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Beyond Desirable in North America: an examination of actual and ideal body preferences, and body attractiveness preferences in a heterosexual sample of men and women from the USA

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Abstract
A recent Australian study demonstrated that both men and women want to have less body fat and more muscularity than they perceived that they had, and that men and women's body ideals are more extreme than the opposite sex finds most attractive. The present study aimed to provide more evidence for the discrepancy between self-reported actual and ideal body fat and muscularity. Further, the present study aimed to explore the relationship between ideal bodies, and the bodies reported to be most attractive by the opposite sex by examining a sample of heterosexual North American men and women. Using data from 362 participants recruited through Amazon's MTurk, this study employed figural rating scales to assess participants' actual and ideal body fat and muscularity, as well as their perceptions of the most attractive body for the opposite sex. Results showed that men wanted to have less body fat and more muscularity, and women wanted to have less body fat than they perceived themselves to have. Additionally, results showed that men's ideal body was in-line with women's preferences. However, analogous to prior research in an Australian sample, women wanted to be thinner than what men found most attractive. These findings underscore the importance of addressing body dissatisfaction and promoting healthy body image ideals. Future interventions should focus on challenging societal beauty standards and promoting body acceptance, taking into account the influence of media and social factors on body image perceptions and preferences.

Negative body image—distorted perception and dissatisfaction with one's own body—is linked to negative outcomes including disordered eating behaviours [1] and depression [2]. Two factors that, in combination, contribute to the development of negative body image are an overvaluation of one's body image (most commonly measured through self-report questionnaires such as the Eating Disorder Examination-Questionnaire [3]) and a discrepancy between one's actual and ideal body. Over the past three decades, this actual-ideal discrepancy has been examined with various figural rating scales (pictorial scales presenting images of bodies varying in adiposity and muscle size/shape), generally showing that both women [4–7] and men [8–10] want to have less body fat and more muscularity than they perceived that they had (i.e., their actual and ideal bodies did not align, and they desired a body in the direction of the 'ideal' body). Recently, Talbot and Mahlberg [11] demonstrated this actual-ideal discrepancy in heterosexual Australian men and women. Additionally, they showed that women's body ideals are thinner than what men prefer, and men wanted to be more muscular and have less fat compared to what women prefer. These findings are of significant concern as the extent of the discrepancy between actual and ideal body image is strongly associated with eating disorder psychopathology [6].

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The present study aimed to extend Talbot and Mahlberg's [11] study by providing more evidence for the discrepancy between actual and ideal body fat and muscularity, and the relationship between ideal bodies, and the bodies reported to be most attractive by the opposite sex in a sample of heterosexual men and women from the USA. Given similar body ideals are reported across Western culture [12], it was hypothesised (H1) that participants would want to have less body fat and be more muscular than they perceived themselves to be. Second, it was hypothesised (H2) that women would want their own bodies to be thinner than what men found most attractive, and men would want their own bodies to have less fat and more muscularity compared to what women found most attractive.

1 Method

This study utilised data from a larger project aimed at understanding the role of body image and personality (Ethics approval ID = 2021-010S) and included 362 consenting heterosexual participants (62% male) from the USA recruited through Amazon's MTurk. Participants were aged between 22 and 72 years ($M = 36.40$, $SD = 9.99$), primarily identified as White (73.40%), and had an average BMI of 26.00 ($SD = 6.24$).

Measures were identical to that of Talbot and Mahlberg [11], including two figural rating scales: the Somatomorphic Matrix-Female [13], and the New Somatomorphic Matrix-Male [14]. Each scale presented 34 figures varying in body fat and muscularity, with each dimension scored from 1 to 10 (Fig. 1). Participants rated their actual and ideal body on the scale congruent to their sex, and rated the body that they found most attractive on the scale incongruent to their sex.

Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were used to examine the differences between actual and ideal body fat and muscularity. Two Mann–Whitney U tests were performed to examine differences in men's self-selected ideal body fat and muscularity ratings compared to ideal body fat and muscularity preferences for men's bodies from women. An identical analytic

