

56 - FITNESS WEAR: THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE FEMALE BODY

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Female beauty has been heralded as a fundamental female quality in mass media. Newspaper and magazine articles, as well as TV programs, have supported this demand for beauty. Such productions sell and profit from the exploitation of the female body; mass media produce a specific body that may not be ideal for many women and that most of the female public is not able to build.

According to Del Priore (2000), "the identity of the female body corresponds to the balance of the beauty-health-youth triad [...] these are basically the three cultural conditions of fecundity and, therefore, of the survival of the species. In all cultures, women are the object of desire." Women have taken up the responsibility to control their own bodies along time, particularly in the 1960s during the so-called sexual revolution. At the same time, traces of submission to social demands and to the search for a specific body image still remain. For that purpose, the market has offered women increasing resources, such as drugs, fitness equipment, cosmetics, and has also provided body images to define current aesthetic standards.

The analysis conducted by Lipovetsky (in Couto, 2001) showed that a large number of women are influenced by an ideal of beauty created and supported by mass media. The search for self-esteem, as well as the fear to look different, the identification of characteristics that are similar to those of other individuals in a social group or of a certain life style, may all be factors that motivate human beings to change their bodies regardless of the sacrifices that it may require.

The circulation of ideas, concepts and products disseminates an ideal of happiness that is glorified in the free promotion of pleasure and solidly based on health and youth. In this era of narcissistic expression and discourses, advice on dieting, aesthetics and bodybuilding multiplies images and information and stresses the individual responsibility for the full management of self. The body as a spectacle becomes the simultaneous cause and effect of communications. (Couto 2001, p.37)

The body, which should be well cared for and intensely exhibited, is covered with meaningful elements in current society; it becomes a type of discourse, full of meanings that reflect current social characteristic, social ideals, culture and values. Such body, when well built, should be exhibited.

The ideal body found in society and disseminated by mass media may lead women to be dissatisfied with their real bodies; they may demand changes from themselves and use any available resources for that.

Mass media have built beauty images using not only body doubles, but also tools, such as Photoshop, which may change physical form, disguise imperfections and create a new woman that is different from the original woman and whose body shows desired characteristics that are, however, unattainable. Many women desire to have a body that is similar to the body that results from the manipulation of images, and also desire to meet the aesthetic standards dictated by fashion shows and top models.

According to Couto (2001), every person, stimulated by mass media, is expected to fight against time and against degeneration and functional obsolescence of the body. Analyzing the same topic, Kehl (2004) said that:

As a result of advertising and the cultural industry, the meaning of life has been reduced to the production of a body for thousands of Brazilians. The possibility of "creating" an ideal body with the help of technicians and chemists takes the place of the construction of a destiny, a path, a life's work. (Kehl, 2004, p.176)

Therefore, the construction of this ideal body is the aim of most of the population, but demands are stronger on the female population. Women are the most desired and seduced consumers in the eyes of the aesthetic and beauty industry. To meet current aesthetic standards, women today suffer more than their ancestors, who wore the hard and tight corsets popular up to the beginning of the 20th Century. In their search for beauty, they have to attend some type of fitness club and wear the fitness outfits required for the practice of physical activities.

A large number of articles and reports in mass media confirm this female concern. In April 2006, the *Marie Claire* magazine published an article under the title "Why does the world hate fat women?", which was based on the results of interviews with 9405 magazine readers. The most surprising fact in that report was that over half the interviewees (52%) said that gaining weight would be worse than losing their jobs. This result reflects the established social imaginary, as well as discrimination and the imposition of a certain shape to the beautiful female body. Weight maintenance is more important for women than, for example, losing a job; that is, the ideal body is sought after by women obstinately.

The magazine points out, however, to something that has been debated recently: the need to review aesthetic standards "suggested" for women so far. The magazine brings up some interesting questions as it reports on the anxiety of most women. For them, the standards demanded by mass media are practically impossible to meet and unhealthy, or demand surgical interventions to that often cause harm to their health.

According to Barros (1998), youth is synonymous with health, and recovering youth means restoring full and exuberant health. Health, as life, is subject to multiple environmental, instinctive, psychological factors and voluntary habits whose organic behavior is expressed by motivations and exterior drives.

According to Andrade (2003), along the 20th Century, the images of what is healthy and what is beautiful moved away from the concepts accepted in earlier ages. To have a healthy and beautiful body became an individual goal. That purpose now requires the exercise of intentional self-control, which demands will power, self-containment and constant vigilance.

In face of this reality, several commercials are shown on TV for products that promise weight loss, no extra calories, body transformation and, consequently, greater social acceptance as if by magic.

Aesthetic standardization and advertising.

Aesthetic standards, according to Coelho Filho (2003), may be beneficial when their purpose is personal improvement and when they help each person to accept himself/herself as unique in the universe. Contrarily, several people understand aesthetics as the insane search for beauty or an unreachable ideal.

For Queiroz (2000), several of the female and male characteristics associated with sexual attraction have been stressed by fashion and plastic surgery: silicone implants, liposuction, etc. The means are not important because aesthetic standards have to be met. Those who are fat, for example, end up being discriminated by society because obesity, associated with lack of health, is considered the evil of our century. Obesity may result in a number of diseases, such as hypertension, diabetes, arthritis. In our society, however, most people seem to think that fat people are sloppy.

Obese people, because of the bodybuilding trends, feel rejected and often depressed. According to Ullmann (2004), beauty became a human obsession; it has a high value in the seduction game, in social acceptance, in self-esteem and even in job selections. Does that mean that the "chubby" are condemned to being depressed, sick and lonely, or can they reverse the situation by trying to make up for that?

