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**A Critical Analysis of Media Images Depicting the New Athletic Body Ideal and One
Woman's Experience with Them**

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Abstract

The ideal body type for women in the United States is morphing into one that not only requires a thin physique, but visible muscle definition and fitness. The athletic body type must still possess feminine qualities such as large breasts, a smaller buttocks, and soft curves. Advertisements, fitness magazines, and internet memes have created a new level of perfection. However, this new ideal body type is still computer generated, created from parts of multiple women, and largely unobtainable. Since its emergence, little research has critically assessed these images and their effects of women's self-evaluations. A feminist perspective was used to determine what these advertisements, photographs, and memes are really conveying to women. A sample size of 30 advertisements was used and 16 patterns were identified such as extremely fit and thin bodies, emphasis on impossible levels of societally defined beauty, and the sexualization of the female body, among other patterns. Auto-ethnographic findings indicated that these images lead to participant's internalization and idolization, which resulted in feelings of shame, guilt, embarrassment, excessive exercising, and dieting in pursuit of this impossible physique. Though this study focused on a single woman's experience with these images, larger implications for women everywhere are relevant and applicable. Those who inevitably internalize these images may travel down similar paths of psychological discomfort leading to physical injury in pursuit of an impossible ideal. Education provided by this study could deter such harms and prevent psychological and biological issues associated with striving for this new ideal body type.

Introduction

It is now a well-known and accepted fact that the media portrays a specific and nearly impossible depiction of the female body that is altered with programs, such as Photoshop, and

composed of multiple parts of multiple women, pieced together to create an ideal yet physically impossible female body (Jhally and Kilbourne 2010; Daniels 2009; Homan 2010; Homan, McHugh, Wells, Watson, and King 2011). This ideal is generally portrayed as being ultra-thin, tall, beautiful, and absent of curves with the exception of large breasts and a round but small buttock. Body fat and other qualities are often considered imperfections that create a very narrow definition that excludes and oppresses the majority of women (Jhally and Kilbourne 2010; Markula 1995). Much research has supported that the inevitable saturation of these unrealistic images leads to internalization—the desire to look exactly like the body type depicted—and self-comparison, contributing to the development of disordered eating behaviors, a fear of fat, severe dissatisfaction with oneself, negative affect, and distorted views and cognitions specific to the body, all despite the knowledge that these images are unnatural and unobtainable (Jhally and Kilbourne 2010; Thomsen 2002; Markula 1995; and Thomson, Bower, and Barnes 2004). Additionally, such images serve to distract women from larger social and feminist issues by framing their own body as a major issue in need of attention, time, energy and concern (Brabazon 2006).

In the last decade or so researchers have noted that a new ideal body type for women has emerged through the rising concern of obesity and the fitness movement (Markula 1995; Thomsen, Bower, and Barnes 2004; and Homan 2010). This new athletic-ideal- present in the growing popularity of health and fitness magazines, advertisements, and fitness propaganda-emphasizes extreme muscle definition and tone, especially in the core. It is often morphed with the thin-ideal, which includes dangerously low levels of body fat, yet the presence of large full breasts and a round, small buttock-, and the absence of facial and bodily imperfections (Homan 2010; Homan et al. 2012; Markula 1995; Markula 2001; and Thomsen 2002). The athletic-ideal

depicts the perfect woman as “firm but shapely, fit but sexy, strong but thin” (Markula 1995:424). While research has extensively investigated the impact of the thin-ideal and internalization on women and girls, very few studies have examined these new, ultra-fit images to uncover their underlying messages. Additionally, few studies have examined the impact of the internalization of the fit/athletic-ideal on women and girls (Homan 2010; Daniels 2009; and Thomsen, Bower, and Barnes 2004). Currently, only a small number of studies have investigated the impact of these images on individual women’s experiences, body image, and sense of self (Markula 1995).

The purpose of this research is descriptive, exploratory, and explanatory. It seeks to identify common fitness propaganda as identified through Google searches using key phrases that a woman seeking workout inspiration may use. It also aims to investigate the messages of these images using a feminist approach and describe the researcher’s experiences with these images. The questions leading this research include: What body specific patterns are present in these images? What other patterns or suggestions are present? How does the accompanying text (if any) relate to the image? What are the subliminal messages of the text (if any)? How does this image and text make the researcher, acting as the consumer, feel? What activities does the propaganda encourage and what are the potential outcomes of those activities? Thus, the research will aim to critique fitness images, identify patterns in both the images and text (if any), assess how the image and text (if any) relate to each other, and determine the consequences of such images based on one woman’s experience with them. Based on similar studies of the portrayal of women in the media, it was expected that the patterns of objectification, sexualization, exposure, use of lighting effects, and image and text or subject contradiction would be present in the majority of the images, resulting in feelings of worthlessness,

inadequacy, failure, and disempowerment for the researcher viewing the images. However, due to the exploratory nature of the study, the researcher attempted to view each image without expectation or prediction.

