

# Personal Body Image and Media Portrayal of Ideal Bodies

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## Personal Body Image and Media Ideal Beauty

Today more than ever people of all ages are being increasingly exposed to various forms of media in their everyday lives, it is so pervasive that it is hard to not see or use some form of media daily. The rate at which technology and media are growing and becoming more available is incredible; people can now communicate instantly with anyone across the world. These tremendous leaps in technology have led to a large increase in socialization and globalization of ideas, cultures, and ideals that are portrayed and communicated primarily by various forms of media. This paper seeks to define body image and its involved processes. As well as examine the ideals of media and its effects on the body image of men and women, while trying to give some insight into how to minimize the consequences of body-focused media in the process. Body image can be defined according to the American Psychological Association as “the mental picture one forms of one’s own body as whole, including physical characteristics and one’s attitude toward these characteristics” (VandenBos, 2015, p.136). This mental picture and accompanying attitudes can be further broken down into concepts known as body and self-schemas, which are defined as mental structures that help summarize and organize perceptions about our bodies and self-relevant information, respectively (Heinzen & Goodfriend, 2021, p.43). When the term media is used it will be relating to all forms of various media that people use such as streaming services, social media platforms, news, television, and more. With the media being increasingly pervasive in our daily lives and its ideals being portrayed, as well as socialized through media it will certainly have consequences on our perceptions of ourselves and our personal values and ideals. Oxford dictionary defines socialization as, “the process by which someone, especially a child, learns to behave in a way that is acceptable in their society (n.d), which is done through sharing and mixing ideals and cultures.” What happens then, when the ideal that is being portrayed within media does not match our own body schemas and images? Tory Higgins suggested a theory known as self-discrepancy theory, that everyone has three “selves” our actual self, ideal self, and ought self and when these three selves don’t match, we experience negative emotional reactions (Heinzen & Goodfriend, 2021, p. 50).

## Media's Ideal Beauty Standards

Both men and women experience pressure and expectations about how to look and act within society. This has only been exacerbated by the growing prevalence of media in our everyday lives. This growing consumption of media has allowed for a culture of ideal attractiveness and body image to be portrayed around the world. Since the media has had access to and has been able to portray photography, it has consistently portrayed images of a thin-ideal body shape for women. One study's results indicated that messages emphasizing the importance of physical appearance and portraying body stereotypes are present in many children's videos (Herbozo et al., 2004). Physical beauty ideals being found within media which is intended for children is concerning as it can leave lasting impacts on their body images and ideal selves, especially during a time of important social development. This concerning trend of appearance-focused media has been shown to be associated with higher levels of restraint and concerns about eating, in both girls and boys between eight and eleven years old (De Coen et al., 2021). Media does not only have the ideal body for women but also for men. They often portray a muscular male body as ideal. These ideals result in pressure from the media for both men and women to conform to an ideal body. With the growing amount of media and access to it, we will continue to see more focus and promotion of ideal body images for both men and women, this growth will also allow for a faster and more pervasive globalization of the ideals. The research will need to continue expanding in this regard to keep up to potential consequences and changing body ideals.

## Perfect Body Ideals and Self-Discrepancy

### Self-Discrepancy

It is evident that media is not only pervasive but portrays certain values and ideals, in the case of the media portraying an ideal body it has some real implications for people's personal body image and can result in self-discrepancy. As discussed earlier, Higgins suggested that we have three simultaneous selves, and that self-discrepancy occurs when your three selves' experiences do not match. The first self is known as the actual self, it is the person we believe we are right now

including our good and bad qualities as well as qualities we think others see in us. The second self is known as an ideal self, the person that we hope to become, the best possible version of ourselves. Finally, the third self is known as the ought self, the person that we think other people expect from us as well as what our culture does and does not approve of (Heinzen & Goodfriend, 2021).

## Perfect Body Ideals

When we consistently experience and see portrayals of ideal body types in media, we begin to internalize it, seeing as it is what our culture seemingly finds attractive. When our own body does not match this “ideal” body, one can begin to experience self-discrepancy. There has been much research in recent years that examines ideal body images and self-discrepancy. One research article demonstrated, with a sample of 77 studies, that media exposure was associated with stronger reports of disordered eating and greater discrepancies between actual body size and ideal body size, as well as women’s perceptions of how others wanted them to look (Hefner et al., 2014). This research gives a great example of self-discrepancy due to the women’s ideal selves, actual selves, and ought selves all not matching, it also supports the idea that exposure to media images depicting ideal bodies is related to various body image concerns for women. It can be concluded from the presented research that some women do experience self-discrepancy because of the portrayal of media ideals and are then more likely to engage in disordered eating.

With regards to media’s portrayal of an ideal body it also has consequences for men. A study from 2008, indicated that pressure from media was associated with negative effects for each of the following variables body esteem, body satisfaction and, self-esteem (Barlett et al.). This same study by Barlett et al. indicated that there was a negative relationship between behavioural outcomes and pressure from mass media regarding exposure to muscular male images (2008). It can be concluded that some men also experience self-discrepancy due to exposure to media ideals and are more likely to have negative behavioural outcomes as a result. It should come as no surprise that an increasing number of studies are indicating relationships between the drive for muscularity and unrealistic ideal body goals and potentially harmful behavioural strategies such as steroid use and excessive weight training (Thornborrow et al., 2020). It is evident then that there are gender differences in not just media ideals of men’s and women’s bodies but also in how each gender responds and interrupts the potential self-discrepancy they could experience.

