



A test of athletic internalisation as a mediator in the relationship between sociocultural influences and body dissatisfaction in women

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ABSTRACT

The tripartite model has been an important and empirically supported theoretical model positing that the influence of peers, family, and media leads women to internalise the thin societal body ideal. This internalisation in turn leads women to experience body dissatisfaction. Recently, a new societal 'athletic ideal' for women has emerged, which promotes a body frame with pronounced lean muscle mass. This study tested the role of the athletic ideal in the tripartite model of influence with a sample of 421 women aged 17–40 years. Athletic ideal internalisation was neither found to be associated with body dissatisfaction, nor act as a mediator in the relationship between sociocultural influences and body dissatisfaction. Although more research is required, the results of this study suggest that for this cross-sectional sample of women, internalisation of an athletic and muscular, rather than thin ideal, may be less detrimental to body satisfaction.

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Introduction

The tripartite model of influence is a prominent model within the field of body image disturbance, and was created in an attempt to incorporate several of the factors found to influence body image and eating disturbance within a single framework (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). The model proposes that three core societal influences (media, peers, and parents) exert their influence on body dissatisfaction indirectly through both body comparison and thin ideal internalisation (Thompson et al., 1999). Since its creation, the model has been consistently evaluated and supported across many studies of adolescent and adult women (e.g., Keery, van den Berg, & Thompson, 2004; Shroff & Thompson, 2006; Yamamiya, Shroff, & Thompson, 2008).

The abovementioned 'thin ideal' has, for some time now, been the dominant societal epitome of female attractiveness, and its internalisation has repeatedly been found to lead to body dissatisfaction (see Stice, 2002 for a review) and subsequent engagement in problematic weight restricting behaviours in order to attain it (Stice, Mazotti, Weibel, & Agras, 2000; Stice & Shaw, 2002). Recently however, a new female sociocultural appearance ideal has appeared alongside the thin ideal, which, rather than being very

thin and without curves, is more athletic and muscular. In previous studies, both the name (athletic/fit ideal) and conceptualisation of the ideal (lean muscular, muscular, hyper muscular) have differed (Calogero, Davis, & Thompson, 2004; Homan, 2010; Homan, McHugh, Wells, Watson, & King, 2012; Lenart, Goldberg, Bailey, Dallal, & Koff, 1995; Thompson, van den Berg, Roehrig, Guarda, & Heinberg, 2004). For the purposes of this study, the ideal will henceforth be referred to as the 'athletic' ideal, and will be conceptualised as an ideal promoting athleticism and muscularity.

The existence of the athletic ideal is most apparent in the media where it appears to be gaining strong support. For instance, there has been a rapid rise in the number of available magazines aimed at women's fitness (e.g., *Women's Fitness*, *Women's Health and Fitness*, *Fitness Rx*), and in new television programs promoting the idea of body improvement through exercise (e.g., *The Biggest Loser* and *Extreme Weight Loss*). It is also noticeable in fashion magazines, where the number of articles promoting exercise in order to 'become toned' has grown since the 1980s, to now surpass the number of articles dedicated to dieting (Wiseman, Gray, Mosimann, & Ahrens, 1992). Thus, the media is promoting the idea that a toned, athletic body is attainable for anyone willing to put in the amount of work required.

At first glance, one might determine that the athletic ideal is a 'healthier option' than the thin ideal, and therefore not as detrimental to women's body image and eating practices. Certainly, exercise has been associated with a myriad of physical and psychological health benefits (Byrne & Byrne, 1993; Myers, 2003). However, in realistic terms, attainment of an athletic and muscular goal requires

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women to gain lean muscle mass through significant and persistent weight training combined with a strict diet, and often, dietary sport supplements use (Field et al., 2005). For the majority of women, such goals are very difficult to achieve and maintain (Curioni & Lourenco, 2005) as they require a constant and continuous commitment in terms of exercise and nutrition. It might therefore be expected that, in the same way that exposure to, and internalisation of, the thin ideal leads to body dissatisfaction and disordered eating practices, promotion of the athletic ideal may produce similarly negative outcomes. To date however, research investigating the consequences of the athletic ideal is neither substantial nor conclusive.

One line of research indicates that exposure to the athletic ideal may have detrimental outcomes connected to body dissatisfaction and eating pathology. For instance, the frequency of reading fitness magazines has been found to positively relate to eating disorder symptomology (Harrison, 2000), and increased levels of depression and body dissatisfaction have been found in women following exposure to pictures of fit female bodies (Fallon & Hausenblas, 2005). Similarly, it has been found that women exposed to a fit peer while exercising, experience higher body dissatisfaction than women exposed to either an unfit peer or no peer at all (Wasilenko, Kulik, & Wanic, 2007). Recently, a study by Benton and Karazsia (2015) tested the impact of exposure to both athletic and thin ideals by exposing women to images of females who were either (a) thin, (b) muscular and thin or, (c) hyper-muscular and thin. It was found that women exposed to both the thin condition, and the muscular and thin condition experienced body dissatisfaction, suggesting that both thin, and athletic ideals were problematic (Benton & Karazsia, 2015).

