

**“Thinness as normal, normal as fat”: reflections on contemporary body and beauty standards****“A magreza como normal, o normal como gordo”: reflexões sobre corpo e padrões de beleza contemporâneos****“La delgadez como normal, lo normal como gordo”: reflexiones sobre el cuerpo y patrones de belleza contemporâneos****Received: 01/09/2018****Approved: 08/15/2018****Published: 05/11/2018****Ana Flávia de Sousa Silva<sup>1</sup>****Taiane Freitas Lima<sup>2</sup>****Camila Cremonesi Japur<sup>3</sup>****Mabel Gracia-Arnaiz<sup>4</sup>****Fernanda Rodrigues Oliveira Penaforte<sup>5</sup>**

The purpose of this article is to generate reflections about the body and the standards of beauty in present days that are interpenetrated by the influence of the media. This is a reflexive essay built upon the critical reading of studies that approached the theme. It discusses how excessive exposure to images of "perfect" bodies, widely publicized in the media, and the discrepancy between the ideals of beauty built by society in contrast with the physical reality of most people generates not only body dissatisfaction, but also important distortions in which bodies that until recently were considered excessively thin are now seen as "normal", and those considered as "normal" are now seen as "large" and "voluptuous". Given the density and complexity of the theme, reflections like these are fundamental to broaden its understanding.

**Descriptors:** Body image; Self-concept; Beauty; Fats.

O objetivo deste artigo é suscitar reflexões sobre o corpo e os padrões de beleza na atualidade, que estão interpenetrados pela influência da mídia. Trata-se de um ensaio reflexivo construído por meio da leitura crítica de estudos que abordavam a temática. Discorre sobre como a exposição excessiva as imagens de corpos "perfeitos", amplamente divulgados pela mídia, e a discrepância entre os ideais de beleza construídos pela sociedade frente a realidade corporal da maioria das pessoas, gera, além de insatisfação corporal, importantes distorções nas quais corpos que até pouco tempo eram considerados excessivamente magros sejam agora vistos como "normais"; e aqueles tido como "normais" passam a ser vistos como "grandes" e "com excesso de volume". Dada densidade e complexidade do tema, reflexões como estas são fundamentais para ampliar a sua compreensão.

**Descritores:** Imagem corporal; Autoimagem; Beleza; Gorduras.

El objetivo de este artículo es suscitar reflexiones sobre el cuerpo y los estándares de belleza en la actualidad, que están interpenetrados por la influencia de los medios sociales. Se trata de un ensayo reflexivo construido por medio de la lectura crítica de estudios que abordaban la temática. Discurre sobre cómo la exposición excesiva de las imágenes de cuerpos "perfectos", ampliamente divulgados por los medios sociales, y la discrepancia entre los ideales de belleza construidos por la sociedad frente a la realidad corporal de la mayoría de las personas, genera, además de la insatisfacción corporal, importantes distorsiones en las cuales cuerpos que hasta poco tiempo atrás eran considerados excesivamente delgados sean vistos ahora como "normales"; y aquellos tenidos como "normales" pasan a ser vistos como "grandes" y "con exceso de volumen". Dada la densidad y complejidad del tema, reflexiones como éstas son fundamentales para ampliar su comprensión.

**Descriptores:** Imagen corporal; Autoimagen; Belleza; Grasas.

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## INTRODUCTION

The body is the fruit of a social elaboration, and the attributes in which it must fit to be considered "beautiful" are, to a large extent, shaped by the bodily ideals and standards of beauty proposed by each society. The latter, in turn, due to their dynamic nature, present a variation in social, cultural and historical contexts<sup>1</sup>.

As the main link between the subject and the world, it is in the body that the relationship of the subject with society is materialized, becoming the arena where symbolic, political, cultural, ethnic, historical, religious and economic conflicts that reflect issues of the present time take place. In view of this, as a social construction, the ways of expression and of body perception have been changing over time in response to changes in society<sup>2</sup>.

The body plays an important role as a biological formwork constituent part of the bio-political-historical reality, with its perception and sensoriality constructed and reconstructed from time to time based on political changes of each moment. Such changes are immersed not only in biological, but also historical factors<sup>3</sup>.

The body can be understood a biological formwork shaped by society, and this makes it (the body) a way of understanding social phenomena<sup>3</sup>. In this sense, body expressions reveal sociocultural logics, and:

*"[...] the production of meanings about the image of the body and the perception that the subject has of the own body is at the same time individual and collective; it operates in the social sphere, but is not limited to it. It develops beyond the individual, from interpersonal relationships or intra-family complexes, blending pre-verbal intensities, affections, and social codes of conduct"*<sup>2</sup>.

