

The perfect body: Men and women negotiate spaces of resistance against beauty and gender ideologies

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Abstract

People use various practices to shape their bodies into culturally defined ideal physiques, and media both construct and reinforce beauty ideals. However their meanings and ideological effects depend upon viewers' interpretations. The aim of this study was to explore ways in which men and women talk about female and male bodies typically presented in media. Two same-sex friendship groups discussed a set of 11 media images. Discursive analyses showed participants employed three main interpretative repertoires in their discussions. Together these led to a dilemma in which men's space of resistance involved hegemonic masculinity, which emphasised their body's functional ability, but simultaneously repositioned women in the space female participants sought to resist: namely, identities using hegemonic femininity with undermined functionality. Examination of alternative ways of 'doing' gender is needed, as is attention to the negotiated and reciprocal nature of resistance, gender and positioning.

Key Words: beauty ideals, bodies, media, femininity, masculinity, gender, eating disorders

Introduction

Within contemporary Westernised cultures there is a pervasive interest in practices aimed at altering the human physique. Such practices, which include cosmetic surgery, bodybuilding, dietary modification, exercise regimes, and eating disorders, signify a cultural fascination with (a pursuit of) the 'perfect' body. Media are frequently postulated as playing a significant role in the construction of beauty ideals and gender ideologies (Gill, 2007), while experimental investigations have demonstrated that exposure to media images depicting 'ideal' bodies has an adverse effect on both female and male viewers (Farquhar and Wasylkiw, 2007; Groesz et al., 2002). The majority of this research has investigated women, with the effects on male audiences being (acknowledged and) studied only recently.

In the Western context, body-altering practices are a rational response, rewarded by the social capital of acceptance (Germov and Williams, 1999), within a social marketplace in which – for women especially – physical appearance has greater currency than other forms of achievement (Lee, 1998). 'Attractive' females are more likely to have a job with higher pay, to marry a 'higher status' male, and to be judged as intelligent, likable, and successful (Myers, 2010). Despite the investigated role of media and cultural beauty ideals, women's 'over-obsession' with their bodies continues to be constructed as a manifestation of their (irrational) femininity (Orbach, 1993). In contrast, increasingly prevalent media depictions of muscular male bodies reflect dominant versions of masculinity (i.e. as active, strong, and autonomous) and may signify an attempt to embody a hegemonic masculine identity – that of the invulnerable 'real man' – during a time of rapidly changing gender roles (Gill, 2008). Male body-altering practices are given little attention within psychiatric and psychological communities, and there has been a comparative lack of psychological research investigating male body dissatisfaction (Grogan, 2006).

The corporeal body is treated as a visual 'sign commodity' (Malson and Swann, 1999, p.401): to be transformed in line with preferred social meanings and identities (Willett, 2008)

that are pervasively and potently communicated via media (Williams, 2003). Media images are loaded with competing ideologies (Gamson et al., 1992) and viewers are actively involved in constructing interpretive readings as they negotiate and act upon such ideologies in their everyday lives (Dworkin and Wachs, 2009). This relationship between media images and viewer interpretations is under researched, yet understandings of body-related issues for both sexes will be hindered without an exploration of the meanings audiences are giving to their bodies (Gill, 2008). Readings of images, which can only be constructed according to commonly agreed conventions of language (Williams, 2003), are frequently interactive and take place within conversations with other viewers (Gamson et al., 1992). Paquette and Raine (2004) found the impact of media to be influenced by women's relationships with others, with some of their narratives describing acceptance of their bodies, and Thorpe (2008) concluded that her participants were not 'docile bodies who allow the media to constitute their subjectivities' (p.217). Media portrayals of ideologies and 'faultless' physiques will not simply be received without challenge (Mills, 1963). Multiple readings are possible: the encoded (dominant) message can be modified without its terms being rejected entirely, or oppositional readings, which introduce an alternative frame of reference, can be taken (Gill, 2008).

