

# **BODY IMAGE IN THE MEDIA – SELECTED ASPECTS OF THE PARALELS OF THE MYTH OF BEAUTY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Body image is a multidimensional construct determined by social-cultural factors. Idealized masculinity and femininity in visualized pictures within mass media stands out as one of the participants involved in disseminating information, forming images, value systems, attitudes or personality of an individual's identity in relation to the perception of one's own body. Socializing agents of contemporary mass-communication prefer the mythological ideology of an ideal body image, which can be achieved through control and changes made solely by an individual's commitment to achieve that ideal.

**Key words:** Body image. Masculinity. Femininity. Mass media. Media content.

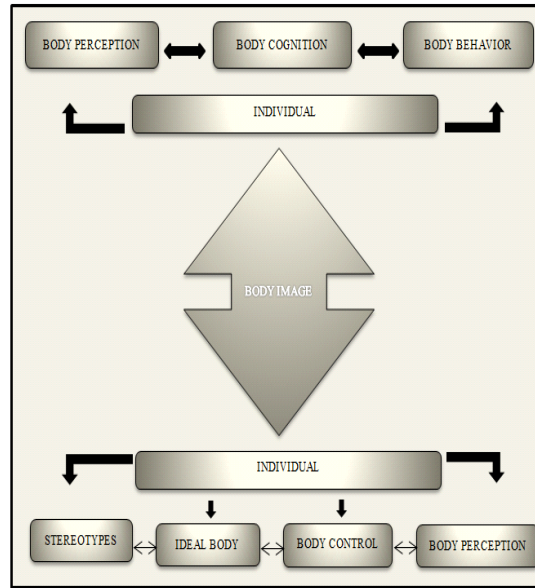
## **Introduction**

Media content influences the way an individual perceives reality and also contributes to the transmission of gender roles. Presenting and maintaining an unrealistic level of body image, itself, is one of the ways of presenting information regarding the idealized image of a feminine and masculine body, which are a part of the media.

Body image is a structure determined by a number of individual and socio-cultural factors. Among the wider socio-cultural determinants of the development of body image are representations of the ideal body, which are transmitted through different socialization factors, such as media, which act as a participant of cultural values. Current social trends, as S. N. Berberick (2011) warns, highlight how unprecedented the media's influence has been on how women perceive the "ideal" image of femininity. Mass media along with popular culture represent the driving force of our time as well as one of the most effective mechanisms for influencing society. Communication means, therefore, in the current digital era become the main participant responsible for information propagation, the forming of ideas, value systems and the personal identity of the

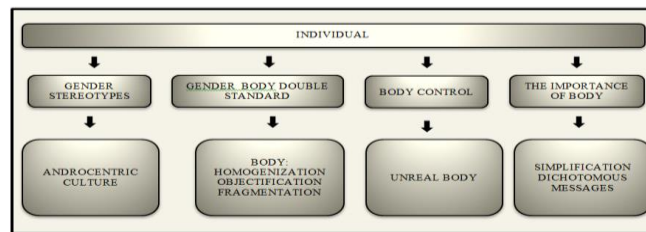
individual, and thus they have an important educational and socialization function. According to the opinion of several authors (V. Marková, P. Kopecký, P. Szabo, 2013, E. Fandelová, M. Džupina, 2013, M. Lincenyi, G. Tamene, 2013), in addition to the short-term impact of media it is also necessary to pay attention to the long-term impact of media content, that arise gradually and usually act directly, without the involvement of consciousness filtering.

Media content often exhibits a high degree of stereotyping of how certain topics, people and groups are portrayed. By their systematic representations they create a standard of certain phenomena, form expectations addressed to specific individuals and their own aspirations, giving rise to the impression that the relevant contents, phenomena, actions and values are self-evident, perhaps even natural (R. Sedláková, 2008, G. Kapusta, 2013). This leads to the formation of a warped reality, a dependence on pleasure and entertainment, a reshaping of secondary cultural and intellectual illiteracy, and the extension of bad life models, attitudes and false authorities (M. Howiecki, T. Zasepa, 2003, J. Světlík, 2013). Mass media therefore strengthen not only cultural stereotypes, but also gender behaviour patterns. Belonging to a particular gender does not only mean learning the ways of behaviour, accepting particular roles, but also evaluating ourselves and our body in accordance with the cultural ideal of physical beauty (M. Bubeníková, L. Bánovčinová, 2011). According to L. Urban, J. Dubský and K. Murdzo (2011, p. 57) "mass media are suggestive, they have a moral, cultural and emotional impact on public behaviour". From a multidimensional point of view the body image is formed by the dynamic interaction of a number of these socio-cultural and individual factors (Picture 1), where a change in any one of them inevitably influences the rest of factors within the cycle (M. Calado, 2011).