In this light, with the changes in the socio-historical context that have occurred throughout the twentieth century and in the contemporary world, the body has gained a freedom that hides a complex system of vigilance and punishment to those who do not fit the ideals of beauty imposed by the market<sup>3</sup>.

Leanness, which in the past used to symbolize weakness and scarcity of food, is now valued as a dominant model and is seen as something to be sought by everyone, regardless of class, ethnicity, or gender, to satisfy a desire that is not proper to its nature but that is regarded as a condition for inclusion in society. At the same time, fatness that has already been linked to abundance, wealth and power is today stigmatized and seen as something morally unacceptable, against the hegemony of thinness<sup>4</sup>.

Contrary to socially stipulated standards, massively promoted by the media as beautiful and ideal, equating beauty with thinness, the current epidemiological scenario shows that overweight and obesity have unprecedented high rates nowadays<sup>5</sup>, making this situation one of the great contemporary paradoxes.

The construction of self-image is adjusted by a perception that incorporates social and cultural patterns of body and beauty into this construction. In this sense, the perception and satisfaction with the self-image is modulated by the socially constructed norm of a lean and slim body as a reference of beauty; and not by what is predominantly seen on the streets<sup>6</sup>. Thus, it is perceived that the current discourse involving obesity as a chronic disease was consecrated mainly by what is morally acceptable, disguised under a discourse about health<sup>7</sup>.

At other times, subjects such as body and beauty patterns were considered futile themes to be studied<sup>8</sup>. However, debates aimed at embracing reflections on corporeality, culture and advertising influences as potential sources in the constitution of an individual, and also collective, subjectivity have advanced, especially in the Brazilian culture<sup>9</sup>. The purpose of this article is to elicit reflections about the body and standards of beauty in modern days, which are interpenetrated by the influence of the media.

## METHOD

This study is a reflexive essay on the relations between body, beauty standards and media in contemporary times. This study was based on

authors who work and/or research about the proposed theme.

## RESULTS

Through the reading of the scientific works that make up the present reflection article, and after the exploration of the material, the discussion was organized in the following thematic axes: "Thinness as normal and normal as fat".

## DISCUSSION

### *Thinness as normal and normal as fat*

The construction of the concept of ideal body, as well as the way the own body is perceived by people, is capillarized by social and cultural influences established in a particular historical context<sup>7</sup>, and social relations can be shaped according to the way the body is: idealized, desired and perceived<sup>1,10</sup>.

Internalization of aesthetic standards and ideals is largely modeled by factors that are external to the subject<sup>1</sup>. Individuals are socialized within the core of a particular culture and this is a strong regulatory mechanism of human behavior, and it is inevitable that they internalize and share attitudes, beliefs, and values that are common to that culture and handed down over the generations.

Individuals shape their actions in terms of what the culture considers to be "normal" and acceptable in their social environment, seeking to meet the requirements demanded by the culture to which they belong. Therefore, it can be said that the construction of the concept of an ideal body that is currently translated by the "deification" of a lean body, is a social and cultural construction<sup>11</sup>.

Since ancient times, the concern to have a beautiful body is been present in humankind. A remarkable step in the fashion/beauty market took place in the United States in 1921 when the first beauty contest was launched, where misses began to become examples of bodily perfection, and social and economic power. The contest gained a wide nomenclature in 1926 with the International Beauty Contest, in which the

champion would gain the title of *Miss Universe*.

Later, in 1952, the event became the *Miss Universe Contest*, one of the most viewed events in the world. From that decade on, the body lives and participates in this event as "bearer-vector-exhibitor of the most intense contemporary paradoxes and it shows to be both strengthened and weakened"<sup>12</sup>. According to the official website of the *Miss Universe* (2017) event:

*"The Miss Universe Organization is a company run by women for women, built on a foundation of inclusion and continues to be a celebration of diversity. Annually, nearly ten thousand young women participate in Miss Universe pageant events. The mission of the organization is to provide the tools which help women to be their personal best. Self-confidence is the key. Every woman should have the confidence to stand up in any situation and declare, "I am secure and that's what makes me beautiful!"<sup>13</sup>.*

The event is defined as a company run by women for women that aims to celebrate diversity. However, what happened in the last *Miss Universe* contest, in 2017, points out just the opposite. *Miss Canada Siera Bearchell*, with is 1.75m i tall and weighs 60kg was the target of countless offenses and biased comments in virtual environments, such as: "she does not have the body of a *miss*", "fat", "chubby", "she is above the body standards of the contest", "she should not be participating in a contest of that nature", and even that "she was there to meet the quota of participation of chubby girls in the contest."

