

ONE SIZE: THROUGH THE EATING DISORDERED LENS AND A DEPARTURE FROM  
DARKNESS

by

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## Introduction

As depicted by American cultural standards, the mass-produced perfect body used to exist only in high-budget advertisements, Hollywood productions, and glamorous photographs. The creation of mass media drastically altered distribution rates and content accessibility, redefining self-perception through millions of mediated images. Over the past 40 years, and especially since the start of the 21st century, idealized body images fill blog pages, pop-up ads, and particularly social media profiles. Constant exposure to hourglass figures, slender limbs, and flat stomachs can damage individuals beyond deflating their ego. It can even be deadly.

Media saturation can act as a causal factor in the development of eating disorders, which have often been classified as the deadliest psychiatric illness (Crisp, Derenne, Wykes). According to mainstream medical sources like *WebMD*, “anorexia is the most lethal psychiatric disorder, carrying a sixfold increased risk of death -- four times the death risk from major depression”(DeNoon). Peer-reviewed journals avoid making these definitive statements, but the common consensus remains that individuals with eating disorders have “significantly elevated mortality rates,” the highest occurring in those with anorexia nervosa (Arcelus et al). However, evidence suggests similar results in cases of bulimia and eating disorder not otherwise specified (EDNOS) (Arcelus et al, Crow et al). Eating disorders affect more and more individuals every year as the weighted mean of global prevalence jumped from 3.5% in 2006 to 7.8% in 2018, with the majority of cases occurring in American women (Galmiche). Furthermore, denial or refusal to report symptoms are often associated with the illness and it has been reported that “more than one half of all cases go undetected”(Prittis and Susman).

Climbing eating disorder rates mirror the development of modern media, which changed in the early to mid-2000s. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and countless other social media platforms prompt people to create idealized internet personas based primarily on image. For Gen Z members, social media has become an ingrained element of their socio-cultural reality, heavily impacting cognitive development. Now, diet culture and unrealistic body standards permeate feeds, perpetrated by individuals who have obtained “perfect” figures. Due to individually targeted algorithms, the more someone obsesses over body image, the more they will see potentially harmful content (Orlowski). Furthermore, models and movie stars are no longer the only public figures who visually reinforce idealized expectations. The way I see it, this enhances the idea that anyone can be popular on social media, and therefore (in a twisted application of logic), anyone can have a “perfect” body if they work hard enough.

Both media and literature have made efforts to dismantle the adverse effects of diet culture and accurately depict eating disorders, yet these narratives are rarely mainstream. Rather, the mainstream media often dismisses or misrepresents the severity of the illness and tends to imply that the disease only affects ultra-thin, gender normative, middle-to-upper class white women. Hollywood and the entertainment industry have historically glorified thin, caucasian women with money through cinematic portrayals of glamorous heroines. Often, the depiction doesn't revolve around their diet regime, however, either through spoken scripts or visual shots, their strict attention to diet is made apparent. Even harmless lines like “I don't like to eat in between meals,” from the female protagonist in *When Harry Met Sally*, can project problematic perceptions (Reiner).

Additionally, sometimes researchers that aim to shed light on the severity of self-starvation can unintentionally enhance class stereotypes as their results are typically derived

from treatment centers that cost an average of approximately \$1000 per day (Frisch et al). It is also important to consider that the narrative highlights anorexia nervosa and rarely addresses the consequential impacts of bulimia, EDNOS, and binge eating disorder (Fabello). These ingrained elements of American culture have serious implications, even if there is no malintent.

Still, researchers and influencers are striving to address the ramifications of body image concerns seriously. Journalists, doctors, artists, authors, and public figures have effectively depicted eating disorders' complex nature and deromanticized unhealthy relationships with food (Cohen, Fabello, Rakoš et al, Sastre, Osgood). Though, as social/mainstream media continues to highlight physical perfection, especially for those that are already vulnerable, more accurate representation is crucial. Therefore, I aim to shed light on the complexity of eating disorders and empower Gen Z Americans, predominantly womxn, in my creative thesis *One Size: Through the Eating Disordered Lens and a Departure from Darkness*. Through both surrealist and authentic images, I intend to photograph portraits that capture the veil of distortion and laborious clarity of recovery. Transcribed outtakes from interviews will accompany individual series, focusing on experiences beyond clinical encounters or diagnoses. Ideally, the project will fuel body confidence and acceptance for all, regardless of weight or identity. *One Size: Through the Eating Disordered Lens and a Departure from Darkness* will contribute to the deglorification of eating disorders in America through highlighting personal experiences and allowing those that struggle to express themselves authentically, without self-perceived or societal labels.

### Literature Review

The pressure on women to obtain physical perfection relies heavily on the traditional duality of gender expectations. Formally first defined by Aristotle, women play a passive role while men are “the effective and active” agents. Initially, the statement referred to the

reproductive process, implying that men possess more control due to sperm production.

However, the sentiment permeates cultural gender standards at large, implying that women are merely props to the advancement of men's power (Bordo). These roles extend sexual encounters and influence society's way of viewing women altogether. The Male Gaze theory outlines the role of gender duality in the literal act of looking. Men are the active viewers while women simply exist to be looked upon (Mulvey). Laura Mulvey created the theory in her essay "Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema," analyzing traditional Hollywood cinema to reflect larger cultural complications. Essentially, the woman "holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire" while "the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification"(Mulvey 62, 63). This concept illuminates the societal pressure on women to appear attractive, but not necessarily do anything beyond standing as an object of sexual significance.

Deep-rooted belief systems have historically contributed to women acting "as the bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning"(Mulvey, 58). Bordo examines how the body has long defined a woman's societal significance due to multiple narratives ingrained into our socio-cultural reality. She states:

For if, whatever the specific historical context of the duality, the body is the negative term, and if woman is the body, then women are that negativity, whatever it may be: distraction from knowledge, seduction away from God, capitulation to sexual desire, violence or aggression, failure of will, even death. (Bordo, xlv-xlv)

Not only must a woman look good, but if a man can't control his desire, the woman is to blame. Evident in various films, both past, and present, the femme fatale trope amplifies the perceived dangerous and untrustworthy nature of a woman who is *too sexy*. The classic narrative often features a woman who aims specifically to seduce, and ultimately kill, a well-intended male

protagonist. Historically, the trope occurred overtly in films like *Dead Reckoning*, where Humphrey Bogart's character falls victim to the tactics of a mysterious nightclub singer with a twisted past. The femme fatale continues to appear in popular culture today, one example being Rosamund Pike in *Gone Girl*.

