

To Be, or Not To Be Beautiful: An Analysis of Women in Print Media

The newest issue of *Seventeen* magazine had just been released and was waiting for me at home. I couldn't wait to see the newest tips on how to score the perfect boy, what clothes I could wear to make my body look more appealing, and hair products that would get my hair as straight as possible. Some nights, I would go to sleep, and wake up hoping I could look just like the girls on the front cover: white, slim, and perfect. After a few weeks of feeling like I could no longer relate to the magazine as an African American woman, I lost interest. For many years now, the representation of women in print media, such as ads and magazines, has been a popular topic. However, for many years, African American women have been excluded from the discussion. Before *Essence* was created, magazines like *Seventeen* dominated. African American women were forced to look to these magazines as a guide of what the "perfect" woman looked like. For African American women, this adaptation meant appearing as white as possible. *Seventeen*, and other magazines like *Vogue*, promote hyper femininity, encouraging overt sexuality, unrealistically thin physiques, and adherence to men, as guidelines to what a woman should look and act like. However, magazines like *Essence* challenge these ideologies that women, specifically African American women, can adhere to promoting natural beauty, independence, and self-worth. I will analyze *Seventeen*, *Vogue* and *Essence* and discuss alongside scholars that are well informed on the topic. Ultimately, I will argue that while popular print media edited by white women promotes women as figments of hyper femininity, black edited media challenges these strict guidelines and provides an outlet for women that discourages negative perceptions of body image and beauty.

Before one can compare the ideologies promoted in white and black edited magazines, one must understand the meanings of beauty in differing cultures. White and black women do not view beauty in the same context. Tracey Owens Patton in her article, “Hey Girl, Am I More than my Hair? African American Women and Their Struggles with Beauty, Body Image, and Hair,” characterizes this difference as “white beauty vs. black beauty” (25). Patton argues, “While individually not all African American women valorize White beauty standards, African American women have had to invent their own beauty measures,” therefore explaining the difference in what both cultures believe to be beautiful (27). White women dominate print media, and are the face of American beauty. However, *Essence* provides a new face for African Americans to adhere to. Meg Lovejoy in her article, “Disturbances in the Social Body: Differences in Body Image and Eating Problems among African American and White Women,” argues that white women tend to be concerned with body weight (243). They long to be thin and as a result may lead to eating disorders. In comparison, black women tend to not have that same drive for thinness. Instead, at least before *Essence* magazine made its debut, black women were considered with the skin color and hair as Patton argues (29). The desire to appear as white as possible was evident. Now, *Essence* challenges this desire. These opposing definitions of beauty may explain the difference in the ideologies being promoted in white and black edited magazines.

While white edited magazines convinces women that a thin physique, a full closet, and a face full of makeup is the pathway to beauty, black edited magazines promote natural beauty, success, and contentment with one’s unaltered appearance. *Seventeen* magazine put together a gallery that showcases their most memorable covers from year to year. In a 2008 magazine cover

starring Taylor Swift, in big orange letter is the phrase, “Get an Amazing Body.” One can assume the body the editor is referring too should look like that of Taylor Swift. The magazine showcases her with skinny arms and a thin physique. The female audience is immediately drawn to the bright orange letters as well as Taylor’s body and inclined to self-reflect on their body. Similarly, in the 2009 cover with Selena Gomez, and the 2010 cover with Nina Dobrez, flat abs are advertised. While there is nothing wrong with wanting to have flat abs, it is unnecessary and pressuring to have the theme of flat abs reinforced on every cover. Convenient enough, none of these most memorable covers showcase a girl that is plus size or bigger than a size 4. Subliminally, women view these magazine as the token to beauty and perfection. Therefore, they are inclined to believe the perfect or amazing body must look just as the women do on the cover: thin. In comparison, *Essence* creates a similar archive of magazine cover ads, yet, there is clear difference in the message. In the most recent covers, from Angela Bassett in 2003, to the 2010 cover starring Tyler Perry’s movie cast, not one cover promotes the “the amazing body” phenomenon or flash the tips to flat abs phrase. Instead covers like the June 2007 issue, featuring Mary J. Blige, contains phrases like, “Be the Woman You Really Want to Be.” *Essence* encourages women not to look how the women are typically portrayed on the covers, but to embrace their own self, and find contentment in their unaltered bodies. *Seventeen* magazine plays on the beauty standard of thinness by advertising amazing physique and tips to reach such standards. *Essence* magazine challenges the Euro-American standards of beauty by not acknowledge a thin body, but promoting a healthy lifestyle in general that is beneficial to the female audience.

