Introduction

Body image refers to an internal composition and representation of one’s thoughts, feelings, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that reflect an outer layer of that individual—physical characteristics (Ridgeway & Tyka, 2005; Galli & Reel, 2009; Calogero & Tylka, 2010). Historically, body image dissatisfaction has been presented as an exclusively “women’s issue,” however, more recent research suggests that body dissatisfaction among men is on the rise (Brennan, Lalonde, & Bain, 2010). Just like the idealized female body, the idealized male body that is portrayed by the media is unrealistic and unattainable (Agliata & Tantleff-Dunn, 2004). This ideal male is tall, muscular, and mesomorphic, and he exemplifies attractiveness, power, and success (Morry & Staska, 2001; Grossbard, Lee, Neighbors, & Larimer, 2009). Current ideal male body composition and shape include five main characteristics: masculinity, leanness, height, muscle definition, and overall V-shaped body (Ridgeway & Tyka, 2005). Deviations from this ideal are almost inevitable and, combined with strong cultural and social pressures toward physical fitness, males now experience increased levels of body shape dissatisfaction and self-objectification (Morry & Staska, 2001). Body image dissatisfaction in men has also been correlated with low self-esteem, negative affect and self-image, and maladaptive image-driven behaviors such as dieting, dietary supplement use, eating disturbances and pathology, excessive exercise and weightlifting, and the use of steroids (Agliata & Tantleff-Dunn, 2004; Grossbard et al., 2009; Chia & Wen, 2010; Grossbard, Neighbors, & Larimer, 2011).

Research is divided on what women and men believe to be the ideal male body. Some studies propose that women find significantly more muscular body shapes more attractive where other researchers suggest otherwise (Gleaves et al., 2000; Grieve, Newton, Kelley, Miller, & Kerr, 2005; Neighbors, & Larimer, 2011).

This study used multidimensional scaling (MDS) analysis to evaluate men’s and women’s body image perceptions. Participants also rated photo piles on three semantic differential scales (anger, sadness, surprise, disgust, happiness, fear) to organize their perceptions of the male body. The four most salient dimensions were the same for men and women: Potency, Activity, Anger, and Sadness.

Results

Distances between mapped points for the “Ideal” and “Average” males were significant in the number of pictures included in the “Ideal” category (t = 1.33, df = 43, p < .19), indicating similar category widths.

Men (M = 7.00, SD = 2.05) and women (M = 6.09, SD = 1.88) did not differ significantly in the number of pictures included in the “Ideal” category (t = 0.63, df = 43, p < .52), again indicating similar category widths.

Men (M = 6.20, SD = 5.83) and women (M = 5.83, SD = 2.18) did not differ significantly in the number of pictures included in the “Average” category (t = 49, df = 43, p > .63), indicating approximately equal levels of discrimination among men and women.

Distances between mapped points for the “Ideal” and “Average” males were very similar for both sexes, indicating that men and women agreed on how much “improvement” would be needed to transform an “Average” male into an “Ideal” male.

In summary, although some researchers have identified sex differences in perceptions of the male body, the most striking finding of the current study was the absence of such differences. Social shaping of our perceptions of the human body begins with early and intense exposure to media images, and both males and females are exposed to these same aesthetic standards. Under the circumstances, it is not surprising to find that by the time men and women enter college, their perceptions of the male body are well-aligned.

Discussion

A Multidimensional Scaling AnalysisComparison: Men’s and Women’s Male Body Perceptions

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Methods

Participants and Procedures

Ten men and 35 women recruited from college classes worked with 27 black and white photos of males of varying ages, including two cards labeled “Ideal Male” and “Average Male.” Participants sorted the images into 4-9 piles based on similarity, then judged the piles for similarity on a 1-8 scale to create 27 x 27 stimulus proximity matrices. Participants also rated photo piles on three semantic differential scales (evaluative, potency, activity) and six emotional reaction scales (anger, sadness, surprise, disgust, happiness, fear) to evaluate the dimensional characteristics of participants’ body perceptions.

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MDS Analysis of Body Perceptions

Note: Semantic and emotional reaction dimensions with the highest salience in organizing men’s perceptions have been positioned through the map using regression analysis. Bipolar semantic dimensions include two arrows; unipolar emotional reaction dimensions show one arrow.

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Figure 1. Composite MDS stimulus map of male participants

Figure 2. Composite MDS stimulus map of female participants

References