Evidently, women who accentuate their sexuality can rarely be victims in the public eye. Time and again, a rapist claims he was granted consent because the woman was "asking for it." The paradoxical pressure on women to both appear attractive and define their morality through physical expression perpetuates internal conflict and shame. Bordo examines how "this guilt festers into unease with [...] femaleness, shame over [female] bodies, and self-loathing" and may result in "anorexia nervosa, which often manifests itself after an episode of sexual abuse or humiliation." Thus the development of anorexia as outlined by Bordo "can be seen as at least in part a defense against the 'femaleness' of the body and a punishment of its desires" (Bordo, xlviii)..

Recent studies continue to analyze this correlation, attempting to determine the extent to which self-objectification contributes to eating disorders. In 2005, Calogero et al conducted the first empirical study on the relationship between the two, examining media as a causal factor in self-objectification. With self-reported data from 209 women upon their admission to treatment centers, they identified a link between self-objectification and a "drive for thinness." Internalized appearance ideals as depicted by the media contributed to the process, whereas informative media did not. Therefore, Calogero et al concluded that both treatment and prevention plans should more formally consider the role of self-objectification and media literacy in eating disorder development (Calogero et al). Another study conducted in 2005 provided more evidence to support this claim, finding that young women reacted less negatively to "thin-and-beautiful"

images if they had lower levels of self-internalization and read informative media literacy before viewing the images (Yamamiya et al). In 2018, researchers examined women's rates of self-objectification specifically in relation to Instagram engagement. Through surveying over 500 college-aged women, the study found that generally, "increased Instagram usage was shown to be associated with greater internalization of cultural standards of beauty"(Feltman, 26). Feltman considered feminism a mediating factor, finding those with stronger feminist opinions less likely to be negatively affected by appearance ideal media.

The studies outlined above provide evidence to support Bordo's claim that internalized gender roles can lead to body dissatisfaction and potentially, clinical eating disorders. When we consider media as contributing to the process, the historic practice of shaming women's bodies becomes more than a scholarly discussion. If media is in fact increasing self-objectification, further reassessing the contemporary media landscape as it pertains to feminine ideals remains crucial. Especially as media consumption plays a significant role in shaping beliefs for younger generations, there needs to be more media highlighting healthy methods for women to conceptualize their bodies.

Body concerns within the LGBTQ community require a deeper analysis of traditional gender theory. For example, in homosexual relationships, the Male Gaze no longer determines the sexual interaction between an active male and passive female. Oftentimes, stereotypes lead people to believe that one partner represents the masculine entity while the other must be predominantly feminine. This school of thought contributes to unsupported generalizations that ultimately discredit the experiences of LGBTQ individuals. In terms of body dissatisfaction, one may assume that a lesbian woman would be less concerned with her appearance as she is not

influenced by male desire. Past studies supported this claim, finding a discrepancy that could be attributed to a rejection of heteronormative appearance standards. However, more recent studies demonstrate that body dissatisfaction occurs at approximately the same rate for all women, regardless of sexual orientation (Huxley). This may suggest that the pressure of socio-cultural expectations continues to intensify, thus affecting even those who dismiss the hegemony.

Beyond sexual orientation, body dissatisfaction discrepancies exist between gender identities. Research on transgender individuals has gained traction over the past ten years, revealing the complexities of self-perceived physicalities within these communities. The debate over proper terminology continues to be an intricate part of the discussion, however, transgender individuals are generally defined as “feel[ing] that the way they think about themselves does not match their sexual anatomy”(Bradley). Assuming that all transgender people desire to represent themselves as either masculine or feminine can result in misconceptions about the fluidity of gender identity and performance. As author Bruce Flemming states in an analysis of trans vocabulary:

Transgender advocates make much of the fact that people clearly do acquire signalers for gender: we learn to be [masculine] or [feminine] based on what we want to project. But the conclusion that is typically drawn is not justified. The usual conclusion of advocates to the undeniable fact that I can decide how [masculine] to be is that gender has no basis other than the act of construction. (Flemming).

If we consider physical appearance and performance a part of this construction, body image plays a significant role in gender identity formation. Additionally, due to the disconnect between their biological sex and gender identity, “almost by definition, trans people feel dysphoria about their bodies”(Witcomb et al). Therefore, one could hypothesize that trans



individuals feel more subject to body image pressure than their cisgender peers. While the topic still lacks sufficient research, empirical data exists to support this claim.

In 2015, a study measured body dissatisfaction and eating-related psychopathology in transgender individuals through comparative analysis. Surveying 200 transgender people, 200 people with eating disorders, and 200 control participants, they found transgender individuals reported the highest body dissatisfaction. While cis women tend to have more body image concerns than cis men, the results demonstrated the opposite in trans groups. Transgender men reported higher body dissatisfaction than transgender women, however, both cis and transgender women still reported the highest drive for thinness (Witcomb et al). These results not only demonstrate the prevalence of body image issues within transgender communities, but they also illuminate differences between transgender men and women. The study suggests that more research is needed on eating concerns within transgender communities and I believe inclusive media representation is a crucial first step.

Beyond critical gender/sexual theory, socio-economic class and race remain predominantly left out of the discussion on disordered eating. While studies have shown similar body dissatisfaction rates across cultural and racial barriers, the popularized depiction of diet concerns continues to be thin, wealthy, white women (Wykes and Gunter). This could be due to the fact that researchers typically derive their results from treatment centers that cost an average of approximately \$1000 per day (Frisch et al). Discrepancies in socioeconomic class still lack sufficient evidence to be empirically proven, but studies suggest that bulimia nervosa may be more common among low-income populations. Additionally, "eating disorders are prevalent across racial and ethnic backgrounds, with the possible exception of anorexia nervosa, which is more commonly diagnosed in white people" (Fabello, Hudson et al). Failing to represent the

diverse number of people affected by eating disorders not only perpetuates stereotypes it can also prevent people from seeking help.

