

An investigation of the ‘ideal body’ and how women interpret this representation

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Abstract

The representation of the female body has been an area of study for many researchers. The concept of the ‘ideal’ body has been the focus of controversy with suggestions that women are been presented with an unattainable image of beauty. This study involved female participants to create their perception of the ideal body using a sample of cut out body parts from a variety of media sources, in addition interviews were used in order to understand the reasoning behind their selection and general thoughts around this topic. The feedback highlighted re-occurring themes that emerged amongst participants, as they appeared to be unable to define real bodies from enhanced figures which lead to confusion of their perception of the ideal. Participants ultimately acknowledgment that the ideal is at some level unattainable however the majority provided further evidence to connote at a deeper level they had accepted the representation shown within the mass media.

Key Words: *Body image; women; ideal body image; media representations; identity*

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Introduction

Within history the representation of women and their appearance has been a focus within society. The introduction and expansion of the mass media has been a key factor in creating and reinforcing representations through the form of stereotypes and imagery. The continuity presented within the media of the female form in particular has been labelled the ‘ideal body’ in which previous research has suggested women ultimately aspire to be (eg. Wolf, (1990); Bordo, (1987); Brown and Gilligan, (1992). The body has been seen as holding great significance to women, as it encompasses all that represents being feminine. It is suggested that the body provides a powerful quality in which cultural rules are defined (Bordo, 1987). Gender is portrayed through bodily discourse in which is expected within societies expectations, this has lead to feminists suggesting that men take control over the beauty ideal as Greer (1999, p31.) supports stating, “Beauty norms are made by men, beauty norms do not change because women change them but because men control the media.” From this the female body has been a topic of research with the focus on the body becoming a definer within women’s lives, as it appears they are continually assessed by their appearance. The development of feminism has enabled women to have more freedom and equality than ever before however this seems unimportant as if a women is not beautiful she is deemed a failure (Greer, 1999).

It has been considered that the representation of present time provides an unattainable figure as airbrushing, plastic surgery, computer modification of imagery becomes ever more prevalent, presenting women with mixed messages. Taking into account previous research and findings this study aims to investigate female’s thoughts and opinions of the representation of the ‘ideal’ to consider the depth in

which women partake in the acceptance or rejection of this representation. Differentiating from much past research rather than examining one particular media source, which may be considered to be somewhat reductionist as media messages can be mediated through many sources, it was decided to research a wide variety of media types rather than isolating one in particular.

Literature Review

The subject of body image and appearance represented within Western media has become a complicated issue. The awareness of the female appearance has been under the spotlight for many decades. From the Marilyn Monroe figure to the Twiggy look, women have always had a body shape to aspire to within the media. This has been named the ‘ideal’ or ‘beauty ideal’. Since the early 1990’s the ideal has become an ultra thin body shape with flawless features that dominates the media. This has raised the controversial debate of whether this ‘ideal’ represents a healthy attainable image of femininity that the average women can aspire to.

It has been suggested that a beautiful body is essential within modern society and is a quality that women aspire to be and men can lust after, “Women must want to embody it and men must want to process women who embody it.” (Wolf, 1990, p12.). Wolf also put forward that the ‘beauty myth’ was initiated during industrialisation as the family structure started to break down and perfect images of women were more prevalent within everyday media, this resulted in women no longer being defined by their domesticity rather their appearance and beauty. Frost (2001) similarly agreed advancing on this by proposing that in order to achieve attractiveness an unwritten

checklist needs to be addressed, from skin colour to smoothness of one's hair are all taken into account when summarising a women's overall attractiveness. It has been considered that a woman's appearance can affect her ability to become successful within life. Psychological research conducted by Berscheid (1986) has proven that achieving a good job, high grades at school, choice of marital partner and even preferential treatment within courtrooms are determined by appearance. It is clear that for women regardless of female liberation they are constantly negotiating with judgements against their external appearance, "Every women knows that, regardless of all her other achievements, she is a failure if she is not beautiful." (Greer, 1999, p23.). Therefore young girls are spending more money on their appearance and the interest they take in all aspects of their appearance is on the rise as suggested by Frost (2001). However it is apparent that being in the financial position to access these powers of the beautiful body is not always possible and therefore it can hold a very unattainable dream for many women and girls.