Although the studies reviewed above suggest a detrimental impact of exposure to the athletic ideal, other studies have not reached the same conclusion. For example, Bissell and Zhou (2004) examined the relation between exposure to general sports media and body dissatisfaction. Not only did general sports media exposure fail to lead to an increase in body dissatisfaction, but in some cases it actually predicted a decrease. Similarly, in an experimental study conducted by Homan et al. (2012), a sample of 138 women were randomly exposed to (a) images of fit women who were also very thin, (b) normal-weight fit women, or (c) neutral objects. It was found that exposure to fit, normal-weight women did not lead to an increase in body dissatisfaction, whereas exposure to images of women who were both fit and thin produced an increase in body dissatisfaction (Homan et al., 2012). The authors interpreted the results to suggest that the athletic ideal was not detrimental and that it was problematic only when paired with the thin ideal.

The studies reviewed above investigated the impact of exposure to the athletic ideal. However, research surrounding the thin ideal has indicated that it is the *internalisation* of an ideal, rather than simple exposure to it, that is most detrimental (Stice, 2002). Only two studies to date have investigated the effects of athletic ideal internalisation on body dissatisfaction and eating pathology. As with research conducted on exposure to the athletic ideal, the results are inconsistent. In support of the hypothesis that internalisation of the athletic ideal may be problematic, a study by Calogero et al. (2004), employing a clinical sample of 440 women, found a connection between internalisation of the athletic ideal and body dissatisfaction. Additionally, the study found that eating disordered patients reported higher internalisation of the athletic-ideal than a sample of college women. In contrast, a 7-month longitudinal study by Homan (2010), found that internalisation of the thin, but not athletic ideal, predicted increased body dissatisfaction.

The studies outlined above have all investigated consequences of the athletic ideal. To date however, there has been no investigation of factors that might lead women to internalise this new ideal in the first place. As noted previously, the tripartite model of

influence (Thompson et al., 1999) suggests that media, peer, and parental influence lead to internalisation of the thin ideal and body comparison, which in turn lead to body dissatisfaction. Although the model has to date never been explored using the athletic ideal in a female sample, it has been investigated in the area of male muscularity. Studies with males have consistently found that media influence is important to the promotion of the muscular ideal in men (Barlett, Vowels, & Saucier, 2008; Frederick et al., 2007), and that parents and peers have an impact on male general weight concerns, muscle dissatisfaction, and drive for muscularity (Galioto, Karazsia, & Crowther, 2012; Helfert & Warschburger, 2011; Jones & Crawford, 2005). In studies exploring the tripartite model of influence in a more holistic manner with men, results have been promising, with peer, parent, and media influences being found to positively associate with male internalisation of the muscular ideal, and to subsequent muscle dissatisfaction (Stratton, Donovan, Bramwell, & Loxton, 2015; Tylka, 2011). Although conducted with men, studies such as these indicate that the tripartite model of influence may be appropriate for investigating an ideal that similarly focuses on athleticism and muscularity in women.

With literature regarding the female athletic ideal now spanning over 10 years, it appears that this new prototype of female attractiveness is not merely a passing fad, but instead represents an enduring societal female ideal. It is therefore the aim of this study to investigate whether, consistent with the thin ideal in the tripartite model, athletic ideal internalisation plays a mediating role in the relationship between sociocultural influences (peer, family, and media) and body dissatisfaction. Body comparison is an important part of the tripartite model of influence, however internalisation is of primary interest to this study and body comparison will therefore not be included. Although investigating the athletic ideal is of primary interest to this study, the mediating role of thin ideal internalisation in the relationship between sociocultural influences and body dissatisfaction will also be assessed. This will allow for prior research to be replicated, and importantly allow for analyses to control for the effects of each ideal when establishing the mediating roles of both ideals.

In light of prior research and the arguments presented above, four hypotheses are made. First, internalisation of both the thin and athletic ideals will be positively associated with body dissatisfaction. Second, internalisation of both the thin and athletic ideals will mediate the relationship between media influence and body dissatisfaction, such that greater experienced media pressure will predict greater internalisation of the thin and athletic ideals, and in turn, greater body dissatisfaction. Third, internalisation of both the thin and athletic ideals will mediate the relationship between family influence and body dissatisfaction, such that greater experienced family pressure will predict greater internalisation of the thin and athletic ideals, and in turn, greater body dissatisfaction. Fourth, internalisation of both the thin and athletic ideals will mediate the relationship between peer influence and body dissatisfaction, such that greater experienced peer pressure will predict greater internalisation of the thin and athletic ideals, and in turn, greater body dissatisfaction.

Method

Participants

Table 1 outlines the demographic information of participants. Five hundred and forty-seven participants began the questionnaire. Due to either incomplete responses ($n = 71$), identification as male ($n = 12$), or being outside the age limits set by the study ($n = 43$), 126 of the original 547 participants were removed from analyses. The remaining participants were 421 women aged 17–40 years

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