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, researchers began more thoroughly examining the effects of societal body standards as depicted by the mass media. In the 1950s, curves and a relatively full figure represented the ideal female form, personified by Hollywood stars like Marilyn Monroe. Then society started to change. The sixties spread fervent social movements, inspiring women to adopt feminist beliefs and reject objectification. As bras burned in the streets, the boyish figure of models like Twiggy came to embody a new icon. While citing the rise in feminism as a contributing factor to thin ideals creates considerable controversy, scholars have cited the phenomenon as changing Western beauty standards (Derenne). Furthermore, from this point on, women in the media became increasingly thin. In 1980, the average fashion model was 8% thinner than the average woman. By 2006, this number rose to 23% (Derenne). The heroin chic phenomenon of the '90s glamorized extreme, arguably sickly portrayals of skinniness. Voluptuous stars such as Pamela Anderson countered the stick-figure glamorization, with big breasts and wide butts, but these women still flaunted a tiny waist. These images implied that some weight was okay, though only in the right places. As television programs and tabloid publications grew, the ideal-figure became more unattainable and harder to ignore.

Evidently, a rise in body dissatisfaction among the general US population mirrors the development of thin-ideals and mass media production. At the turn of the century, various researchers found a significant increase in the percentage of individuals who reported being unhappy with their bodies. In the '70s and '80s, Psychology Today surveyed American men and women aged 18-70 on their body image perceptions. A decade later, researchers reassessed the

questionnaire and used a wider audience nationwide, focusing only on women due to discrepancies in the original results. The results demonstrated a drastic increase in negative self-perceptions, climbing from 30% of women reporting body dissatisfaction in 1985 to 48% by 1993 (Wykes, Cash). Additionally, the beauty industry isn't the only source of potentially damaging content distribution. In fact, even media that's generally considered harmless can have negative ramifications. A study conducted in 2000 evaluated the prevalence of disordered eating symptomatology in adolescents who are exposed to thin-ideal, fat-character, and sports media. As previous evidence suggests, the study found thin-ideal media correlated with a drive for thinness, especially in older females (9th to 10th grade). However, fat-characters on television affected the widest range of adolescents, signaling bulimic behavior in both younger boys and girls. This example demonstrates the complex relationship between media and body image, suggesting that the type of content is less important than overall exposure (Hargreaves and Tiggemann).

The media landscape radically changed upon the introduction of mass social networking platforms. Once Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter became an integral part of media distribution, consumers turned into content creators. This shift introduced a new category of public figures, often referred to as "influencers." From my own experience, I remember the saturation of model-types posing in bikinis on luxurious vacations, often sharing diet tips or workout routines so that the rest of us could strive towards perfection. Some accounts faded while others became an international phenomenon. For example, the young influencer Alexis Ren began gaining mass internet attention at the age of 15 after she posted a bikini picture on Tumblr. Between modelling and media popularity, she was able to move out of her parent's home and spent the next few years travelling with her then influencer boyfriend Jay Alvarez. Four years later in 2016, she'd

acquired 7 million followers on Instagram. Today, she has 14 million. In an article on her idolized status, *The Cut* describes Alexis' waist as "so small in circumference it appears to defy the laws of physics"(Jones). In the same article, she later refers to her posts as "all innocent and fun." While one can't assume that Alexis or any other influencer pursued their position with malice intent, the rhetoric dismisses the potentially detrimental ramifications of the content. Especially when the target audience consists primarily of young girls.

The connection between viewing social superstars and developing body issues seems obvious. One could suggest, as many have, that vulnerable populations should simply avoid this content. However, images of thin young women are not the only problem. Researchers have identified a strong correlation between eating concerns and media use in Americans aged 19-32, regardless of volume or frequency but associated with general use. The study surveyed nearly 2000 individuals, measuring their responses based on eating disorder screening questionnaires and overall time spent on various social platforms including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. They found some discrepancies in the prevalence of eating concerns between gender and race identity, with white women scoring the highest, though more social media use directly correlated with higher reports of eating concerns in all groups (Sidani et al). This data suggests that rates of body dissatisfaction may have less to do with feminist beliefs or self-objection, as outlined earlier, and may be more dependent on shifts in our sociocultural reality.

As is the case with most mental illnesses, it is difficult to define an independent cause in the development of eating disorders. Pinpointing the media as a primary source of eating concerns can dismiss the many factors at play in clinical cases. In an empirical study, Levine and Muren outline why people find the focus on media problematic:

A growing number of parents, biopsychiatric researchers, clinicians, and cynical adolescents find proclamations about media as a cause of any disorder to be an irritating distraction. Their contention is, in effect: 'Of course, we know now that eating disorders, like mood disorders and schizophrenia, are severe, self-sustaining psychiatric illnesses with a genetic and biochemical basis. So, of course, no scientist seriously thinks that mass media and the escapades of actors, models, and celebrities have anything to do with causing them. (Levine and Muren)

Therefore, the researchers attempted to refine the classification of media as a causal factor in eating disorders and respond to critical flaws in general assumptions. For example, how can we explain the high rate of media use compared to the relatively low prevalence of clinical eating disorders? To assess the critique, they examined media use among adolescent girls, who account for the highest risk group. They found that the assumed percentage of users combined with estimations of other risk factors, such as lived experience and influence from peers, resulted in a probability rate that matches the actual approximate prevalence of anorexia and bulimia in this demographic. They concluded that more research needs to be done to deem media an independent cause, though the negative implications are undeniable. Levine and Murrine illustrate that "In fact, mass media are one of many sociocultural sources for the normative prejudice that fat is 'horrible and ugly,' and that 'getting fatter' is a sign of at least 4 of the classic '7 deadly sins'"(Levine and Muren).

Still, media must be considered in the growing rates of global eating concerns. Mirroring the development of social media, the weighted global mean of eating disorders nearly doubled since 2006 (Galmiche). While debate exists over the cause of rising rates, many still consider the media a primary source of concern. In 1992, the medical scholar Crisp highlighted mass media

and communication as one of two major socio-cultural developments contributing to the relative contemporary prevalence of anorexia (Crisp). Others have simplified the argument by claiming "the influence of media messages does not necessarily cause the disorder but may be an important stepping stone" (Frank, 53). The media alone doesn't account for why people develop eating disorders and not everyone consuming media will experience disordered eating, which limits an empirical connection. Still, the mass body of research considers it a potential trigger for someone who's already vulnerable, so it is crucial to create media that counters the detrimental effects of mainstream narratives.

Various academics, doctors, and authors have written on body issues and eating disorders. From personal narratives to empirical research, the textual support on the destructive nature of self-starvation could fill a library. However, "the human brain processes images 60,000 times faster than text and 90 percent of information transmitted to the brain is visual" (Kosmyna et al). Particularly in terms of beauty standards, *seeing is believing*. People have not become more self-conscious because they read the ideal waist size measurements. Rather, the image itself has been pounded in their minds, continuously appearing before their eyes. Therefore, I will examine existing visual representations of disordered eating and attempts to promote body confidence and through my methods, contribute to effective approaches.