Pic. 1: A model of body image development according to gender (M. Calado, 2011)

Mass media acts as intermediary structures between individuals and the sender of the signal to society: only a certain physical stereotype of beauty is appreciated. This intermediate ideal is present in mainstream media (K. E. Van Vonderen, W. Kinnally, 2012). The body image thus becomes a dynamic part of an individual (Pic. 2), which changes over the course of life and is influenced by social-cultural influences (I. Plevová et al., 2011). As M. Bubeníková and Ľ. Bánovčinová (2011) mention, satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the body affects the survival of an individual's self-worth.



Pic. 2: Model of factors contributing to the development of body image among youth according to gender (M. Calado, 2011)

Socializing agents of traditional and new mass media proclaim that the perfect body image can be achieved through control and changes, by an individual's sole

determination to achieve that ideal. This means participation in the provision of information on how to achieve this. However, in many cases, media images presenting the ideal body are actually unattainable, since the depiction of the body itself is retouched before publication (Pic. 3, Pic. 4, Pic. 5, Pic. 6).

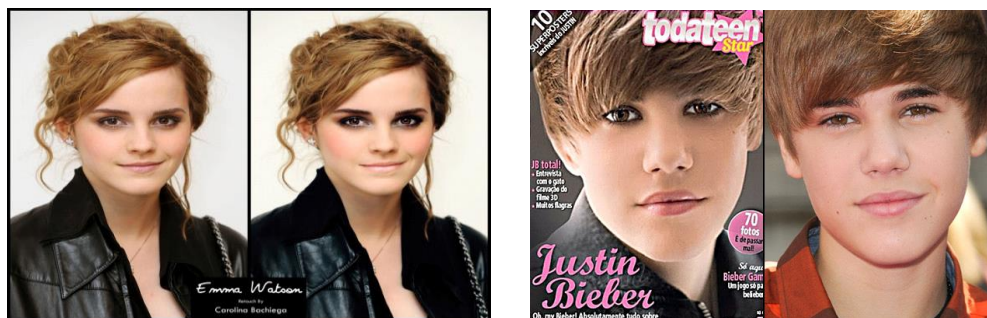


*Pic. 3: Depiction of a body and its retouched version*

<http://www.mike-reiss.com/retusche/cosmopolitan.php>

*Pic. 4: Depiction of a body and its retouched version*

<http://www.mike-reiss.com/retusche/vogue.php>



*Pic. 5: Depiction of face detail and its retouched version*

<http://cahz.deviantart.com/art/Emma-Watson-Retouch-77280776>

*Pic. 6: Depiction of face detail and its retouched version*

[http://www.tyden.cz/fotogalerie/obrazem-jak-kouzli-photoshop-retusovane-celebrity-bez-chybicky\\_5051//](http://www.tyden.cz/fotogalerie/obrazem-jak-kouzli-photoshop-retusovane-celebrity-bez-chybicky_5051//)

According to J. Ftorek (2012, p. 176): "media do not necessarily reflect social reality, but they separately re-create, or create it by resorting to the presentation of reality by using templates and stereotypes". In fact, this causes a widening gap between the difference of what an individual should be and what, in fact, an individual actually is. A variable, which remains constant in the analysis of body control, is weight. The obesity stereotype tends to include a belief that weight is controllable and that overweight people tend to be seen as greedy, weak and lazy (B. Blaine, J. McElroy, 2002). It is, therefore, important to emphasize the relationship between the physical ideal and social values. Ideal physical shapes are associated with personality traits and a positive value increases their suitability. The ideal of beauty becomes a value itself, which varies in different contradictory dimensions. Slim women are associated with wealth, success, health, control and beauty, while an increase in weight has negative connotations such as weakness, laziness, lack of control and an unhealthy lifestyle. This dynamic leads to the acquisition of a more positive value, stressing that slim people are intelligent, more friendly and resolute (K. N. Van Vonderen, W. Kinnally, 2012).

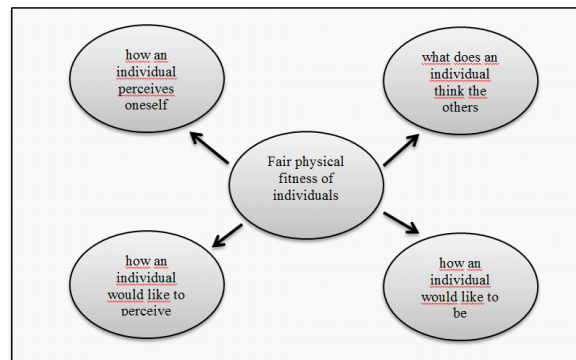
### **Body image - multidimensional construct of one's own body image**

Body image (own body image) is generally considered to be a broad, multifaceted construct. Its terminology definition is perhaps based on the definition given by S. Grogan (2006, p. 11), according to which "body image is the way a person thinks about his/her own body, how he/she perceives and feels it". According to M. R. Solomon (2006, p. 175): "we see body image as ideas, which we create about our body together with the influence of media images". The above mentioned characteristics imply: the estimated size of the body (perception), rating the attractiveness of the body (reflection) and emotions associated with the shape and size of the body (feelings). Body image as an image produced about the body has, according to a number of authors, therefore several components:

- **Sensory or perceptual component** – deals with the degree of accuracy of the estimated size and shape of one's body.
- **Emotional or subjective component** - refers to the degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with one's own body.

