

Eye of the Beholder

“Engender’s campaign to open up a public debate about sexualisation and objectification of young women and girls in 21st century Scotland.”¹

The aim of the surveys created and distributed by Engender, in September 2010, was to gain a better understanding of public perspective on the sexualisation of young people in the media. Engender’s stance has been that the media, and in particular magazines and social networking sites, are promoting and reinforcing an “idealised notion of beauty for both men and women” [*Eye of the Beholder* brief], which leads to consequences such as eating disorders, sexist perspectives, poor self esteem and depression. In severe cases, exposure to gender stereotyping may lead to sexual harassment and rape, abuse, and unwanted sexual attention.

The surveys (appendix1) were distributed by Engender to S2-S5 pupils at Broughton High School, and HND and HNC students at Stevenson College. There were 248 returns from Broughton and 60 returns from Stevenson with ages ranging mainly from 14-17 years, but also including some participants aged 12 to 50+ years.

They show that although many participants felt that the media put pressure on men and women to conform to impossible ideals, some participants did not appear to view the situation as being serious. It should be noted that when asked, some of the Stevenson participants claimed not to have fully understood the purpose of the survey, which could reflect the feelings of many of the participants. However, in combination with the seminars which were conducted as part of this project, *Eye of the Beholder* has brought the issues into discussion and therefore contributed to an increase in awareness of these issues.

¹ *Eye of the Beholder brief*, Engender.

It is clear from the surveys that most of the participants read magazines on a regular basis, particularly the female participants. Most females said that they preferred glamour/style or celebrity gossip magazines, which could be argued are the magazine types most likely to contain images which are designed to influence the reader's self perception. For example, images which portray being thin as glamorous and desirable.

Most men (in the Stevenson group) also said that they read magazines, with sports being the most popular, but with 'lad's mags' taking second place. 'Lads mags' objectify women, but sports magazines could be said to present an unrealistic image of how men should be, in a similar way to style and gossip magazines for women.

Facebook was by far the most popular website listed, and a very high proportion of participants said they had a social networking profile. Lots of people noted Facebook and internet adverts when asked what methods they thought the media used to sell products. Many thought that the media used false promises to advertise products, and that sex was also used as a method to sell by the media.

Although many qualitative questions were left unanswered or answered too briefly, some participants recognised that advertisements can use crude stereotypes in their narratives. This is an example of one participant's opinion of advertisements:

"Fairy washing always a stereotypical woman, men are usually the heroes. They stereotype men are clever and strong and women are stereotyped to be caring, kind and attractive."

Another participant said:

"Smirnff advert shows a woman doing dangerous work for a wealthy man, suggesting that she is below him."

This would all suggest that most people have a level of resistance to the media and the pressures exerted by advertisements. However, the majority of participants across all three groups felt that advertisements were effective. Although most women thought that advertisements are untruthful, females were still more likely than males to find them both truthful and effective. Females were also less likely to give a negative response to their feelings towards adverts than men. This suggests that men may be in general more resistant to the messages and pressures of advertisements than women.

Most men and women thought that it was not easy for men or women to live up to ideal types as portrayed by the media, and that the media did not portray men and women equally. Most women and men felt that being 'sexy' was one of the ideal attributes of a woman as portrayed by the media. Most women also listed 'sexy,' although the male participants did not on the whole. They mostly thought that 'attractive' was one of the ideal attributes portrayed by the media. Interestingly, the majority of both men and women listed 'attractive' and 'thin' for women, but only women also said 'fashionable.'

Perhaps this is a reflection of the type of magazines this sample mostly read and therefore suggestive of the pressures and influences that the media have over young people. Similarly, most men listed 'wealthy.' This again may be symptomatic of the gender oriented pressures directed towards men and women by the media, and could also represent the way that men and women are still pressured to conform to stereotypical ideals, i.e. women should aspire to be fashionable whilst men should aspire to be wealthy.

The surveys have been useful in showing that the public are aware of the gender stereotyping prevalent in the media, and in highlighting the danger that the public are claiming to find advertising "effective," suggesting that it is making an impact on people's perspectives. They have also been useful in prompting the participants to consider the issues, which is in keeping with Engender's aim for this project.

Also in September 2010, Engender members were invited to complete a 'survey monkey' (Survey link: <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/WK8FWYV>) which highlighted a number of ideas about how to raise the debate on the sexualisation of young people in the media. We had 68 returns.

Interestingly, only a few participants suggested censorship, whilst social and formal education appeared to be the most popular proposed solution. Another recurrent idea was to use the media itself to raise awareness, perhaps through the production of a documentary highlighting the consequences of gender stereotyping.

Many respondents to the survey monkey were wary of the dangers of 'accepting' the images and stereotypes portrayed by the media, which are becoming more normalised in modern culture. This fear may be realised when analysing the participation of students in one of the Stevenson seminars, during which many claimed to know girls who were lap dancers and didn't believe it to be degrading. Many in this seminar also voiced the opinion that people 'can look too far into it,' and that they did not personally see a problem. It is apparent from the Engender member surveys that this 'normalisation' of the objectification of women is a prominent issue within this discussion.