According to the author, in times of body idolatry as now, it is necessary to sculpt each muscle and eliminate each gram of extra fat, no matter at what price. Beauty is no longer a parameter; perfection is what is sought after. In its name, gallons of sweat and mountains of money are spent in fitness clubs. The cosmetics industry expands; there are waiting lists in weight loss programs and plastic surgery clinics; and plastic surgeries may even be paid for in several installments. Steroids are also taken to define and increase muscles in an attempt to speed up the process of body beautification.

However, most people that are unhappy with their weight are not obese. Some are overweight, usually middle-aged people whose hormone production is no longer as efficient as in youth; others are simply taller than most; but they are all in search of the fashionable body.

Corpo a Corpo and Boa Forma Magazines

To investigate how mass media depicted bodies, this study evaluated ads for fitness wear in two Brazilian health and beauty magazines: *Corpo a Corpo* and *Boa Forma*.

We analyzed one issue of each of these magazines and found several advertising texts that sold not only the "fitness club fashion" but also the desired fitness that is aimed at by people that work out in these clubs.

The fashion models in these ads are young women that have long hair, a tan, are carefully made up, and wear jewels and a watch as fitness wear accessories. Of the ads analyzed, only two showed women practicing some kind of physical exercise; all the others were photographed in static poses that emphasized the clothes and the model's body rather than the practice of a sport.

These ads placed emphasis on the physical form and followed an easily defined standard: a woman should be very thin, her body should be firm, but the muscles should not bulge; her breasts should be big even when the woman is thin, her stomach should be flat, the nails and hair should be carefully groomed.

The clothes worn by the models leave a large part of their body visible, which also suggests the results that fitness wear and sports practice may bring to women. At the same time, there seems to be a recurrence of aesthetic standards valued by society, regardless of the place where people are.

These discourses become a mirror for readers, who have a "dress well" manual in their hands to guide them about what to wear in fitness clubs or other places where sports are practiced. This type of fitness wear may not be restricted to the fitness club and may also be worn in other informal places.

Final considerations

We live in a society in which the construction of a healthy body image, regardless of its being actually healthy, demands that people should look beautiful and healthy. Therefore, fact and image are seen indistinctly because of the aesthetic standardization of everyday life and the influence of a culture of consumption. In this process, mass media create beauty and health icons and produce standards that should be followed although they often distort beauty and health.

The analysis of current body aesthetics shows that women stopped searching for health and are now exclusively concerned with the appearance of their bodies. Women are primarily concerned with physical appearance and their body beauty; they do not worry about the fact that this may affect their health. They seem to believe that beauty is fundamental to be seen with favorable eyes in their different social groups.

Women aestheticized their own bodies more than men, and they did it by wearing clothes, make-up and accessories and by sculpting their bodies in work-outs and diets. Each woman her own way defines her own understanding of female identity.

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FITNESS WEAR: THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE FEMALE BODY

Abstract:

This study analyzed the effect of mass media, particularly health and beauty magazines, on the construction and maintenance of current female aesthetic standards. The body is covered with meaningful elements in current society, and is read as a discourse full of intensions that reflect current social characteristic, social ideals, culture and values. Fitness wear, the object of analysis of this study, is one of the tools used by ads in the construction of such body.

Key words: Mass media; female body; aesthetic standards

FITNESS WEAR: LE DÉVELOPPEMENT DU CORPS DES FEMMES**Résumé:**

Cet article examine l'influence des médias, en particulier des magazines orientés à la santé et de beauté, en préparation ou d'entretien des normes esthétiques des femmes aujourd'hui. Aujourd'hui, le corps est présenté en compagnie d'éléments couverts significative, le texte devient chargé de sens, reflétant les caractéristiques sociales actuelles je mets en valeur les idéaux, la culture et les valeurs de la société. La salle de gym de même, l'aptitude d'usure, l'objet de l'analyse de cet article, est l'un des instruments utilisés par de la publicité pour la rédaction corps.

Mots-clés: médias, féminin corps, normes esthétiques

FITNESS WEAR: LA ELABORACIÓN DE CUERPOS FEMENINOS**Resumen:**

Este artículo analiza la influencia de la media, en especial de las revistas dirigidas a la salud y belleza, en la elaboración/mantención de patrones estéticos femeninos en la actualidad. Hoy, el cuerpo se presenta en la sociedad recubierto de elementos significativos, constituyéndose en un texto cargado de sentidos, reflejo de las características sociales actuales, exaltando los ideales, la cultura y los valores de la sociedad. La ropa de gimnasia, *fitness wear*, objeto de análisis de este artículo, es uno de los instrumentos utilizados por los anuncios publicitarios para esa elaboración corporal.

Palabras-clave: Media, Cuerpo femenino, Patrones estéticos

FITNESS WEAR: A ELABORAÇÃO DE CORPOS FEMININOS**Resumo:**

Este artigo analisa a influência da mídia, em especial das revistas voltadas à saúde e beleza, na elaboração/manutenção de padrões estéticos femininos na atualidade. Hoje, o corpo se apresenta na sociedade recoberto de elementos significativos, tornando-se texto carregado de sentidos, reflexo das características sociais atuais, prezando os ideais, a cultura e os valores da sociedade. A roupa de ginástica, a *fitness wear*, objeto de análise deste artigo, é um dos instrumentos utilizados pelos anúncios publicitários para essa elaboração corporal.

Palavras-chave: Mídia, Corpo feminino, Padrões estéticos