Seventeen magazine has become a sexual manuscript for young women to advance their sexual practices and adhere to men. In the 2005 spring issue featuring Paris and Nicky Hilton, the phrase, “What Turns Guys On,” radiates in a bright teal color. In the 2008 issue with Taylor Swift, in yellow is the phrase, “The New Hook-Up Rules,” shines in yellow. Considering the target audience is young women ages 15-21, the message construed encourages promiscuity in women. The magazine places emphasis on sex and impressing men with the tips provided in the magazine. Not only is it inappropriate to encourage sexual relations in young women, but the sex discussed is not for the pleasure of the woman but for the satisfaction of the man. In the 2005 cover with Paris and Nicky Hilton, sex is referred to in relations to the guy. Considering the target audience for *Essence* is women 21 and older, discussing sex is not obscene. Although sex is flashed on the covers of *Essence* magazines as well, more commonly advertised is the way to success. In the July 2005 issue featuring Eva Marcille, *Essence* gives tips on how to “Make Your Money Grow,” tips that *Seventeen* magazine lack. It is arguable that a younger audience would not be concerned with making money when most of the audience are still students in high school and college and have not yet reached such point in their life. However, tips about how to prosper in school is certainly appropriate. Even so, the September 2006 issue with Beyoncé has the phrase, “Dare to Live Your Dreams: How to Release the Fear and Step Out on Faith,” plastered on the cover. Certainly this phrase is appropriate for the target audience in *Seventeen* magazine. Yet, the most memorable covers encourages objectification of women as sexual objects. These

opposing ideologies lead to opposing perception of body image that may later lead to physical issues.

While *Essence* promotes natural beauty and unaltered appearances within their cover ads, white edited magazines like *Vogue* often alter their covers to produce a more “acceptable” woman. Cameron Russell in her TED Talk, “Looks Aren't Everything. Believe Me. I'm a Model,” discusses her experiences with her career as a white model. She admits that she won a “genetic lottery” that allowed her to be a model. That lottery is the face, skin, and body type of a white woman. More importantly, she talks about how the pictures printed in *Vogue*, *V*, and *Allure* magazines were not accurate depictions of her. She shows side by side pictures of the modeled photos against photos of her throughout the day and there is a clear binary. In contrast, Jill Scott's appearance on *Essence's* October 2012 issue tells a different story as shown below:





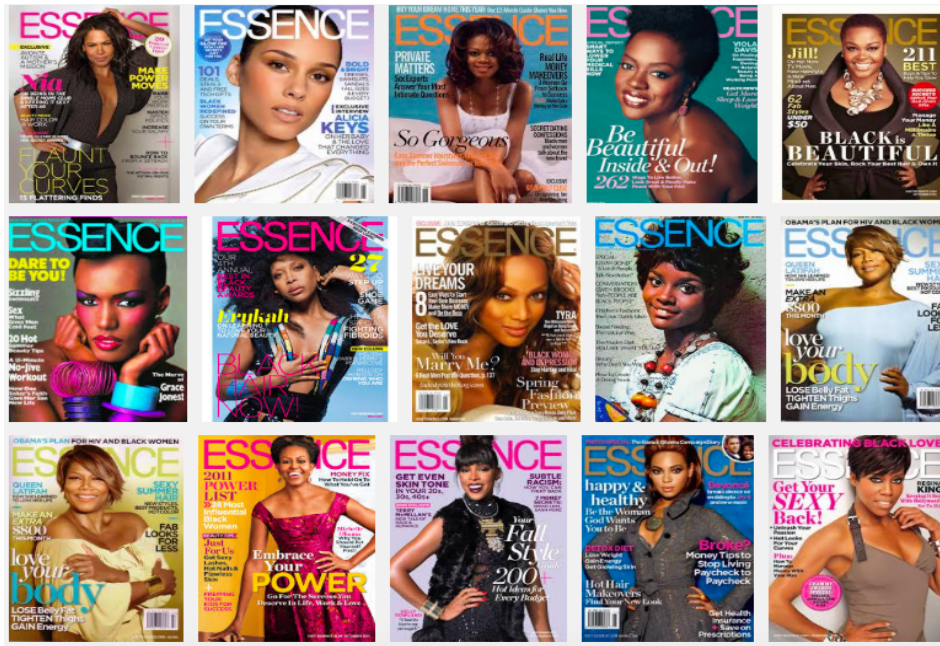
The professional pictures of Russell are extremely sexualized. She has little clothing on, makeup and props that makes it impossible to identify her, no smiles plastered on her face, and she holds very sexual poses. Her self taken photos portray her fully clothed, no makeup, and a huge grin. The portrayal of Jill Scott in her self taken photo and her professional pictures are not far off. In her magazine photo, she is easily recognizable. Her skin tone is not altered as Russel's is and she has roughly the same amount of clothing on in both photos. *Vogue* fails to represent Russell as she appears daily, suggesting her natural appearance is not good enough. *Essence*, in comparison manages to portray Jill Scott very close to how she appears daily, suggesting she does not need to be altered and that her natural appearance is valid. This binary proves that while white edited magazines alters photos to portray the perfect slim and beautiful woman by means of technology and make-up, magazines edited by black editors are accepting of all beauty types and less susceptible to negative body image.