One of the most encouraging outcomes of the member's survey was the high level of support for the 'Eye of the Beholder' project:

"I'm really pleased that you are focusing on this project. Media images bring untold suffering on people, and yet the producers of these images are not held to account. Most people in fact seem to accept the increasing sexualisation and gender stereotyping of young people as 'normal.' Thanks for doing something to address this."

Although there were some concerns as to the limitations of Engender's resources, many praised this work as being 'important and long overdue.'

Eye of the Beholder Survey

1. What **age** are you? _____

2. What **gender** do you identify as?

- Female
- Male
- Other
- Prefer not to say

3. How often do you **read** magazines?

- Daily
- Weekly
- Monthly
- Occasionally
- Rarely
- Never (skip Q. 4)

4. What sorts of magazines do you **read**? Tick all that apply.

- Glamour/Style (e.g. InStyle, Grazia, Mizz, More)
- Gossip/Celebrity (e.g. Heat or Closer)
- General Women's Lifestyle (e.g. Cosmopolitan or Sugar)
- Music/Entertainment (e.g. NME or Empire)
- Sports/Motoring (e.g. Match! or BBC Top Gear)
- 'Lads mags' (e.g. Nuts/Zoo or FHM)
- General Men's Lifestyle (e.g. GQ or Men's Health)
- Particular Interest (e.g. Psychologies or PC Gamer)
- Current Affairs/Academic (e.g. The Economist or New Scientist)
- Other – name

5a. How often do you watch **television**?

- Daily
- Weekly
- Monthly
- Occasionally
- Rarely
- Never

5b. If you do watch **television**, for how many hours a week?

- Less than 5
- 5-10
- 10-15
- 15 +

6a. How often do you use the **Internet** for personal interest (i.e. not for school/college or other study)?

- | | |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Daily | <input type="checkbox"/> Occasionally |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Weekly | <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Monthly | <input type="checkbox"/> Never |

6b. If you do use the **Internet** for personal interest, for how many hours a week?

- Less than 5
- 5-10
- 10-15
- 15 +

7. What are your 3 favourite websites to visit?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

8. Do you have a social networking profile? (For example, Bebo, Facebook, MySpace)

- Yes
- No

9a. How effective do you think advertisements are in affecting your opinions?

- Very effective
- Effective
- Ineffective
- Very ineffective

9b. If you think advertisements do affect your opinions, do they affect the opinions of any of the following:

- Yourself
- Others
- Products

10. How truthful do you feel most advertisements are?

- Very truthful
- Truthful
- Untruthful
- Very untruthful

11. What methods do the media use to sell products, particularly to young people?

12a. Have you ever felt offended or irritated by an advertisement or brand?

- Yes
- No

12b. Have you ever felt impressed or supportive of an advertisement or brand?

- Yes
- No

12c. If answered yes to either 12a or 12b, why?

13. Which three qualities best describe the 'ideal woman' as presented by the media?

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Clever | <input type="checkbox"/> Opinionated |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sexy | <input type="checkbox"/> Strong |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Attractive | <input type="checkbox"/> Motivated |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Quiet | <input type="checkbox"/> Successful |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Confident | <input type="checkbox"/> Good Sense of Humour |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Emotional | <input type="checkbox"/> Wealthy |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Healthy | <input type="checkbox"/> Well-groomed |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fashionable | <input type="checkbox"/> Thin |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Popular with same sex | <input type="checkbox"/> Popular with opposite sex |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sexually available | <input type="checkbox"/> Sexually expendable |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Kind/considerate | <input type="checkbox"/> Talented/skilled |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other | |

14. Which three qualities best describe the 'ideal man' as presented by the media?

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Clever | <input type="checkbox"/> Opinionated |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sexy | <input type="checkbox"/> Strong |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Attractive | <input type="checkbox"/> Motivated |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Quiet | <input type="checkbox"/> Successful |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Confident | <input type="checkbox"/> Good Sense of Humour |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Emotional | <input type="checkbox"/> Wealthy |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Healthy | <input type="checkbox"/> Well-groomed |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fashionable | <input type="checkbox"/> Thin |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Popular with same sex | <input type="checkbox"/> Popular with opposite sex |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sexually available | <input type="checkbox"/> Sexually expendable |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Kind/considerate | <input type="checkbox"/> Talented/skilled |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other | |

15. How easy do you think it is for ordinary men to live up to these expectations?

- Very easy
- Easy
- Ok
- Not easy
- Not very easy

16. How easy do you think it is for ordinary women to live up to these expectations?

- Very easy
- Easy
- Ok
- Not easy
- Not very easy

17. Do you think it is possible for ordinary people to live up to these ideal types?

- Yes
- No
- Don't Know

18a. Do you think the media portrays men and women as equal, particularly in advertisements?

- Yes
- No
- Don't Know

18b. Can you give examples of adverts?
