

# Ideal body in the assessments of a large city students' youth

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**Abstract**— The article reveals what students think about an ideal body and discusses some cutting edge body design trends. The human body is a project that can change throughout life in accordance with the image that is formed in the process of socialization and that is formed in the context of a specific social and cultural environment. Industries are being created and developed to meet the individual's needs in required physicality. Our study was conducted in 2019 in Yekaterinburg. Its object is students of a humanitarian undergraduate program (n = 37). The primary data was collected using semi-structured interviews. Twenty three freshmen (20 – girls and 3 - boys) and fourteen fourth-year students (11 girls and 3 boys) were interviewed. The results of the study have shown that masculine features such as physical strength and athletic figure dominate in the ideal image of the male body. The female image of the body is primarily associated with clean look and cared-for look. The main practices of body design are physical activity, sports and a balanced diet. At the same time, students believe that practices such as aesthetic surgery and uncontrolled diets can have a negative impact on health.

**Keywords**—body, ideal body image, design body practices, students

## I. INTRODUCTION

In modern scientific literature, there is an increase in interest in the study of the body, physicality, body techniques and design practices. Said issue is actualized in the last mid-century Western researchers' classical works such as M. Merleau-Ponty [1], E Goffman [2], J. Baudrillard [3], M. Mauss [4]. P. Schilder's [5] considers the image of the body as a human's experience of his\her body. The body image is a psychological image that develops in the process of human being interaction with other people. According to T. Cash [6], the body image appears as a result of interactions between the thoughts, beliefs, sensations and behavior of an individual associated with his\her own body. The assessment of one's body as being the ideal image, which corresponds to a social and cultural context, determines the position and the status of an individual in a specific social group and in the society as a whole. [7].

Today, such a subject area as sociology of the body has received institutional development [8,9,10]. Such sociologists as E. Reischer and K.S. Koo [11], analyzing modern theoretical approaches to the study of a body, identify two leading directions for the interpretation of the

body: "symbolic body" and "body-agent". The first direction focuses on the symbolic meaning of the body as a space for social values. The second direction emphasizes the role of the body as an active participant in the social world. The body is the first thing that is perceived in social interaction and it is a condition for the formation of social relations. Ideal models become the basis for copying, while, as noted by D. Carlson Jones [12], negative self-esteem is formed when comparing oneself with ideal images.

We believe that the ideal body image is a multidimensional design that describes the ideas about the structure of the body and appearance in relation to himself\herself and others [13,14]. The process of formation an ideal body image can depend on gender, age and media, as well as beliefs, values and culture in general [15,16]. For example, the media exert pressure by proposing standards of attractiveness through replicating the bodies of slender women and muscular men [17,18]. Thus, the inconsistency of his\her body with an ideal image leads to deterioration the life quality for women aged 18 to 42 years [19].

The ideal body image is a lifelong process [20]. The human body is constantly changing from birth-and-death process. In this case, the body can be the object of control and manipulation. It is manifested, firstly, in following the social norms of the standards of beauty and health and secondly, in transferring care and responsibility for the body to experts (cosmetologists, surgeons, nutritionists, etc.). In this case, it is rather the control of specialists such as doctors and technologists over the human body. M. Foucault [21] notes that control extends to many public areas. For example, one can control the behavior of people in extreme situations or control the gait of schoolchildren in accordance with certain standards.

The image of the ideal body changes in certain contexts [22]. Individuals following cultural patterns of physicality seek to modify their body without medical prescriptions. The ideal body image, thus, becomes an independent value, which people are guided in their lives, forming a variety of practices, including those that cause harm to their own health. Dissatisfaction with one's own body and the "race" for the ideal may be one of the main reasons why people are involved in various practices of modifying and designing their physicality.

The development of body design practices is associated with advances in biotechnology and medicine. Today it is

possible to design one's body through plastic surgery [23, 24], various diets [25, 26], exercise and sports [27, 28]. The individual is increasingly given opportunities for bodily transformations.