Body positivity movements started by organizations and individuals continue to gain traction in the media. In the early 2000s, companies began to counter traditional advertising techniques that tend to sexually objectify women. Dove launched one of the first large scale body positivity campaigns in 2004, using women of *all shapes and sizes* without airbrush editing in the company's Real Beauty initiative. This strategy became relatively popular, specifically for targeting middle class women. Aeropostals sister brand Aerie, which primarily promotes lingerie

and comfort-wear, started #AerieREAL in 2014. Similar to Dove, they used unedited photos of a relatively diverse range of women, sometimes featuring Olympic athletes rather than Hollywood stars (McKelle). While both companies made a step in the right direction, the campaigns still received backlash as they lacked racial diversity and most of the women remained quite thin. Still, highly profitable companies choosing to change demonstrates a shift in the societal standard of beauty. More inclusive imagery in advertising could be a crucial step in achieving real change, however, it is likely not enough.

The existing research on body positivity media remains relatively inconclusive, however, evidence suggests that the effects aren't entirely beneficial. A recent study evaluated the effect of Instagram's body positivity content (or posts tagged "#BoPo") on young women. The author found that viewing this content increased overall mood but also increased self-objectification (Cohen). As self-objectification correlates to developed eating disorders while overall mood is generally an interchangeable factor, this data could suggest that body positivity content may in fact cause more harm than good. Additionally, oftentimes the "#BoPo" content I've encountered tends to highlight a specific body type. While it is important to recognize those who've been historically excluded from societal beauty standards, failing to represent all sizes could create a divide between weight categories. Another study examined three-body positivity websites, concluding that body positivity, in this context, "more closely mirrors than challenges a neoliberal paradigm of bodily compliance"(Sastre). Again, societal pressure accounts for another root cause of body dissatisfaction and attempting to mirror external expectations can result in a range of negative self perceptions. More research is needed to fully determine whether or not "#BoPo" is actually counterproductive, yet based on the evidence thus far, it's not a solution.

So, if positive imagery purely focused on self-love and confidence won't work, then what will? Various studies recommend more media literacy as a means of prevention, but few define the specifics of this content. Melissa Fabello, a PhD in human sexuality studies whose work focuses on body politics and wellness, offers the most comprehensive and straightforward outline that I've encountered for better media representations of eating disorders. Fabello stresses the importance of "diversifying the protagonist" through deconstructing the white, wealthy, female stereotype. As demonstrated earlier in the literature review, a wide range of individuals struggle with eating disorders who are often left out of the common narrative. Recognizing the wide range of people who struggle with disordered eating is crucial to ending stigmas and providing inclusive care.

Fabello goes on to stress specific elements to avoid and include in portraying eating disorders. Often, media that aims to be informative by including extreme descriptions of the body or detailed dieting habits can result in material that may trigger those at risk. While these accounts could be eye-opening for the general public, they could cause someone to relapse. Furthermore, the popular focus on anorexia nervosa tends to romanticize the nature of the disease, glorifying the idea of extreme "purity" through control, while dismissing the severity of binge eating and bulimia as these forms can be viewed as *a lack of control*. Fabello suggests that the narrow representation reflects our cultural ideals, applauding self discipline and shaming the opposite. Therefore, we must shift our coverage of disordered eating at large in order to change socio-cultural perceptions. In terms of imagery, Fabello offers four specific guidelines that I will consider in making photographs:

- Don't focus on graphic images or physical descriptions of the body at its unhealthiest point.



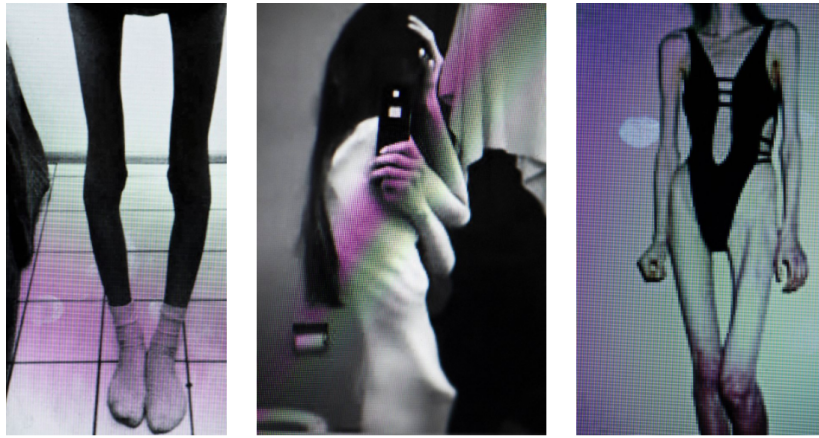
- Don't provide tips or play the numbers game.
- Watch out for the appearance ideal.
- Emphasize the seriousness of eating disorders without portraying them as hopeless.

Unfortunately, the majority of existing journalistic work contributes to, more than counters, the described problems in representation. Lauren Greenfield's photographic essay and documentary film *Thin* accounts for one of the most prominent examples in this realm. In 1997, Greenfield began documenting the lives of women who were residential patients at Renfrew Center, an eating disorder treatment facility in Coconut Creek, Florida, while on an assignment for Time. She later returned to continue her work and was given unrestricted access to the daily lives of the residents. *Thin* sheds light on the complexities of disordered eating, demonstrating that the illness is more than a desire to fit beauty standards (Greenfield). Especially in the late '90s, this perspective needed to be publicized. However, the photographs revolve around the clinical experience, featuring anorexic women and their direct relationship to food and weight. Characterized by muted colors and intense emotional expressions, the images are by no means glamorous. Although, today this work could be considered as enhancing stereotypes and potentially triggering regressive habits as it highlights arguably graphic images and behavioural tendencies.



**Fig. 1.** Patient photographs from Greenfield, Lauren. “Thin.” *Instituteartisit.com*, 1997.

In 2012, journalist Laia Abril released *Thinspiration*, a photographic documentation of pro-anorexia communities online. The term Thinspiration refers to images of skinny women and motivational phrases posted by individuals to heighten their own drive for thinness and inspire others. Entire sites became dedicated to promoting anorexia and choosing to view the disorder as a lifestyle rather than an illness. Many people within these communities personify the condition, referring to it as Ana, which an anonymous woman describes as a friend that she doesn’t want to lose. Another quote featured on Abril’s website summarizes this sentiment stating, “Christians believe in God, I believe in Ana.”



