



The fit beauty ideal: A healthy alternative to thinness or a wolf in sheep's clothing?

Laura R. Uhlmann^{a,*}, Caroline L. Donovan^{a,b}, Melanie J. Zimmer-Gembeck^{a,b}, Hayley S. Bell^a, Robin A. Ramme^a

^a Griffith University, School of Applied Psychology, QLD, 4222, Australia

^b Menzies Health Institute Queensland G40 Griffith Health Centre, Level 8.86, Gold Coast Campus, Australia



ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 5 May 2017

Received in revised form 23 January 2018

Accepted 24 January 2018

Keywords:

Female body ideals

Thin ideal

Fit ideal

Muscular ideal

Internalization

Exercise behavior

Eating pathology

Body image

ABSTRACT

Anecdotal testimony suggests the 'fit' female body ideal is 'healthier' than the thin ideal, because it simultaneously focuses on muscularity. However, statistical investigation into the outcomes associated with fit ideal internalisation is absent. This study used moderation analyses to investigate whether concurrent muscular internalisation mitigated the relationship between thin internalisation and; negative affect, body dissatisfaction, bulimic symptoms, and dieting. Additional analyses investigated whether concurrent thin internalisation amplified the relationship between muscular internalisation, compulsive exercise, and supplement use. No significant interaction was found on any of the outcome variables. Thus, the results suggest that incorporating muscularity into an ideal of thinness does not mitigate the detrimental eating and affective outcomes commonly associated with pursuing thinness. Equally, incorporating an ideal of thinness into one of muscularity does not appear to alter the detrimental behavioural outcomes commonly associated with pursuing muscularity. Such findings do not suggest fit internalisation is healthy for women.

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1. Introduction

Understanding the role that societal standards of beauty play in the aetiology of body dissatisfaction and eating pathology in women is particularly pertinent for western and high socio-economic status societies. These cultures are not only renowned for perpetuating female beauty ideals that are extremely unrealistic (Grogan, 2008), but they have also been shown to have very high rates of body dissatisfaction, eating disorder symptoms, and eating disorder diagnoses (Frederick, Forbes, & Berezovskaya, 2008; Gunewardene, Huon, & Zheng, 2001; Keel & Klump, 2003; McLaren & Gauvin, 2002; Swami et al., 2010). Accordingly, a large body of research has focussed on the centrality of female appearance in western culture, and the influences and outcomes of this ethos.

Sociocultural models of eating pathology, such as the Tripartite Influence Model, operate under the assumption that disordered eating behaviour is a by-product of unrealistic cultural messages

and pressures regarding appearance (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). Central to these models is the construct of internalisation, which is defined as the extent to which individuals buy into, incorporate, and accept the value of culturally endorsed ideals of beauty, to the point that it affects body image or personal behaviour (Flament et al., 2012; Thompson & Stice, 2001; Thompson et al., 1999). According to the Tripartite Model, internalisation is one of the key mediating mechanisms linking sociocultural pressures (i.e., peer pressure, media influences, and family influences) to pathological outcomes such as body dissatisfaction, dieting, bulimic behaviour, and negative affect (Thompson et al., 1999). Indeed, there is a great deal of empirical support for the Tripartite Model, with the full model being repeatedly supported in the literature (Keery, Van den Berg, & Thompson, 2004; Shroff & Thompson, 2006).

In Western society, thinness has arguably been the ideal beauty standard for women (Owen & Laurel-Seller, 2000; Swami & Tovée, 2005), and nearly two decades of empirical research, including research using longitudinal and experimental designs, supports the assertion that internalisation of the thin beauty ideal is detrimental to one's mental and physical health (Karazsia, van Dulmen, Wong, & Crowther, 2013). Indeed, the thin ideal has been linked to restrained and external eating (Flament et al., 2012), bulimic

* Corresponding author at: School of Applied Psychology, Room 7.97, Level 7, Health Building (G40), Parklands Drive, Southport, Qld, 4222, Australia.
E-mail address: laura.uhlmann@griffithuni.edu.au (L.R. Uhlmann).

symptoms (Moradi, Dirks, & Matteson, 2005), compulsive exercise (Homan, 2010), body image disturbance (Durkin & Paxton, 2002; Homan, 2010), and negative affect (Cusumano & Thompson, 1997), and higher levels of thin-ideal internalisation have been found in eating disordered samples compared to non-eating disordered samples (Calogero, Davis, & Thompson, 2004). Thus, it is not surprising that thin-ideal internalisation and appearance pressures have been identified as some of the most important risk factors in the development of body image dissatisfaction and eating pathology (Cafri, Yamamiya, Brannick, & Thompson, 2005; Stice & Shaw, 2002; Thompson & Stice, 2001).

In recent years however, what has variously been termed the muscular or 'athletic' ideal has also emerged as a beauty standard for women (Thompson, Van den Berg, Roehrig, Guarda, & Heinberg, 2004). Traditionally, muscularity has been conceptualised as a male aesthetic standard, and in male populations, muscular-ideal internalisation has been linked to depression, lower self-esteem, lower life satisfaction, higher supplement use, and disordered eating behaviour (Hatoum & Belle, 2004; Kelley, Neufeld, & Musher-Eizenman, 2010; McCreary, 2007). In women, research investigating the internalisation of the muscular/athletic ideal is limited. Although a growing body of research has found that muscular internalisation is not related to body dissatisfaction in women (Bell, Donovan, & Ramme, 2016; Homan, 2010; Ramme, Donovan, & Bell, 2016), research investigating other psychological and behavioural outcomes of muscular internalisation is less conclusive. For example, it has been found that internalisation of the muscular-ideal predicts compulsive exercise (Homan, 2010) and dieting and bulimic symptoms (Bell, Donovan, & Ramme, 2016) in women. However, a longitudinal study found that muscular internalisation did not predict dieting over time (Homan, 2010). Thus, at this stage, researchers could benefit from having a greater understanding of the outcomes associated with muscular internalisation in women.

