

WHY CAN'T I LOOK LIKE HER 1

Why Can't I Look Like Her?

Stephanie Shen

The College of New Jersey

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Regarding formatting and editing, not bad for a first draft. 10/10x 1.5= 15

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The development of our contemporary society has been accompanied with a correlating increase in the ever-present phenomenon of our self-esteem and mental wellbeing being dictated by something so seemingly simple as our bodies. Society must question the source of accountability of what sparked this problematic link between self-worth and physical appearance. This inspired my autoethnography topic of body image as I attempt to uncover the various ways in which females are affected by negative body image perception and what external and internal influences lead to these negative perceptions in the first place. The overall idea of body image is how we perceive our physical selves when we either look into a mirror or what we think we look like when we envision our own bodies. In "The Influence of Sociocultural Factors on Body Image: A Meta-Analysis," Yuko Yamamiya et al. (2005) explore how the various elements of our lifestyle and social culture has influenced our views on our body image. I explore this societal issue in further depth by examining my own three narratives that discuss my personal struggles in coping with a negative body image perception, from comparing myself to strangers to ridiculing every flaw I find in myself whenever I'm met with my own reflection. Readers have a sense of the unhealthy obsessive pattern my brain undergoes of constantly worrying about my body image in relation to others. From the three narratives I extracted three themes: 1) Comparison: The desire to look like others because they fit society's beauty standard, 2) Self-awareness: Knowing the thoughts and actions leading to body image issues is harmful and toxic, but challenging to combat, and 3) Self-deprecation: Dissatisfaction with my own body. I present scholarly literature on the topic of body image that mainly concerns the factors that affect female body image perception, then discuss my findings that I've extracted from all three themes in relation to the literature, and finally reveal the implications, significance, and takeaway of my findings to readers.

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Literature Review

The topic of body image is often discussed in the context of adolescent females living under the negative influence of various societal expectations of what the female body should look like in order to be considered "attractive." Such expectations most commonly come from the media, both from magazines to social media posts. Various research has shown that women are far more dissatisfied with their bodies after viewing a series of images of the the conventionally "thin" women (Yamamiya, Cash, Melnyk, & Posavac, 2008, p. 74). This behavioral pattern is especially consistent in today's culture given the oversaturation of social media websites, most prominently Instagram, which inevitably leads to increased opportunity to both post and view pictures of yourself and other people. In addition to social media posts taiting the mentality of the adolescent, Yamamiya, Cash, Melnyk, & Posavac state that 94% of the females featured in television shows are thinner than the average American women. This statistic could be questionable, however, as a very valid question arises: What exactly defines the "average American women?" What quantitative and/or qualitative data was collected to reach this conclusion? But they are accurate in the claim that the media does indeed "instruct how to attain thin bodies by dieting, exercising, and body contouring surgery, encouraging female consumers to believe that they *can* and *should* be thin."

A more accurate description of the causation of body images is offered from Shroff and Thompson in "The Tripartite Influence Model of Body Image and Eating Disturbance: A Replication with Adolescent Girls," fitting in fairly well to my understanding of what we females are influenced by in terms of body image. The primary factors the teenage girls draw influence from are peers, parents, and the media, and are further internalized through two methods: "internalization of societal standards of appearance and excessive appearance comparison"

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(Shroff & Thompson, 2006, p. 18). This thoroughly explains the mental process most female adolescent teens go through that exhibit what we're exposed to look like in our environment and how we perceive it that eventually end up negatively affecting our body image. Gianine D. Rosenblum and Michael Lewis in "The Relations among Body Image, Physical Attractiveness, and Body Mass in Adolescence" cite a recent national survey that found that nearly 50% of the women who participated in the survey reported to have a negative outlook on their body image and appearance overall (Lewis & Rosenblum, 1999, p.50).

The external validation of others plays a role in the construction of our body image as well. Gianine D. Rosenblum and Michael Lewis in "The Relations among Body Image, Physical Attractiveness, and Body Mass in Adolescence" elaborate on the relationship between "social feedback" and our physical appearances, which then play an overall effect in shaping our body image. They state "Through social feedback, the views others have of us come to influence the views we have of ourselves" (Lewis & Rosenblum, 1999, p.51). They argue that "physical appearance is likely to make an important contribution to the social feedback that shapes our body image over time" because there exists a "social consensus on what is considered attractive."