The notion of femininity is a key theme that emerges in researching the representation of females as Brownmiller (1984, p2.) suggests, "a rigid code of appearance and behaviour defined by do's and don't-do's." has developed. It appears that to encompass femininity a female has to abide by the set images that are presented to her through the mass media. Bordo (1987, p 17.) also concurs this in proposing how the rules of being feminine are communicated through bodily discourse such as images teaching us which 'body shape, facial expression, movements and behaviour is required.' With this proposition in order to attain femininity these set codes need to be addressed. To understand codes of femininity the male role needs to be considered. It has been inferred that men look at women and

women watch themselves being looked at (Berger 1972) affecting the overall relationship between both sexes and women to themselves. He put forward that women turn themselves into objects and particular an object of sight. This leads onto Mulvey (1989) who developed this further by suggesting women acquire an ‘exhibitionist role’ where they are looked at and displayed, Mulvey labelling this ‘to-be-look-at-ness’. Therefore it is taken into account that the construction of the female ideal is developed to exude femininity and consequently please the viewing of men as well as the female upon herself (Thew et al., 2018).

Since the early 1990’s there has been a vast amount of research conducted to test if exposure to media images of the ideal female body has a direct effect on women’s perception of themselves, (Irving, 1990). A study conducted by Irving (1990) suggested that a group of undergraduate women who were exposed to images of thin models represented negative thoughts of their own bodies as a subsequent, whereas in the case of being exposed to images of average or plus-size models the negativity was not so present. Also Stice and Shaw (1994) mirrored these results by finding a link between the thin-ideal and an increase in negative mood and body dissatisfaction.

The repetitive image of beauty that represents unattainable beauty increasingly impact on women’s self-esteem (Bordo, 1993, p166.) resulting in eating disorders, she states, “We continue to feel insufficient. The farthest extremes see practises of femininity leading to utter demoralisation, debilitation and death.” Bordo explains the reasoning behind women conforming to the ideal is a result of pressure from wider society. As women desire success within the traditional male dominated world of

business she suggests that the only method to penetrate this world is to become slender and therefore appearing more masculine. Therefore the more traditional female shape of the ‘hour-glass figure’ in which is depicted as overweight within magazines is rejected and a gaining of masculinity occurs. Bordo continued this by suggesting this development was not simply an aspiration to succeed within a masculine world, moreover to detest traditional female values. To encompass Bordo’s proposals it could be considered that to enter a male dominated world and gain career success it is encouraged through media representations that slenderness will lead to equality.

The majority of media forms can be seen to uphold the ‘beauty ideal’. With this the most commonly used is television and magazines within everyday life. Tiggermann (2003) found a significant difference between reading magazines to watching television. His study found fashion magazines showed an internalization of the ideal body however this response was strong and more effective than watching television programmes. Therefore the level at which women accept the ideal body is different according to the media type which it is viewed.

Thompson and Heinburg (1999, p341.) similarly focused on magazines stating, “Women’s magazines, probably more than any other form of mass media, have been criticized as being advocates and promoters of the desirability of an unrealistic and dangerously thin ideal.” The ideals considerable presence within magazines is presenting girls from early childhood an image of how they should appear. It is considered that young girls could be accepting this image of beauty represented within magazines leading to problems in later life. Festinger (1954)

relates to this in his Social comparison theory, which proposes that individuals base their opinions and thoughts by comparing themselves to others. This suggests that by viewing a particular look will eventually affect the opinion they hold. Festinger (1954) suggests that there are two types of comparison – downwards and upwards. Downwards is in the case of one comparing themselves to a less attractive individual. Upwards is comparing oneself to a superior which creates a reaction of depression and anger. These two groups can be related to the beauty ideal in that this theory suggests an average female with an upward comparison of an ultra thin and beautiful model would feel envious towards the representation. Botta (2000, p4.) states, “They compare themselves and are motivated to act on the discrepancies they perceive as a result of those comparisons.” This suggests that women will actively compare themselves to the ideal and aim to resolve their own problems in order to become this representation (Willmott et al., 2018).

