

Men's and Women's Responses to Idealized Body Types

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Abstract

We examined men and women's cognitive processing style in response to idealized body types (exposed to either thin model images, athletic, or muscular). Women who were exposed to the athletic condition were significantly more likely to generate negative social comparisons than women in the thin condition. Moreover, women in the thin condition were significantly more likely to generate counterarguments than women in the athletic condition. Yet, there were no significant differences across body type conditions for men.

Introduction

- The ideal female body, as portrayed on social media, is shifting toward an emphasis on an ultra-fit, toned/athletic body in addition to "traditional" thinness (Robinson et al., 2017)
- Exposure to the athletic ideal (but not the muscular ideal) has been found to have a negative impact on women's body image (Benton & Karazsia, 2015)
- Men's body image is negatively affected by exposure to media appearance ideals such as the "traditional" muscular ideal (Barlett, Vowels, & Saucier, 2008)
- Effects can be explained by Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954):
 - Tendency to make negative *upward social comparisons* after viewing idealized body images is a significant predictor of appearance-based dissatisfaction (Tiggeman & McGill, 2004)
 - 'Critical Processing' of body ideals can interrupt the social comparison process, and thus attenuate its associated impact on body image disturbances (e.g., Halliwell & Dierdrichs, 2014)
- Research has yet to investigate how both men and women respond to the variety of ideal body types portrayed in social media in terms of social comparison and critical processing
- We adopted the methodology of Engeln-Maddox (2005) who examined the relationship of counter arguing and social comparisons in response to three advertisements of highly attractive thin models among women only.

Hypotheses:

- For women, the tendency to generate negative social comparisons will be greater for those in the thin and athletic (but not muscular) condition. The tendency to generate counterarguments will be greater for those in the muscular condition.
- For men, the tendency to generate negative social comparisons will be greater for those in the muscular and athletic (but not thin) condition. The tendency to generate counterarguments will be greater for those in the thin condition.

Method

Participants

- N = 195 men and women recruited via Amazon Turk (53% male, M age = 28, 73% Caucasian, 84% Heterosexual, all U.S. citizens)
- Compensated \$2.00 for participation.

IV: idealized Body Type Images:

- 36 photos were validated in a pilot study of 20 participants to determine levels of thinness, muscularity, and athletic build for various racially diverse images. Two images of each body type for men and women were chosen (i.e., 2 thin, 2 athletic, 2 muscular)
- Participants were randomly assigned to view one of the 3 sets of idealized body types (i.e., Thin, Athletic, Muscular) corresponding with their gender (see examples above next column)

Constant (open-ended thought-response task):

All participants engaged in an open-ended thought-response task (adapted from Engeln-Maddox, 2005) :

- List the first ten thoughts that come to mind in response to the person in each of the two images List up to five thoughts that they had about themselves while looking at either image

(After the thought-response task, participants completed a list of measures about body image that are not included in the analyses presented here.)

Coding Response Strategy:

Two coders blindly coded responses with a high percent agreement (97%) and inter-rater reliability (Cohen's Kappa = .95) for the variables of:

- Negative Outcome Social Comparisons:** Statements indicating the desire to have a certain body type, expression of dissatisfaction with any elements of one's own body, any negative appearance related feeling or expression, etc. (See sample responses)
- Counter Arguments (Critical Processing):** Criticizing the body type (e.g., too thin, too muscular, unhealthy, etc.) and indicating a desire not to have the body type by questioning the appearance, doubting the body type, or rejecting it entirely. (See sample responses)



The images above are one set of the photos used in the study for Idealized Body Type Condition (Thin, Athletic, Muscular, respectively). Faces are blurred intentionally to control for attractiveness.

Results

Negative Social Comparisons (NSC)

Main Effect of Gender

Women generated significantly more negative social comparisons (M = 2.66, SE = 3.0) than men (M = 1.54, SE = 2.5); $F(1,189) = 9.75, p = .002, \eta^2 = .05$.

Main Effect of Ideal Body Type:

Marginally significant difference of body type condition on the mean number of NSC generated, $F(2,189) = 2.85, p = .06, \eta^2 = .03$. Post hoc comparisons (Tukey HSD):

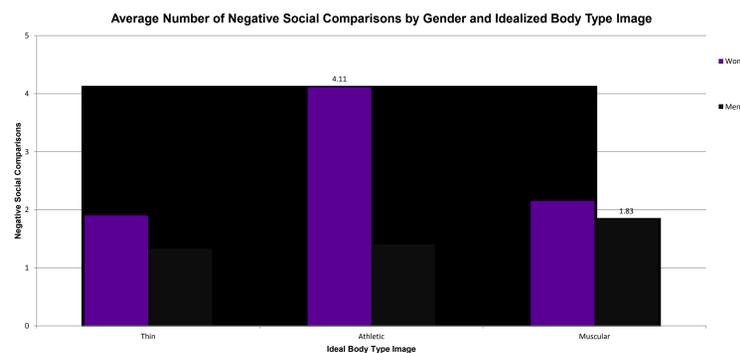
- Women in the athletic condition (M = 4.12, SE = .53) generated a significantly higher number of NSC ($p = .01$) than women in the thin condition (M = 1.90, SE = .52).
- The muscular condition (M = 2.15, SE = .50) did not significantly differ from either the thin ($p = .94$) or athletic ($p = .72$) conditions. See Figure 1.
- No significant differences among men across conditions.

