

Ever-decreasing stars

The fluctuating weights of celebrities are constant tabloid newspaper fodder - but what does the battle for a finer figure say to their young, female fans?

What are thin celebrities saying to young girls?

Spice Girl, Mel C puts on weight and is criticised. Meanwhile her former band-mate, Geri Halliwell, loses loads, apparently on a diet of yoga and steamed fish and is praised. But both have eating disorders, so why are they treated so differently by the media?

Furthermore, just what are young girls to make of our ever-decreasing celebrities? And why are our role models getting thinner while obesity and eating disorders among children and young people are on the increase?

Says Della Hicks-Wilson, 15, of Mel C's media treatment: "I don't think she should be too upset about what the media has said, what do you expect? For her to go and put on weight when she's supposedly 'Sporty Spice', it's inevitable that the media would have something to say."

Gillian Antwi, 14 agrees: "It's only natural, she's in the limelight and she should be ready for it. But the press need to realise also that she's human. I think there's a lot of pressure on celebrities to look thin and have the perfect image."

Along with most of the Spice Girls, other stars who've had very public weight battles include singers, Kelly Price, Janet Jackson, and chat show host Oprah Winfrey. Like rapper Missy Elliott before her, when Kelly Price first entered the music business she bucked the trend that said you have to be skinny to make it in the music industry. But some years after Kelly made her proud to be big statements she re-emerged as slimmed down version of her former self.

Keshia Harvey, 13, says of dieting celebrities: "If it's obvious that they were unhappy when they were big and they're happy losing weight then, yeah, that's okay."

"But what's the point of saying you're happy to be big and then turning around and losing weight drastically? You obviously didn't believe a word of what you were saying all those years ago."

But not all publicly weight-obsessed celebrities get the thumbs down. Despite her roller-coasting weight and much-documented dieting, 14-year-old Sekai Makoni thinks Oprah Winfrey is a good role model.

Healthy

"I think she's quite good because she's got thin but she has got big again and that's kind of real. That's what happens in real life. She's not really thin now, she just looks her normal healthy weight and that's good."

Keshia meanwhile thinks there is a link between skinny celebs and increased eating disorders among young people because, "whether or not you're interested, there are people on the TV like models and presenters who are thin and you're like, 'I want to be that thin.'"

Celebrities who publicly lose weight and then make videos and books promoting their various diets, are helping to sustain the problem, Keshia believes. "I'm sure Vanessa Feltz has done programmes in the past about anorexia and dieting too much", says Keshia. "I don't see the point, because they should realise they're setting trends, it's good to have a healthy build but not to be stick thin."

But Della disagrees, arguing that the public's obsession with thinness has as much to do with ourselves as it does the media: "I think it's wrong to blame increasing eating disorders on celebrities and the media", Della contends.

"We're not that tolerant of seeing imperfect people on our televisions. I think we are looking for someone who's beautiful, who looks better than we do. If you saw people that looked like you on your television everyday, would you really want to watch it?"

However Sekai believes the more varied images available via the media, the less people will desire thinness: "If they [celebrities] were all that big then I'd still watch", she says.

"If they were all 'normal sized' then I don't think there wouldn't be that many people wanting to be skinny. People want to lose weight because they want to look like everyone else and if they see people in the media who aren't thin then they won't want to be."

Sekai agrees that the desire to be thin shouldn't be blamed on the stars, or models like Naomi Campbell, but thinks they are a reflection of a wider problem in society:

"You can't blame the celebrities themselves," says Sekai. "They haven't gone out and thought, 'right, I'm going to be anorexic.' It's the people who work in the media and only show pictures of skinny people who are influencing young people."

With so few "normal-sized" role models available to young people, one music star who gets praise for her failure to become a beanstalk is rapper Missy Elliott. "It's really good that she's in the media. She's big but she looks good and it shows people that it's all right to be big", said Sekai.

Della agrees: "By having rappers like her around who are larger than the average person it gives hopes to teenagers who are plump to see that you can be famous and be a singer like Kelly Price did when she first came out. "

But if Missy suddenly lost a substantial amount of weight would people's perceptions of her as a woman who's 'happy to be big' change? "That would just be saying that it's better to be thin", Sekai believes. "It would be better if she just stayed the size she is."

Pressured

For Gillian, any weight loss from Missy would be a matter for her. "If she wanted to be thin, as long as she was doing it for herself then that's fine. She shouldn't be pressured into staying fat, if she wants to be thin, she should be."

But while Missy may be an exception to the rule the smash-hit ITV programme Popstars, which spawned the group, Hear'Say provided young people with some insight into how the entertainment industry really prefers it's stars to look. For example, "Nasty" Nigel, the TV boss who had the ultimate say over who made the group, was very clear on how he wanted his young proteges to look.

"I thought it was interesting how Nigel commented that Kym (a Hear'say member) should lose weight," Keshia observes. "What he said was out of order. But it was good to see that it's not always the individual who wants to lose weight but the industry that forces them."

"They could have given some of the big people a chance," says Cindy Crome, 11. "It just wasn't fair not to have talented people just because they were big."

Perhaps in an attempt to redress the problem of skinny role models, toy manufacturer, Lego recently unveiled their latest product, a curvy doll designed as a rival to Barbie the skinny missy who's reigned supreme as the nation's favourite blonde for some 40 years now.

But the question remains, if Barbie and the new Lego Lady where to ever face each other at an audition for the latest pop group, who would win? This article was compiled by Keshia Harvey, 13, Della Hicks-Wilson, 15, Gillian Antwi, 14, Sekai Makoni, 14 and Cindy Crome, 11.

About the team

This article was produced by the Children's Express members quoted above. It was published as part of Teen Talk, the Children's Express page in [New Nation](#).

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