Little research has directly explored whether or not viewers take up dominant beauty and gender ideologies contained within media, or whether these are rejected or reinterpreted. Ahern and colleagues (2011) asked young UK women to discuss images of women in the media to explore what the thin ideal means to them. They found women's relationship with the thin ideal was multifaceted and included ambivalence, contradiction, and conflicting attitudes. The aim of the current study was to explore men's and women's talk about images of female and male bodies typically presented in media, their jointly negotiated meanings and the implications of these.

Method

Participants and procedure

Two same-sex focus groups were conducted with three males and three females aged between 29–37 years, in a range of occupations, all NZ Pakeha (of European descent), and all heterosexual except one homosexual female. Participants were well acquainted with each other and the group moderator, a 29 year-old bisexual female (psychology graduate student and teaching assistant).

Friendship discussion groups were employed as these have established rapport, which increases disclosure and richness of the data (Suter, 2000), while same-sex groups ensured similarity and comfort, and allowed gender comparisons (Greenbaum, 2000). The study procedure was given approval by the university ethics committee. Discussions were undertaken in the private homes of two participants. Conversations were initiated by the display of media images, which were randomly placed on boards, spread on a table and left visible during the conversations. Participants were asked to talk generally about the images and what they thought. Discussion flowed easily; the moderator adopted a back-seat role (Kitzinger, 1994) allowing participants to guide the direction and content of the talk, providing more naturalistic conversation and contextualised accounts. Discussions were 64 minutes (female group) and 105 minutes (male group).

Media images

Media images were employed to stimulate group discussions (Greenbaum, 2000). Internet search engine 'Google images' was used to locate images depicting various male and female

body sizes by entering the following terms: ‘female model’, ‘male model’, ‘thin female model’, ‘thin male model’, ‘average sized model’, ‘overweight’, ‘bodybuilder’, ‘warrior woman’. ‘Warrior woman’ was included because of the rising prevalence of this body-type (Heineken, 2003). Few results were obtained for ‘overweight’ and many appeared to be personal photographs. Therefore the chosen image, which appeared to be a media advertisement, displayed an overweight heterosexual couple rather than individuals. All but one of the images included models of Caucasian appearance, which is typical of media representations (Milkie, 1999). Eleven images were selected in total, and these covered eight distinct body-types. The images and body-types are further described in Table 1.

Table 1: Description of media images presented to participants

Image number	Body type	Image description
1-2	Female model	Female swimsuit models wearing bikinis. One appears to be breast augmented.
3-5	Male model	Muscular male models. Displayed with no upper body clothing. Hairless chests. Tanned.
6	Thin female model	Female catwalk model, wearing bikini. Hipbones and collarbones protruding. Small breasts. Body size smaller than swimsuit models.
7	Thin male model	Thin male model. No upper body clothing. Hair on chest. Pale skin. Body size and muscles smaller than muscular male models.
8	Average-sized female models	Six women ‘with curves’, wearing white bras and underwear. Range of skin tone and ethnicities represented. Body size larger than swimsuit models.
9	Overweight	Overweight heterosexual couple. Both wearing shorts-style swimwear. Female wearing bikini top.
10	Male bodybuilder	Male bodybuilder wearing speedo swimwear. Hairless chest. Professional stage tanning. Veins protruding. Muscles larger than muscular male models.
11	Warrior woman	Warrior/action women (computer-generated). Athletic/muscular body. Large breasts. Thigh-high boots and skin-tight corset. Body size similar to swimsuit models.

Analytic approach and procedure

Discourse analysis was employed to investigate participants’ interpretive readings of the physiques they viewed. This entails an examination of the construction, function and variability evident within dialogue (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). As people communicate they draw on cultural linguistic resources to construct their accounts – termed interpretative repertoires (Parker, 2002; Potter and Wetherell, 1987) – which contain ideologies and subject positions that can be dominant or devalued at an historical time point. Subject positions are negotiated, refused, or taken up by speakers, listeners, and audiences (Davies and Harré, 1990).