**Fig. 2.** Images from Abril, Laia. “Thinspiration.” *Laia Abril*, 2012.

*Thinspiration* reveals the dark paradoxical nature of dealing with a life threatening condition that one often doesn’t want to recover from (Abril). In fact, people support each other in getting even sicker. Recognizing this facet of the disorder is essential in treatment and the reason why truly treating anorexia can seem impossible. However, Abril’s photography and general portrayal of eating disorders blatantly contradict Fabello’s suggested guidelines. Instead,

*Thinspiration* almost epitomizes problematic representation. The photographs are extremely graphic and while they intend to capture the severity of real Thinspiration content, as it appears outside of Abril's documentation, they essentially duplicate Pro-Ana posts. Every photograph features skeletally thin women, overlaid with digital editing that intensifies the distorted darkness. Additionally, the written description as well as video interview at the end make anorexics seem hopelessly demented. The anonymous woman in the video states Thinspiration triggers her and encourages her to remain anorexic. So why would Abril indirectly promote this exact type of material?

I haven't had the opportunity to ask this question and there's a chance that I never will. However, I assume she only had good intentions. The images capture the disturbing extremes that people will go to in order to be thin, and for the average viewer, skeletal bodies are scary, not attractive. *Thinspiration* fails to explore **why** people with an eating disorder, specifically anorexia, would dedicate their lives to looking like this regardless of external opinions. Eating disorders operate beyond logical reasoning and those suffering can't necessarily recognize when their perceptions become distorted. As eating disorders are a mental illness, this is due to changes in brain chemistry. A growing body of research suggests that especially in cases of anorexia and bulimia, the disorder likely starts with a neurological predisposition. Cultural influences, such as the media, can increase the chances of developing the disease, however, clearly not everyone who engages with potentially toxic social content develops an eating disorder. Someone may be unhappy with their body, but these feelings will likely only progress to a clinical diagnosis if they are biologically at risk.

Research on the specifics of genetic factors remains relatively new as "while we know a general genetic code of our DNA, we do not know much about how genetic mechanisms exactly

drive psychiatric disorders" (Frank, 77). However, the common consensus is that eating disorders are highly heritable and rely on "relatively similar temperaments"(Weir). One individual may develop anorexia while their direct relative could develop bulimia, or never fully develop an eating disorder at all. Furthermore, differences in specific regions of the brain can help determine which form of the disorder someone may experience.

Dr. Guido Frank, a professor of psychiatry at the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus and leading researcher in the field, found significant variations in the neurological functioning through comparing MRI scans of healthy individuals and those with a disorder. He identified changes in the regions of the brain that regulate mood, behavior, fear response, and body perception. For example, the orbitofrontal cortex' gyrus rectus, which is part of the frontal lobe, plays an important role in mitigating food and is also important in general decision making. It is suggested that when this region of the brain is larger, one may be over stimulated by food and predisposed to food avoidance, correlating with anorexia. On the other hand, when this region is smaller it makes it harder to determine when the body is full, which can be followed by guilt and purging, thus linked to bulimia and binge eating disorder. Additionally, the studies demonstrate an altered reward system as regulated by dopamine in both bulimic and anorexic brains.

Contrary to the general belief that dopamine triggers happiness, the higher release rate in cases of anorexia "triggers anxiety rather than pleasure" in relation to food, while bulimic individuals experience the opposite effect (Weir). These chemical imbalances not only affect one's eating habits but also regulate mood, behavior, and self perception. The more someone limits their food intake, the more their brain deteriorates in response to malnutrition. Dr. Guido studied the right anterior insula which pertains to self-recognition and introspective awareness,

demonstrating that a false sense of self can be largely linked to neurological processing.

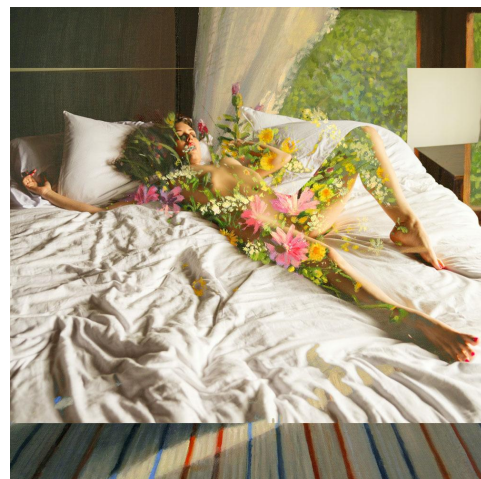
Therefore, “a fixed perception of being fat while severely underweight in anorexia nervosa could be thus related to right sided increase, abnormal anterior volume”(Frank, 62).

In my opinion, projects like *Thinspiration* dismiss the underlying biological causes of anorexia and imply that body disillusionment occurs on a more superficial level. While I am not in the position to contribute directly to the medical discussion, this information remains imperative as I aim to portray eating disorders as they pertain to a foundational shift in cognitive functioning. Since mental health operates on an illusive level that can't be overtly observed, applying an artistic approach will allow me to convey the gap between self-identity and reality. My work thus aims to intersect documentary photography and contemporary art.

As defined by Susan Sontag, “to take a photograph is to participate in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability” (Sontag, 15). In a purely documentary sense, photographs provide evidence, visual proof of an occurrence that can transcend time. The rise of photojournalism allowed people to view distant events through static, and often intimate, images. An image cannot define morals, though it can reinforce existing beliefs and thus inspire individuals to take action, evident in the social upheaval of the 1960s. It’s possible that the public would have remained rather passive if it weren’t for Vietnam's photographic record. Violent scenarios require an extra layer of vulnerability from the subject and violation performed by the photographer. Though, this sentiment pertains to all forms of the practice as “to photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed”(Sontag, 4). Therefore, photography in itself performs on a level of abstraction.

Identity, image, and presence can all be altered and defined through photographic means. While documentary photography may be thought of as real and true, all photographs distort the subject matter to some degree through “the very creation of a duplicate world, of a reality in the second degree, narrower but more dramatic than the one perceived by natural vision” (Sontag, 47). Contemporary artists often take abstraction a step further, creating imagery that may look nothing like it’s metaphoric counterparts. Furthermore, the digital world allows artists to completely transform their identity through self-controlled processes that can be immediately and continuously published on the internet. As I’ve focused primarily on how media can damage body image, demonstrating how it can be used to reclaim the body provides an alternative angle to consider in constructing my photographs.