Ideal Body Type x Gender Interaction:

Significant ideal body type condition and participant gender interaction for the number of NSC generated, $F(2,189) = 3.74, p = .03, \eta^2 = .04$.

- Women made significantly more NSC in the athletic condition than did men.
- The mean number of counterarguments generated in the thin and muscular conditions did not differ between men and women. See figure 1.

Figure 1.



Counter Arguments (CA)

Main Effect of Gender:

Women generated significantly more counter arguments (M= 2.33, SE= 0.30) than men (M=1.30, SE= 0.24); $F(1,189) = 9.04, p = .003, \eta^2 = .05$

Main Effect of Ideal Body Type:

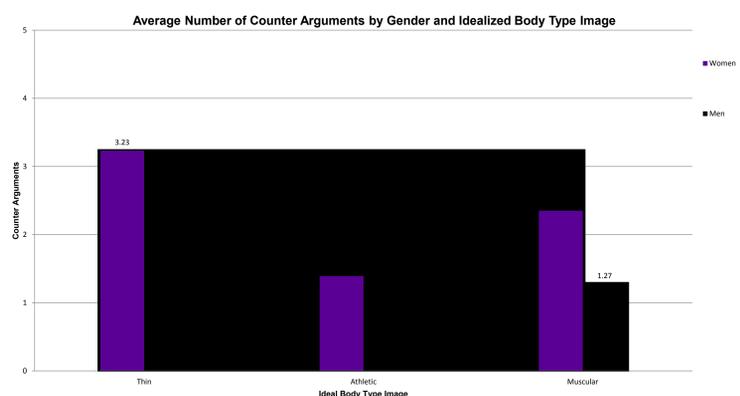
Significant difference of body type condition on the mean number of CA generated, $F(2,189) = 3.13, p = .05, \eta^2 = .03$. Post hoc comparisons (Tukey HSD):

- Women in the thin condition (M = 3.32, SE = .53) generated a significantly higher number of CA ($p = .05$) than women in the athletic condition (M = 1.40, SE = .55).
- The muscular condition (M = 2.40, SE = .50) did not significantly differ from either the thin ($p = .45$) or athletic ($p = .40$) conditions. See Figure 2.
- No significant differences in the mean number of CA from men were found across conditions.

Ideal Body Type x Gender Interaction:

Men and women did not differ in the extent to which they generated CA across each ideal body type image condition, $F(2,189) = 1.34, p = .27, ns$.

Figure 2.



Sample Coded Responses

Women

Sample Counter Arguments

Thin Image (n= 30)

This is unrealistic/unattainable.

Girl needs to eat a sandwich.

Too skinny.

Anorexic/eating disorder.

Athletic Image (n= 28)

She must have a poor self-image to feel she needs to look like this.

This is too much effort.

I wonder if this picture is photo shopped.

Muscular Image (n= 34)

Muscles like this on a woman freak me out.

It's fine for women to be strong, but I believe there is some kind of limit.

Way too much upper body strength.

Sample Negative Outcome Social Comparisons

Thin Image (n= 30)

Maybe I should lose some weight though to be skinny.

I wanted my stomach to be flat like hers.

I want to look like her.

Athletic Image (n= 28)

I need to diet.

I wish I was that fit.

I wish I had abs like hers.

Muscular Image (n= 34)

I wish my arms/abs looked like hers.

I wish I could be that muscular.

I hope to look like that some day.

Men

Sample Counter Arguments

Thin Image (n= 33)

This guy needs some more meat on the bones.

This guy needs to get a six-pack.

This guy needs to go to the gym.

He needs to gain some weight...and eat more proteins

Athletic Image (n = 30)

I wouldn't want to look like THAT, but I would like to be more in shape.

I think this person cares about their looks too much.

Thighs could be a bit more muscular.

Muscular Image (n = 40)

Does he use steroids?

I think the guy is too buff.

The photo is edited.

Sample Negative Outcome Social Comparisons

Thin Image (n= 33)

I am fatter than him.

I could stand to lose a bit of weight.

I will never be able to be that skinny.

Athletic Image (n= 30)

I wish I could be even half that fit.

I need to look more like that.

I should practice more sports.

Muscular Image (n= 40)

I need to workout more

I'm so fat and flabby

I will never attain that body image

Discussion

Women made marginally more NSC in response to athletic images than the thin and muscular images. Women made more CA in response to thin images than the athletic images. Findings reflect the changing nature of sociocultural appearance-related pressures for women:

- Decades of media campaigns teaching women to critically evaluate and reject ultra-thin ideals portrayed in media (Stice & Presnell, 2007) might have led to decreases in thinness-oriented body dissatisfaction over time (see Karazsia, Murnen, & Tylka, 2016 for a meta-analysis across 31-years).

- As such, women may be more readily able to make counter arguments (CA) toward thin ideal images. Accordingly, the athletic ideal may be replacing or providing a new option to the thin ideal, thus leading women to make more NSC when shown athletic images.

Among men, no emergent condition differences on CA and NSC responses were found.

- Appearance ideals for men more flexible/diverse than they are for women (Buote et al., 2011), and men are more valued for their internal (versus their external) characteristics (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), so they do not experience increased muscularity body dissatisfaction overtime (Karazsia et al., 2016).

Future research could explore whether responses made to idealized body types can predict other body image related variables (e.g., internalization of appearance based ideals and body appreciation, a conceptually and theoretically similar construct).

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