Carrotte, Elise, & Anderson in "A Systematic Review of the Relationship between Trait Self-Objectification and Personality Traits" define this state of unhealthy body image as "self-objectification," and cite several studies that have shown that self-objectification is heavily connected to perfectionism, neuroticism, and narcissism (Carrotte, Elise & Anderson, 2018). A situation we all find ourselves in at some point in time is coming across images of models and we cannot help but think to ourselves, "That's what I'm supposed to look like," formulating an image of what we're supposed to look like with the "perfect" body so we are accepted by society.

Methodology

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Upon examining my eighty-page journal for a potential research topic, I noticed one recurring matter I kept writing about more than others: physical appearance, specifically my own body image. To collect my data, I first put all three pieces that discussed this topic into one document. After reading them all, I had a general understanding of recurring themes that appeared in all three pieces. I first noticed I continuously talked about comparing myself to others a lot, whether that'd be with people I saw in person or with my friends in photographs. If I came across a quote that demonstrated the theme of comparison, I'd highlight it in orange. Proceeding this was how incredibly self-aware I was of the toxicity surrounding body image altogether in all sorts of senses, from acknowledging poor choices I made that affected what my body looked like to my consciousness of my obsession with body perception. I then highlighted any quotes of this self-awareness theme in lavender. The final theme I was able to extract from all three pieces was self-deprecation, where I'd pick out my flaws any time I saw myself; I highlighted phrases/sentences of this theme in purple. I then made a separate document where I created a headline for these three themes. Under each theme headline I copied and pasted all the quotes from my three pieces into their corresponding category. Then I created a descriptive theme for each theme by asking myself, "What are all my quotes *specifically* talking about?" For example, under "Comparison," I noticed that behavior was related to my desire to look like others whom I thought were socially "attractive." In regards to subjectivity, one must understand I am exploring the issue of body image from the perspective of an average middle-class adolescent teen who has struggled with maintaining a healthy body image almost all her life. Thus it is almost imperative to view my research and findings in the same light as someone who wishes to understand these often demonizing and harmful body image expectations.

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Findings

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Comparison: Desire to look like others because they fit society's beauty standard

In my first personal narrative, I undergo various experiences throughout my daily life in which my toxic tendency to compare my physical appearance to others emerges to the surface of my thoughts and behaviors, thus triggering an everlasting sentiment of envy for others' physical appearance if they are what I believe to be socially defined as "attractive." I practice the behavior of evaluating other females' bodies almost literally at any point in the day at any location whenever I can, like with the girl walking in front of me at the Stem building lounge. I even acknowledge her natural and uncontrollable tendencies of thinking such thoughts, exemplified when I state, "I cannot help but look at them, either admire or dismiss the curvature of her hips, the length of her legs, the shape of her arms, the way her stomach holds up, the overall shape of her body." I reference several locations of where such comparisons can take place, ranging from the library of her school, to students walking past her, to even public transportation. Such thoughts on body image extend far beyond just evaluating the physicality of strangers as well, where "my mind wanders down one of two paths: *Why can't I look like her?* Or the most sinister *I hope I don't look like her.*" Thus the process of comparing myself to others transforms from one of simple and innocent observation to a judgemental and shallow characterization of the person. Not only does the process of comparison out of my desire to look like certain girls occur with passing strangers in a public area, but it also with people of whom I know personally as well. For example, I describe an specific incident: "I look at the photo and notice the bottom of my torso is in line with Cally's upper thighs, and even worse in comparison to Tia, we are both wearing high waisted jeans but hers runs a whole 2-3 inches higher on her body than mine." I discover something I do not like about my physical appearance, and it was only through seeing what my

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body looked like relative to others did I notice this flaw within myself. I didn't like the length of my legs because I saw what long legs looked like on Tia, and because I didn't see this within myself too, I automatically thought of myself as unappealing. This unhappiness with my physical appearance stemming from my desire to look like others through comparison is finalized when I state, "Time and time again the same thought would race through my head--*I want that body.*

*Why can't I have been born like **that**?"*

Self-awareness: Knowing the thoughts and actions leading to body image issues is harmful and toxic, but not being able to stop

