

Starter

Look at the following women, who were all beauty icons of their time.



1950s
Marilyn Monroe



1960s
Twiggy



1980s
Cindy Crawford



1990s
Kate Moss

- Describe their appearance. What do you notice?
- What is our beauty ideal today, both for men and for women?

Describing Appearance

well-built	
in good shape	
a good figure	
tall ≠ short	
skinny, thin, slim	
plump, big, large, on the big side	
overweight, obese	
curvy	
an hourglass figure	
boyish looks	
tanned	
to be bald / to go bald	
facial hair (moustache, beard)	

Are the stars good or bad?

Are today's TV stars really role models for teenagers? **Tracy McVeigh** looked into what adolescents and their teachers think.

Airbrushed pictures of women in underwear in magazines are nothing new. For one of Britain's headmistresses, though, the image of a wealthy American socialite in bra and pants above the headline "Officially your hottest woman in the world" was simply too much.

In a speech at an education conference this summer, Dr Helen Wright said the cover of *Zoo* magazine, featuring US reality TV star Kim Kardashian, represented "almost everything that is wrong with Western society", where her success is judged by her looks, not by her achievements. The "descent of civilization" could be read into every one of Kardashian's curves, she said. "The pupils in our schools are really taking in a diet of empty celebrity and superficiality. They are under a huge amount of pressure, hit by these images and messages."

Dr Wright, who is head of St Mary's Calne, a private girls' school in Wiltshire, south-west England, added that she had received numerous messages of support after her speech and that she believed schools and the government were not doing enough about the influence of an all-pervasive¹ celebrity culture. "It's not about a person," she said. "That single photograph brought together different aspects of our society – fame for fame's sake, the distorted² views of reality that brings, and our oversexualized culture. It encapsulated³ the enormous pressures on young people. I'm not just talking about girls.

¹ weit-verbreitet, allgegenwärtig

² verzerrt

³ to sum up; zusammenfassen, resümieren

Boys, too, suffer from the focus on appearance that we are in danger of allowing to become mainstream.”

Dr Wright believes that, just as footballers and politicians are coming under increasing pressure to behave like responsible role models, so should celebrities like Kardashian. The star is the face of several products, from perfumes to clothing, and became famous when a home sex video made it on to the internet. Kardashian took the video company to court over the tape’s ownership and won, adding \$5 million to an already large bank balance. Her reality TV show, *Keeping up with the Kardashians*, has been running since 2007. Interviews centre around make-up, the size of her bottom – of which she’s “proud” – and her boyfriends, her current one being rap star Kanye West.

She is the kind of role model young women could do without, Dr Wright said. But at one school, three 15-year-olds said they felt patronized⁴ by people who simply assumed that they were being heavily influenced by celebrity culture.

Victoria, Lucy and Helen are all pupils at St Catherine’s School in Surrey, south-east England. They are not impressed by the idea that they might be greatly influenced by celebrity culture. Victoria said: “There’s a stereotype, and it’s quite hard to battle against. The pressure is on to be the perfect woman, but not really to work for anything. I think that’s sad. I did watch *Keeping up with the Kardashians*. I didn’t watch it because I wanted to be like them. I found it quite interesting to see how they live. But I had to turn it off. I wouldn’t recommend it.

The girls also say that there are plenty of young women who struggle with the constant images of celebrity wealth and perfection on show. “You shouldn’t aspire⁵ to be somebody who doesn’t have to work to achieve something – if that’s what they are saying. I also think it’s bad for self-esteem. A lot of my friends think they are so fat, when they are not at all. They think they are not perfect, and they think they should be. All the photoshopping: they know it happens, but they still think they should look like that,” said Lucy.

Nor did they like the idea that they needed to have a role model. “I love the idea of independence. That’s important to me. A role model isn’t the best idea. You shouldn’t want to duplicate someone else, but be yourself,” said Helen.

Louise Robinson, head of Merchant Taylors’ Girls’ School in Liverpool, is also president of the Girls’ Schools Association (GSA). The GSA is running “Ahead of the Game”, an entrepreneurship competition for girls, precisely to help fight some of these issues.

“We don’t praise the characteristics of women: it’s all about looks and what they are wearing,” she said. “In our school, we use celebrities as examples who are also

⁴ to patronize sb: to speak or behave towards sb as if you were better than them

⁵ anstreben

businesswomen, like Beyoncé and Victoria Beckham, women who go on the record and talk about how hard they work to diversify⁶ and take their talents further.