This topic is worth considering because of the increased prevalence of the fit-ideal and the fitness trend that has been accepted by young, Western nation women and girls. This has become evident in the increase of fitness magazines and propaganda, as well as observed by the researcher through everyday interactions. As more and more women and girls join the fitness movement and consume fitness propaganda, they begin to identify with and internalize the athletic-ideal, which is often intertwined with the thin-ideal, desiring to look exactly like the woman on the cover of *Shape* magazine, for example. If such an ideal does suggest similar narrow definitions of beauty that are largely impossible to obtain, this could lead to extreme exercise behaviors, negative affect, distorted cognitions pertaining to the body, disordered eating behaviors, and harmful outcomes for women and girls. In the effort to obtain a potentially impossible body type, the psyche and physical health of women and girls could be compromised. This research could serve as a gateway for additional studies by potentially identifying another risk factor for eating disordered and excessive exercise behaviors, by identifying the harmful themes in fitness propaganda, and through the descriptive, ethnographic analysis of the effect of them on one woman.

First, however, relevant literature pertaining to the fit-ideal, thin-ideal, and their effects on women and girls will be explored, followed by an explanation of the methods the procedures used for image critiques, results of the patterns identified, implications of those patterns, an account of the thoughts and behaviors that result from such images and messages according to the researchers experience, and research limitations and recommendations for further study.

Review of Relevant Literature

Homan (2010) investigated the relationship between athletic-ideal internalization and feelings of body dissatisfaction, dieting, and compulsive exercising. Homan (2010) hypothesized that a stronger internalization and endorsement would lead to increased body dissatisfaction, with a stronger adherence leading to increased dieting, negative affect, and the misuse of exercise as a means to lose significant weight.

Participants completed an initial compilation of questionnaires designed to measure degree of athletic-ideal internalization, degree of thin-idea internalization, amount of body dissatisfaction, dieting practices, and compulsive exercising behaviors. Demographics including age, weight, and height which were also gathered to calculate each participant's body mass index (BMI). After 7 months, participants completed the same questionnaires, excluding the demographic questionnaire.

Results compiled from the two trials indicate that a stronger adherence to the athletic-ideal leads to the misuse of exercise and negative affect associated with missing a session, thus supporting the first hypothesis. However, adherence to the thin-ideal was equally associated with compulsive exercising, suggesting that endorsement of either ideal could lead to compulsive exercising behaviors and negative affect. Homan (2010) found that internalizing the athletic-ideal did not lead to body dissatisfaction and dieting while internalizing the thin-ideal did. Homan (2010) notes, however, that often these two ideals are present in unison in the media. In conclusion, internalization of the athletic-ideal, which is not predictive of risk factors of eating disordered behaviors, may not be as damaging as internalization as the thin-ideal, which does predict the risk factors of dieting and body dissatisfaction (Homan 2010).

In a later study, Homan, along with McHugh, Wells, Watson, and King (2012), tested whether exposure to the ultra-fit ideal, exempt from the thin-ideal, would result in body dissatisfaction. The study also examined internalization and the cultural ideal as moderators. A review of the literature found mixed results regarding levels of body dissatisfaction or satisfaction among those viewing peers working out or athletes performing in a sport. Thus, the study's question focused on separating and isolating the fit-ideal and thin-ideal to determine how the fit-ideal alone effects body dissatisfaction (Homan et al. 2012).

Homan and colleagues (2012) hypothesized that images of athletic women would result in increased body dissatisfaction only if the athletes were very thin. It was also hypothesized that respondents who had internalized the fit-ideal would experience an increased degree of body dissatisfaction when viewing thin images compared to their peers who hadn't internalized the ideal. Additionally, it was hypothesized that, when viewing normal weight athletes, those who had internalized the athletic-ideal would experience a small increase in body dissatisfaction compared to those who had not internalize the ideal.

