Different types of social support”, the writers stress, “may be particularly effective in helping individuals cope with a variety of stressors” (200).

Once women are media-educated, they may know what they can achieve and be less blinded by magazine advertising. They know that what they buy may contain false promises of results. Consequently, when women fail, they may be less hard on themselves and not blame their body failing them. Education gives women choice through which they can express their identity and self-confidence. As Robin Tolmach Lakoff and Raquel L. Scherr emphasize:
whether the body is plump or muscular is not really the issue. The issue is autonomy, being one’s own person. In that resides the first criterion of the beautiful person […] we must take the problem of beauty in hand, and reshape that magical ideal which has always enhanced our lives into something that enriches our humanity even more deeply. (297-98)

By reversing the usual formula of women as passive objects to women as active subjects, society and women themselves can perceive female bodies and revalorize themselves according to true expectations, self-awareness, self-love and the power of choice. They may have the strength to speak out loud about female bodily experience and resilience. However, resistant readings of magazine advertising may not ensure that people will no longer see female bodies demeaned by fashion images. There will still be advertisements where women assume and embody the qualities of a product or, more accurately, of a commodity self. But through her new awareness, a woman may laugh and triumph over the dichotomy between fatness and thinness as cultural norms defining ideal beauty.

4.2 Final Thoughts

The analysis of the advertisements in chapter 3 attempted to establish that there is no authentic woman in mainstream fashion advertising. There are only various ideas of how a woman should be to embody the ideal of perfect beauty. Different postures, faces, body parts or fashion dresses all showcase thinness as today’s ideal female attractiveness. It is the repetition of the same elements — perfect legs, buttocks, breasts, thighs — that comes to signify slenderness as bodily perfection. Being thin becomes the “natural” and “innate” characteristic in women, all women. Oversize bodies become, thus, the badge of unnatural femininity that is synonymous with unhappiness, dissatisfaction and rejection. The analyses bring into relief how dominant patterns in fashion advertising despise fat on a woman’s body. As Kilbourne argues the thin body underscores the notion that a better physical appearance is what women need to pursue personal and social success (“Killing Us Softly” 3).

Commodities’ qualities are transferred to the ideal body or body parts and women’s bodies are transformed into objects to be possessed. Bodies become commodities/fictional realities with an exchange value. The analyzed ads embrace the style of today’s mainstream advertising. Indeed, they demonstrate that, as Rita J. Freedman explains, “the impact of today’s visual media is different from the effect of visual arts of the past”. She notes that “historically
figures of art were romanticized as unattainable, but today’s media blurs the boundaries between glorified fiction and reality” (93). And, the textual analyses reveal how obsession with thinness is “firmly rooted in two key assumptions: first, that all women share a major preoccupation with the way in which they look; second, that all women can improve their appearance by the application of time and effort and through the purchase of certain products” (Ballaster et al. 151).

The analyzed ads are not, however, mere reflections of today’s ideal beauty. Indeed, they do not create meaning only by themselves. But they make meaning through their difference and their relation to each other and current mainstream advertising. It is through intertextual relationships between ads and the repetition of certain visual elements in each image that the latter come to have a meaning for us. In this way, signs of thinness and symbols of fatness come to signify slenderness as beauty ideal and set off in women the need to change (Walters 29-49). Magazine advertising makes women great consumers or, more accurately, it makes them feel as if they lack something. As Kilbourne writes “our materialistic culture encourages the sense of emptiness because people who feel empty make great consumers”. The author further points out that “the emptier we feel, the more likely we to turn to products […] to fill us up, to make us feel whole” (Deadly Persuasion 29).

One striking aspect that came about from my analysis is that obsession with the ideal body is a never-ending comparison between “ordinary” women and airbrushed top-models. Indeed, real bodies always have flaws when they are measured up with computer-enhanced physiques. And, they are constantly reminded of which areas of the body need to be improved. Women become subjects split between an unachievable ideal beauty and their outer body. Shields and Heinecken note how this gap between perception of oneself and the current beauty ideal leads women to have a “split-consciousness of the surveyed female”. The two authors remark that “in this split-consciousness women are aware that they are seeing male-defined images of themselves, and yet still find themselves influenced” (77). And, Bordo refers to this split-consciousness as the dualism between mind and body. Indeed, the author notes how today’s body is seen as something distant from the inner self whose negative influence weakens the best efforts of that self. Thus, the material body, she argues, becomes synonymous with those social obsessions and cultural anxieties about the female body and perfect appearances (Unbearable Weight 5-13).
The scarce number of selected ads with plus-size women demonstrates that there is a symbolic annihilation of positive images of overweight women from magazine advertising. Through the absence of empowering images of oversize bodies, fashion advertisements socialize most women into thinking that they are “abnormal”. Jhally claims:

There is nothing bad about visual objectification. It is part of human nature to objectify and to want to be objectified at times. The evaluation of that objectification as positive or negative comes from the image’s relationship to other images in a system. In a sign system in which female sexuality and objectification is a sign of female success, the absence of objectified fat women as sexual means that they are symbolically annihilated from being seen as sexual beings. And, in not being shown as sexual objects, fat women lose the right to be seen as laying claim to the privileges of that objectification - - love, marriage, children, and other aspects of “feminine” success. (qtd. in Shields and Heinecken 165).