Not only do the ideologies promoted by white edited print media lead to negative perceptions of body image, but even more problematic are the physical effects of those

perceptions. Because print media encourages women to strive for unrealistically thin physiques, and most often that target is white women, they begin to develop eating disorders to appear as those women in the film. African Americans are somewhat shielded from these critiques. Mary Shuttlesworth argues that white women experience eating disorders more than African American women due to “acceptance of many forms of beauty coupled with rejection of dominant Caucasian beauty ideals” (907). Black women do not identify with the women in the magazines and have developed their own standards of beauty in magazines: standards that are more welcoming of natural beauty and body. Meg Lovejoy brings it all together when she writes, “to counteract their stigmatization in the larger society, Black women may develop particularly strong positive self-valuations as well as alternative standard for valuing their appearance and character that may be more liberating than mainstream standards” (249). *Essence* magazine encourages these standards with covers like that of Jill Scott who is not a size 2, but appears perfectly content with her body size. Some critics may argue that African American women also struggle with the physical effects of perception and body image, however, this struggle is not a result of print media and its ideologies. Lovejoy highlights the reasons for these physical effects such as obesity. She talks about a woman, Byllye Avery, who observed that most women who were overweight used eating as comfort and security in a world that oppresses African American greatly (247). Sexual assault along with racism, poverty, among others, were factors that contributed to the need for comfort. Black women continue to use eating not as a retaliation to print media but to cope with their oppression. In contrast, white women, in general, develop

eating disorders due to negative body image and the harsh ideologies pressed by magazine ads such as *Vogue* and *Seventeen*. These ideologies have proven to be damaging and must be reconciled.

Critics have also argued that black edited magazines such as *Essence* still reflect the white standards of beauty. While that statement might have been true for the past, certainly in *Essence's* most recent years, it portray women of all sizes. Vanessa Hazell and Juanne Clarke in their article, "Race and Gender in the Media: A Content Analysis of Advertisements in Two Mainstream Black Magazines," shared the data they acquired from the black edited magazines *Essence* and *Jet*. They write, "In 2003, the second most prevalent body type in *Essence* magazine was an average body type, but in 2004 the thin body type was second most popular. Furthermore, no ads featured models with larger body sizes, despite the fact that Black people are more accepting of this body type" (15). However, more recently we know that not to be true as photos of plus size women such as Jill Scott, Queen Latifah, Jennifer Hudson, and Oprah have been released are easily located with a simple google search. What is more interesting is that a simple google image search of "essence magazine covers" produces a significantly greater amount of plus size women in comparison to the search "vogue magazine covers. In fact, after scrolling down at least ten rows in the *Vogue* magazine search, not a plus size model is in sight. Within the first four rows of the *Essence* magazine search, plus size models are showcased three times as shown on the next page:



Of the photos that showcase plus size women, two of them flash the words in big bold letters, “love your body.” The number of plus size women represented in relations to white edited magazines, is significantly higher, regardless of how many are represented without comparison. This not only proves white edited magazines are concerned with thin physique by means of beauty, but it highlights the ways in which black edited magazines stray from the white ideologies that were once pushed on them. It still remains that black edited print media, such as *Essence* magazine, promotes more positive ideologies regarding women that lead to more positive view of body image.

Patton writes so effortlessly, “We are socially constructed through language and mediated images to believe that what makes a woman beautiful is not her intelligence or her inner beauty but her outer beauty” (39). It is unfortunate that beauty is subjective and that women are forced to squeeze into a certain look. What is admirable of black edited magazines is the recent

challenge of those standards. The historical past of African American women can help explain why black edited magazines promote the ideologies they do. For many years, African American women were subjected to the white American standard of beauty. Often times, black women fell into the trap and began to desire the Euro-American features they saw in magazines. After magazines like *Essence* were created, black women were given an outlet to express their own standards of beauty, standards that encouraged natural beauty, independence, and self-worth. We hope that eventually these ideologies are encouraged in all women, providing an open interpretation of beauty. These open interpretations will help prevent the physical turmoil that negative perceptions of body image cause.

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