While private girls' schools may have the resources and space to help young women confront the pressures of a celebrity-obsessed culture, not all schools can. This summer, the Home Office, which is Britain's ministry of the interior, produced a new booklet with before-and-after photographs of actresses and singers. The idea was to help parents show children between the ages of 6 and 11 how airbrushing works. It's an attempt to help children deal with the body-image issues that affect them as a result of constantly having to see digitally enhanced⁷ pictures of celebrities. The booklet warns parents that children are at risk of developing poor self-esteem and even mental health problems as a result of the distorted views of appearance that are presented to them.

It advises parents to "place emphasis⁸ on personal attributes such as personality, achievements, skills and outlook on life. Refrain from⁹ placing emphasis on physical aspects such as prettiness, likeness to celebrities of thinness. However, do not feel scared to praise the physical attributes that make your child unique, whether they are tall, short, narrow or wide."

The advice was especially meaningful, since it came just days after Michael Rose, a West Somerset coroner¹⁰, blamed the fashion media for the death of 14-year-old Fiona Geraghty. Geraghty was found hanged in her home last year after suffering from bulimia. Rose said he thought that magazines and catwalks should stop using thin models.

Other people point beyond the "media", though, to the consumers of celebrity culture. "Kim Kardashian is not famous for being famous," Robert Thompson, a professor of television and popular culture at New York State's Syracuse University. He pointed out that "most celebrities get rich because we line their pockets. Now, it may be that her skill is one that's harder to identify than that of a prizewinning scientist, but she's good at what she does: getting people to pay attention to her. People have been complaining about it as long as it's existed. ... I don't think we really want it to go away." Thompson believes that if celebrities disappeared tomorrow, we would all shout for them to come back.

The desire for attention is, however, where the major danger of celebrity culture lies, according to Dr Angie Hobbs of the University of Warwick. "My first thought on hearing Dr Wright's comments was that there are worse things – global warming, the banking crisis – than Kim Kardashian on the front of a young men's magazine. I do think sometimes that adults can regard celebrity culture as more of a problem than it actually is. Young women do realize when people are trying to sell them stuff and to exploit them. But for young people who perhaps feel a bit lost, then it's true that the choice of role models can be an issue."

⁶ here : seine Fähigkeiten erweitern

⁷ to enhance : verbessern, verändern, nachbearbeiten

⁸ Wert, Gewicht auf etwas legen

⁹ Avoid placing, don't place

¹⁰ Untersuchungsrichter(in)

Dr Hobbs said the human desire for status had been documented as far back as Plato: “But when a society starts divorcing¹¹ status from doing honourable things and awards it for materialistic things, that’s when you are in trouble. You have to look very carefully at why people who don’t want to be famous themselves want to follow famous people”

Dr Hobbs said she was optimistic that things would soon come full circle, though. “As part of the proliferation¹² of media, the blogs, the news outlets, it gets to a point where nobody is going to be talking about the same thing,” she said. “Today, it is impossible for anyone to be as famous as the Beatles, for example, because the media conversation is so diverse. You can be famous in one part, but unknown in another. No matter how many videos and blogs you put up, no one will be watching. So celebrity itself will implode.”¹³

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Comprehension and Discussion

1. Why does Dr Wright think that the cover of *Zoo* magazine, with Kim Kardashian as the hottest woman of the world, is a symbol of “everything that is wrong with Western society”?
2. In how far do Victoria, Lucy and Helen agree with Dr Wright? What do you think?
3. How is the Home Office’s booklet trying to help parents? What do you think of its advice?
4. Michael Rose blames the death of Fiona on the fashion media. Who does Robert Thompson blame? Who do you agree with and why?
5. What is Dr Angie Hobbs’s opinion on the issue?
6. Explain in your own words: “When a society starts divorcing status from doing honourable things and awards it for materialistic things, that’s when you are in trouble.”
7. Explain how or why celebrity itself might explode.

¹¹ trennen

¹² increase, multiplication ; Vermehrung, Zunahme

¹³ zusammenbrechen ; in sich zusammenfallen

Beyond the text

Watch the adverts *Dove evolution* and *Dove onslaught* on YouTube.

- a) Who are these adverts aimed at? What is their message? What is your opinion on them?
- b) Some people believe that these ads still focus on appearance and that therefore beauty remains the most important characteristic of a woman. They think that we should judge each other on intelligence, humour or personality, not on our face and bodies. What do you think?

Essay topics

1. There are worse things in life than Kim Kardashian on the cover of a magazine.
2. Germany's Next Topmodel should be banned.

Glossary

eating disorders: anorexia, bulimia	
beauty ideal	
body image	
have / suffer from a negative body image	
self-conscious	
insecure / to have insecurities	
(have a low/high) self-esteem	
self-confident	
a body hang-up	
to judge sb on sth	
to blame sb for sth to blame sth on sb	
judgmental	
to feel obligated to do something	
to live up to a standard	
to put on / lose weight	
to be overweight	