Following transcription of the discussions, data were thematically coded line-by-line to identify congruent and dissimilar topics (e.g. breasts, attainability). Sub-topics were placed into four tables for manageability: women talking about female images, men talking about female images, vice versa, and then shuffled multiple times into broader themes. We investigated where negotiations of meanings were taking place by examining variability across and within the discussions. Topics continued to be re-organised and re-examined until they formed overarching interpretative repertoires.

Results and discussion

Three main repertoires were identified and these are discussed below.

Nice person repertoire

The participants drew on notions of Cartesian dualism to discuss physical versus non-physical attributes. More 'normal' looking people were constructed with greater positive attributes, while people constructed as sexy and attractive were seen as less appealing in terms of their intelligence, sociability, and liking, as shown in Extract 1:

Extract 1 Roberto: This woman [image 2] has got nothing, just standing on a beach and that's it. I don't expect her to have any goals ... The sexy women [images 1 and 2] don't seem particularly nurturing either. I mean they just appeal to ya, um, let's get her pregnant type things¹

Here, these 'sexy' women are constructed as empty and without purpose. They are derided for 'just' appealing to men's sexual drives and for not seeming 'nurturing' (an attribute associated with traditional femininity). In contrast, the male participants positioned the average sized women [image 8] as decent and nice:

Extract 2 Roberto: I like the underwear, how it's um, it kinda covers everything. It's not actually revealing ... They're not being overtly sexual but I think a lot of their attractiveness and sexuality still comes from, you know, them being women and being still curvy
Orlando: and in their underwear
Roberto: and its, its quite nice

Here participants reinforced each other's views that these average-sized women are 'nice' yet remain attractive. These models could be said to be embodying notions of traditional femininity by not being 'overtly sexual' (which threatens the customary 'nurturing' role of women) but remaining attractive through their curves and (under)clothing. Other research also shows that curves are considered attractive and womanly (Ahern, Bennett, Kelly and Hetherington, 2011). The male participants also devalued the inner qualities of the male bodybuilder [image 10]:

Extract 3 Orlando: There'd be a huge proportion of the women that would turn around and go 'wohhooow', you know, 'wow'. But as soon as he opened his mouth, there'd be a huge proportion of those women that would go ... ya know, 'he he looks nice and I might might wanna play with him tonight but I wouldn't wanna necessarily um, be his partner'

Here the bodybuilder is constructed as having few positive inner qualities, similar to the sexy women. Heterosexual masculinity is usually associated with lust-oriented pursuits of the opposite sex that prioritise their mate's physical attractiveness, whilst heterosexual femininity is associated with nurturing quality time with her partner (Allen, 2003). The extract above might suggest a shift in how women are constructed more generally by men: as active sexual beings who treat men as sexual 'objects'. The females discussed both the bodybuilder's inner and outer characteristics in disparaging terms:

Extract 4 Sophie: ah, the bodybuilder freak
Lilith: yeah I think I'd agree actually
Raye: so he must have something going for him
Lilith: well that bodybuilder guy, not only looks physically kind of repulsive, but looks as though he'd be so utterly obsessive ... that you'd probably never get a word in edgewise

This repertoire demonstrates the participants navigating their way through a stereotype that attractive people have unfavourable inner characteristics. This functions to devalue external corporeal features in favour of inner attributes, thus rejecting culturally endorsed physical ideals.

Objectification repertoire

The females drew on this repertoire to counter sexual objectification of women, while the males drew on it to describe what heterosexual versus homosexual men find appealing. For the female participants, 'sexy' models [images 1 and 2] were seen as images which exist principally to benefit heterosexual men:

Extract 7 Raye: that's just really sad, like I see what they've done to their bodies ... I wish I could go out and slap them

Sophie: these two are very much like, um, so sexually targeted that they lose any power ... By making themselves sexy they've made themselves weak ... she looks like she's gonna fall out of her bikini and both of them can't really do a lot in those bikinis, you know like it sort of inhibits their, their...