Quantitative results support the first hypothesis. Homan et al. (2012) found that images of athletes exempt from the thin-ideal did not produce an increase in body dissatisfaction and negative affect in participants when compared to the control group. Results do not support the second hypothesis. Instead, Homan and colleagues (2012) found that internalization of the thin-ideal was not a moderator for body dissatisfaction. This is contrary to past findings, which have found at least a moderate relationship. It was suggested that this discrepancy may be due to the different internalization scale used, which may have not measured thin-ideal internalization specifically enough (Homan, et.al, 2012). Likewise, results do not indicate that internalization of the athletic-ideal was a moderator. The researchers conclude that images of athletic women

exempt from the thin-ideal are not harmful to the cognitions and affect of women. Media images that depicted only the athletic woman could inspire women to make fitness, as opposed to thinness, their goal. However, internalization of either ideal could lead to harmful behaviors in pursuit of the specific look. More research into the effects of the athletic-ideal internalization is advised (Homan et al. 2012).

Markula (1995) used media analysis, ethnographic fieldwork in a university aerobics class, and interviews to reconstruct the cultural dialogue around the female body, aiming to highlight both public and private voices. Through an analysis of women's fitness and health magazines including *Health*, *Women's Sport and Fitness*, *Shape*, and *Self*; analysis of the environment of aerobics classes; and both formal and informal interviews with aerobicizers before and after classes, Markula (1995) found various contradictions within the new ideal female body. Women are now expected to be toned and slightly muscular in only certain parts of the body, yet also shapely, lean, and slightly curvy; "firm but shapely, fit but sexy, strong but thin" (Markula 1995:424). Recently, strength training has been added to the aerobics classes for greater weight loss and toning, included in an effort to sculpt the body to fit the athletic-ideal. Certain moves have been created to target certain parts of the body, labeled problems areas by magazines and in everyday female discourse. The muscle developed as a result of such specific moves has produced a predicament for women: too much muscle is seen as unfeminine while not enough is seen as fat and unattractive. Individual women report this new ideal creates an uncomfortable situation, one where they are both proud and ashamed of their muscle definition. Aerobicizers fear that they will become too muscular and thus undesirable to men. While they are able to identify the contradictions and absurd demands of society, strives continue to accomplish the ideal the public voices of the media create (Markula 1995).

Markula (1995) concludes that both negative and positive effects exist for women who participate in the aerobics world and encounter the fit-ideal. Aerobic classes, traditionally composed predominately of women, serve as a gathering place- one where women can focus on themselves, be physically active in a safe place, and offer an opportunity to meet with friends. However, Markula (1995) also finds that the pursuit of this impossible and uncomfortable ideal remains oppressive to women. Like the thin-ideal, it suggests that women must appear a certain way to be valued by men. Women thus continue to be positioned as inferior in images depicting the new fit-ideal.

Thomson, Bower, and Barnes (2004) conducted a qualitative study on the effects of viewing athletes in women's health, fitness, and sports magazines on adolescent volleyball player's self-concept. The focus of the research was on how images of athletes whose photographs speak more strongly of aesthetic beauty rather than physical ability relate to the participants construction of self, gender, and physical development. Female athletes struggle between the physical demands to be fitter and stronger for their sport and society's demands for small, toned, and very thin physiques. Thus, female athletes face contradictory messages that affect the self, with each mind-frame bringing up both pride and disappointment in the body (Thomson, Bower, and Barnes 2004).

Thomson, Bower, and Barnes (2004) used reception analysis of in-depth group interviews to determine how adolescent athletes construct the meaning of 25 images drawn from issues of *Fit*, *Shape*, *Sports Illustrated for Women*, *Oxygen*, *Women's Sports and Fitness*, *Ironman*, *Fitness*, and *Health* magazine. Photographs were passed around the group, and the girls offered their thoughts, opinions, and feelings pertaining to each image. Each session was recorded, transcribed, and coded using a grounded theory approach.

The authors (2004) found their results supported previous studies findings that girls often struggle to make sense of society's standards while still striving to become better athletes. The confusion grows when media images depict athletes who are glamorized and sexualized, degrading their status of an athlete. Additionally, results indicate that the athletes compare themselves to their peers by objectifying their bodies. While it was concluded by the sample of females that it is acceptable for the abdomen and arms to be muscular and larger, it is unacceptable for the thighs, height, and overall size of the body to be greater than that of their peers, and such often leads to negative evaluations. Even though these qualities make the volleyball players superior as athletes, such was less important than looking similar to their peers and the ideal, thin female body. Thus, it becomes evident that the sexualization and beautification of athletes, placed out of the athletic arena, along with the thin-ideal, is confusing and damaging to adolescent athletes who are often at an already increased risk of eating disordered and excessive exercise behaviors due to the demands of their sport.

