Should women be “All About That Bass?”: Diverse body-ideal messages and women’s body image

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ABSTRACT

While most body image research emphasizes the thin ideal, a wider variety of body-ideal messages pervade U.S. popular culture today, including those promoting athleticism or curves. Two studies assessed women’s reactions to messages conveying thin, athletic, and curvy ideals, compared to a control message that emphasized accepting all body types. Study 1 (N = 192) surveyed women’s responses to these messages and found they perceived body-acceptance and athletic messages most favorably, curvy messages more negatively, and thin messages most negatively. Further, greatest liking within each message category came from women who identified with that body type. Study 2 (N = 189) experimentally manipulated exposure to these messages, then measured self-objectification and body satisfaction. Messages promoting a body-ideal caused more self-objectification than body-acceptance messages. Also, athletic messages caused more body dissatisfaction than thin messages. Together, these findings reveal the complexity of women’s responses to diverse messages they receive about ideal bodies.

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1. Introduction

From advertisements to street harassment, much of Western culture clearly communicates that a woman’s worth comes from her body and that body should be thin. Research generated from objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) conveys how important appearance is to how a woman values herself (e.g., Moradi & Huang, 2008; Overstreet & Quinn, 2012) and how she is valued by society (Heflick, Goldenberg, Cooper, & Puvia, 2011; Strelan & Hargreaves, 2005). The thin-ideal has been well documented as the predominant portrayal of women in the media (e.g., Tiggemann, 2002), and this thin ideal is easily internalized by young women, especially White women (Sabik, Cole, & Ward, 2010; Thompson & Stice, 2001). However, perhaps in response to this pervasive thin ideal, messages promoting alternative body types have begun to take hold in mainstream media. For example, recent hit songs like Nicki Minaj’s “Anaconda” and Meghan Trainor’s “All About that Bass” suggest that a curvy body with a large bottom is ideal. Indeed, young women in focus groups have reported pressure to obtain this curvy ideal (Ahern, Bennett, Kelly, & Hetherington, 2011). Additionally, “fitspiration” images and messages, which promote a body that is not just thin but also muscular and athletic, are readily available, primarily on social media sites (Boepple & Thompson, 2016; Simpson & Mazzeo, 2017; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2016). Thus, women now seem to face a wider variety of body prescriptions beyond the thin ideal. The present research aimed to assess women’s reactions to these diverse messages and their effects on women’s self-objectification and body satisfaction.

1.1. The thin ideal

The thin ideal is pervasive throughout a wide variety of media, including advertising in print, video, and online formats (e.g., Jhally & Kilbourne, 2010; Slater, Tiggemann, Hawkins, & Werchon, 2012), magazines (Sypeck, Gray, & Ahrens, 2004), television programs (e.g., Fouts & Burggraf, 1999, 2000), animated cartoons (Klein & Shiffman, 2005), movies (e.g., Fox-Kales, 2011), video games (e.g., Martins, Williams, Harrison, & Ratan, 2009), music videos (e.g., Zhang, Dixon, & Conrad, 2010), and even children’s literature (Herbozo, Tantleff-Dunn, Gokée-Larose, & Thompson, 2004). Newer media sources, such as social media sites like Pinterest and Twitter, serve as platforms to share “thinspiration” images and messages that explicitly promote the thin ideal (Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015). Portrayals of the thin ideal are inescapable in Western media, offering a persistently sharp contrast to the actual norms for women’s bodies (e.g., Greenberg, Eastin, Hofschire, Lachlan, & Brownell, 2003; Martins et al., 2009).

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Body image researchers have long emphasized that the cultural emphasis on the thin ideal is harmful to women. Unrealistic portrayals of women’s bodies in the media have been blamed for the “normative discontent” that women feel about their bodies (Grabe & Hyde, 2006; Littleton, 2008; Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1985). Indeed, several meta-analyses have examined the expansive literature and concluded that increased media use can cause women to become dissatisfied with their own bodies, internalize the thin ideal, and adopt disordered eating attitudes and behaviors (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Levine & Murnen, 2009). Media use may be an especially powerful predictor of body dissatisfaction for young women (Groesz et al., 2002).

Objectification theory can explain why the media portrayal of women’s bodies leads to body dissatisfaction. The theory hinges on the frequency with which women’s bodies are visually inspected, whether in interpersonal interactions or via mass media portrayals (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). From this ubiquitous gaze, women learn that their livelihood depends on their appearance, and so they spend time inspecting their own bodies to assess whether they are meeting society’s appearance standards (McKinley & Hyde, 1996). The resulting third-person perspective on their bodies (known as self-objectification) results in negative consequences ranging from increased body shame to poorer cognitive performance to lowered sexual functioning (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Moradi & Huang, 2008). Indeed, a recent comprehensive review of the literature reveals a clear link between consuming appearance-focused media and self-objectification among women (Ward, 2016). While the bulk of this literature has focused exclusively on the thin ideal (e.g., showing that exposure to the thin ideal can cause increased self-objectification among college women (Harper & Tiggemann, 2008)), attention should be paid to the other messages regarding ideal body types women may receive. Given that any body-ideal involves a focus on the appearance of one’s body, it may be that the “ideal” rather than the “thin” emphasis is what drives the self-objectification. In other words, any body-ideal – whether it is promoting a body that is thin, athletic, curvy, or otherwise – is anticipated to increase women’s self-objectification and its attendant negative consequences.