Fat bodies in advertisements reinforce the notion that being “plus-size” means being deviant from societal and cultural beauty standards. The Fruit of the Loom and Marina Rinaldi advertisements seem to engage in significant departures from mainstream ideal beauty. However, they are not alternative or subversive images of women. Indeed, they frame the two plus-size bodies in a distorted and humiliating way by measuring the two women against the current norm of thinness. The ads’ settings, colors, postures and words, once related to today’s visual culture, show how their wink involves a biased portrayal of real curves and female bodies. First, size is defined against the average measures of a top-model’s body, which clearly reflect neither those of the average woman nor those of the average oversize body. Secondly, the two ads promote dresses that do not squeeze generous waistbands and make women more attractive to men. In other words, they highlight how plump women need to hide their curves if they want to get closer to ideal beauty.

Besides, their language connotes how the terms “plus-size and full-figured” are dominant definitions of female beauty. The use of the two terms together with visual elements disavows any sense of acceptance and progress in the representation of the two bodies. Indeed, they draw the viewer into the message that thinness is ideal beauty. They further mark the top-models’ bodily deviancy as different from the fashionably ideal beauty. The language of the two ads works with the visual elements, in other words, to create the dream that overweight women also
might be able to achieve bodily perfection. What we actually see is not recognition that each size is worth the look, but it is the illusion that women can represent female beauty no matter what size they wear. Therefore, these two images compared to the other ads demonstrate, mould and play with the visual and verbal elements through which we make sense of and perceive our bodies.

I believe that the use of plus-size top-models is not an advancement in the representation of women in magazine advertising. Their visibility is a dehumanization of the female body by which oversize women are further diminished, humiliated and persecuted. Their presence in advertising also capitalizes on overweight women’s feeling of inadequacy by selling fashion that promises to solve their problems or flatten out their problematic areas. If these two images “read against the grain” of advertising’s ideal beauty, why do they address softer and generous curves as problematic? Why do they stress that “style is not a size…but it is an attitude”? By doing so, they enhance the fact that all plus-size women should strive to get closer to perfect slenderness. The psychological effects of this cultural stigmatization of overweight women brings persons “to view their bodies as grotesque and loathsome and believe that others can view them only with hostility and contempt” (Stunkard and Sobal 418). And W. Charisse Goodman affirms that:

Weight prejudice is a true form of bigotry in every sense of the word. Like racism, it is based on visible cues; i.e., the fat person is discriminated against primarily because of the way she looks. Like anti Semitism, it defines an entire group of people numbering in the millions within a narrow range of negative characteristics and behaviors. Like sexism, it elevates the status of one group of people at the expense of another. In short, weight prejudice is new twist on a timeless and ugly pattern of human social dynamics”. (7)

The analyzed ads also underscore the fact that today’s ideal beauty is a racist image. Indeed, only one out of eight images presents an African-American woman. Different ethnicities and racial beauty standards have little space in mainstream fashion advertising unless they recall Western beauty standards and whiteness. Feminist scholars such as Jacqui Roach and Petal Felix suggest that we live in a culture where the dominant gaze is not only male, but white” (qtd. in Shields and Heinecken 145). And, Shields and Heinecken emphasize how this racist trend is particularly true when it comes to representations of African-American beauty. The two authors, using major feminist scholars’ studies, write that “unlike the “exotic other” of the Hawaiian or
Asian girls, blacks are society’s mundane other” (145). bell hooks reinforces this idea when she writes that:

Blacks in commercials and on news programs may be perceived as “Exotic Primitives”, blacks with “white talents”. They are non-threatening to the white community while providing assimilationist role models to the Black community. They have successfully conformed, in the eyes of the white culture”. (163)

In the Diesel ad, the African-American woman is, indeed, present because she resembles white beauty. The color of her skin is not too black and her bodily features are not too prominent. Margaret Wilkerson pinpoints that:

White women suffer under the notion of beauty but black women suffer doubly, triplo under them because in one sense the standard for white beauty has been defined in opposition to the black norm […] thin lips, aquiline nose, color of eyes, are in direct conflict to what is the norm for blacks”. (qtd. in Tolmach Lakoff and Scherr 251)

In my work, I noted that today’s feminist scholars remark on how ideal beauty creates divisions between the mind and the body, thin bodies and plump bodies, and women and men. Perhaps one way to engage in changing cultural imagery about the female body is to use communication as a basis for collaboration and stronger interpersonal binds. In this way, women and men realize that the ways in which female physiques are rendered visible are linked to our consumer culture dynamics and manufactured meanings that trivialize bodies and sexuality. Understanding the body not as a commodity on sale and as a locus for self-love and self-realization could be something that bring women and men together in a more positive reading of female beauty. Changing societal and cultural imagery calls for a multidimensional approach to women’s experiences, bodies and roles. And, it encourages women to be aware of their bodies and realities. By modifying cultural ways of seeing on a broad level, we may try to change the meanings that ads gain from their relation to culture and society as well as their relationship to each other. In a society obsessed with the surface of thinness, the advertised meaning of beauty can only be as unbearable pressure on how we look. Whereas, in a culture not abnormally preoccupied with flawless slenderness, we might find meaning in the representation of emotional and personal fulfillment. As women seek to be fully represented as subjects, a complete understanding that female worth does not depend on appearances becomes increasingly vital.
Indeed, it is a fight for the diminishing commodification of female beauty and not just a critique of dominant discourses in mainstream fashion advertising.

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