Contemporary artist, Leah Schrager, utilizes performance, photography, and digital manipulation “in an institutional critique of the female body and its depiction online, image appropriation, and self-exposure”(Lakin). Many of the images found on her website consist of sexual selfies that have been contorted or “sensored” through editing. These images almost seem to tease the viewer by offering a glance at her often nude figure while simultaneously forcing the eye to look elsewhere. This technique offers a powerful opposition to society’s expectations, particularly in relation to the Male Gaze. Rather than renouncing sexuality, Schrager firmly places herself in the realm of desire and claims it as her own.



**Fig. 3.** Images from Schrager, Leah. “Cubist” and “Painted.” *Leah Schrager*, 2016 to 2017.

Unlike Schrager and various contemporaries who subvert viewership through their own physicality, my photographs depend on separate entities and individual identities. I cannot assume the exact emotions that accompany unique experiences of body dysmorphia and disordered eating. However, I believe that through abstraction, the subject may maintain more autonomy than they would through pure, untouched documentation. While images of war zones capture an unforgiving environment that most of us have never seen, images of mental illness can't fully capture the lived experience. Especially in terms of eating disorders, the primary visual focus tends to be a thin, sometimes malnourished, body. As their physical form alone can carry trauma, individuals who struggle with body dysmorphia should be allowed more control in the creation of their photographed image. At the very least, they should be allowed some distance between the war in their mind and their static representation. Therefore, I aim to contribute to the discussion by focusing on internal perception and thus subverting society's conception of body dysmorphia and eating disorders. Ideally, the photographs will demonstrate the deep complexity of mental illness and provide visual evidence that the disorder involves more than a desire to be thin.

### Methods

In order to accurately portray an individual's experience, I made the photographic process highly collaborative. Previously, I'd hoped to go to their homes and capture their emotions in an intimate space. However, due to the pandemic, this proved difficult. Therefore, I prioritized each individual's comfort level and utilized outdoor spaces when necessary. The contrast between

open and closed spaces thus offers more visual support on the dichotomy between hopelessness and recovery.

Additionally, due to the pandemic, I was unable to meet all my subjects in person. I found online participants through the anonymous discourse site reddit and conducted both the interview and photoshoot through Zoom. In order to maintain creative agency, I directed the shoot in terms of lighting and positioning. I believe this speaks on the digital nature of our current reality and thus provides insight on how we express body image within this space. Furthermore, the experience allowed individuals to remain in a private space, providing more comfort throughout the experience.

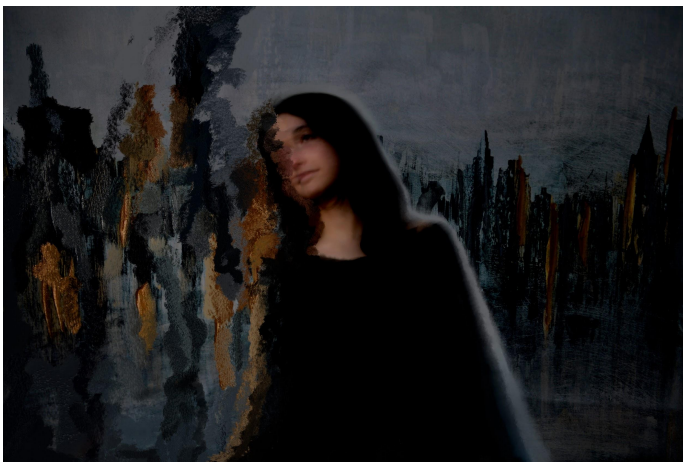
In total, I interviewed and photographed eight individuals, half digitally and the other half in person. I could not represent diversity to the extent that I originally intended, but I was able to capture a relatively sufficient range of experiences. One of my subjects identifies as non-binary, another is from Malaysia, and some represent socioeconomic disadvantages. Additionally, one participant is in her 60s, which provides insight into generational differences. I met with all of these individuals at least twice to build trust and kept in close contact throughout the process. Before taking the photographs, I sent them a model release form outlining my rights to use the images. Some of the participants preferred to remain anonymous or not use their full name.

For the interviews, I focused on lived experience and the causal elements that perpetuated their disorder. I tried to avoid discussing specific physicalities such as weight and instead dive deeper into social and emotional impacts. As these experiences brought up trauma, I emphasized their safety before starting the interview and all subjects had received some form of external help. After discussing their disordered eating, I pivoted to recovery. Most participants had been in recovery for over a year, but a few were still coming to terms with their disorder. In both



cases, I asked what inspired them to recovery and how they managed the implications involved in this process. The majority said it had been a hard, constant process, but one that significantly changed their lives for the better.

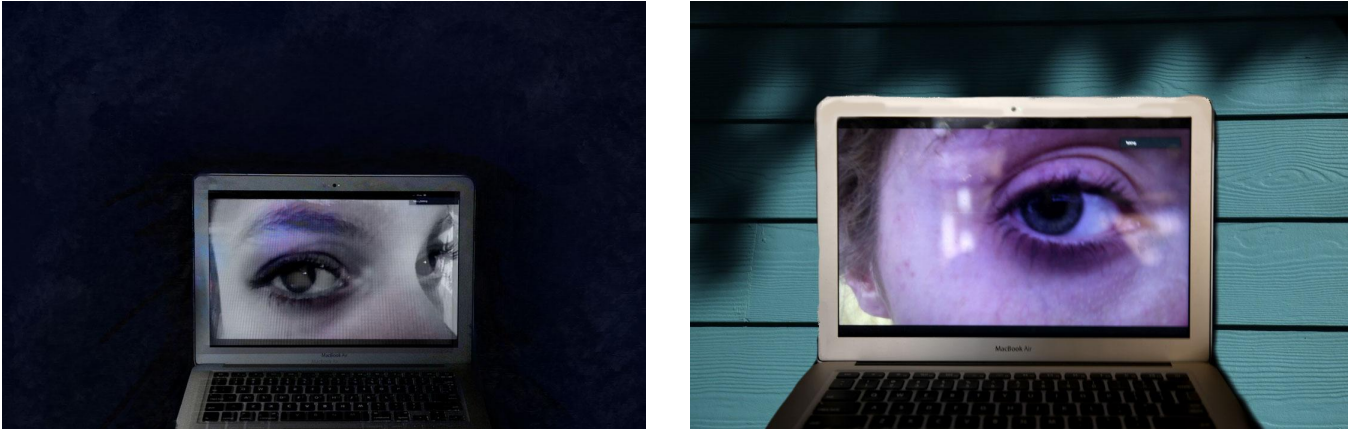
To highlight hope and prioritize their health, I tried to photograph the individuals as they felt confident. In order to achieve capturing their return to life beyond their illness, I conducted the interview before the photoshoot and allowed a generous amount of time in between. I didn't want them to be focused on trauma during the shoot as I wanted to capture their true selves, not their disordered identities. Therefore, the authentic photographs consist of more traditional portraiture or apply a colorful aesthetic. Including digital art allowed me to take the dark imagery into my own hands instead of forcing it onto the subject. I manipulated these images to depict an eating disorder's consuming nature. Below, I've attached two examples from an in person shoot.