In a similar study, Daniels (2009) examined the degree of self-objectification when adolescent girls and college women examined images of performance athletes, sexualized athletes, sexualized models, and non-sexualized models. Identifying that women and girls are often sexualized in the media, Daniels (2009) applied sociocultural theory that holds that culture largely influences the construction and maintenance of body image, beauty, and body shape, with media playing a key role in the process. Objectification theory, which holds that societies objectification of the female body creates a tendency for females themselves to view their own bodies from an outsiders perspective as an object, was also applied.

Daniels (2009) hypothesized that females viewing the non-sexualized, performance athletes would self-objectify to a lesser degree and describe their characteristics with more

physical, non-body terms. It was also hypothesized that participants viewing the sexualized images would self-objectify to a greater degree by using more beauty statements rather than physicality statements. Additionally, it was expected that athletes viewing athletes of a similar status would describe themselves using more physicality statements than state-specific or beauty statements compared to other athletes and non-athletes.

Participants in the study viewed a total of 5 photographs. After viewing 2 images, participants were asked to write about the photographs and their feelings in response to each of them. Participants were instructed to attach a fitting title to the 3 remaining photographs. Participants were then asked to complete a questionnaire which assessed demographic information, sport participation (if any), and state perceptions of self-objectification, where participants completed 20 “I am___” sentences pertaining to themselves and their identity in response to viewing the images. These statements were then coded by double-blind coders and checked by the researcher; grouped into categories of beauty statements and physical statements; and then labeled as positive, negative, or neutral/ambiguous statements.

Results of participant’s responses to non-sexualized, performance athletes both support and fail to support the hypotheses. Images of performance athletes were found to result in more physical self-descriptions, which tended to be positive. However, participants viewing these images also recorded beauty self-descriptions, which tended to be negative. After viewing the sexualized images, participants made more negative statements pertaining to their appearance and made more beauty self-descriptions compared to physical statements. The results thus confirm the second hypothesis proposed by Daniels (2009). Contrary to the third hypothesis, however, athletes displayed no difference in the number of beauty and physicality statements when viewing similar performance athletes than their non-athlete peers. Daniels (2009) suggests

that some athletes do not see themselves as athletes and thus would not differ from their non-athlete peers.

Based on these results, Daniels (2009) concludes that while images of performance athletes have the potential to empower women, the sexualization of such images demeans such potential. Thus, the recommendation is for more performance-focused images of women in the media as such was found to have positive effects on females' views and sense of self.

Similarly, Thomsen (2002) used a structural equation model to test whether reading women's health, fitness, fashion, and beauty magazines influences the fear of being fat, with the potentially direct or indirect effects of expected weight loss or weight gain (referred to as "hope") and the internalized belief that men expect women to be thin as mediating factors. Social comparison theory, which suggests that women consciously and subconsciously compare their appearance and body to that of models and actresses who are believed to embody the ideal female body, was used to inform the study.

Thomsen (2002) hypothesized that magazine reading may instill a sense of hope that readers can obtain the ideal depicted in its images by following the exercises and suggested tips. It is also suggested that the greater the level of hope, the greater the resilience in the reader against the pressures for thinness created by these images. Both of these possibilities are presented in Thomsen's (2002) model, which suggests a positive relationship between increased magazine reading and hope, a negative relationship between hope and expected weight gain, and an indirect link between magazine reading and increased body concerns.

Results were obtained via a questionnaire developed to collect perceptions of men's expectations of female's appearances, body shape concerns, amount of magazine reading, degree of hope, expected weight changes in five years, and height and weight for BMI calculations. All

scales were developed and tested in previous studies, and displayed both reliability and validity. Three key findings emerged as significant through the many overlapping relationships of these variables. First, the largest predictor of body shape concerns was women's belief that men expect women to be thin. Second, while beauty and fashion magazine reading was not linked to body shape concerns, the consumption of health and fitness magazines was directly linked to body shape concerns. Finally, results showed that hope played no role in any of the examined relationships, nor was it influenced by any of the factors examined. These results then suggest that the consumption of health and fitness magazine reading may, in fact, contribute to body shape concerns and lead to beliefs that men expect women to be thin, thus encouraging dieting, excessive exercising, and comparisons, and contributing to the cultural thin ideal. This finding correlates with findings from other studies that have found consumption of such material leads to increased body dissatisfaction (Thomsen 2002).