With the domination of the appearance culture it was clear that the need to work out and diet is increasing. MacDonald (1995) argues how the changing of the model into the supermodel and the diet industry increasing the awareness of eating disorders suggesting that there is a deeper concern than making money. Therefore he suggests that the ideal is moving further away becoming unattainable as modernism detaches the images we see through the media from their realities. This mirrors the thought of Thompson and Heinberg (1999) who suggested that the use of print and electronic media such as magazines blur the boundaries between fiction and reality by using techniques such as airbrushing, soft-focus cameras, editing and so on. Therefore presenting images that distort the true picture, leading consumers to believe the illusions created. Thompson and Heinberg (1999) study showed how women

internalize the thin images and express them on their own bodies, calling this process thin-internalization. A similar study by Levine and Harrison (2004) which evaluated the internalization of thinness suggesting it is a consequence of exposure to the media. The study suggested that there was evidence of a positive relationship between media exposure and effects on body image and ultimately idealization of the thin body.

Harrison and Cantor's (1997) used The Social Cognitive Theory within their study which aimed to investigate whether media consumption could result in body dissatisfaction among its audience. Harrison and Cantor's (1997) identified two components – Prevalence and Incentive. Using these to explain how using Social Cognitive Theory, suggests as images of thinness and dieting within the media increases, audiences will adopt these dieting behaviours as well. The incentives for being thin are shown as being rewarded and satisfied with oneself. This suggests a possible link between the ideal and its effects on women. Through the media we see individuals who have qualities that are perceived to withhold everything we associate with success and being happy (Dlamini et al., 2017; .

Myers and Biocca (1992) found results that identified that body ideals played a role in the distortion of one's perception of one's self. As their study showed how both anorexics and bulimics overestimated their body size. This highlights how the representation of the body ideal can affect the way women view their own bodies. This was also suggested by Thompson and Thompson (1986) in a previous study that showed 95% of women with normal eating tendencies overestimated their body size on average by 25%. Goldman, Heath and Smith (1991) also suggested that representations show the ideal as attainable by everyone. Studies carried out by

Garner et al (1980) highlighted evidence showing direct links between magazines and the increase of anorexia nervosa within women.

The ‘beauty ideal’ cannot solely concentrate on body size, it also focuses on appearance as a whole. With the increase interest in make-up, obtaining the perfect skin and being fashionable it has been referred to as appearance culture. Jones et. al. (2004) created a path model to explain the appearance culture. She suggested that it was a combination of three factors, firstly the appearance focus within magazines. Secondly the conversations they had with friends and thirdly how their peers criticized others appearance. This model suggested that magazines could not be solely blamed for the obsession with appearance and image within young girls, however mixed with opinions and criticism from peer’s this reinforces the expectations to look a particular way.

It is thought that we have always used our surroundings to help form our identities. In regards to gender identity Barkly (1990, p65.) states, “We are born male or female but not masculine or feminine. Femininity is an artifice, an achievement.” She suggests that the way in which people learn to be either feminine or masculine is through society and the way it is portrayed. The media plays a key role in the cultural process of social construction and representations (Duke and Kreshel, 1998). In magazines the images within articles and advertisements can reflect what is thought to fit into the conventions of femininity. It has been found that young girls in the transition from childhood to adolescence, also named the ‘flight to femininity’, which relates to how appearance is very important during early teenage years (Beal, 1994). The magazine content shown to young girls play a role in their understanding of the

perceived feminine role. By adopting the advice that magazines suggest such as dressing like the ideal and changing behaviour to fit the expected, girls believe this is the norm from childhood. Brown and Gilligan (1992) reported that in early adolescence girls strive to achieve the ideal feminine look and they start to internalize cultural expectations of feminine behaviour. Moreover this would suggest the beginning of dissatisfaction with one's self and their bodies, as what they are seeking is generally out of reach.

It is feared that the media is representing images of female perfection which is unattainable and which could result in girls becoming overly self-conscious of their appearance. Adolescence is a time of uncertainty and low confidence as suggested by Erikson (1980) and Brown and Gilligan (1992). Girls look to their surrounding environments for support when they feel in a vulnerable state of self. However findings of Duke and Kreshel (1998) show that girls are fully aware of the expectations of society in relation to femininity such as to be thin, attractive, wearing fashionable clothing. Even though magazines were shown to reinforce these values, the readers were aware that the media portrayed unrealistic ideal body images.