**Fig. 1.** Sample images from Pykkonen, Kaylie. “Wildfire” and “After the Flames.” *One Size*, 2021.

For the Zoom photoshoots, I'm applying more editing techniques as cyberspace remains photographically limited. Therefore, I will use simple images in a documentary sense and add

my own use of aesthetic contrast through color. Beyond color and editing technique, I'll include certain objects to represent growth, juxtaposing this experience by using mirrors or distortions within the constrained space to portray suffering.



**Fig. 2.** Sample images from: Pykkonen, Kaylie. “Role Model” and “Insight.” *One Size*, 2021.

Some of the shots that I'd intended to represent darkness ended up being aesthetically much lighter, so I worked to alter the symbolism through editing and subverted some of my own expectations. Above are two examples where I used the same creative direction, but it resulted in a dichotomy. The interviews thus informed my editing process, allowing me to make stylistic choices that correspond with an individual's lived experience.

Ideally, I wanted to print the images and display them in a gallery setting, with the size and placement of each depending on symbolic portrayal. Although as Covid postpones the possibility of this presentation, I am creating an open-source website called [onesizeproject.com](https://onesizeproject.com). The website will include my abstract, references, methods and, of course, highlight the images and interviews. This will also help me attempt to publish the project in the future as I aim to create a book eventually. Additionally, I will highlight resources for those who may be

struggling and promote mental health awareness through my site. While I believe an in-person event would be effective, this portrayal could prove more representative of my methods and intentions.

### Findings and Discussion

In conducting the creative section of this project, I found that people who've experienced an eating disorder find the current media representation of the illness problematic. The sample size doesn't offer conclusive results as I had eight subjects, though all of the interviews shared striking similarities suggesting a common consensus. In my initial meeting with participants, I prioritized consent and allowed time for any questions the individual had before they agreed to move forward. The majority started by asking why I chose to do this project and what my overall intentions were. I told them that eating disorders have had a personal impact on my life and after looking at the current media representation, I found it problematic. This general statement resonated with each of my participants as they expressed their own disapproval of the representation, stating that the coverage they'd seen on anorexia focused on extremities and shock value. Not only can this be triggering, yet it also perpetuates the narrative that someone "isn't sick enough" to seek help until they appear skeletal. One participant even mentioned this exact effect in her interview, explaining that her mom had expected her to "look scary" due to the images she'd seen, which she felt indirectly invalidated her need for treatment at the time. Another participant noted that she used to search the internet for "thinspiration," mostly through social sites like Tumblr, and one participant even pointed to these sites as a root cause of her disorder.

To ensure holistic and accurate reporting, I met with Dr. Sue Bennett who specializes in eating disorders and has worked in the field for over 16 years. Bennett expanded on the various factors that can cause an eating disorder, both biological and environmental. Most individuals are predisposed, which is important to note in the media analysis, and there are similarities in the personality traits and genetic makeup of those affected. For example, eating disorders are often hereditary and tend to correlate with perfectionism or OCD symptomatology. Additionally, the disorder is often compared to addiction as it can be a maladaptive coping mechanism. However, the medical community cannot discern what triggers these factors to manifest into a full eating disorder. Social media could be the tipping point for some, but each case remains unique. In terms of specific demographics, eating disorders do not discriminate. Bennett emphasized the exigency for more accessible and affordable care, especially when it comes to in-patient treatment services.

The lack of diverse resources and representation became a recurring problem noted in my exploration of media narratives and made more apparent through the creative process. While international representation remained small within the scope of my project, I was able to include Bernadine Kwan from Malaysia. Kwan illuminated the societal pressure she felt to be small as an Asian woman, which became difficult due to a generally sedentary lifestyle and a high sodium diet. Similar to the United States, Kwan explained that food plays a prominent role in Malaysian culture and events always include a wide range of dishes. Most surprising, a women's size medium in Malaysia is comparable to a women's extra-small in the United States. Kwan's family openly spoke about her size and made condescending remarks when she started wearing a medium, highlighting a general disregard for serious disorders as she began bingeing. This

reflects the prevalence of deeply embedded body issues beyond American culture that remain underrepresented through a Western lens.

Within the United States, socioeconomic status and gender identity are rarely acknowledged within the mainstream depiction of eating disorders. The participant Juju, who identifies as non-binary, stated that childhood conflict in navigating their identity compounded body confidence problems, eventually resulting in a clinical eating disorder. Though, through finding their community in Burlesque and LGBTQ social circles, they were able to distance themselves from the disorder. In regards to the mainstream narrative around eating disorders, Juju expressed frustration towards the focus exclusively on dark outcomes and deadly cases rather than highlighting recovery. Additionally, Emily Lund, a participant from a disadvantaged socioeconomic background, didn't receive help for the trauma that perpetuated unhealthy eating habits until college. In Lund's case, being a victim of sexual abuse at a young age caused her to reject her developing female form. Later, receiving attention from older men as a "cute" and "small" girl only complicated her relationship with her body further, pulling her deeper into destructive habits.

Listening to this experience accounted for the most intense and emotional interview I conducted. Therefore, it is paramount that Lund now has access to professional help. In terms of academic findings, the manifestation of sexual trauma in an eating disorder corresponds with Bordo's theory on how women respond to abusive situations when they otherwise feel powerless. Less severe examples of patriarchal power were also proven to affect the eating habits of some subjects. For one participant, a comment made by the boys at her high school on how "they would only fuck her because of her flexibility" sparked deep body shame that destroyed her self-perception for years after. The eldest participant, now in her 60s, could pinpoint the exact

moment that started her eating disorder. At 16, her then-boyfriend had said “why don’t you just throw it up,” after they ate a big meal together. 50 years later, she still won’t go out to dinner.