## II. MATERIALS AND METHODS (MODEL)

The study used a qualitative strategy. The major research objective was to study student's ideas about the ideal body image. The primary data was collected using semi-structured interviews. Thirty seven students of a humanitarian undergraduate program of the Ural Federal University named after the first President of Russia B. N. Eltsin were interviewed. Twenty three freshmen (20 – girls and 3 – boys) and fourteen fourth year students (11 girls and 3 boys) were interviewed. The interviews with the students were conducted in April 2019 at the university during student's spare time.

The authors created a semi-structured interview guide with a predominance of open questions. The interview process was guided by designed questions as follows: 1. Describe the ideal images of the male body and the female body 2. What practices are used to form the ideal body image? 3. What practices of forming an ideal body image are the most dangerous? 4. What are the practices of constructing an ideal body image are the least dangerous? In all the questions the respondents had the opportunity to independently formulate their own opinion.

The next step in the study was the transcription of interview texts. The respondents' answers to the same questions were grouped after the transcript of the interview. Such a grouping made it possible to identify the commonality and specificity of the respondents' answers that facilitated the interpretation of the responses received by the respondents.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Male's ideal body image was estimated by the students as follows. The male body should be, above all, athletic. An athletic body for students is also a pattern of masculinity that allows one to demonstrate the male principle in everyday practices: *"a man must be muscular and athletic, his body must demonstrate strength"* (female, a 4th-year student). In this perspective, one can observe traditional ideas about male physicality in line with hegemonic masculinity, the main features of which are commonly referred to as heterosexuality and body strength [29]. The ideal of the male body in the ideas of students is also connected with health: *"the ideal body of a man is a healthy body"* (female, a freshman). *Health is an attribute of endurance and feasibility. Every second respondent talks about these qualities: "a man must be healthy in order to perform all the necessary functions, his body must be resilient ..."* (female, a 4th year student).

It is important to highlight that along with the above characteristics of the ideal image of the male body, other properties are also present in the views of modern students. We are talking about such attributes of male physicality as his height (*"a man must be at least 180 cm ..."* (female, a freshman), *the presence of a beard or mustache ("... a beard is possible ..."* (female, a freshman), tattoos (*"I like tattoos, I*

*don't mind if my young man has them"* (female, a freshman), *hair color, eyes and skin ("dark hair, blue eyes and not dark skin ..."* (female, a freshman). Such an approach to male physicality demonstrates the increasing spread of "unisex" as a social phenomenon that equates the men and women positions. It should be noted that if the freshmen give preference to such indicators of masculinity as height, weight and body proportionality, etc., then by the fourth-year students determine the male body through its functionality: a hard-working body, an enduring body and a strong body.

Much attention should be paid to the ideal characteristics of male physicality associated with tidiness. One of the informants points out that *"... everyone has his own idea of the ideal body: someone likes a "dry" body, someone prefers a lot of muscles, someone likes "volumes", and someone prefers "bones". I believe that a man should be tidy, he should have well-groomed hands and nails, his teeth should be even, the skin should be clean ..."* (female, a 4th-year student). Such an approach to male physicality highlights again the increasing spread of "unisex" as a social phenomenon that equates the positions of men and women. It demonstrates the transformation of masculinity and the gradual obsolescence of the "real man" image.

The study has shown that respondents attribute the ideal female body, first of all, to accuracy and cleanliness. The point is that the female body should be well-groomed: clean hands, clean skin and clean hair, etc. The purity of the body indicates, according to the respondents, that the girl takes care of her body, treats it carefully. *"A girl should be neat to look at her body, she should not cause disgust, for example, with dirt under her nails, or her hair stuck together ..."* (male, a 4th-year student).

Smartness and well-set-up characterizes the attractiveness of the female body. At the same time, respondents emphasize that the body should not be thin as lath. *"A girl should be slim, but not thin as a lash, because it is not relevant today. A very thin body is a sign of ill health"*(female, a 4th-year student).

The study has found that the healthy body for both men and women as an ideal is noted by all the respondents. *"The ideal body for both men and women should be in the framework in which it will not do damage to health"* (male, a 4-year student). This is an important characteristic of physicality since the use of body construction practices can cause irreparable damage to health.

