

THE QUARRY

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Fault Lines Behind Fashion

Like many women in the Western world obsession with body image is part of my life. It began with puberty and will probably follow me, in some way, for the rest of my life. I am young, healthy and exercise regularly. I am an Australian size 8-10 and understand on a rational level that I have nothing to be concerned about. I am far from overweight and lucky enough to have genetics that means I probably won't ever be. Yet I am not satisfied with my body, I feel guilty about my love of baked goods, I dislike the size of my thighs, bum and upper arms and wish my stomach was flatter. I am happiest with my body when

I wake up in the morning – an empty digestive system means a stomach flat as a board. This will sadly disappear after the morning's coffee and toast.

I am not alone. This is a constant topic of conversation between my friends and I, who are all as slim as me if not more so. It should be mystifying that beautiful young women feel this way, but unfortunately the obsession with thin is now part of Western culture. While it is part of our broader culture, it is impossible not to recognize the fashion industry's instrumental role in the fetishism of the ultra-skinny. The body image and beauty standard set by the fashion industry is based in fiction, not reality. Fashion magazines create elaborate editorials where all the model's flaws are airbrushed away and healthy, glowing skin is photo-shopped in. We are left with a picture perfect image that young women the world over will measure themselves against.

The industry has set an impossible standard that the majority of real women, with their curves and their blemishes, will never be able to achieve, at least not through healthy methods. The fashion industry's don't-ask, don't-tell policy means a blind eye has been turned to the condition and health of models used in photo shoots and on the runway. While there has been a recent shift against promoting models that are known to be suffering from eating disorders, how can this really be policed? And how can you ensure that everyone in the industry is onboard? Whether it is continuing or not, the reality is fashion magazines were promoting models who were suffering from an emotional and physical illness. These models lose weight to fit into the impossibly small sample sizes and are then praised for how good they look. They are booked for shoots in high profile magazines such as Vogue and their behavior is rewarded. In light of this it is no surprise that eating disorders, such as anorexia and

bulimia, have trickled through the pages of the glossy magazines and into the real world.

Eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia stem from the desire to look different and fix something about oneself. This may be physical or emotional - while eating disorders manifest in a physical form this doesn't mean the cause is also purely physical. For most sufferers, the root of the problem is deeper than food and weight related issues. Things like depression, insecurity and the pressure to be perfect or feeling out of control are masked by their ability to control what food goes in and out of their body. Once a sufferer is deep into their eating disorder it becomes hard for them to distinguish between reality and fiction - their own body image is highly distorted.

Someone with a healthy body image will be saddened or even repulsed when they see an image of someone who is severely underweight, while someone suffering from anorexia will only feel worse about their own body and set their weight loss goal even higher. The illusive supermodel becomes a muse as opposed to an unrealistic image of what the female form should look like.

Growing up I felt these pressures, as did most women I know. In year eight I dabbled in bulimia, knowing I could never commit to the drastic measures needed to become anorexic as I loved food too much. This sentiment pinpoints how harmless my 'eating disorder' really was. After recess and lunch I would go to the staff toilet and stick my fingers down my throat. This went on for a few weeks until my concerned friends took me to the school counselor and she phoned my mum. I am now ashamed to say this was more attention seeking, a desperate bid to fit in rather than a desire to be ridiculously thin or disgust in

my body. If it appears that I'm making light of eating disorders I assure you this is not my intention. However, I can see now how trivial my experience was compared to real victims of this disease. It consumes their lives in a way it never did mine.

Over the years there have been numerous cases of young models dying due to the prolonged effects caused by anorexia. Particularly notorious is the death of French model Isabelle Caro, who spoke openly about her battle with anorexia in a hope to educate young women and men. Caro struggled with anorexia from the tender age of 13, caused by what she referred to as a 'troubled childhood'. She then went on to work as a model rocketing to fame in 2007 after teaming up with Italian fashion brand Nolita to shoot an anti-anorexia advertisement in which she posed nude. This was the first time the public saw Caro as she really was – a skeletal body with protruding vertebrae and facial bones. The image shocked viewers worldwide. For Caro the campaign seemed to have the opposite effect, the images made her famous, the face of anorexia and a media darling. Caro's condition didn't improve and sadly she died 3 years later from the effects of being so weakened by anorexia. Caro appeared to be trapped in a vicious cycle - the very images that were meant to send a strong anti-anorexia message kick started her career. While her anorexia was not brought on by the pressures of modeling it isn't a huge stretch to suggest that her prolonged battle with the disease correlated with her modeling career.

In some cases Caro's advertisement with Nolita had the opposite of the desired effect. Images of Caro can often be found on 'pro-ana' blogs highlighted as a source of 'thinspiration' rather than a cautionary tale. The back

alleys of the internet are littered with pro-ana blogs which have been created, for the most part, by young women suffering from anorexia and/or bulimia. The blogs walk a fine line between support groups for sufferers and a celebration of the disease.

There are numerous photos of painfully thin celebrities and models all captioned by aspirations such as ‘so thin, love it, love her’. Meal plans and nutrition guides are posted followed by exercise plans. There are diary style entries ranging from an outline of the days ‘meals’, tips on skipping meals without drawing unwanted attention and confessions on relapse. When I discovered the pro-ana sites it felt as though I had stumbled into a secret society, one where I certainly didn’t belong. Reading the personal struggles these women were having with anorexia was horrifying. It was painstakingly clear I could never relate to the depth of their insecurities. I wanted to write an angry letter demanding they be removed, but who would I write to and who am I to decide I have the right? These are all personal blogs, forms of self-expression. How could I be so judgmental and presume I knew what was best for them?