Methodology

This study was conducted to examine how women interpret the 'ideal body'. A sample of six participants were selected to participate within the study as this would provide enough data to analyse sufficiently. A wide selection of ages to represent women of all ages within this study therefore reflecting the real life audience. Participants were selected by the technique of 'judgement' sampling, in which the researcher actively selects participants in order to meet a criteria that is felt will suit

the research aims (Marshall, 1996). Therefore participants were selected on their ages in order to provide a varied data collection.

All participants were interviewed on a one to one basis and were anonymous, creating a more comfortable and relaxed environment for the study to take place. All interviews commenced within an isolated room to prevent distractions away from the task and maintain the participant's full attention. On arrival participants were initially provided with a consent form and briefed by the researcher prior to the study, also being informed that they were taking part in a study about 'the representation of the ideal body' After the participant was fully aware of the study's aims and purpose an initial questionnaire, enabling the participant to provide basic information, was distributed. Information given within this questionnaire allowed considerations such as age and more importantly dress size to be compared with feedback given within the interview stage in order to access whether these factors influenced thoughts and opinions.

Following this participants were asked to participate in one task and interview session with a researcher. The research method for this study was based on interviews in which coincided with a simple set task. The interview technique was chosen as qualitative data would provide a much more in depth study into the thoughts and feelings participants may have as Kvale (1996, p 1.) states, "...qualitative research interview attempts to understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold the meaning of peoples' experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations." This may not however be expressed through a quantitative research method for instance questionnaires.

Commencing the initial questionnaire the collage task was introduced. The stimuli for this task consisted of scanned colour images of women's body parts (Head, Breasts, Stomachs and Legs). The original images were taken from a wide variety of media sources such as magazines and clothing catalogues. The reason for this was to incorporate a wide and varied selection of women's bodies in order to reflect the images women viewed throughout their daily lives. The basis for this selection of varied formats enabled the study to provide a selection of body shapes and sizes. The sample of body parts showcased a selection of race, age and body size, allowing the participant to choose from a vast choice. Body parts were of similar size eradicating any particular image standing out amongst the rest. A pilot study was conducted prior to the experiments in order to verify that the selection was adequate in size and choose to supply participants with a sample that will generate reliable and varied data. The sample of body parts were laid on the table surface within their categories such as all legs being grouped, this allowing the participant to easily view all body parts on the surface. They were then asked to select each part individually, after each selection they were asked to set their pictures in front of them, resulting in a full body being made from their selection.

Each participant was then interviewed regarding questions on their reasoning behind their chosen 'ideal body' collage and their experiences of the representation of the female body. The use of interviews enabled participants to give an explanation for the reasons behind their selection of body parts in the task as well as creating their perception of the 'ideal' through the selection of images that also provided data. The interview questions were constructed to help generate a discussion around their views

and opinions about the ‘ideal body’ that is represented through media imagery. Questions were designed for open answers and were constructed carefully to prevent leading questions. To allow interview data to be fully documented all studies were recorded with the participants consent. Finally as the interview is concluded the participant was debriefed at the end of their study and advised how they can access the result of the experiment.

After all participants had taken part in the experiment the collage’s produced from task one were collated with their basic questionnaires. Following this the recorded interviews were partially transcribed, selecting relevant material on the basis that they provided interesting and relevant information about the representation of the ideal women. As Strauss and Corbin (1990) indicated that text selected for transcription should take into account the analytical contribution it will provide to the overall study. For the purpose of analysis three age categories were defined to group participants (18-25, 26-35 and 36+). This will enable the information produced within the interviews to relate to the ideal body collage task and ultimately allow the researcher to analyse similarities and themes that emerged in order to discuss how the experiment can address the initial proposal.

Results and Discussion

A number of themes emerged from the interviews carried out which will be discussed in further detail within this section. The six participants were initially asked to create a collage selecting body parts to form their opinion of their ideal body. The findings from this have been analysed and interpreted.

The ideal bodies created presented continuity between selections as from the large and varied sample provided to each participant, similar or even exactly the same body parts were chosen (refer to appendix 3). It appeared that participants within the age group 18 – 25 selected the same head of a young, blonde haired celebrity. Also group 26 – 35 chose the same head of a young, brown haired celebrity. However group 36 upwards did not select the exact same head but they did select very similar heads, both young models with brown curly hair and tanned skin. The heads that were selected were of women all under the age of 25, wearing heavy make-up, long glossy hair and tanned skin, therefore this presents that as participants selected a very similar ideal head this would suggest that the ideal shown within the media is of this appearance.

