



Thin and sexy vs. muscular and dominant: Prevalence of gendered body ideals in popular dolls and action figures



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ABSTRACT

We examined the extent to which popular dolls and action figures were portrayed with gendered body proportions, and the extent to which these gendered ideals were associated with heterosexual “success.” We coded internet depictions of 72 popular female dolls and 71 popular male action figures from the websites of three national stores in the United States. Sixty-two percent of dolls had a noticeably thin body, while 42.3% of action figures had noticeably muscular bodies. Further, more thin dolls were portrayed with more sex object features than less thin dolls, including revealing, tight clothing and high-heeled shoes; bodies positioned with a curved spine, bent knee, and head cant; and with a sexually appealing facial expression. More muscular male action figures were more likely than less muscular ones to be shown with hands in fists and with an angry, emotional expression, suggesting male dominance.

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1. Introduction

Since the 1970s, the media have portrayed the ideal woman as thinner and thinner, while the average American woman’s weight has increased (Dittmar, Halliwell, & Stirling, 2009). In order to meet diagnostic criteria for anorexia nervosa, one must be fifteen percent or more below expected body weight (APA, 2013). Research has shown that models portrayed in magazines may be up to twenty percent below their expected body weight (Dittmar et al., 2009). The unrealistically thin body type that permeates media has been referred to as the thin ideal (Greenwood & Lippman, 2010). Internalization of this ideal may lead to body image dissatisfaction (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008), disordered eating (MacNeill & Best, 2015), and the onset of an eating disorder (Stice & Shaw, 2002). Body image dissatisfaction is so common among women in North American Culture that is considered “normative” (e.g., Calogero & Thompson, 2010; Stice & Shaw, 2002).

Body dissatisfaction is no longer considered a women-only domain (Murnen & Karaszia, 2017). Recent analyses have indicated that men are increasingly unhappy with their bodies, and their levels of body image dissatisfaction are catching up to those of women (e.g., Frederick, Forbes, Grigorian, & Jarcho, 2007; Frederick, Peplau, & Lever, 2006). As media depictions of women have become smaller over time, men have become more muscular (e.g., Pope, Phillips, &

Olivardia, 2000). The “ideal man” is depicted with a v-shaped body, created by a muscular upper torso and a lean waistline. Researchers have pointed to the discovery of anabolic steroids, first used by bodybuilders in the 1950s, as popularizing the image of the overly muscular male physique (Pope et al., 2000). From the 1970s to the 1990s, the average *Playgirl* centerfold lost roughly 12 pounds of fat, while gaining approximately 27 pounds of muscle (Pope et al., 2000). As media depictions of men in North American culture have become increasingly muscular, men’s desire for muscularity has increased. In one cross-cultural study, 90% of men from the United States desired a more muscular body, compared to 69% of men from Ukraine and 49% of men from Ghana (Frederick, Buchanan et al., 2007).

According to various theories of body dissatisfaction, such as sociocultural theory (e.g., Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999), cultural portrayals of unrealistic body ideals lead to body dissatisfaction when people internalize the ideals and engage in social comparison. In girls and women, internalization of the thin ideal may then lead to eating disordered attitudes. In boys and men, internalization of the muscular ideal could lead to steroid use and other maladaptive behaviors (Murnen & Karaszia, 2017). Sociocultural models have been successful in predicting the development of eating disordered attitudes in girls and women (e.g., Keery, van den Berg, & Thompson, 2004; Thompson & Stice, 2001). In boys (e.g., Smolak, Murnen, & Thompson, 2005) and men (e.g., Karaszia & Crowther, 2009, 2010) correlations have been found between exposure to unrealistic ideals and predicted maladaptive attitudes and behaviors.

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1.1. Gendered body ideals in popular dolls and action figures

In the past several decades, cultural depictions of men and women have moved in opposite directions, with men growing as women shrink. The more extreme these body types become, the more gendered they are and the better they reinforce the physical prescriptions for heterosexual success. Most research on cultural models concerns the effects of media portrayals of men and women on their audience. According to several meta-analyses, in both women and men, short-term exposure to media portrayals of gendered body ideals is associated with subsequent body image dissatisfaction (Barlett, Vowels, & Saucier, 2008; Blond, 2008; Grabe et al., 2008). These gendered body expectations do not exclusively affect adults, though. Cognitive social learning theorists (Bussey & Bandura, 1999, 2004) argue that children can learn gendered behavior from models. Girls as young as six have expressed thinness concerns and knowledge about dieting (Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2004). Boys, on the other hand, report feeling pressure from the media to increase their muscularity and are more likely to engage in eating and exercise habits designed to increase their muscle tone (McCabe, Ricciardelli, & Finemore, 2002).