- **Behavioural component** - focuses on avoiding situations that cause discomfort related to exterior physical appearance.

According to S. Reddy and R. Otien (2013, p. 40), body image is "a multi-faceted psychological experience concerning physical appearance and one's own perception and attitude involving perception, cognitive and behavioural aspects". According to J. Koudelka et. al. (2012, p. 17) it is: "a complex concept for a particular mental state, by which we perceive our own body". In light of the above mentioned, body image can be abstracted into four basic ranges: 1.) How an individual perceives him/herself, 2.) How an individual would like to perceive him/herself, 3.) How an individual thinks he is perceived by others, 4.) How an individual wants to be perceived by others. The above mentioned four concepts of body image represent the theoretical basis of schematic model, which shows the diversity of the individual ranges of body image perception from the perspective the perception of the subject him/herself – (I) the individual. The catalyst of this perception is the realistic objective physical condition of an individual, around which all these concepts oscillate. The given subject so affected, inter alia, by the depicted idealised media images within a specific cultural environment that the idealised body image becomes a source for the subject's dissatisfaction with his/her real physical condition.



*Pic. 7: A schematic model of body image*

The perception of the ideal of beauty, based on fashion and the use of the clothing, and thus the perception of a kind of prototype of the „beautiful person" is different in various cultures. Body image can thus be, broadly speaking, understood in accordance with J. Koudelka et. al. (2012) as a part of the tangible and intangible elements of culture,

for which certain general features are typical.

### **Communication parallels of body image in media content**

Currently, the slim ideal of body image is present and depicted in media. Thinness has become a value, the ultimate goal of many individuals' efforts, as well as being associated with attractiveness and personal happiness. Medialised texts referring to successful women are accompanied by images - of models and actresses, presenting information designed to motivate women to carry out such changes (K. Lišková, 2006):

- **they evoke the idea that each woman can obtain „beauty“**
- **they awaken an entrepreneurial spirit**
- **a sense of absolute responsibility for the size of their own body and its aging**

Thus women, based on this mediatised stimulation, learn, what it means "to be beautiful", and receive detailed instructions on how to achieve this "beauty". Stimulation for achieving an ideal body image occurs mainly during puberty, but, as several authors (M. G. Durham, 2005, M. Buck, 2007, K. Toffotelli, 2008) warn, even earlier. They present findings that mass-communication promotes such images so that, even in the pre-pubertal period, immature femininity is seen as a sexual object, which is according to M. Kinsbourne (In: K. Bussey, A. Bandura, 1999) a highly "worrying phenomenon".

Research studies emphasize, that presenting ideal body in media increases dissatisfaction with one's own body, reduces confidence, and increases anxiety and depression (D. Ozmen et al., 2007). The domination of slenderness in the media often has very positive socially desirable connotations, which indicate success. As such an individual perceives his figure and weight as a measure of social value. Media content related to body image can be perceived as the embodiment of success and social desirability. A slim figure is currently considered to be the ideal of beauty, and, in rich Western societies, is associated with happiness, success, youth and social acceptance. Being overweight is, on the other hand, associated with laziness, lack of will and loss of control. Whether it is a man or a woman, being overweight is perceived as physically non-attractive and is associated with other negative connotations. S. Bordo (1993, In T.

L. Heiland et al., 2008) tried to find out what social significance was attributed to slenderness in the past. With the research that was carried out she pointed out how, since the end of the last century, excess fat has become associated with bad ethics in terms of inability or lack of will. Slenderness thus means being in charge of one's own body. A muscular body is a symbol of strong will and control. A body that is strong and developed is seen as a symbol of success. S. Bordo (1993, In T. L. Heiland et al., 2008) claims that the key aspect of the current idealized body image is body control.

Several studies (L. M. Groesz, et al. 2006, M. Calado, 2011) discuss the relationship between media and the development of physical dissatisfaction that the ideal beauty of the human body may substantially affect attitudes and behaviours. Aesthetic standards based on stereotypes of the ideal slim body, can lead compliance with idealized cultural values and are considered to be possible determinants of body image dissatisfaction. Existing research points to a complex reality, which leads to a debate about whether the forms of media content are related to the causes and consequences, highlighting the major correlation of the relationship between the exposure and frequency of displaying a slim body and physical dissatisfaction (S. Grabe, et. al, 2008 In M. Calado, 2011). These studies present the facts that the reading of fitness magazines, TV music videos and access to specific web site content or internet social networks are associated with dissatisfaction among adolescents due to exposure to the ideal image of beauty, which therefore creates the desire to loose weight (M. J. Hogan, V. C. Strasburger, 2008). In addition several experimental studies have indicated that the exposure of a slim body image in the media has led to increased physical and body dissatisfaction (S. Grabe, et, al, 2008 In M. Calado, 2011).