Lilith: like they look vulnerable

Sophie: yeah

Lilith: like they're just offering themselves up

Here 'sexy' women are constructed as weak and vulnerable, with little function (in direct contrast to their warrior woman constructions). Scholars have argued that female heterosexuality requires women to make themselves 'object and prey for the man' (McCaughey, 1999, p.149), and that it is the constant demand to become a passive object of the landscape that results in women feeling estranged from their bodies, powerless and weak (Grogan, 2006). Females may not want to inhabit these bodies not because they hate the way they look, rather because they hate the way they are looked at by others (McCaughey, 1999). In Extract 8, the females construct the extremely thin female physique [image 6] as unattractive to men:

Extract 8 Sophie: I've got a feeling that a lot of guys wouldn't like to go out with someone like that cause imagine having sex they'd be afraid that they'd break her, ya know?

Lilith: yeah, yeah

Raye: you'd have all sorts of bones sticking in everywhere

Previous research suggests that most people are not attracted to the breastless, bone-protruding physiques produced by women practicing anorexia (McCaughey, 1999; Ahern et al., 2011). The male participants reinforced these views by collectively arguing that 'ultra skinny women' are 'not attractive to any man', and that this perception of attractiveness stems from homosexual males working in the fashion industry. They described her as looking more like 'a preadolescent boy'. Conversely, the warrior woman counters weakness by embodying both feminine characteristics as well as those reserved for masculinity, as Extract 9 illustrates:

Extract 9 Lilith: she looks really sexy [image 11]

Raye: yep, I think so too

Lilith: she's got big old tits and she's got a little waist and wide hips, slim legs, that go on forever, she's wearing high heel boots ... she's utterly, completely and utterly feminine. Her, she's mysterious, but she looks really powerful

This resonates with recent views that women are now expected to meet the requirements of their traditional gender role as well as being strong-minded, self-sufficient and successful outside the domestic arena (Sultze, 2003). As Guendouzi (2004) has argued, 'being slim is no longer enough, today women also have to be fit, muscular, and able to kick butt' (p. 1644).

Bloke repertoire

Cultural ideologies of masculinity dictate that 'real men' are strong, invulnerable, heterosexuals with hearty appetites who are unconcerned with their appearance. The bloke repertoire was evident in both the female and male groups. In Extract 10 the females describe the way the male models position their bodies to convey masculine ideologies, and in Extract 11 the males nostalgically work up an account in which today's men are compared to rugged 'real' men of a previous era:

Extract 10 Sophie: It's interesting how they're, how they're posed like ape men, so that that broadens their body making them look bigger

Lilith: Cause women don't stand like that, women don't stand with their arms out (...) they're all kind of strong looking

Sophie: It's like the cat bristling up its back to look bigger

Extract 11 Roberto: men are being increasingly focused for fashion items now ... whereas they previously weren't ... men would disregard that, those sort of things

Mario: men were men

Roberto: yeah men were manly

Mario: men are starting to get more feminine now

Orlando: ... It's not just good enough to be rugged and hairy and muscly or not even that muscly but just rugged, now ya, now ya have to achieve to be pretty

The 'real man' is constructed as a privileged position, providing a space of resistance against increasing pressures for men to attend to their appearance – a concern that is aligned with femininity and homosexuality. 'Real men' position homosexual men at the bottom of a masculine hierarchy, and in order to cultivate a full heterosexual identity they assert themselves as everything that femininity is not (De Souza and Ciclitira, 2005). Therefore, female images that deviate from traditional femininity proved dilemmatic because a woman's refusal to take up the traditional feminine role destabilises the traditional role of the 'real man', as shown in the quote below:

Extract 12 Mario: is she [image 11] gonna be a lesbian, is she gonna want a man and what sort of, the man that she has would have to be twice as efficient at ... whatever they're doing [general laughter] because if she had a man that was just a normal man, he wouldn't have a role ... he'd be just lost

In order to resolve this dilemma, the males described this warrior woman as failing to exist and an unrealistic creation of the women's rights movement, as demonstrated in Extract 13:

Extract 13 Roberto: I know women who ... read those sort of fantasy books where the women are warrior women, so I'm not quite sure what it is about them but yeah they don't really seem to have any nurturing

Mario: they don't actually exist

Roberto: um, but they're certainly attractive in a confident, sexy sort of way, that's interesting, I don't know where that comes from

Orlando: yeah but ... you'd look at that and you'd just go that's not real, that isn't a real person, that doesn't exist ...