The mixed results of these various studies suggest a lack of understanding and a need for further investigation into the characteristics and effects of images depicting very fit and stereotypically-defined beautiful women. The current study, informed from previous studies, thus aimed to define the fit ideal by examining the patterns present in 30 images, unveil the messages it conveys to women, and assess the effects of such images via the researcher's emotional response to viewing the images. Results will then inform additional, generalizable studies and expand and clarify the limited and contradictory results obtained from the fore-mentioned studies.

Method

A sample of 30 images associated with fitness and women were obtained from six different google searches. Five images were selected from each search. Searches were crafted

based on the researchers own experiences with searching for workout, fitness, and weight loss inspiration and motivation. The phrases used for the searches included “workout inspiration,” “motivational fitness posters,” “fitness inspiration,” “fitspiration,” “tumbler fitness,” and “gym motivation women.” To clarify, “fitspiration” was an early term for the fitness movement and has a contradictory movement against images depicting ultra-fit female bodies. “Tumbler fitness” was intended to get at images from various accounts on Tumbler, a blogging and social networking site, recommended by a fellow researcher for having particularly aggressive and shocking images of overly-fit females with the intention of inspiration. Images were selected based on the researcher’s exposure and familiarity with popular images and quotes pertaining to fitness, or the shocking and extreme nature of the image.

Each image was placed in a spreadsheet and commented on by the researcher acting as a consumer. First, basic observations were made pertaining to the appearance of the female in the image- including the clothing, shape, muscular definition, degree of perceived beauty, environment, and the presence of the text, if any. Next, aspects of the image and text were critiqued based on feminist and sociological principles. Underlying yet pervasive patterns that may not be readily observed by the ordinary person were then observed and commented on. Such aspects and patterns included, among others: degree of sexualization, body position, association between the text and image, lighting or shading effects, degree of objectification, degree of submission, and the hidden suggestions of the text and/or image. Finally, the researcher responded with her own feelings and reactions to the images and text, if any, after a brief moment allowed to switch from the role of the researcher to the role of a consumer.

Procedure

A grounded theory approach was used to develop memos from the codes of patterns identified in each image (Hesse-Biber 2014). Descriptors were examined and grouped together based on similar meaning. Patterns were then formed, and the process continued until all descriptors were included within mutually exclusive categories. Each category was then measured against each photograph to see if it applied to the photograph. Tallies were placed beside each category every time it applied to the photograph to determine the prevalence of the pattern in the sample of 30 photographs. Tallies were totaled up and used to calculate the rate of occurrence, or percent, rounded to the nearest whole percent.

Results and Analysis

A total of 16 patterns were identified and conceptualized. The most prominent patterns were the presence of both the fit-ideal along with the thin-ideal in the images, as well as the beautification of fitness and the sexualization of women in the images. Each of these patterns appeared in 28 out of the 30 images, thus appearing 93% of the time. Images that fit the category of the presence of both the fit- and thin-ideal included visible muscle definition and tone, as well as extreme levels of leanness necessary to display such definition, and protruding bones, such as the ribs, pelvis, and/or other areas. The only reason the presence of both the fit- and thin-ideal did not appear in 100 percent of the images, as was expected, is that two of the images were categorized as only depicting the thin-ideal, defined as little to no muscle definition, but the presence of visible protruding bones.

Beautification of fitness was conceptualized as images where women were still perfect, sweat-free models, despite being involved in physical activity or being equated with working out. Women in these images were often wearing make-up, situationally inappropriate clothing

(such as a push-up bra or a formal dress), and even high heels and bikinis, as if reclaiming their femininity by embodying traditional stereotypes.

Images in which sexualization was present featured nearly or fully nude women- dressed in underwear and sports bras or bikinis- often exposing their breasts, buttocks, or posed in a very sexualized and seductive manor. Specifically, nine images, or 30%, featured women grabbing their buttock or breasts- pushing them up to increase the exposure- as well as women slightly pulling down the waistband of their bottoms (often underwear), lifting up their shirts to expose their abdomen, or tearing their shirt up to their breasts.

The next most pervasive pattern was the use of photographic effects to enhance the appearance of the images. Twenty-five images, or 83%, displayed obvious lighting effects, shading, positioning of the body, and/or color effects- such as turning the photo black and white- to accentuate the muscle definition and make the woman in the image appear more lean and narrow. The use of photographic enhancement thus makes the women appear thinner and fitter than she is in real life, creating an impossible standard.