Meta analysis of 25 experimental studies according to L. M. Groesza, et. al (2006) states that participants were significantly more dissatisfied with their bodies after seeing slim idealized models as opposed to when they saw average large models. Most of society is exposed to media messages, which might lead to dissatisfaction with one's own body and develop unhealthy attitudes and behaviour. They become the trigger of psychological processes; the individual becomes more vulnerable to group values, beliefs and attitudes, which were received through the mean of socialization. Using a research cohort of 97 girls aged 5 - 8, H. Dohnt and M. Tiggemann (2006) studied how to



incorporate the desire for thinness in relation to their self-esteem. A year later, variable monitoring focused on television programmes predicted the growth of dissatisfaction and pointed to a relationship with temporary low self-esteem.

It seems that the greater availability of music, television programs and magazines focusing on appearance leads to a stronger level of consciousness regarding diets. This is consistent with research carried out by K. Harrison and V. Hefner (2006), in which greater television exposure to adults with slim bodies, resulted in a higher level of eating disorders among the cohort of girls aged 7 - 12 years of age. J. S. Aubrey (2006) points out that media depictions are associated with an increased physical self-definition (of me), in terms of externally perceptible properties, in other words, the appearance of the body rather than on internal features, in other words, body control. This fact about the media presentation of the body cultivates, in particular, a view of oneself; a view, which emphasizes physical appearance. Currently the most significant as well as cunning employer of the myth of women's beauty is the field of so-called exhibition professions (actresses, singers, stewardesses, models, presenters, dancers, etc.) which bring with them a qualification for professional beauty. It is a concept by N. Wolf (2000, In M. R. Love, 2007), indicating that the main attribute of a woman in her professional career and success is her beauty.

Gender stereotypes, integrated in traditional fairy-tales (Snow White, Cinderella, etc.) are a great "collaborators" in the beauty myth. From early childhood they imperatively stylize an individual into predetermined gender roles. Even small girls and boys are, through classical fairy-tales, instilled with the "unquestionable" behavioural patterns of women and men. In each fairy-tale good triumphs over evil. A small child adopts this ethical standard, which is also a natural part of the human soul. Along with a moral message, fairy-tales also indicated to children the "natural" ways of achieving this ideal, which is through the model of the traditional gender stereotypes of women and men. One of the resulting effects of the influence of the beauty myth on a woman's life is the disruption and destruction of the possibility of a harmonious relationship of a woman towards a man. Under this influence a woman concentrates on her own body as the object of a man's sexual desire. She reflects her own identity through the eyes of a man (men). A woman consequently perceives her sexuality and her body as secondary, imperfect, as

something that requires constant "correction" and care to be "worthy of love".

In magazines for women femininity is understood as the need to comply with the current imperatives for a slim and well-cared for body and self-esteem is reduced to the art of managing certain tricks. All of this is richly accompanied by images of how she should look. A woman, to be a woman and independent, has to look like these censored beauties in these photographs. Usually, however, this is an unattainable ideal, which is, according to N. Wolfvej (2000 In M. R. Love, 2007), accessible only to approximately ten per cent of the population. Instead of allowing women to be polarized by the myth of beauty, they should stop looking at themselves as a threat to their femininity and individuality. They should understand that the false ideals of the beauty myth are a threat to their healthy self-esteem and are only a means of weakening their identity. They should learn to see themselves as human beings, the best at understanding their feminine essence.

## **Conclusion**

The presentation of an idealized body image in media field nowadays calls upon society to engage in a relevant international dialogue initiating activism against this inadequate exhibition of the body. The perception of unrealistic depictions of the body has an affect the formation of one's perception of his or her own "I" at a pre-pubertal and pubertal age. The effort to achieve a physical construct as represented by the media can lead to negative health effects for both genders. Any disharmony between one's perception of his/her own body and reality creates negative ideas about one's own body. In the future it is therefore necessary to emphasize to adolescents, not their one-dimensionality based primarily on the depiction of a body image, but rather the multi-dimensionality of this concept. One way of doing this is to reduce the idealized contents related to body image presented throughout the media in its predominant explicitness together with an adequate warning about possible negative consequences regarding as well as the high-quality processing of information with the intention of increasing the media literacy of adolescents. It is also necessary for the means of mass-communication to de-mystify the primacy of the idealized body image, which is so dominant and ever-present in media today.

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