Women are confronted with the ideal thin body which can result in dangerous avoidance of eating or extreme diets, whereas men are confronted with the ideal muscular body that can result in dangerous behaviours such as steroid use or overworking their bodies. Why does some research then implicate that multiple exposure to appearance-focused Instagram profiles of real same-sex people led to greater body dissatisfaction among women, but not among men? An example of such work indicates that women exposed to images of attractive same-sex individuals show an increase in the extent to which they define themselves and their self-worth by their physical appearance, which could be an explanation (Casale et al., 2021). Other research confirmed the idea that lower self-concept clarity predicted a greater degree of internalization of social standards for women but not for men (Vartanian, 2009). While also indicating that for both women and men internalization predicts body image and dieting concerns (Vartanian, 2009). Self-concept can be defined as “one’s description and evaluation of oneself including psychological and physical characteristics” where clarity refers to the extent to which people with a clear self-concept know who they are, and do not have beliefs that conflict with one another (VandenBos, 2015, p. 953).

## How Can We Mitigate Effects of Body Ideals?

Fortunately, there are ways to mitigate the effects of body ideals in media and possibly also ways to change it from a negative interaction with self-concept and body image to a more positive one. One possible way to combat the negative side of what is portrayed in media would be more inclusive, some research suggests that including more diverse forms of body images and even sexual orientations could have a positive socialization effect on the included groups. One example of inclusion would be research that suggests increased exposure to lesbian, gay, and bisexual-oriented media could decrease uncommitted members of the LGB groups perceived differences between their actual selves and their ideal selves (Bond, 2014). With the potentially decreased perceived differences between actual and ideal selves it would result in some relief from self-discrepancy from clashing ideal and actual view of self and body image and with it hopefully increased well-being. Another great example of the inclusion of body images other than the media’s regularly occurring thin ideal would be a study that was done indicating that images of overweight women seem to have a positive effect on women’s body image (Holmstrom, 2004). This resulting positive effect on women’s body image from viewing images of larger women could

be explained by the social comparison theory, which is defined by how people evaluate their own opinions, values, and abilities by comparing themselves to others (Heinzen & Goodfriend, 2021). Within social comparison theory, there is also downward comparison where people compare themselves to people are perceived as being worse off (VandenBos, 2015). As a result, increase self-satisfaction which is what would be occurring when people view images of larger women. What might also be occurring when people view images of larger people rather than ideal bodies could be that their perceived ideal selves and actual selves are being perceived as less different based on media presentation and mere exposure to less ideal bodies.

Other ways that people can mitigate effects of experiencing ideal bodies on media could be with the use of critical media literacy and social medial literacy interventions. Such interventions would promote the critical appraisal of appearance ideals that are often concealed under the guise of health and wellness (Monks et al., 2020). Critical thinking interventions could also help in identifying social comparisons we do to unrealistic ideals seen in media, and the pressure media puts on us for these harmful comparisons. This research also goes on to indicate that we should continue to promote adaptive positive body image features that may assist in mitigating potential negative effects (Monks et al., 2020).

Some research that investigated outcomes which included body dissatisfaction, restrictive eating, and symptoms of eating disorders, the results indicated little evidence for media effects in males and that effects were minimal for most females (Ferguson, 2013), which contradicts earlier research by Barlett et al. whose results indicated that portrayals of ideal male bodies often resulted in dangerous health behaviours such as excessive physical activity. Some evidence also suggested that women with pre-existing body dissatisfaction may be primed by media ideals especially in experimental studies (Ferguson, 2013). This has implications that treatments and interventions for people with body dissatisfaction may be able to lower self-discrepancy and effects of media on women.

## Conclusion

### Limitations of Existing Research

Research on the topic of media depictions of ideal bodies and effects on individuals' body image and self-schemas has been explored more in recent years however there are some limitations that need to be addressed in this area of research. First more research needs to be done on the various body ideals and changing body ideals that are seen in modern times. There is still a thin body ideal portrayed by the media however increasingly there is more and more media ideals of women with large lips and buttocks. The evolving taste and ideals that are portrayed in the media may have differing effects on individuals' body image. Another limitation that should be addressed is participation, are the participants regularly, or rarely consuming media. These studies are often conducted in individualistic Western societies and as such more research needs to be applied to more collective societies so that a comparison can be made to infer how cultural and societal differences may impact body image.

### Future research

More research needs to be done into the diversity of body shapes, sizes, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and gender identities being portrayed in media. As discussed earlier the mere exposure and portrayal of lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) people in media had a positive effect on uncommitted members in those groups. As did women viewing unconventional ideals such as larger women in media. More research as stated earlier could be done in countries with different social climates and cultures to infer societal differences.

### Implications

Understanding the impact media ideals can have on body image and potential behaviour as a result is important to understand and learn how to alleviate negative self-views and feelings. Knowing that women with pre-existing body dissatisfaction are more likely to be primed by media ideals gives us ways to mitigate exposure. Understanding that critical media literacy and social

medial literacy interventions could benefit people who are exposed to media regularly and may mitigate the effects of media on body image and body dissatisfaction.

## Discussion

There is no doubt that media is pervasive in our modern daily lives and that media ideals regarding body image will likely always be around to some extent. It is evident that media ideals affect people's perceptions about their ideal body image and what they believe people want them to look like (ought self). It evidently affects women more than men in the regard that lower self-concept clarity predicted a greater degree of internalization of social standards for women than for men and that women with pre-existing body image problems were most likely to experience self-discrepancies. However, there are some possible silver linings to be found within the research, the idea that depicting diverse groups of people in media could decrease perceived differences in ideal and actual selves. There needs to be more study in this area regarding how we could turn media ideals into something of a more positive and inclusive note as opposed to a singular ideal body type, as it would be pretty strange if we all looked the same.

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