The second body part participants were asked to select were breasts. In that four out of the six participants chose surgically enhanced breasts. It suggested that within the interviews, participants held negative opinions about larger breasts with participant 4 stating, “...to have huge boobs, in my opinion boobs are just fat and that’s why people have fake one’s...boob jobs look weird” and participant 1 in response to her reasoning behind selecting the breasts chosen she replied, “not too big boobs”. This appears to highlight how women view having surgically enhanced breasts as a negative aspect if they are too big however even stating their dissatisfaction to them it appeared that they could not distinguish the real from the enhanced breasts upon choosing their ideal breasts. As a result four out of six participants selected enhanced breast as their ideal which supports Thompson and Heinburg (1999) findings that the boundaries of fact and fiction are blurred as women are unable to define what is real or not within images shown in magazines. Therefore

even though women thought they did not adhere to enhanced ideals from their opinions within the interviews, the chosen body parts suggest they are clearly not able to define what is real and have accepted this as their ideal.

The stomachs that the participants selected provided a wider range of results as age group 26 – 35 both chose UK size 4/6 and toned stomachs. With group 18 – 25 choosing a UK size 8 and group 35 upwards choosing size 12. The results here present how the age of the participant influences their perception of the ideal. Participant 1 stated, “...as you get to my age you know what's attainable and what isn't and to look that thin like on catwalks isn't natural or healthy.” Similarly participant 3 agreed, “I think age is important as I got past 50 women are less bothered. I think it is becoming more stressful for women at a younger age.” This finding holds similarities with Brown and Gilligan's (1992) proposal that adolescent girls are aiming to achieve the ideal feminine look that they see presented within the media and ultimately internalise cultural expectations. However the results differ slightly as the participants within age group 25 – 35 selected the smallest stomach which suggests that during the transition from childhood to adolescent cannot be solely blamed for women aiming for a very thin body shape as it could be interpreted that during the years of 25 – 35 women are more insecure about their body shape and therefore aim for a very thin ideal.

Finally participants were asked to select legs for their ideal bodies which presented very similar results from all participants, as all legs were UK size 8 or 10. The opinions about legs were less prevalent than the other body parts which suggested that as long as they were, “nice thin legs” and “long” participants were not as

opinionated as other parts. After the assembly of the full body participants were asked what weight they thought their chosen body was, in response to this all participants replied ‘normal weight’ this puts forward how the ‘ideals’ selected from a UK size 6 – 8 which supports suggestions that women are accepting a thinner ideal than ever before and now interpret this shape as being ‘normal’.

A result of this Festinger (1954) proposes that individuals base their opinion by comparing themselves to others around them and therefore by seeing thinner women within the mass media in particular women will accept this as average. This was also apparent in the responses from participants when asked if they have ever thought they were thin, participants in the group 35 upwards replied, ‘when I was younger’. However participant 2 (size 10) answered ‘no’ and participant 4 (size 8) stated, “I know I’m thin because technically I’m a size 8/10 and people always say I’m thin but I wouldn’t say I’m overly thin but I’m not one of them people who look in the mirror and think I’m fat”. This infers that Myers and Biocca (1992) found the ‘ideal’ plays a role in the distortion of the perception of one’s self is apparent within women’s opinions and thought processes.

Another finding that supports this is the consideration of BMI by participants as this reoccurred during interviews. As participant 6 states, “Rather than focusing on the so-called ideal of celebrities and models people should focus on their own body and find out their ideal weight by using their BMI.” The focus of BMI aims to advise each individual taking into account their height what a healthy weight is for them and therefore will result in people being different sizes. Other participants talked about their BMI however held different opinions, as participant 4 admitted she was

optimum weight for her height however she did not class herself as thin and would like to tone up. Also participant 1 similarly suggested she was average according to her BMI however went onto states, “I’m in the higher end of the range so I’d rather be at the lower end” and to achieve this she aimed to lose a stone also saying she wouldn’t mind being under her BMI. These findings show how BMI can be helpful in providing women with a healthy weight according to their height and proportions however participants acknowledged this and still persisted in wanting to loose weight.