According to the respondents, plastic surgery is the most dangerous practice of body design. Researchers associate the growing popularity of plastic and aesthetic procedures with the need of the individual to conform to the ideal image [30]. In fact, the only reasonable solution for performing aesthetic plastic surgery is to improve the individual's psychological well-being [31]. Appeal to aesthetic surgery, including students, is associated with dissatisfaction with their own appearance and difficulties in interacting with other people [32]. The result of manipulations of a plastic surgeon, as studies show, is ambiguous in patient evaluations. Some researchers believe that operations improve psychological well-being and a positive perception of a new body is observed [33], other researchers have

revealed the fact of dissatisfaction with the body after the intervention of a doctor [34].

Another practice that may be unsafe for an individual's health is the uncontrolled eating behavior by specialists that is a diet. *"Very often, due to the fact that people begin to lose weight, they do not see the measure; they follow the very hard diets, showboat themselves and drink diet pills ... It is very, very injuring for the body"* (female, a 4th-year student). Unfortunately, diet as a set of rules for the use of food by a person, aimed at preserving health, is changing significantly today. Diets are considered as a universal way of body design with the lowest physical cost. Studies show that there is a link between the internal composition of the diet and the metabolic state of the human body. At the same time, its long-lasting violation leads to functional and organic disorders in the digestive system, blood circulation, bone tissue, the immune system, and human intelligence.

According to the respondents, among the practices of body design, the least dangerous to health is exercise and physical activity. At the same time, students emphasize that physical activity should be carried out *"... without fanaticism, everything is in moderation, the main thing is not to injure yourself..."* (female, a freshman).

What practices of body design do modern students use? First of all, students turn to physical culture and sports practices: they do fitness, do exercises, and jog in the morning and evening. *"The best designer of the body is sport. If we put together the right training and nutrition program, we can achieve good results without injuring our health"* (female, a freshman).

According to the respondents, it contributes to the formation of a lean and slim body that will be in demand both from the opposite sex and from other people who will meet on the life journey. *"... activity and movement will lead to the fact that a person will be less sick, and he/she will not have problems associated, for example, with the selection of the right size clothing. In addition, based on current public opinion, those people who are "in shape" are more easily attracted to themselves"* (male, a 4<sup>th</sup>-year student).

Another practice is the practice of balanced proper nutrition. *"... I do not say the word diet; I advocate a balanced diet, I consider, for example, bread, fats and carbohydrates, which the body should receive. It helps to construct a figure"* (female, a freshman). In addition, female students are turning to cosmetologists. *"... I sometimes go to the beautician for face peeling and eyebrow correction, etc. I think that a girl should look after her face because this is her hallmark of success"* (female, a 4<sup>th</sup>-year student).

The ideal body is the image that modern students aspire to. *"I work on myself and my body, I want to look and feel comfortable"* (female, a freshman). At the same time, every fourth respondent notes that he/she does not strive for modeling his/her physicality: *"... There is a lack of need to chase after an ideal body"* (female, a freshman); *"There is nothing worse than a mad pursuit of a perfect body"* (female, a 4<sup>th</sup>-year student).

Biologically defined body does not require improvement. Today we are witnessing the formation and development of social movements aimed at preserving the nature of a given physicality. For example, supporters of

Body Positive are in favor of a positive attitude towards a biologically given body. People need to free themselves from the criticism and public condemnation of their own body in order to hear the needs of the body and love it [35].

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Research materials have led to the following conclusions. Firstly, the physical body is the primary, nature object, which is transformed into the social body in the process of maturation, socialization and the adoption of certain socio-cultural norms by the individual. The body is an unfinished project that they work on throughout their lives. Secondly, the ideal image of the male body is connected, first of all, with such masculine properties as physical strength and athletic body. Meanwhile, there is a transition to a gender-neutral image, associated with cleanliness, tidiness and grooming. This is the image of the ideal female body represented by students. This image serves as a marker of the woman's care of her body. Thirdly, students use such body design practices as physical education and sports as well as a balanced diet. These practices are the most secure. The respondents attributed plastic aesthetic operations and the use of diets without the control of doctors to the number of health risks. In general, in the ideas of students, the body must be healthy, and the practice of its design is primarily health-saving.

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