1.2. Diverse body-ideal messages

While the thin ideal is still present, women seem to be aware of a wider array of body-ideal messages. For example, Webb, Warren-Findlow, Chou, and Adams (2013) conducted focus groups with college women and found a preference for a curvy-thin or athletic ideal among White women. Of course, idealization of body types beyond the thin ideal is less novel for many women of color. Overstreet, Quinn, and Agho (2010) found that Black women prefer a curvier ideal than White women, and Viladrich, Yeh, Bruning, and Weiss (2009) found that a Latina curvy ideal serves as a counterpoint to the fit/thin ideal promoted for White women. In a series of interviews with African–American women, one subject encapsulated the expectations placed on Black women’s bodies when she held up First Lady Michelle Obama as an ideal, describing her as “a thin African American woman with sculpted ‘ripped’ arms and ‘sistah’ girl hips” (Talleyrand, Gordon, Daquin, & Johnson, 2016, p. 13).

A meta-analysis conducted by Roberts, Cash, Feingold, and Johnson (2006) questions assumptions of persistent dissimilarity between Black and White women’s body satisfaction, and is suggestive of the role of messages beyond the thin ideal. Where it once was clearer that Black women had greater body satisfaction than White women, Roberts and colleagues (2006) found that evidence for this difference declined from 1966 to 2002. Further, they argued that women’s overall body satisfaction must be based on more than comparisons to the thin ideal, as studies using thinness-oriented measures showed different trends than studies using broader attractiveness-focused measures. Further, given that women of all races seem to be affected by media portrayals of body ideals when the models featured match the race of the viewer (e.g., Capodilupo, 2015; Frisby, 2004), it is reasonable to expect that diverse groups of women may be affected by idealized images of toned, muscular bodies or curvy bodies.

While fitness and athleticism have long been promoted for men (e.g., Pope, Phillips, & Olivardia, 2000), the emphasis on women’s bodies being muscular and toned in addition to being thin may be relatively new (Gruber, 2007). Evidence of this athletic ideal abounds in “fitspiration,” which are images and words designed to be easily shared through social media to inspire women to engage in physical activity and achieve a toned, muscular body (Boepple & Thompson, 2016). Similarly, companies selling athletic gear (e.g., Nike) often use messages and images that suggest that the best body is a fit body. Given the well-established health benefits of exercise (Lee et al., 2012), the messages touting the athletic ideal often mix messages about health with an emphasis on both appearance and thinness. For example, in a content analysis of health magazines, Bazzini, Pepper, Swofford, and Cochran (2015) found that cover captions and images contained a significant number of appearance-focused and objectifying messages. A majority of fitspiration posts sampled from two social media websites featured objectifying photographs (e.g., emphasizing thin models’ bodies) and messages touting the appearance benefits of exercise (Simpson & Mazzeo, 2017; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2016). Together, these findings suggest that cultural messages about health are contaminated with those promoting objectification and the thin ideal.

While research on this athletic ideal is nascent, early findings suggest that the athletic ideal may contribute to the same problems as the thin ideal. For example, correlational evidence shows that internalization of athletic media messages predicts body dissatisfaction among both athletes and non-athletes (Swami, Steadman, & Tovee, 2009). Similarly, a longitudinal study found that internalization of the athletic ideal predicted compulsive exercise in a sample of college women (Homan, 2010). Meanwhile, experimental studies have found that exposure to an image of a woman who is both thin and fit leads to more body dissatisfaction than images of women who are fit yet a typical weight (Homan, McHugh, Wells, Watson, & King, 2012), and that exposure to a fit peer while exercising decreased body satisfaction and time spent working out in a sample of college women (Wasilenko, Kulik, & Wanic, 2007). A recent experiment found that social media-inspired fitspiration photos harmed women’s mood, body satisfaction, and appearance self-esteem relative to travel-related photos (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). The athletic ideal could have a similarly negative impact in terms of women’s self-objectification, given the focus on appearance inherent to any body-ideal, but this outcome has yet to be tested.

Another alternative is the curvy ideal, although what that label promotes is sometimes unclear. “Curvy” can refer to a modified thin ideal with the additional expectation of large breasts and a big butt (Peters, 2014), which is how young women in focus groups described the ideal body type for women (Ahern et al., 2011). However, mainstream culture has also begun to celebrate a curvy ideal that is larger all around than the thin ideal, as seen in marketing campaigns like Dove’s Real Beauty, media like Meghan Trainor’s song “All About That Bass,” and celebrities like plus-size model Ashley Graham. Perhaps this reflects a loosening of restrictions on the ideal female form, rather than the rise of a new ideal. Yet, curvy figures are also pitted against thinner frames, as when Ashley Graham (2016) discussed being criticized for appearing to have lost weight, or when Meghan Trainor sang lyrics that seemed to prize a larger...
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