Ana Bole

A Pretty Girl

I once heard that social media is like gambling. The constant ding of your phone with every new notification making it almost impossible to ignore. The loading bar is like pulling the slot machine lever and seeing images on the screen spin. Checking and rechecking on how your post is doing is just like pulling the lever over and over again. The same satisfaction and odds of going viral as hitting the jackpot. You even get a similar boost of serotonin. Social media is a roller coaster of emotions for me. At times I feel ecstatic about how well my post is doing and then feel lonely and empty when I see the life others live. Sometimes I wonder if my self-image would be different if I never used social media.

When I first look in the mirror, I see a pretty girl, but when I stare at myself too closely things start to change. I begin to compare myself to those unrealistic ideals I have in the back of my head planted there by the images viewed on social media. I have green almond-shaped eyes with hints of yellow and blue streaked through that have always been one of my favorite features. In middle school, my friends told me I had a perfect nose that's destined to have a nose piercing, which I still haven’t gotten. I have freckles that fill my whole face that tend to multiply and become more pronounced when I’m out in the sun. (Thank *god* freckles are a trend this year.) My left eyebrow has a scar running through it, which always causes my eyebrows to be slightly different shapes. I have a nice smile with smile lines that will eventually wrinkle my whole face. But if I stare for too long, my face becomes too round and my cheekbones non-existent. I’m not fat but not skinny, not super fit or athletic looking but I’m not out of shape. My waist isn’t small enough for the size of my hips and don't get me started on my legs. I’m not one of those Instagram models or hell even some of my friends but I’m alright... I’m a pretty girl.

Summer is when social media is the hardest. Every time I open Instagram or Twitter, or even TikTok there is a girl who is the ‘perfect standard’ of beauty wearing a bikini. If it's a bad day, I’ll examine the picture and compare myself to what they are projecting into the world. If it's a good day, I’ll like the picture and move on with my life. Lately, social media has caused me a lot of uneasiness. Here I am in my childhood bedroom finishing my sixth semester of college while everyone else seems to be out with their friends despite the risk of the virus. Social media can cause me to feel inadequate in some weird way, as if someone going the beach with their friends makes me less than because I didn’t go that week. Quarantine magnified my flaws; I now have all the time in the world to think about what I want to change about myself.

There's an image of the perfect woman in every girl's mind, the one who society tells us represents perfect beauty. But beauty standards shift over time. In the twenties, it was rail-thin women with bobs. In the fifties, Marilyn Monroe’s hourglass figure was all the rage. In the seventies, thin was back in style and now the ‘curvy’ Kylie Jenner look is in. It seems with every decade there is a new it-girl who everyone else dreams of looking like. In the past the body shape deemed “the best” were somewhat achievable the only catch being you had to be born with that body type. But today’s “best” is usually created by surgeons. How fair is it to compare yourself to a person who has plastic surgery to change their appearance? I don’t like how a body type that is not possible to the average person without a nutritionist, personal trainer, and plastic surgeon on call has become the ‘ideal woman.’ Believe me, I’m not down on plastic surgery; if lip fillers or a butt lift will make you feel good about yourself, do it! I know personally that seeing famous people on my social media, with let’s say *enhanced* features, can cause me to feel inadequate compared to them. I start to believe that I could never be as good looking as them because my body or face doesn’t look like that.

Why is it that women, me included, put so much value on what the media deems to be “beautiful”? Is it that I truly think a particular look is beautiful or is it that the media *convinced* me it was? It’s ironic that if you wait long enough the flaw you’ve been worried about will be a trend like freckles or thicker eyebrows. I always liked my freckles, but I thought they made me just cute and nothing more. But lately people have been drawing faux freckles on their face just to get the look I have naturally.

*Natural?* That’s the question, how much of what is posted is even real? When I see a post on social media, I get mixed emotions. Logically, I am aware of what goes on behind-the-scenes of the 1,000-picture photoshoot and that a lot of what I am seeing is fabricated by editing, makeup, and poses to produce the perfect shot. But I still can’t help but feel like I not as attractive or beautiful as the people I’m examining. I find myself looking up my body mass index and the average size of a twenty-year-old in America about once every two months. I measure my waist and hips and compare my dimensions to celebrities and my friends I follow on social media. I know the tricks people use to make themselves look good and, still, I feel the harmful effects of comparing myself to others.

I know that most of the time people online only show their best selves. Of course, we’ve always heard that first impressions are lasting impressions and to put your best foot forward. It’s only human nature to show your best self to the world. I mean, I even do that. Who would want to reveal something negative about themselves if you didn't have to? But when does the persona overshadow the authenticity of the person behind the post? We all want to show the highlight of our lives, the picture you looked the best in, the fancy restaurant you just dined at, or the vacation everyone wishes they went on. At one point in time, one of my posts could’ve caused someone to feel less than even though that was never my intention. I was just making a scrapbook of the highlights of my life that I could look back on later. Sometimes I think about how my social media could affect others. I start to wonder if I want to be in a career that deals with using social media manipulatively.

As an advertising student, I question the job I am pursuing a lot. How might I feed into the perpetual problem of social media? If I go into this career field my social media is no longer only for personal use, but I will use it on a societal stage. I don’t want to play into the damaging narrative about body image that is seen in the media. Advertising and social media only added to my distorted self-image. I know how much not seeing your body type represented in the media can be damaging to yourself confidence. I worry that I will be forced to create advertisements that will hurt the impressionable or vulnerable young minds that see it. We are taught in school about native advertising which disguises ads to make them seem like any other post on social media or article in a magazine. They are used to subconsciously convince the consumer to buy the product because over the years people have started to find traditional untrustworthy. These ads can subconsciously convince consumers that these products being promoted will give them the results they desire.

Is it right that advertisers can convince naïve consumers unaware of advertising tactics to buy a product without their full knowledge of the manipulation at hand? Social media is now just another a tool for brands to manipulate, or the industry term ‘persuade’ the consumer. Brands have been using social media influencers to promote fad diets, teas, and gummies that have no real health benefits. We live in a capitalist society, so everything is bound to need to make a profit. It's harmful to young girls to see an influencer on their page promoting a weight loss tea that will give you a body “just like them.” Beauty flaws are constructed so that brands can sell their products to fix them. The concealer will hide your acne and a waist trainer will make you have an hourglass figure.

With my future career in advertising, I want to contribute to the wave of positivity surrounding body image that is beginning to start online. While the media has become more inclusive for different body types there is still a lot of work to be done. Not all content is equal, there are Instagram pages out there that encourage posts about body positivity and who try to normalize stretch marks, cellulite, and fat rolls. There are ways I can try to be inclusive in the advertising I will create, but my efforts can only go so far if I am not in charge of the campaign. Perhaps if I point out harmful imagery or show ways to be inclusive to my future co-workers, I can start to make a small dent in the larger issue. I chose to go into advertising because I wanted a career that would be creative and financially stainable. Sometimes the “creativity” in advertising campaigns is just to think of new ways to manipulate the consumer. But it just takes one person to start a change, maybe I can work towards shifting this negative usage of creativity into a positive effort to improve the industry.

Everyone wants to feel attractive whether you're a man or a woman or an identity as anything else. My reflection in the mirror should not be distorted because of the beauty standards society promotes. A career in advertising can give me a platform to change the harmful standards of beauty so less girls grow up with warped concepts of self. It seems like a colossal task, too big for one person to take on. But maybe if we all stand up to the societal constructs of beauty, we could create an inclusive environment for all people. I should look in the mirror and always see a pretty girl no matter who appears on my feed. Every girl deserves to feel beautiful just the way we are.

Word Count: 1831