Kirstie Clements worked at Vogue for 27 years, 13 of those spent in the editor’s chair. Clements is now an international name thanks to her recent tell-all book about her Vogue years. A candid Clements reveals the seedier side of the fashion industry, describing models as ‘one of the most controversial aspects of fashion magazines and the fashion industry’. The conundrum of who should be blamed for the portrayal of overly thin models is complex. Magazine editors are generally in the direct line of fire but as Clements explains the problem begins long before reaching the glossies. Designers use skeletal fit

models (an in-house body the clothes are designed around). The collections are then sent to the runway and worn by equally tall, pin-thin models, as that's how the designer wants to see the clothes fall. Runway samples are sent to magazine stylists who must cast a model who will fit these tiny sizes.

Clements relays various horrifying accounts of models she had worked with over the years whose bodies were depleted as they openly starved themselves. While Clements admits she was complicit this appears to be an admission she is only comfortable making now. During her time as editor she was in a position where she could have pushed for real change. There were minor attempts such as instigating a policy that Vogue would not employ models under the age of 16. While a good start this wasn't exactly the platform for ground breaking change. From her account it appears Clements was caught in a constant tension between what the fashion office wanted, what the readers wanted, and her own morals.

In 2011 Clements caused a ripple in the fashion world featuring a 'plus' size model in the pages of Vogue. The issue was a resounding success with readers yet a plus size model has not been featured since. Clements sums up the heart of the problem - 'the high fashion world has a deep vein of callousness. For every woman who related to the lovely photographs of a curvaceous Robyn, there is a stylist in Paris eating iceberg lettuce hearts sprayed with Evian for lunch and telling the hopeful young models they are too fat to get into the jacket'. What Clements doesn't say is that she sat somewhere in between the editor who featured a plus size model and this stylist, meaning she remained part of the problem. This is the dilemma of the fashion industry, one I will no doubt face myself one day.

Based on Clements book it would appear thin culture in the fashion industry isn't changing anytime soon. However, Clements account shouldn't be taken as gospel. There are many in the fashion industry who believe there has been a definite shift, particularly here in Australia. Fashion designer Krystal Davis asserts the industry's attitude towards the use of 'sickly thin' models has changed dramatically in the last five years. As a designer and creative director of her own label *IXIAH*, Krystal works across all areas of the industry. She isn't just sitting in a studio sketching out new trends - Krystal hand picks the models that will showcase her designs, accompanies them on shoots and puts look books together. There's a certain aesthetic Krystal's clients are after and according to her it isn't models who are unnaturally thin. 'I think you find these days everyone is more health conscious and has more of an understanding. The consumer at the end of the day doesn't like that look, they feel intimidated and that it's not real and it's unhealthy'.

The shift in model culture has largely been driven by the consumer. The days of the 90's supermodel who maintained her figure on a cocktail of alcohol, cigarettes and cocaine is definitely behind us. Krystal believes this shift is due to a general increase in education about diet, health and wellbeing. Consumers want to see toned healthy bodies something they can aspire too rather than something completely unobtainable. However, you can't escape the fact that clothes fall better on a tall, thin body and while the models are staying thin the healthy way, they are still often a size 6 - something the average Australian woman is not. This poses a dilemma for the designer. They need slight figures to showcase their product while also meeting the desires of the consumer. I ask Krystal if she has received backlash from consumers in regards to models she

has used for campaigns.

‘I have previously. About five years ago we used a girl who was just naturally skinny but did look quite thin in the clothes. We had a few comments from people, things like “that girl’s too thin”, “she needs to eat”, “you shouldn’t use girls like that, you shouldn’t encourage this”. It can backfire and consumers don’t feel like that’s a real person wearing those clothes. If the model doesn’t fill them out the skirt won’t look as good, because it’s made for a real person not someone so thin. But in recent times I haven’t used girls who are too thin. I use girls that look the part of the collection’.

When it comes to eating disorders within the industry it’s hard to know for certain if the culture still exists and if models continue to use extreme methods to stay current in such a cut throat world. Krystel says she isn’t trying to deny their existence or claim the culture is no longer there but in her experience it is certainly on the decline. ‘All of the models I’ve ever worked with have eaten so much. I think they watch their weight and they’re careful with what they eat but I think a lot of the ones that do have the eating disorder or do take it that bit too seriously, their performance lacks. A lot of the time you really need someone who can move and pose and you need that personality to represent your clothing and I couldn’t imagine they’d be able to work properly. For our recent spring collection we used Caroline and she was so skinny but so toned. So she looks healthy enough because she’s got so much shape. She ate really well but she was a naturally skinny girl and when she was in our pieces you can tell she was really toned. You could see that she would just exercise rather than not eat’.

So is this the new breed of model or are they simply better at hiding their eating disorders? When it comes to the glamorous sylphs lounging across the glossy pages of fashion magazines, it's hard to know. All of anorexia's tell-tale signs can be photo shopped away. However, when you send a model down the runway these signs are harder to disguise, and I would agree with Krystal, the sickly thin trend appears over. Natural or not, our society continues to celebrate the culture of thin and women are presented with an unachievable standard of beauty. The industry is giving itself a pat on the back for refusing to use models known to be suffering from an eating disorder and promoting models that stay svelte the 'healthy' way. But more often than not these models are not an accurate reflection of the shape and size of most 'real' women and this is the biggest fault line of all.