This episode raises an important reflection on the sickness that the tyranny of the current corporal standards has generated. Excessive exposure to slimmer bodies leads to internalizing this body pattern of excessive thinness as normal, and contaminates what is meant by a beautiful body.

It is possible to say that a "normal" body is something relative. Excessive exposure to extreme thinness, bodies that until recently were considered "normal" are now seen as "large" and "voluptuous", and bodies that were thought to be dangerously thin, at the borderline between health and disease, are now seen as "normal".

Moreover, it is evident that contrary to what is being spread by the organizers, the

*Miss Universe* is far from being an event that celebrates bodily diversity. It actually reflects the same understanding of contemporary society that deems an (increasingly) thin body as the ideal and undisputed beauty standard, without space or tolerance for bodily diversity. Not only the misses who participate in beauty contests, but all women should squeeze to fit in this "miss body", socially understood as a body that should be extremely thin, slim and fat-free, even though this it is out of the reach for the vast majority of the population and does not encompass the diversity of body shapes of contemporary world.

What is considered healthy, at present, has a direct relation with the lean physical shape<sup>10</sup>. Tolerance of fat bodies has so drastically decreased that it now falls into a category of exclusion. In this perspective, a fat body, in contemporary society, is despised and seen as out of the standard and synonymous with disease, and also a moral failure, whereas a lean body is seen as a success and provides social status, despite the cases where that thinness is at the threshold of health and disease<sup>14</sup>.

Besides this stigmatization, it is worth remembering that the influence and demands imposed by the media on the ideal physical type which is unattainable most of the time and for most people. It rather generates feelings of frustration, guilt, shame and dissatisfaction. This situation can trigger physical and psychic disorders such as eating disorders, depression, low self-esteem, anxiety, increased aesthetic plastic surgeries, decreased quality of life and even suicidal ideation<sup>15</sup>.

On the other hand, it is intriguing to think that the same society that condemns obesity, using a biological health-based discourse, promotes an enormous tolerance towards malnourished, "curvy" and anabolic bodies that may actually be as sick as, or even sicker than obese bodies.

From this point of view, it can be inferred that if there was no exposure to the norm that regulates how the body and beauty should be, the perception would be basically modulated by what is seen on the streets and

verified by statistics. In this sense, satisfaction with the body would be more influenced by the predominance of what is common. However, it seems that the propagated image conveys more information more than the observed reality<sup>6</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

The social construction of the body is much broader and more complex, because the history of the body is the very history of civilization. The senses attributed to the body image and the perception that the subject has of the own body is at the same time an individual and collective process, and although operates in the social sphere, is not limited to it.

We observe that excessive exposure to increasingly thin bodies has caused an altered perception of our own bodies and of the bodies of the others, with distortions that lead us to consider bodies that were considered "normal" as "large", and bodies that were formerly were on the borderline between health and disease, due to excessive thinness, are now seen as beautiful and objects of desire.

It is essential to deepen the reflections on the concept of ideal body, and deconstruct the notion of "beautiful body as synonymous with lean body". Such a notion, so forcefully imposed by the media and reinforced by the social sphere, seems to have contaminated the notions of normality in relation to body weight.

This reflection also highlights the importance of fostering discussions about body, corporeality, obesity and stigma, and to incorporate the theme of corporal acceptance in health promotion approaches.

It is essential that health professionals approach issues related to body shape from a global perspective of health, both physical and mental health. Ridiculing and discriminating fat bodies does not stimulate or motivate the engagement in any process of change. On the contrary, it may trigger serious and profound negative effects on the health of the individuals. The process of (self)-acceptance regarding body image should not be confused with laziness, neglect or conformism, and it is

an essential tool for the process of effective and change-promoting self-care.

There is a socially constructed link between the lean body and the healthy body that is constantly reaffirmed by society, especially through the media. The association of the lean body with the healthy body creates, therefore, a contrary connection of the fat body with illness, carelessness and laziness.

This "fat-phobia" that comes disguised of concern with health leads to negative repercussions for the physical and mental health of the individuals. In this crossroads between the biological and the symbolic aspect, it seems that, having a thin and slender body is more important than health - symbolizing control/discipline, and beauty, especially in the eyes of others.

The reflections discussed here are far from exhaustive in the discussions about this topic, given their density and complexity, but they are fundamental to broaden its understanding.

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## CONTRIBUTIONS

**Ana Flávia de Souza Silva, Taine Freitas Lima** contributed to the analysis and interpretation of the article and the writing. **Camila Cremozeni Japur e Mabel Gracia Arnaiz** worked on writing and reviewing. **Fernanda Rodriguez Oliveira Penaforte** participated in the conception of the study, in the analysis and interpretation of data, writing and review.