After researching the theme of comparison in the context of physical appearance, I am able to successfully acknowledge the problematic nature of my obsessive mindset. I recognize the condescending process of evaluating other girls from such a shallow checklist of characteristics and placing them into binary categories of "attractive" or "not." This acknowledgement is exemplified when I confess, "It's a really fucked up thing, I know. Not only am I simply comparing myself to others to get a sense of my physical worthiness but I'm also.....actively deciding who looks 'attractive' and who doesn't." With this confession I am attempting to separate myself from the rest of society, the society that sets its own toxic beauty standards and tears down adolescent and young adult females. My purpose is to make a statement that I must not be placed into the same category as them because I know it is wrong. I further attempt to solidify my position by stating "My sadistic evaluation of others is one hundred percent unintentional. As a self-proclaimed feminist, the last thing I'd ever want to do is put down other women, and for something so shallow and fleeting like what their bodies look like as I pass them in some public area. I know it's wrong." Again, I am almost pleading the reader to recognize that though I am partaking in the exact behavior that caused my insecurity, I

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am self-aware of my involvement with this toxic behavior. I attempt to separate logic from my feelings. It doesn't matter how much one is consciously aware of the problematic nature of their own thoughts--you cannot control how you feel.

In addition to self-awareness in the context of my toxic and problematic viewpoint of body image, I also display hyper consciousness of the thoughts and actions I practice that leads to my body image struggle, and particularly how I've been gaining weight as well. I do not go about blindly eating and not exercising completely unaware of its consequences, but rather I acknowledge the situation I'm in, as is shown when I state "I was aware that I had gained weight, and I was aware that I had been treating my body awfully, but for some reason this acute awareness of my extreme weight gain was not enough to elicit a reaction of panic and prompt me to do something about it." Here I display my own self-knowledge of the root problem of my body image issues that stems from within myself: my lack of willpower. Perhaps I view this as a positive thing, a good start in maybe returning back to my old healthy habits, because it is this self-awareness that is constantly nagging at me to make a change in the first place. If I was unaware of my own weight gain and lack of willpower to do so, then the desire to lose weight again would have never come back. I also claim that the eating choices I make then affect my body image, and this similarly goes hand-in-hand with my self-awareness of gaining weight and lacking the self-control and motivation to do something about it, because in both situations I recognize and address the issue which could potentially prompt a change in my behaviors. I state, "But that's what I'm also consciously aware of at the same time, that you never see the actual changes consuming all this junk does to your body until it's too late, three months down the line and you've gained eight pounds." My recognition both serves as a blessing and a curse; a blessing because recognizing my current state and what causes it means I know what is right

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from wrong, and perhaps knowing this distinction could prompt me in the right direction of losing weight again; a curse because it is this self-awareness that is torturing me everyday. As they say, ignorance is bliss, and I am anything but ignorant to my current body image struggles. This negative cycle of self-inflicted psychological torture is shown when I state, "I was, again, disappointed, and also scared, for I had let myself reach this point again only because I wasn't careful, and that it may get worse from here if I continued the trend, which seemed highly likely." Becoming aware of my situation only adds to the initial problem of body image. I could just accept the way I currently am and not improve myself. Thus, this second form of self-awareness of gaining weight and how exactly I reached this point further demonstrates the overwhelming toxicity of achieving the societal expectation of looking skinny, as the feeling of defeat and low-self esteem now proves to be achievable solely from one's own thoughts, and not just rely on direct influence from the outside world.

Self-deprecation: Dissatisfaction with own body

I describe various situations in which I critique my own appearance that exemplify my dissatisfaction with my body. I go as far as looking at past photos of myself and realizing my flaws. I state, "The first thing I notice are my arms. Resembling nothing like that of a lean, ballet dancer I've always desired, they instead looked like two thick chunks of meat. My face, as my mother would say, looks like it's so stuffed with cheek fat that there couldn't possibly be more to fit on there." But it doesn't stop there. Not only do I criticize my past self, but this trend continues into present day as well given I would randomly pick up on certain physicalities I do not like while going through with her day to day tasks. This behavior is shown when I say, "I remember looking at myself in the mirror last night brushing my teeth, and a feeling of disappointment, and not just sad-disappointed, but the hopeless-and-regret-disappointment...Why

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are my cheeks somewhat bigger than how I remembered?" And this is a common trend throughout my writing--discovering and then loathing my physical appearance by coming across my reflection in some means or another, whether that'd be intentional or not. For example, I describe a general situation that occurs quite frequently as I'm just going about my day: "If I'm wearing shorts and I'm walking up to the mirror, I'd notice if the skin on my thighs bounce in synch with each step I take." But this is not the only instance where an event like this happens--I continue by saying "This photo confirmed the countless times I walked to class and quickly caught a glimpse of myself in the glass door entrance, observing my two stump, shapeless legs moving one in front of the other as I approach the door." Then this behavior is usually followed by a statement of realization that truly shows the dissatisfaction I feel within. This could be statements like. "I remember thinking, *did my thighs really get this fat? In a month?*" I seem incredibly unable to accept myself, and only thinks about the negative aspects of my physical appearance any chance I see my own reflection. This thought is finally confirmed with my statement, "Anytime before then when I looked at myself in a photo, or saw my reflection in a door or window or mirror, I was never satisfied with what I saw myself as. *That's* what I look like?" Many people can relate to these feelings. I provide a few prime examples of how negative body image can be manifested in someone's life literally at any moment of the day at any location, and how much it can eat up at a person's self-esteem.