As highlighted by Thompson and Thompson (1986) who found that 95% of women overestimate their body size by an average of 25% this appears to be presents within the interviews undertaken. In response to a question asking what would you worry most about being too thin or too fat, participant 5 answered, “defiantly too fat, how can you worry about being too thin! People don’t judge and stare if you are too thin but if you are overweight everybody seems to take notice and have an opinion.” The statement implies how people are more negative towards overweight people than people that are too thin. Participant generally within their interviews associated between being thin with healthy and overweight people being unhealthy. This may be a result of magazines targeting larger women suggesting they need to loose weight and praising thin women. Participant 4 agreed with this saying, “...monthly glossy magazines have got the celebrities on the front and photo shoot with all the models and everyone is airbrushed and perfect but then you’ve got Heat magazine that circles people’s cellulite”. Magazines were the main medium for showcasing the ideal body as participant 6 stated, “...especially magazines their focus is solely on the ideal body and how to achieve it”.

The rise in self improvement programmes as well reinforces this opinion that thin is good and fat is bad, in which as Harrison and Cantor's (1997) put forward that these programmes give ordinary women incentives to diet and lose weight whether it is necessary or not. It is shown that women who are thin are rewarded with gratification from peers and therefore women associate qualities such as being success and happy. This result arose as participants were asked what personality traits their ideal body would withhold, as participants described them as, 'sociable' 'happy' 'friendly' 'popular' 'confident' (Boduszek et al., 2017; Willmott et al., 2017). This clearly supports that the ideal representation withholds traits that women also aspire to and therefore start to believe that if they mirror this representation they can also inhibit the lifestyle.

During the interview process all participants were asked, 'what is your opinion on the ideal body and does it influence how you feel about your own body and size?' The responses received from this question all agreed that there is continuous imagery representing women within the media in that women aspire to mirror. However some participants suggested how not everybody will aspire to be the same 'ideal'. This did appear through the ideal body collage as participants did not create the same bodies however they did choose similar overall proportions and select some exact body parts.

The controversy over too thin ideals did not appear within the findings as participants did not select any body parts of a size zero figure and were referred to as, 'skeletons with skin on' and 'scrawny and disgusting'. This highlights that from the consensus of the participants taking part within this task and interview, that the size zero phenomenon is seen in a negative light has not been accepted. There appears a

fine line between aspiring to be the ideals that they created and what is unattainable. Five out of the six participants admitted to dieting and wanting to loose weight aiming to achieve their ideals, even though they discussed their acknowledgement that they were of a healthy weight already and that many women that are shown within magazines are airbrushed and altered. It was highlighted by Duke and Kreshel (1998) who suggested that women are fully aware that the representations of the ideal body is unrealistic however the pressures from society continues to reinforce these messages therefore it is unavoidable.

It is clear from the findings discussed that the participants were aware of the unattainable aspects and alterations made to the idealistic women presented through the media however other statements contradicted this as they had internalised their opinions onto themselves and at different levels do appear to accept this ideal. As the sample chosen was only small the findings may differ if a larger group were to be tested however these findings suggest that women do desire to become their ideal body image.

Conclusion

This investigation intended to examine how women interpret the ‘ideal’ body that is constructed through the mass media. The use of a collage task and interviewing techniques enable participants to talk about their own feelings and opinions. The data gathered highlighted themes that continuously emerged amongst participants.

The task itself provided data in which suggested a blurring of real and enhanced bodies, as participants commented negatively about plastic surgery however

the majority selected this as their ideal. Therefore the contradictions showed how the ability to distinguish reality from fake is becoming difficult, this resulting in women accepting the ideal of the enhanced figure. Another theme that coincided with this showed how the ideal size emerged a UK 6- 8 putting forward how women are adopting a thinner ideal than ever before.

The acknowledgment of using the BMI scale in order to discover an individual's average healthy weight was suggested by participants, however the interviewed participants still strived to loose weight. This also provides evidence in which supports the suggestion that women are aspiring to become the ideal even though this contradicts their statements in some cases, the ideals chosen all hold key qualities of the 'ideal'.

Concluding this, the acknowledgment given by participants that the ideal is somewhat unattainable, the majority provided further evidence to connote at a deeper level they had accepted the representation shown within the mass media. Further research could help investigate the reasons behind women ultimately accepting the ideal body at a deeper level. Also sampling a larger selection of participants may produce more diverse and varied results.