Both categories of disproportionate physiques and the positioning of the women in powerful or confident poses were present in 20 of the images, or 67 %. Images that depicted disproportionate physiques typically showed women with extremely low levels of body fat- identified through their highly visible muscle definition- yet still had large, round breasts. Based on experience and knowledge of the effects of extreme levels of body fat, women's breasts typically all but disappear. The women who were disproportionate in body parts displayed much larger breasts than is biologically natural.

Interestingly enough, while 67% of the images displayed powerful or confident poses- conceptualized as images where women appeared confident, determined, strong, and driven- 16

of the images, or 53%, depicted women in submissive forms- defined as poses where women were looking down, looking away, or where the body was confined into a small area. Often, these two patterns appeared simultaneously, where women were posed in a confident stance, yet were looking down or hidden from the camera. Sometimes, their faces were not even shown, but instead hid under their hair or turned away from the camera. While the presence of powerful and confident poses has the potential to empower women, traditional views of femininity that encourage submission continue to be perpetuated through these images.

Another pervasive pattern was the objectification of women's bodies in fitness images, which appeared in 19 of the 30 images, or 63% of the time. Women were often identity-less-reduced to tight and defined abs, large breasts, hips, and a full buttock. Legs were typically cut out of the images, as well as faces and arms. Thus, these images reduced women to body parts- to objects of desire. Even when the images did not include objectification, they typically displayed aspects of sexualization or other negative qualities. Thirteen, twelve, and ten images depicted patterns of unnatural poses intended to display the body, revealed a contradiction between the texts message and image displayed, and featured text that elicited guilt or shame in the viewer to serve as a motivator, respectively. These patterns were less prominent, but were nonetheless important. In 13 images, or 43%, women were positioned in awkward or strange positions in order to best expose their body, as if placing themselves on display. While this category appears to be very similar to objectification, objectification can be considered more detrimental as it reduces the women's worth to one part of the body. The category of unnatural poses, however, includes the whole body being displayed.

Text was present in 24 of the images. Of those 24 images, 12, or 50%, featured text that did not match the image of the woman. In many cases, the text featured a message about fitness,

working out, or health, while the image was often a beautified, sexualized woman positioned in an exposed fashion or displayed for the viewer to examine. Thus, these images send very mixed messages to the viewer of what it means to be a fit female.

Finally, in 10 of the 24 images that contained text, or 42%, the text elicited guilt or shame, often pertaining to eating. For example, one image's text read "Your stomach shouldn't be a waste basket." Thus, the woman who enjoys the occasional pizza slice, brownie, or Chinese takeout is shamed for her indulgence. Messages like that may drive some to develop unhealthy thoughts and behaviors, such as rules and restrictions, pertaining to food.

Similarly, 6 images, or 25% of the 24 images containing text, were found to glorify physical or psychological harm in the messages of their text. In the images examined, bingeing and the compensatory behavior of excessive exercise was glorified, along with injury, obsession, and pain. Perhaps the most familiar saying is "no pain, no gain," which was present on two of the images examined. Pain is the body's natural response to injury, and is intended as a signal to stop before further injury occurs. To normalize pain is to normalize exercise to the point of injury. For the individuals who have internalized the fit-ideal, this can lead to long-term physical harm.

Conversely, 7 images, or 23%, actually conveyed messages of empowerment. These included texts that read, for example, "In this world there is no force equal to the strength of a determined woman." In six of these images, women were actually depicted working out, absent of objectification and sexualization. For example, the woman paired with the previous text was engaged in single-handed pushups and dressed in shorts and a non-revealing tank top. Unfortunately, such positive findings are minor compared to the 70% of images that featured a woman posed for effect or that conveyed negative and detrimental messages.

Simplification of obtaining the fit-ideal was present in 9 images, or 30% of the time. By creating the illusion that a well-defined body is easy to achieve, this sets viewers who internalize the ideal up for failure. The women depicted in these images spend every day and, indeed, every minute on their body in some form or another. They dedicate their whole lives to achieving and maintaining 6- or 8-pack abs. By simplifying the amount of dedication necessary through messages such as “An hour a day is only 4% of your day. Get it,” viewers who attempt to obtain the ideal embodied in these images will meet disappointment and failure. Such messages can be very detrimental to their body satisfaction and self-esteem if they fully ascribe to the fit-ideal.