Discussion

According to Yamamiya, Cash, Melnyk, & Posavac (2008), a number of studies have concluded that women are far more dissatisfied with their bodies after viewing a series of images of the conventionally "thin" women. My findings fall in similar line with this conclusion, as I have expressed dissatisfaction with my body after seeing someone who appears thin, but only

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differs in the fact that my encounter with these females were entirely in the form of in-person interaction, and not a series of images. While they largely attribute the repetitive exposure of "thin" women to a group of females via photographs as a primary factor that influences body image, my findings instead reveal that damaging factors could very much be self-induced in the form of voluntarily and involuntary comparison with other girls one comes across on a day-to-day basis, whether they are conventionally "thin" or not. This realization from my findings serves as an eye-opener to young adolescent females as it increases their awareness of the fact that they may be damaging their own self-esteem just on their own simply through comparing themselves to other girls they know and/or see. In addition, the final claim of the article fails to address the essential factor of being self-aware of one's body consciousness and toxicity of the harmful beauty standards, which my findings heavily addressed.

Hemal Shroff and Kevin Thompson (2006) propose more accurate conclusions in relation to my personal findings as they acknowledge the notion that a primary way adolescent females are affected by factors that influence body image is through "internalization of societal standards" and "excessive appearance comparison." My findings clearly indicate that much of the dissatisfaction I felt with my own body was largely self-inflicted, as in, I did not need to see an image of a supermodel in a magazine or an Instagram model posing on the beach to feel self-conscious of my body. Instead, as most notable in my "Comparison" findings, I seem to be responsible for my own negative thoughts as I continue to compare my body to others in very unlikely places, like a nearly-empty STEM building on a college campus. This correlates to the "internalization of societal standards" Shroff and Thompson reference as I am only able to carry out these unhealthy comparisons with a premeditated mental image of what an "attractive" female should look like. I also display this internalization of beauty standards in my findings

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when I continuously reveal my self-deprecation and longing for a more "socially acceptable" body anytime I see my own reflection. There is a choice to ignore the social standards of beauty that I carry with me by deciding to cease the comparisons and self-deprecation, to practice self-acceptance more, but I do not choose to ignore them. Instead, such patterns of my current behavior shows that comparing oneself to others is a fundamental causation of body image issues; it is a great external influence on how we view ourselves, not always just media and images we see on Instagram, but the people we see on a day-to-day basis.

My findings continue to fall directly in line with Lewis & Rosenblum (1999) as they place heavy emphasis on physical appearance as a factor of social and self evaluation whilst also acknowledging a "social consensus" on what is considered beautiful. In my narratives and overarching theme, there is a continuous reference to my physical appearance, and how I then seem to express some sort of dissatisfaction with myself after I take note of my own physical appearance, thus composing the "self evaluation" part of Lewis and Rosenbloom's argument. In my self-awareness theme findings, my attempt to separate myself from society's toxic dictation of what is deemed attractive or not is my acknowledgement of the existence of the "social consensus" of beauty that Lewis and Rosenbloom also reference in their scholarly article. Their reference to this consensus also has a connection with my finding of being self-aware, as my acknowledge of this consensus displays my cognizance of these damaging societal standards. My acknowledgment of this "social consensus" but continuation of internalizing it further shows how strong of a feeling negative body perception is, that even knowing it is a harmful mindset to be in it is nearly impossible for one to stop thinking about it in such a negative light.

Implications

The findings and discussion of this autoethnography is mostly applicable to adolescent to young adult females, as the issue of body image seems to largely affect this demographic the most explicitly. By sharing my personal experiences and connecting them to expert articles, I am simply implying that the various causes of body image can extend far beyond just the conventional "media" and "Instagram models" trope. Yes, though they are largely responsible for forming the consensus of what is deemed "beautiful" in our society, and what adolescent females internalize when they gauge the worth of their own bodies, many times the simple day-to-day comparisons between oneself and other girls' body is enough to plague an individual with negative low-esteem thoughts about her own body. Body image issues are many times actually self-inflicted, when we take the time and effort ourselves to put ourselves down because we realize we may not live up to society's shallow expectations expectations. Thus this study creates greater consciousness of not falling into society's trap of high beauty standards, as well as a greater consciousness of when you are the one being affected/hindered by the high beauty standards.

