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

Kelsey Mischke

Minnesota State University - Mankato

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

Kelsey Mischke
Dr. Amy Sullivan
The Realization Moment

- **Inspiration**: The power of observation and self-reflection.
- **Purpose**: Explore, describe, and explain the new athletic-ideal.
- **Leading Questions**:
  - What are the patterns present?
  - What characteristics define the fit-ideal?
  - What messages does the text convey?
  - What are the effects of these messages?
- **The importance of education and activism.**
The Fit-Ideal and the Thin-Ideal

Ultra-Thin

The Thin-Ideal

Tall

Beautiful

Perfect

Models

Dieting

Eating Disorder

Skinny

Anorexia Nervosa

White

Obsession

Desirable

Drive

Sexualized

Perfect

Harmful

Pain

Confident

Muscular

Dedicated

Toned

Happy

Ultra-Lean

Obsession

Strong

“Firm but shapely, fit but sexy, strong but thin.”

Toned

Beautiful

Strong

Defined
Methods

- Sample: 30 images obtained from 6 different Google searches:
  - “Workout Inspiration”
  - “Motivational Fitness Posters”
  - “Fitness Inspiration”
  - “Fitspiration”
  - “Tumbler Fitness”
  - “Gym Motivation Women”
Methods

- Sample: 30 images obtained from 6 different Google searches:
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  - “Fitspiration”
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  - “Gym Motivation Women”

- Critique and Reaction:
  - Observations on appearance
  - Identification of surface and subliminal messages using a feminist perspective and sociological principles
  - Reaction and elicited feelings

- Analyzed using a grounded theory approach.
Results

- 13 total conceptualized patterns:
Results

- 13 total conceptualized patterns:
  1. Presence of the fit- and thin-ideal - The depiction of a woman as ultra-thin and lean, as well as very defined and muscular.
    - Prevalence: 93% or 28 of the 30 images
Results

- 13 total conceptualized patterns:
  2. **Sexualization** - Fully or nearly nude women posed in a seductive or sexual manor.
    - Prevalence: 93% or 28 of the 30 images
Results

- 13 total conceptualized patterns:
  3. ** Beautification of Fitness** - The beautified images associated with working out, often depicting sweat-free women with perfect hair, make-up, and other qualities.
    - Prevalence: 93% or 28 of the 30 images
Results

- 13 total conceptualized patterns:
  4. **Photographic Enhancement** - The obvious usage of lighting effects, shading, and strategic placement to make women appear more narrow and defined.
    - Prevalence: 83% or 25 of the 30 images
Results

- 13 total conceptualized patterns:
  5. **Disproportionate Physiques** - Characterized primarily by unnaturally and inappropriately large breasts compared to the degree of body fat.
    - Prevalence: 67% or 20 of the 30 images
Results

- 13 total conceptualized patterns:
  - 6. Messages of Empowerment - Images where the woman appeared strong, determined, confident, and/or driven.
    - Prevalence: 67% or 20 of the 30 images
Results

- 13 total conceptualized patterns:
  - 7. **Submissive Poses** - Images where the woman was looking down or away from the camera, or posed so her face is not shown.
    - Prevalence: 53% or 16 of the 30 images
Results

- 13 total conceptualized patterns:
  8. **Objectification** - The reduction of a woman’s body to one or a few parts, thus equating her worth with a part of the body.
    - Prevalence: 63% or 19 of the 30 images
Results

- 13 total conceptualized patterns:
  - Additional Patterns:
    - Unnatural poses
    - Image/Text Contradiction
    - Direct Elicitation of Shame/Guilt
    - Encouragement of Physical/Psychological Harm
    - Simplification of Obtaining the Fit-Ideal
The Story So Far…

- What or who is the fit woman?
  - Biologically impossible
  - Lean, yet muscular
  - Strong, physically and mentally
  - Dedicated
  - Perfect and beautiful
  - Happy, confident, and capable
  - Hypersexual

- The results of saturation:
  - Saturation → Acceptance/Internalization → Body as a Project and Problem → Harm and Negative Affect.
  - Serves as a distraction and a tool of disempowerment.
A Call for Education and Action

-belief: Images depicting the fit-ideal are thought to be obtainable, positive, empowering, and motivational.

-reality: Images depicting the fit-ideal are damaging socially, politically, and individually.

-education and action are required for the physical and psychological protection of women and girls.

-suggestions for further research.
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