Speaker 1: The Missouri State Journal, a weekly program, keeping you in touch with Missouri State University.

Nicki Donnelson: Runway models, social media influencers, pageant queens, celebrities, and even Barbie, support troubling body image ideals. They are almost unequivocally identified as beautiful, as evidenced by the money we spend and who we choose to idolize. Dr. Brooke Whisenhunt has studied media influences on body image for more than 20 years. As a professor of psychology at Missouri State University, she works alongside her colleague, Dr. Danae Hudson, leading a lab of graduate and undergraduate students to research this and related topics. Whisenhunt is my guest today on the Missouri State Journal. For her, this began as a research project of pageant contestants when she was an undergraduate college student herself.

Brooke Whisenhu...: When I was doing this research, I discovered that a large percentage of the women in our national pageants, Miss USA, Miss America pageant, when they used to report height and weight, were actually meeting the weight criteria for anorexia nervosa. And that was a real eye-opener for me, this idea that, I'm not saying everyone in a pageant has an eating disorder, but the ideal body image that was being portrayed for the average woman was one that was actually pathological in terms of their actual body size, an unhealthy ideal. And so, that really started me down this path for the last 25 years, looking at how has media really shaped how we think about how women should look.

Nicki Donnelson: Decades ago, Dr. Rick Gardner from the University of Colorado gathered historical and contemporary images of pageant contestants and Playboy centerfolds. He also collected height and weight data to examine body image ideals. Whisenhunt explains his findings.

Brooke Whisenhu...: And so, it was the idea that these are idealized images. How have they changed over time? We had had a lot of data from many decades to look at and discovered that both of these populations, their height had increased over time and their weight had decreased. So if you think about a BMI, that's a significant reduction in BMI if you're taller and thinner over time.

Nicki Donnelson: Whisenhunt co-authored a publication with former graduate student Francis Bozak that built upon this research. The findings gained national attention.

Brooke Whisenhu...: So we designed a study, and she did this as her master's thesis, to test whether or not actual Miss USA pageant contestants, trying to make this a little bit comparable to the Garner study, had become more muscular and also continued to become more thin over time. And those are the basic findings of that study that yes, those contestants over time... Now, we were looking actually at the winners. So if you're thinking about the one person who is supposed to embody the ideal female body image, that's the sample we looked at. And students rated over time that those images were both thinner and more muscular over time, suggesting to us that now the idea was not just thin, but it is also muscular.

Nicki Donnelson: In a related study, they found that women highly preferred muscular images over the ones that were thin only. This further confirmed the hypothesis that muscularity is now part of the ideal. And Whisenhunt points out that historically women have not been great at reminding themselves that these images aren't realistic.

Brooke Whisenhu...: I think it reads as a bit of a trap for women, the sense that muscular must be good, that we are now caring about fitness, for example. There's lots of information on fitness and wellness, and getting in shape, and working out. And unfortunately, while obviously exercise has great benefits for people, when you have an idealized image that is incredibly thin and muscular, I fear that the thing we have done is make this even more unattainable for the average person, that this is an impossible ideal for women. Being thin and muscular is actually almost an oxymoron. And so, I think that it makes it seem like it's healthier in an insidious way, but it's actually more pressure for women to achieve something even more unattainable.

Nicki Donnelson: That was Dr. Brooke Whisenhunt I'm Nicki Donnelson for the Missouri State Journal.

Speaker 1: For more information, contact the office of university communications at (417) 836-6397. The Missouri State Journal is available online at ksmu.org.