Limitations and Successes

There were several limitations throughout this study that may have prevented the research to be completed in its most effective and optimal way. To begin, there was simply not enough data, as I only had three personal creative nonfiction narratives to study and summarize the entire topic of body image on, something that millions of adolescents go through. There is a very little chance I was able to encompass the majority consensus of body image struggles for teens and young adults. I am also not trained researcher, and thus throughout the study I approached my research from the perspective of a student--following the professor's instructions step-by-step, asking myself at certain points "Well what should I do to make sure I can get an A?" I have

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stepped into the world of research without actually having literally any training, experience, and overall exposure to this process in a professional sense. This brings me to my next point, that this was my first time carrying out a research question via this approach. I therefore found myself confused and dumbfounded at many points during the writing/researching process; the unfamiliarity of process made it challenging to smoothly write each section of the autoethnography in a detailed and coherent manner. "Am I doing this right?" was a common question I asked myself, especially writing the literature review and all three theme findings. There were two notable successes that I must call attention to. First, I selected a very easily-researchable topic. The discussion of body image is incredibly common especially in contemporary society with the recent boom in media and online sharing. This thus led to the second success of being able to locate a substantial amount of scholarly literature on it, where one has the chance to explore the depths of the causes of body image struggles and various studies from a wide variety of well-experienced researchers.

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Moving Forward

If one wishes to carry out a similar study on the topic of body image, I advise them to gather more data. Instead of picking a mere three or so personal narratives, perhaps even fill up a whole journal on one singular topic; designate a single document for a potential topic and just write for pages and pages and pages. This may even help in developing more themes, and from personal experience I feel as though the creation of more themes could open up a better discussion as the researcher will have more findings to compare with expert literature to. It is also imperative to first see the overall research and writing process requirements prior to taking the first steps in starting your project. I wish I had done this as it would have been easier to see the objective and overall goal of everything I was doing as I was doing them. Instead of blindly

writing about my themes diving straight into the research with the question, "Why am I doing this?" in mind, I would have more easily known the purpose and best approach of each step. For example, if I had know ahead of time that my theme findings would be used in the discussion in such a way that it would be *compared* to expert literature, I would have focused more on the *conclusions* of each theme finding and of each article I came across as I wrote and researched them. This therefore would have allowed me to more coherently conclude the similarities and differences between my findings and the experts when it came time to writing about them.

Summary/Takeaway

Throughout this autoethnography, I focused on one central issue of body image, and specifically the causations of body image struggles in adolescent females. I did so by combining my personal narratives and the findings I extracted from them in the form of three separate themes with scholarly literature by experts. After thorough research of studies and expert opinions and comparison of my findings with the literature, I found that many experts over-emphasize the role that media plays in damaging young females' body perceptions. They place heavy blame on external factors as a cause of low self-esteem, whereas my findings indicate that body image issues may arise from anyone and anything at any place and any time, not just conventional magazines and media outlets. A lot of the struggle stems from a mental battle within oneself, where self-acceptance is hard to achieve because an individual is constantly thinking about what she looks like. This conclusion is important because it indicates the importance of finding routes to achieve true internal self-confidence, a confidence that does not rely on the influence of media or the validation and opinions of others. Only if this is achieved do we greatly reduce our risk of falling under the trap of society's harmful beauty standards. These beauty standards will always exist, no matter what people do, constantly perpetrated by

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the fashion industry, sports ads, corporations that exploit the insecurity of teenage girls, to the never-ending trend of blasting your bikini body via Instagram and other social media sites. But it is up to the individual of whether or not to internalize these expectations. As I have stated and as is evident through my findings, much of the dissatisfaction one feels with their body is self-inflicted, and thus it is important to have the willpower to not inflict it upon yourself by being self-aware of your own harmful behaviors as well as the problematic viewpoints society has constructed.

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Yamamiya, Yuko, et al. "Women's Exposure to Thin-and-Beautiful Media Images: Body Image Effects of Media-Ideal Internalization and Impact-Reduction Interventions." *Body*

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Image, vol. 2, no. 1, 2005, pp. 74–80., doi:10.1016/j.bodyim.2004.11.001.*Google*

Scholar.