Magazines: A Culture of Self-Hate?

*by Éimear O'Shea*

As I walk down the supermarket aisle the glossy magazine covers immediately grab my attention. The new diet wonders of our favourite celebrities, latest fashion news as well as all the important gossip are the most common features on the many different magazine covers. In fact the one thing that every single magazine cover had in common with the other was celebratory weight loss claims as well as the new wonder diets. ‘Lose 3 pounds a week’ is one of their many attention grabbing headlines. Even the more teen related magazines are sticking with the diet and weight loss theme.

This makes me ask the question, how does this affect our already body-conscious generation? This constant barrage of weight loss advice is surely affecting many teenagers, in particular teenage girls who are the main target market for many of the magazines. As well as articles telling young girls how they should look, and what weight they should be advertising also plays a huge influence on teenager’s self-esteem. Makeup and hair products are the most common, with tall, beautiful models (most of which have been photo-shopped) gracing the front pages enticing us to buy their new product that will make us all as equally beautiful. Photoshop is probably the worst thing that could have happened for body-conscious teenagers. Graceful models are photo-shopped to the stage that they don’t look human any more. A recent example of this is Julia Roberts for Lancôme. The advertisement was banned in the UK as it was branded by the Advertising Standards Authority as misleading due to the fact that Robert’s skin looked ‘too good to be true’. Make-up giant Maybelline also had to pull their advertisement which featured super model Christy Turlington out of the UK after a string of complaints. Both of the advertisements were for foundation based products which promised to give skin a ‘natural light’ as well as combatting the effects of ageing. Both Maybelline and Lancôme are owned by the L’Oreal Company. L’Oreal UK, responded by saying that the Maybelline ad featuring Christy Turlington had been "digitally retouched to lighten the skin, clean up makeup, reduce dark shadows and shading around the eyes, smooth the lips and darken the eyebrows". Even though they admitted that they had tampered with the original images they still defended their actions by saying that the advertisement "accurately illustrated" the results of their ‘The Eraser’ foundation. L’Oreal also went on to defend their actions surrounding Julia Roberts’ campaign for Lancôme by stating that the advertisement was an "accurate representation" of her natural glowing skin.

Both of the advertisements were banned as L’Oreal had gone "too far" in digitally enhancing the images of the two naturally beautiful women. However just how far is too far? Every advertisement featuring models, actors and singers has more than likely been photo-shopped to various extents. But the message from these worldwide companies is the same: these beautiful women are not beautiful enough to be the face of our various products. So if these women have to be photo-shopped to be pretty enough for these multi-million companies, just what exactly do us mere mortals have to do? This is more than likely the question being asked by teenagers world-wide as they gaze up at the various advertisements.

According to a 2007 study of Irish children and adolescents, 1.2% of Irish girls may be at risk of developing anorexia nervosa, with 2% at risk of developing bulimia nervosa. Based on the KIDSCREEN study of children in thirteen countries, Irish children aged 12-18 ranked twelfth out of the thirteen countries in terms of self-perception score. These recent statistics make you wonder just how much of these cases are fuelled by our new magazine culture. Recent research by Cardiff University shows that teenagers from 11-16 have a much higher chance of developing an eating disorder if they view gossip magazines then those that don’t.

A perfect example of how this new magazine culture is affecting teenagers is a 1999 study by the American Academy of Paediatrics. A questionnaire was distributed to approximately 550 girls aged 10-17. Half the participants reported that magazine pictures convinced them they needed to lose weight. 66 per cent overall said that they wanted to shed some pounds, more than half of those girls were not overweight at all.

This new celebratory and diet based culture is troubling the present generation of teens.Scientists have known for a while that magazine reading in women (in particular) has been a predictor of body image and eating disorders.

Right now we’re living in a culture of self-hate being fuelled by the multi-million euro media companies and so far no one’s been brave enough to stop it.