Discussion

This study of a critical analysis of media images depicting the new athletic-ideal body type analyzed 30 images obtained from six different Google searches to find a total of 16 patterns. These patterns tell a story to the viewer of what constitutes the ideal women, what qualities a beautiful woman possess, what characteristics she should display, and defines what it means to be a fit woman. They tell of an imaginary, impossible woman; a contradiction of expectations that lead the viewer confused, just as Markula (1995) found amongst her informants. Every woman is expected to look like the new ideal- to have large breasts, small curves, and an attractive butt, yet also be very fit, highly defined, and very lean. The fit woman is hyper-sexualized, always working out in little clothing- often in her underwear and a sports bra. She does not sweat or get tired, but instead always has perfect hair and make-up. Her poses and the lighting she stands in only accentuate her perfection. She is obsessed with her body— always examining her tight abs, groping her breasts, and displaying herself for others to look at. She is dedicated to fitness, blind from pain or injury, and driven by obsession.

The fit woman is additionally conveyed as happy, something everyone wants to be, but this kind of happiness often eludes many. These messages convey promises that if one fulfills the fit-ideal level one will be happy, complete, and be able to do things that could not be done before. Looking like the fit woman means that one will always be confident as well, content with her flawlessness. The reality is, though, that someone who pushes her body to that point of the fit-ideal will always be discontent with some part of them. They will always see flaws somewhere, encouraged by the media's obsession with women's so-called problem areas. The women in these images look the way they do because of their inability to accept their perceived flaws. Thus, these images hold empty promises of happiness, confidence, and health. Ironically, the path to obtaining the fit-ideal is paved with discontentment, disdain for the body, and unhappiness with the self.

. The persistence of the patterns found in this study normalize the fit-ideal. It has become the new level of female perfection. The saturation of these images desensitizes the viewer from their shocking and biologically unnaturally aspects, and the ideal becomes accepted as obtainable for all women by other women and men (Jhally and Kilbourne 2010). As the fit-ideal becomes internalized by women, many vow to work until they obtain the same physique. However, such a physique is impossible for the general population. Not only do these images elicit negative emotions and reactions in women toward their own bodies and selves, thereby separating their self from their body, but they also encourage harmful behaviors, cognitions, and attitudes. The body becomes a project, as expressed by the participants in Markula's (1995) study of aerobicizers, an issue and a source of inadequacy that must be changed, and it is then targeted for abuse by the mind which has been conditioned by the media. Women who inevitably internalize the ideal will meet physical and psychological damage. After all,

according to these images “if it isn’t hurting, it isn’t working. No pain, no gain” and “it takes a certain amount of obsession to get fit.”

The researcher’s own experience with these images demonstrates a case-in-point. Throughout the critical analysis of the images, the researcher offered her own experiences with and reactions to the images. All of the images viewed elicited negative reactions, always directed toward her own body and self instead of the image. This finding of a resulting negative affect correlates with the findings of Homan (2010); Markula (1995); Thomson, Bower, and Barnes (2004); Daniels (2009); and Thomson (2002). This demonstrates how internalization leads to the acceptance of this physique as normal, desirable, and acceptable. Despite being a seasoned marathon runner and regular gym enthusiast—putting in 2.5 to 3 hours a day, six days a week—the images caused feelings of shame, disappointment, inadequacy, powerlessness, and a sense of hopelessness for ever being able to obtain the fit beauty ideal. After viewing the images, the researcher indeed felt inspired to work out, but it was inspiration through elicited feelings of guilt, shame, body-disdain, and a desire to punish the body for its inadequacy. None of the images, which they may have originally been intended to do, inspired empowerment and encouragement. Rather, these images left the researcher feeling fat, unattractive, undesirable, inferior, and not fit.

In addition to degrading women and eliciting feelings of inadequacy, powerlessness, and inferiority, these images also serve to distract women from larger issues, thereby serving the interests of patriarchy. Women become obsessed with fixing their own bodies, identified as problems, and are thus distracted from issues of inequality, injustice, and other feminist issues that concern women and their rights. By directing all attention and energy toward the self, little to none is left for standing up for equal pay, fighting for abortion rights, and addressing larger

social issues. The fit-ideal not only serves to remove women's sense of power, but also silences their political voices (Brabazon 2006).