Despite similar patterns in participant’s development of an eating disorder, their experiences remain unique and it is difficult to discern a primary causal factor. While the majority agreed that the media can have toxic effects on body image, few cited this as the source of their issues. For example, the eldest participant didn’t believe that her disorder had heightened as beauty standards became more prevalent, but she did enjoy seeing pictures of celebrities post-pregnancy when they looked “real.” Additionally, I received mixed responses on the positive effects of online support groups. Some found their involvement in these communities to be beneficial as it helped hold them accountable and feel less alienated. Others expressed little interest in eating disorder communities as it kept them tied to their disorder when they were ready to let go.

The contrasts in comfortability through online spaces became largely reflected in my methods. When I initially posted a participant inquiry on Reddit, I received more responses than expected. Out of those who initially expressed interest, only three followed through to fully participate. Communicating over Zoom creates a barrier between people as neither can witness the natural demeanor of the other. Although, I found that my two longest and most personal interviews occurred through the screen. It was almost as if the distance allowed us both space to breathe. These participants had recently sought therapeutic treatment for their disorder and both expressed that it helped them put the experience into words, which likely had an impact on their willingness to share. Still, it seemed that communicating this way allowed them to open up without fear or hesitation, like speaking into a physical void. On the contrary, I feel we had a valuable and intimate connection within this space, unparalleled by the in-person experiences.

After the official interview, we debriefed a bit and then both people thanked me and addressed me by my name. While it's a simple form of recognition, I rarely experience this kind of acknowledgment anymore. The other interviews ended on pleasant terms, but few exhibited this sort of gratitude.

The comfortable and trusting nature of some virtual participants may be reflective of people's desire to connect with others amidst the pandemic. As social distancing restrictions impose difficult barriers on new interactions, individuals may be more enthusiastic about online opportunities for deeper discourse. Additionally, I found most of the virtual participants through Reddit, an anonymous internet space for discussion. I believe the lack of personal identity within this space allows people to openly share their trauma without consequences in real-life relationships. The majority of participants expressed the shame they've felt when it comes to their disorder, so virtual interactions could help diminish the stigma and prompt transparency. Meeting through Zoom then provides proof of each other's true identities and intentions, though the physical barrier still cannot be crossed. In terms of body image issues, this may offer comfort as full appearances remain hidden.

Due to the integral body insecurities at the heart of eating disorders, photographing these subjects felt somewhat invasive at first. Even as I avoided depicting the body itself, I was afraid to capture close-ups and detail shots at risk of violating the individual's comfort or in some cases, their desire to remain anonymous. Resultantly, I focused on visual aesthetics in the first two shoots, aiming to represent the dichotomy between hope and hopelessness through color and lighting. After speaking with my photojournalism professor, Ross Taylor, about this dilemma, he made a comment that changed my approach and perspective; "Photography is a form of listening." Essentially, Taylor was illustrating the fact that even if someone feels insecure about

their appearance, as the photographer you can play to their strengths and make them feel beautiful. Thus, in the following shoots I was able to apply more confidence in my direction while adhering to the subject's contentment.

In photographing an individual's experience with an often shameful illness through the lens of light and recovery, I believe I succeeded in aiding their self-acceptance. Eating disorders are destructive diseases that manifest in consuming darkness. Therefore, I applied digital editing techniques to personify the disorder itself and hyperbolize its controlling form. Though, I ensured the subject's autonomy by maintaining their individuality and identity outside of the disorder. Most subjects said that their lives became centered around a fear of food that stripped them of who they were beyond that. Evidently, these individuals also believed separating themselves from the disorder to be paramount in their recovery. In this regard, the images reflect a sense of reclamation.

In addition to receiving a generally positive response from participants, some even posted the pictures on their personal accounts. As this can cause copyright issues, I made sure the model release form was signed before sharing the pictures with them. Though, I believe this provides further evidence that the experience aided these individuals in presenting their physical appearance with pride rather than shame. Additionally, one participant recently shared an eating disorder awareness post on Instagram, utilizing colorful and uplifting photographs of her own. While I can't take responsibility for this action, I hope that the process helped her use her voice and continue the dialogue around destigmatization. Through focusing on empowerment rather than trauma in both imagery and interviews, the project inverts expectations of standard media coverage on eating disorders.



Beyond conceptual and personal perspectives, medical statistics support my emphasis on recovery. When I asked Dr. Bennett for a conclusive statement, she highlighted the fact that about 60% of people will recover. Out of the remaining 40%, half will be in and out of treatment while the other half won't make it.

“I've seen many more people recover or manage rather than die from an eating disorder. But I've lost patients too, and it's absolutely heartbreaking. You feel terrible for these people and their families. Some parents have taken out mortgages on their house to pay for treatment and it's just heartbreaking. So I keep working for that 20%, we owe it to them. And recovery is possible.”- Sue Bennett

In conducting the creative section, I was incredibly nervous to send the wrong message and overstep my creative autonomy in editing. Though, my primary goal from the beginning was to represent these individuals in a beautiful but informative light, and I believe I succeeded in doing so. Even if the images don't meet fine art standards, the overall aesthetic provides a meaningful and unique take on the subject matter, which can best be observed at [onesizeproject.com](http://onesizeproject.com). Also, I learned something valuable about the creative visual documentation process. Susan Sontag was right when she said to photograph people is to violate them, though as Ross Taylor illuminated, it's also a form of listening. The responsibility to make an image of someone who struggles with their physical form weighed on me. Sometimes, it even kept me up at night.

I chose to do this project because I've watched the people I love, specifically my sister, suffer with an eating disorder. It took me a long time to comprehend my sister's battle with an illness that inadvertently objects survival. Though the more I learned, I developed a deep empathy for those trapped in the disease paradoxed by remorse that I hadn't done enough to truly

listen. For me, this project represents far more than an honor's project. It's a chance to amplify the voices that I've continuously heard, but can't fully understand. Throughout the project, I had to navigate the fine line between creative autonomy and just representation. Especially in the digital editing process, I was afraid to overstep and alter one's identity in a way they didn't intend. Although, I've realized that this fear plays an integral role in visual documentation. To make someone's image through your own lens is to take something from them. The photographic subject can't control the outcome. At the same time, it can be a gift. As a photographer, I was able to represent people in a light they may not see and mirror the darkness they know too well. The experience taught me that truly envisioning your creation before it's made is impossible. Though when you set out with the intention to create something truly meaningful, beauty finds itself.

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