

Playboy centrefolds and eating disorders — from male pleasure to female pathology?

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Objective. To highlight a potential environmental risk factor promoting the development of eating disorders.

Design. A retrospective analysis of calculated body mass indices of *Playboy* centrefolds.

Setting. South African editions of *Playboy* magazine.

Subjects. *Playboy* centrefolds, February 1994 - February 1995.

Outcome measure. Body mass index.

Results. Of surveyed centrefolds, 72% achieved a body mass index under 18, implying undernourishment.

Conclusions. Body mass indices calculated on the basis of stated weights and heights of *Playboy* centrefolds reveal the majority to be technically undernourished, which is clearly not so on inspection of the centrefolds. The body dimension data in such magazines should be treated with circumspection. Acceptance of the validity of such data may create the erroneous impression that undernourishment is desirable. This notion may have an impact on self-perception and dieting behaviour in certain individuals, precipitating and promoting disturbed eating attitudes and behaviour that may lead to the onset of eating disorders.

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The prevalence of eating disorders among adolescent and young adult females is estimated to be 0.5 - 1% for anorexia nervosa, 1 - 3% for bulimia nervosa¹ and 5 - 10% for subclinical eating disorders,² i.e. eating disorders that do not meet the full criteria for either of the aforementioned conditions. Hence, potentially 15% of a specific section of the general population are affected by conditions that have a significant impact on both their psychological and their physical well-being.¹ Of great concern is that the incidence of these conditions appears to be increasing.³

The role of the media in this phenomenon has been the subject of much research and speculation.^{3,4} Overall, investigators have strongly implicated the media — both lay and medical — in playing a causal role.^{3,4} A specific issue is the promotion of a certain stereotype of body shape and

dimension as indicative of physical attractiveness and health, i.e. slimness, with increased body dissatisfaction and consequent efforts to address such dissatisfaction through dieting and exercise, potentially leading to eating disorder symptomatology.

Empirical data support a continuum of media exposure and eating disorder symptomatology. Research findings emerged in the 1980s which demonstrated that both *Playboy* centrefolds and Miss America Pageant contestants had become thinner over the preceding 20 years, while data from Metropolitan Life Insurance weight tables indicated that expected weight for women aged under 30 had increased.⁴ By implication, a significant disparity between 'ideal' and actual standards was operational, and a potentially powerful contributor to body dissatisfaction with its consequences was established.

Within the South African setting, recent liberalisation of censorship laws has permitted the entry of *Playboy* and similar publications into the media market. The current study was aimed at establishing the nutritional status of *Playboy* centrefolds (South African edition) according to published data on certain physical dimensions of centrefolds (weight, height).

Methodology

Playboy editions from February 1994 to February 1995 were reviewed. Owing to the author's inability to acquire a copy of the October 1994 edition, the February 1995 edition was incorporated into the data analysis. The December 1994 and January 1995 editions were published as a single edition, hence 11 centrefolds were reviewed in total. Data on age, weight and height were established for each centrefold according to published information. The body mass index (BMI) for each centrefold was calculated.

The BMI is a measure of nutritional status and is calculated according to the equation: weight (kg)/height × height (m). For females, a figure of 20 - 25 is regarded as optimal, 18 - 20 as underweight, and below 18 very underweight. It has been suggested that a figure of over 18 indicates that a patient with an eating disorder is not significantly underweight.⁵ Means for the aforementioned parameters were calculated with specific emphasis on the BMIs.

Results

The mean age (\pm SD) was 25.54 \pm 3.67 years, the mean height was 1.71 \pm 0.04 m, and the mean weight 52 \pm 4.21 kg. The mean BMI was 17.63 \pm 0.76. Of the 11 centrefolds, 8 (72.7% of the sample) had BMIs below 18. The remaining 3 (27.3%) had BMIs between 18 and 19. The range of BMIs was 16.26 - 18.93. The lowest BMI was that of Pamela Anderson, of 'Baywatch' (television series) fame. One hundred per cent of the sample had a suboptimal BMI, with the majority being classifiable as being very underweight (Table I).

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Table 1. *Playboy* centrefold data, February 1994 - February 1995

Issue	Age (yrs)	Weight (kg)	Height (m)	BMI
Feb 1994	29	52	1.72	17.57
Mar 1994	20	50	1.7	17.30
Apr 1994	24	58	1.75	18.93
May 1994	26	50	1.67	17.92
June 1994	23	56	1.74	18.49
July 1994	34	50	1.7	17.30
Aug 1994	24	52	1.75	16.97
Sep 1994	25	58	1.8	17.90
Nov 1994	27	47	1.7	16.26
Dec 1994/Jan 1995	23	45	1.62	17.10
Feb 1995	26	54	1.72	18.25

Discussion

The findings raise a number of questions, not least of which is: can the published data be believed? Accepting the published data, and by implication the calculated BMIs, as valid, what is to be inferred from the results? That *Playboy* centrefolds are technically suboptimally nourished! Visual inspection renders such an opinion absurd, yet the facts remain, questionable or not.

Interpretation of the findings leads to the possible conclusion that a certain stereotype of female desirability is associated with suboptimal nutritional status (in the view of the magazine and its readership). Such findings constitute grounds for concern, given their potential impact on the psychological and physical well-being of certain sections of the female population at risk for or suffering from an eating disorder. Given that media images play an important role in self-evaluation of media users (and related matters such as augmentive therapy), through highlighting the issue of data validity, the concerned citizen may foster a spirit of questioning about stereotypes of female attractiveness and male pleasure as manifested in the media.

Conclusion

Within the South African setting, *Playboy* centrefolds — according to published information for the period of review — are classifiable as suboptimally nourished. Given their potential for serving as stereotypes of attractiveness, this 'undernourishment' is of concern. Future local research should be aimed at evaluating the impact of media images on self perception. Eating disorders are increasing in incidence. Factors in our environment that potentially promote this trend need to be identified and addressed.

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Dokter en digter

Seniliteit

Groot-grootjie-ourma noem ons haar,
op honderd het sy laas verjaar.
Haar liggaam – wat 'n wonderwerk,
die word net meer gesond en sterk.

Maar o verdriet met die verstand
is sy reeds huistoe, uit die land,
en leef sy voort in kinderdae,
word deur kabouterjies gepla.

Vanoggend is haar baba weg.
Sy huil aanhoudend, voel so sleg.
Die dingetjie gisteraand gebaar,
was in die tjalie – wys sy daar.

Met simpatie help soek ek saam,
lê op die feëtjieprins die blaam,
en so al soekend deur die huis
kom ons weer saam gelukkig tuis.

Nou snuffel, vroetel sy weer rond –
soek spore op die mat se grond,
vind juigend in die koffiekas
oorlede oupa Koos se jas.

Die wonder van . . . noem dit maar kens,
lê in die brein se goeie wens,
dat dit wat huidig seer sou maak
in die verlede draagbaar raak.

C. J. v. d. M. Pretorius