Mario: it might have come around from the days when they're were tryna do women's rights

Thus the males construct strong warrior type women as 'unrealistic', implicitly constructing them as deviations from idyllic nurturing femininity. This undermining of women who deviate from traditional femininity resurrects and maintains men's privileged position as 'real men', discursive moves which sanction and maintain traditional gender roles.

Conclusion

In this study hegemonic masculinities and femininities were fundamentally implicated in men's and women's responses to body ideals perpetuated in media images. Men's most powerful space of resistance against pressures to possess the perfect body was a traditionally masculine identity – esteemed for function rather than beauty. Conversely, the females' powerful space of resistance was less traditional feminine identities incorporating masculine characteristics. However these threaten hegemonic masculinity and the current gender order, and were responded to by the males with a reproduction of hegemonic gender ideologies and preference for traditional gender roles.

Real men are invulnerable and unconcerned with their appearance because it is their power to function that is deemed the vital feature of their bodies. This is resonant of Berger's 1972 statement that 'men act and women appear' (p.47); in media men are defined by their strength, potential for action, and ability to be effective (Bishop, 2005). Conversely, media depictions of women display their ability to be passive sights of beauty; they do not act but are acted upon. Cultural messages convey that boys 'should develop and strengthen their bodies, making them more functional', while girls 'should preserve their bodies ... and make them more attractive to look at, rather than stronger, healthier and more useful' (Lee, 1998, p.125). Hegemonic femininity determines a destiny of maternal duties and heterosexual womanhood that is devalued in our culture (Bordo, 1998). It undermines a woman's ability to function because it necessitates dependency, vulnerability, and sexual objectification. It is perhaps unsurprising that the female participants resisted images drawing heavily on hegemonic femininity and found those counteracting traditional constructions of femininity as more appealing (extreme thinness; warrior women).

Media are potent communicators of cultural ideals; however, their ideological effect is constrained by viewers' collaborative negotiation of and resistance to these messages. These findings highlight the importance of including both men and women in studies on beauty ideals, as only in this way can we see the reciprocal nature of gender positioning, and how this plays out in negotiated talk. It would be valuable to explore how men and women might negotiate these beauty ideals together to explore how gender ideologies work in practice in conversations between men and women.

Media advertising relies heavily on the ability to elicit desire, frequently sexual desire, and viewers' sexual orientations are related to what will be determined as attractive. Therefore future research could beneficially explore sexuality more fully. Images depicting alternative body-types to those in this study, or using other modes of delivery (music; videos) would be valuable. There was some ambiguity regarding the computer-generated warrior woman image as a 'real' identity, and this could be better represented. It would also be useful to explore differences in age and ethnicity in images and in viewers, as people from different ethnic groups and life stages are likely to have different linguistic resources and spaces of resistance available.

The emphasis on male functionality in relation to undermined female functionality found here illustrates one of the many ways Westernised gender hegemony is structured to facilitate men's dominance and women's subordination. Nonetheless, this reciprocal position is not fixed. Structural changes within the gendered division of labour speak of new types of femininities being embodied by women, and research has shown different forms of masculinities are being created and negotiated (Lyons, 2009). As others have argued (Lyons, 2009; Schippers, 2007), we need greater examination of alternative ways men and women are doing gender, and with what consequences. It is through such explorations that more beneficial ways of doing gender, which have less detrimental effects on the reciprocal other, could be identified and promoted as new identities available for uptake.

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Note

1 Italics within an extract indicate authors' own emphasis. Three full stops indicate brief segments of the original transcripts have been omitted.

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