With respect to the measurement of internalisation, the thin and muscular ideals have traditionally been conceptualised as a dichotomy. For example, one of the most widely used and validated scales of internalisation; The Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire – 4th version (SATAQ-4; Schaefer et al., 2014) and the revised 4th version (SATAQ-4R; Schaefer, Harriger, Heinberg, Soderberg, & Thompson, 2017) measure internalisation of the thin and muscular ideals via independent subscales (Schaefer et al., 2014; Thompson et al., 2004). According to Schaefer et al. (2014, 2017), muscular-ideal internalisation is applicable to both men and women, while internalisation of thinness is more common in women. As such, the thin and athletic (muscular) subscales of the SATAQ-4 and 4R were designed to be independent, with the suggestion being, that women and men could endorse one or the other. When it comes to male populations, it makes sense to dichotomise thinness and muscularity, as men desire muscle bulk and size (McCreary & Sasse, 2000), an aesthetic that is incongruent with slenderness. However, it is our contention that for women, this dichotomous conceptualisation of aesthetic internalisation is flawed.

Research now suggests that many women desire neither thinness nor muscularity in isolation, but rather, an amalgamation of the two ideals (Bordo, 2003; Grogan, 2008; Gruber, 2007; Kelley et al., 2010). This amalgamated female body type is becoming known as the 'fit' ideal and refers to a body ideal that is very lean, highly toned, and apparently, highly desirable. Longitudinal research of magazine content, has found that promoting dieting as a means of achieving thinness is now less common than the promotion of diet in conjunction with exercise, as a means of losing weight and improving 'tone' (Luff & Gray, 2009; Willis & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2013). Furthermore, cross-sectional research has indicated that the drives for muscularity and thinness are more

likely to be held *simultaneously* than they are individually (Kelley et al., 2010). Population based studies indicate that women not only experience high levels of body and weight dissatisfaction, but also muscle tone dissatisfaction (Cash & Henry, 1995; Cash, Winstead, & Janda, 1986; Fallon, Harris, & Johnson, 2014), and experimental research has shown that compared to a control group, exposure to a thin *and* toned body results in increased body dissatisfaction (Benton & Karazsia, 2015; Homan, McHugh, Wells, Watson, & King, 2012; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015) and decreased appearance-based self-esteem (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). These latter findings are quite significant, as from the perspective of social comparison theory, women would not feel dissatisfied with their shape or tone unless these aesthetics represented ideal referents (Festinger, 1954; Stice, 1994). Indeed, the relationship between fit-ideal exposure and body dissatisfaction has been shown to be fully mediated by social comparison (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015), a finding that is consistent with the empirical literature on the thin ideal (Fitzsimmons-Craft & Bardone-Cone, 2011; Fitzsimmons-Craft et al., 2012), and supports the argument that women view this amalgamated aesthetic as desirable.

Examination of social media also suggests that the fit beauty ideal is extremely popular. On social media platforms such as Instagram, the fit-ideal is commonly referenced under the label "Fitspiration" or "Fitspo" (i.e., fit inspiration). A search of the "fitspo" tag returns over 49 million images, many of which depict very thin, yet muscular women working out or posing in revealing sports clothing. Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2015) described the women in "fitspiration" images as being thin *and* muscular, less thin than traditional fashion media models (due to their levels of muscularity), yet still exhibiting figures that are unattainable for most women. Interestingly however, these images are portrayed as being "healthy," often at the expense of thinness. For example "exercise to be fit, not skinny," "strong is the new skinny," or "skinny is not sexy, health is" are all quotes that commonly accompany fitspo images. These types of messages are prominent on platforms such as Instagram and Facebook (e.g., on fitness accounts), YouTube (e.g., in montages or workout videos), Pinterest (e.g., in 'fitspiration' image boards), Tumblr (e.g., in blogs) and many more. As of November 2017, these social media sites alone collectively had over 43 million active Australian monthly users (Cowling, 2017), suggesting that fit-ideal images and their associated messages have a wide reach. However, despite popularity of the fit ideal and the argument for its health benefits, there is no known research investigating the outcomes that may result from internalising this aesthetic. Instead, the majority of research appears to have focussed on the outcomes associated with exposure to this ideal, meaning there is a large gap in the literature regarding fit-ideal internalisation.

Upon examining the paucity of existing literature, the health benefits espoused by fit ideal advocates do make some empirical sense. For example, muscular-ideal exposure (Homan et al., 2012) and muscular-ideal internalisation (Bell et al., 2016; Homan, 2010; Ramme et al., 2016) have not been identified as predictors of body dissatisfaction in women. Further, there is a strong body of research outlining the benefits of exercise on body image and affect (Hausenblas & Fallon, 2006; Martin Ginis, Strong, Arent, Bray, & Bassett-Gunter, 2014). Consequently, some researchers have suggested that those who internalise an ideal involving thinness would benefit from a focus on athleticism and muscularity (Homan et al., 2012; Ramme et al., 2016).

Given the strong empirical links between affective constructs such as body dissatisfaction and depression, with behavioural constructs such as bulimia and dieting (Stice & Shaw, 2002; Van den Berg, Thompson, Obremski-Brandon, & Covert, 2002) it follows that improvements in the former could lead to improvements in the latter. Thus, for women who internalise a thin-ideal, concurrent muscular-ideal internalisation could have the potential to mitigate

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