Toys marketed to children may increase children's body image concerns. Action figures marketed to boys have changed dramatically in their body proportions since the 1960s (Pope et al., 2000). While *Barbie's* slender waist and large chest may put her at an unhealthy weight and not allow her to stand up straight, *G.I. Joe Extreme*, the 1990s version of that action figure, would have larger biceps than any bodybuilder in history (Pope, Olivardia, Gruber, & Borowiecki, 1999). Baghurst et al. compared versions of *Batman*, *Superman*, *G.I. Joe*, *Hulk* and *Spiderman* released 25 years ago to action figures released in 2005. They found that only the waist size remained the same, with the neck, chests, arms, forearms, waists, thighs, and calves all becoming significantly more muscular (Baghurst, Hollander, Nardella, & Haff, 2006). *Barbie* has represented an area of concern for body image experts for decades. However, the recently released *Monster High* dolls make *Barbie* appear less problematic. *Monster High* dolls have surpassed *Barbie* in sales since their release in 2010 (Allen, 2014). These new dolls possess an emaciated body structure. If *Barbie* came to life, she would have a 30-in. bust and a 21-in. waist; however, a real life *Monster High* doll would be nearly half that size, with a 16.5-in. bust and a 12-in. waist (Hess, 2014). The dolls' waists are approximately half the width of their head, and their eyes are wider than their arms or thighs. Research has been conducted in other forms of media directed at children, with Herbozo, Tantleff-Dunn, Gokee-Larose, and Thompson (2004) finding that 60% of children's videos portrayed thin female characters and 32% of children's videos included muscular male characters. With dramatic caricatures of extreme body types marketed for children, it is worth examining the kinds of products children interact with every day.

There have been some experimental studies that link contact with gendered body ideals in children's products with the development of body image dissatisfaction. One study found that looking at images of *Barbie* was associated with lower body esteem in girls (Dittmar, Halliwell, & Iye, 2006) and another found that children who played with a full-figured *Tracy* doll showed less body dissatisfaction than children who played with *Barbie* (Jellinek, Myers, & Keller, 2016). However, a third study did not find that playing with *Barbie* had such an effect (Anschutz & Engels, 2010). Rice, Prichard, Tiggemann, and Slater (2016) found that girls who were exposed to *Barbie* demonstrated higher internalization of the thin ideal, but found no immediate effect on body image. Fewer studies have examined the effect of action figures on boys' body esteem. One study found that boys believed that current, muscular action figures looked "healthier" than older, less robust action figures. The

boys also stated that they would prefer to look like the new toys because of their size and muscularity (Baghurst, Carlston, Wood, & Wyatt, 2007).

Additional studies have suggested that children may pick up on gender stereotyped behaviors and ideas while interacting with toys. Sherman and Zurbriggen (2014) found that 4- to 7-year-old girls who played with *Barbie* (whether she was a doctor or a fashionista) imagined a lower number of possible careers for themselves than girls who played with *Mrs. Potato Head*. Additionally, Coyne et al. found that engaging with *Disney Princesses* on a regular basis was associated with higher levels of gender-stereotyped behavior in girls (and boys) and a significant increase in gender-stereotyped behavior one year later (2016). However, princess engagement was not longitudinally associated with body esteem in girls. These studies suggest that children may learn more than the mere existence of gendered body ideals when they interact with toys. They also learn that conforming to the ideal is associated with heterosexual "success." The thin ideal in females is likely associated with being a successful sex object, and the muscular ideal in males is likely associated with the sexual actor role. Miller and Summers (2007) studied video game characters and found that female characters who were frequently portrayed as attractive were also depicted as sexy, helpless, and innocent; while male characters were frequently shown as muscular and powerful. Media developed for children may affect their perceptions of appropriate body types for men and women, and it may also impact their ideas of what it means to be a man or a woman.

Based on previous content analysis research (e.g., Goodin, Van Denburg, Murnen, & Smolak, 2011; Mager & Helgeson, 2011), we argue that the sex object role can be portrayed through clothing characteristics such as decorative clothing, tight clothing, and body revealing clothing (and high heeled shoes for female characters only); as well as through the body positioning characteristics of bent knee, curved spine, and head cant; and a sexually appealing facial expression. We expected these sex object features to be more commonly associated with more thin female dolls than less thin ones. The sexual actor role is associated with physical dominance (and perhaps even violence), and based on previous research (e.g., Mager & Helgeson, 2011; Vokey, Tefft, & Tysiaczny, 2013), can be operationalized through functional clothing and the presence of weapons and armor; portraying the body in motion and with hands in fists; and a stoic, unreadable, or angry emotional expression.

1.2. The present study

In the present study, we examined the extent to which characters in children's popular culture were depicted with gendered body ideals. We examined two different types of cultural products that have not been examined in a thorough manner, dolls and action figures. These products may offer children the opportunity to identify with the portrayed characters through pretend play. It was expected that both female and male characters would be depicted with gendered body proportions, but that a noticeably thin depiction of female characters would be more frequent than a noticeably muscular depiction of male characters.

Gendered body proportions may also be associated with the corresponding prescriptions for heterosexual "success," which are sex object features for more thin characters and physical dominance features for more muscular characters. In the present study, we expected more thin dolls to be more commonly associated with sex object features than less thin dolls. Correspondingly, we expected physical dominance features to be more associated with more muscular action figures than with less muscular action figures. Three specific hypotheses were tested.

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