Thus, in conclusion, the researcher offers that these images are not empowering or encouraging like they are marketed to be. Rather, like the thin-ideal, they elicit very negative feelings, reactions, and behaviors. The researcher herself has often pushed beyond the point of injury in pursuit of losing weight to obtain the leanness necessary to display her muscles. Likewise, the researcher, driven by the ideal, has and continues to limit her diet to very specific foods that are low in calories and fat, and are easily digested to facilitate body fat loss. She constantly monitors her consumption and counts calories, sticking to a strict limit. Since no other factors that may contribute to these behaviors are present or can be identified at this time, media images can be to blame for her obligatory exercise practices and specialized, restricted diet.

This research then becomes important for understanding that these images are not helpful or healthy like many consider them to be. Rather, they are as detrimental, if not more, as the thin-ideal alone. The need for education about these images and what it really means to be a fit and healthy woman is imperative because these images offer poor, narrow examples. It also calls to attention the need for continued advocacy and pressure directed toward the media to use real, untouched, and natural women. Creating an impossible dream woman only leads to the physical and psychological demise of women everywhere. It serves to silence women, keeping them at an inferior level to that of men (Brabazon 2006).

Limitations and Recommendations

This critical analysis of media images depicting ultra-fit female bodies and autoethnographic research on the effects of such images has many limitations. First, the selection of media images were chosen based on the researcher's previous exposure and often selected based on their shocking content. These images perhaps represent the worst and most harmful images of the new athletic-ideal for women and, thus, are not representative of all fitness-based images. Second, patterns were identified based on the researchers own standpoint, informed by her education and social background. Others may very well interpret such images quite differently and see other patterns missed by the researcher. Finally, the research highlights one individual woman's voice, meaning this study is not representative of the general population of females who engage in fitness and ingest media images. Others may demonstrate greater resilience to such images, may not be as sensitive to the suggestions of such images, or may not find the images as degrading, insulting, and harmful as the researcher.

In light of these observations, further study of these images and the impact they have on female's cognitions, body satisfaction, confidence, self-image, and behaviors in response to such images remains critically important. A random sample of "fitspiration" images should be obtained and administered to a sample of female athletes to build a more generalizable study. A comparison study could be administered where images are shown to both female athletes or females who engage in fitness and females who do not work-out to determine if the effects differ between the two groups. Quantitative and/or qualitative information of the effects of these images on females can be obtained via reaction surveys and/or through individual or group interviews. Additionally, other media images can be examined, such as fitness and health magazine covers, athletic wear advertisements, other gym propaganda, and even general advertising to see if this ideal is expanding beyond the fitness world. Future research on this

important topic can take many directions; this exploratory, explanatory, and descriptive study was just a beginning- a starting point for further research and investigation.

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Author's Biography

Ms. Kelsey Mischke spent most of her childhood on a country farm in Southwest Minnesota near Westbrook. Growing up, she was very active in the sports, theatre, music, and academic extracurricular activities. She graduated from Westbrook Walnut Grove High School in 2011, valedictorian of her class of 50 peers, and choose to attend Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa for one semester. Driven by her pleasant experiences on the Minnesota State University, Mankato campus and desire to pursue a degree in mortuary science, she choose to transfer the fall of her freshman year. Kelsey is currently a senior at Minnesota State University, Mankato, and is pursuing a Bachelor of Science degree in sociology with a double minor in psychology and gender women's studies. She is also completing a nonprofit leadership certificate to prepare her for work in the nonprofit sector. In her free time, she works at a group home, volunteers with the YWCA, participates with campus clubs, and enjoys training for half and full marathons. Ms. Mischke is currently pursuing research fellowship opportunities and plans to volunteer for the Peace Corps before attending graduate school for sociology. While her long term goals and plans are still being considered, she is sure that she loves academia, research, and activism, and could easily see herself as a university professor and lifelong activist.

Mentor's Biography

Dr. Amy Sullivan, Ph.D. (University of Illinois at Chicago, History) served as a Fixed Term Assistant Professor at MSU, Mankato in the 2013-14 academic year. Dr. Sullivan was previously the Director of the Self-Sufficiency Program and Lecturer in the Women's, Gender & Sexuality Studies Department at University of Wisconsin-La Crosse from 2002-2011. She has presented her scholarly work at local, national and international conferences. Her current book project is a feminist oral history that involves the Girl Scouts of Tulsa, Oklahoma and the long-term impact on the community after the murder of three girls at the council camp in 1977. Her areas of interest include children's history, women's history, and the social history of medicine. She is particularly interested in concepts of childhood and associated parenting trends, trauma & recovery history, and the role of memoir/personal narratives in women's lives.