The themes that emerged highlighted that the female body represents more than simply a body. Cultural expectations and societal norms have all been shown to influence the ideal body as well the mass media. The symbol of the body will always reflect within the lives of women and for generations to follow it appears that there will always be a body shape that women aspire to be.

Reflective Commentary

Conducting a dissertation study proved to be a challenging task, with new skills and understanding needed. It was clear from the onset that conducting your own research was much more complex and in-depth than any other work. The area of study chosen focused upon female body image and specifically the representation of the ideal within the media. This topic has been an interest of mine since earlier study during college and had been continued with the media debate centering around size zero models, therefore this inspired the dissertation proposal.

To establish the groundings for the study past research was a crucial starting point in gaining an awareness of previous theory and findings. It was clear that there was a vast amount of writing around this subject which required time and patience in order to narrow down the relevant work which would support my studies from work with less importance (Baumeister, 2003) Writing a literature review presented a different style of writing that I was initially unsure about as it differed from an essay structure, however this was overcome by reading other researchers literature reviews.

The decision to use both a task and interviews to form my research was thought to ensure the findings presented great detail and more insight into the participant's thoughts and opinions (Kvale, 1996). The collage task presented problems during gathering the sample of body parts as it proved difficult to find underweight and overweight images. This gave me motivation to search further a field than print media looking in clothing magazines and the internet which enabled me to

gather a wide and varied range of images to include within my sample. In hindsight opening the media type to various forms of media allowed the study to consider a general view of the ideal body rather than focusing on one in particular.

The experience of preparing, setting up and completing the task and interviews with the participant was a very enjoyable stage within study. To ensure that they all went smoothly I prepared every detail from the sample to the recording of the interviews. This helped me stay calm and relaxed which in turn I thought reflected onto the participant's responses. This highlighted a strength that I was unaware of as the organization skills adopted whilst structuring my research allowed little room for error and also with a more relaxed environment participants were willing to be more open with their feedback.

After collating all the data the next stage required the interviews to be partially transcribed. This was a new experience which I had not come across before, therefore I used library books and the internet as a help guide. Initially it was challenging being able to type as fast as the participant was speaking however the ability to pause and rewind the audio made it possible. Transcribing the data was the most repetitive stage within the dissertation and was very time consuming which highlighted the sample of six participants chosen proved the correct size for the time constraints set.

For me, the most significant element of the study was learning the process of analysing data to create relevant results. The ability to gather and link information together took a while to understand. As participants were interviewed about the collages that they produced during the task, I grouped each individual participant's

material together. This helped highlight how participants had chosen similar body parts depending on their age. Also by highlighting the themes within each transcript I could see how they were linked to others. This helped when writing the discussion section as the themes that had been raised during the interviews appeared to address many themes that's had been researched within the literature review section. This enabled my discussion to flow easily as it showed that findings from past researchers had been addressed within my study.

Following this I realized how my study was steadily developing into an actual piece of relevant research, the main results that were produced from the study amongst others suggested that women acknowledge the unattainable aspects of the ideal body however they still strive to achieve some of its characteristics. This outcome produced similar results to past findings which would suggest that the ideal is still an influential factor within women's lives.

Contradicting this a figure that did not seem as present as debate suggest was that of size zero. As discussed previously this focus fuelled the reasoning behind the topic of the female body ideal however throughout the course of this study it did pose some difficulties. The limited access to size zero models within magazines resulted in a widening of resources as the internet was the only medium to showcase this ideal. This problem was therefore resolved allowing participants the choice of selecting size zero body parts however none were selected and often negative comments were given. This did differ from the results that were forecasted on the basis of past findings however this did not diminish the result found in any way as many themes were presented.

This conclusion was based on findings of a small sample, if it were possible to develop this research further a larger selection of women would provide a more representative sample (Marshall 1996). Also dependant on time constraints a deeper analysis of the interviews could have been conducted. The afterthoughts from this study were to further the research by focusing on the reasoning behind women's acceptance of the ideal. However as a first research project I thought the overall outcome was very pleasing. The process of learning new skills needed to develop from stage to stage overcoming any obstacles has helped me understand the task of performing your own research, which has given me a deeper understanding whilst reading others work and has developed my knowledge for future working life.

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