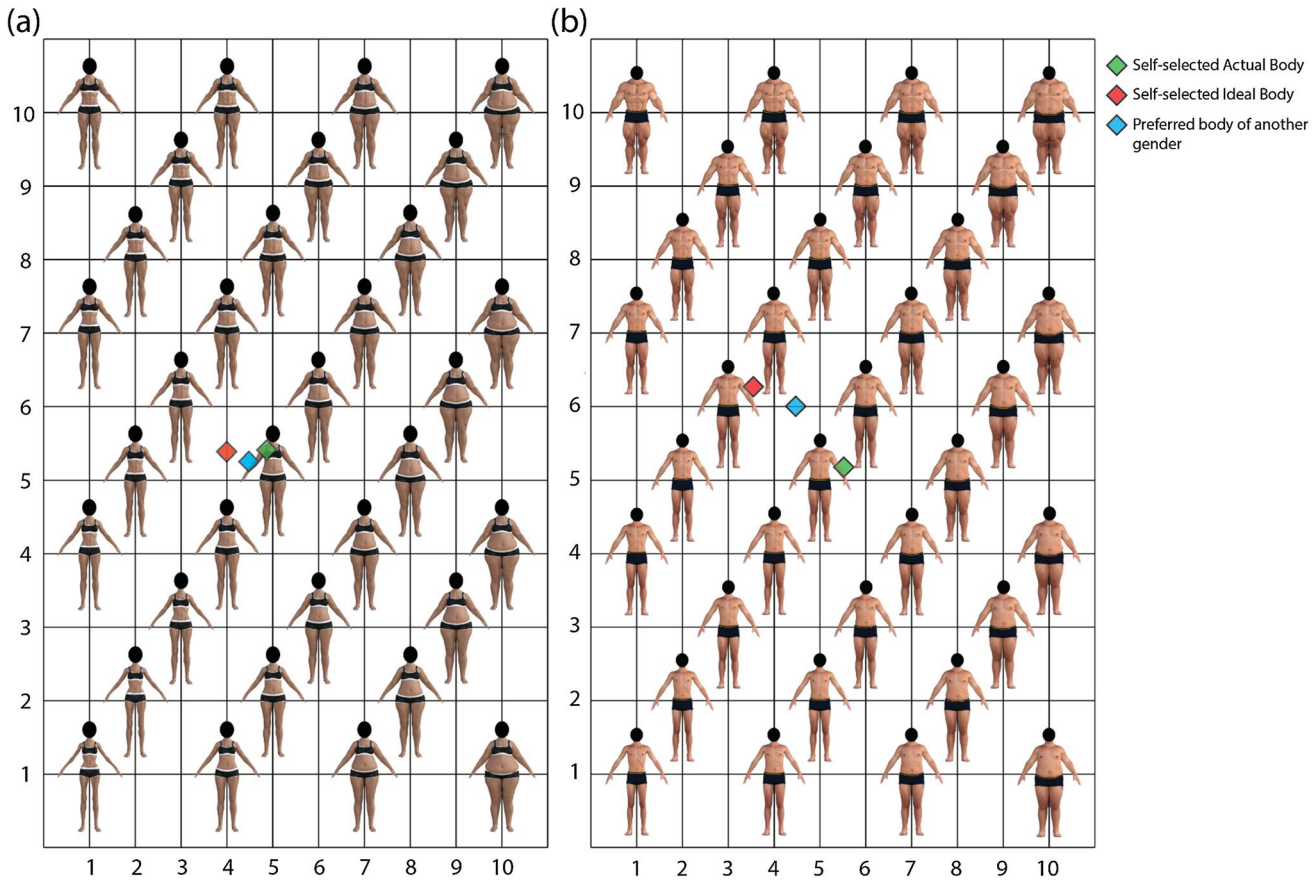

Fig. 1 **a** Means of actual and ideal bodies as selected by women, and the mean female body that men found most attractive. **b** Means of actual and ideal bodies as selected by men, and the mean male body that women found most attractive

strategy was used for female participants: women's self-selected ideal body fat and muscularity ratings were compared to ratings from men.

2 Results

Results showed that men's actual body fat was higher than their ideal body fat ($W = 9473$, $p < 0.001$, $r_{bs} = 0.53$), and their actual muscularity was lower than their ideal muscularity, $W = 2450$, $p < 0.001$, $r_{bs} = -0.61$). Similarly, women's actual body fat was higher than their ideal body fat ($W = 3757$, $p < 0.001$, $r_{bs} = 0.61$), however there was no difference between their actual and ideal muscularity ($W = 2340$, $p = 0.896$, $r_{bs} = -0.02$). Descriptives are displayed in Table 1.

Additionally for men, there was no difference between their ideal body and the male body that women found most attractive for both body fat ($U = 14{,}996$, $p = 0.695$, $r_{bs} = 0.02$) and muscularity ($U = 14{,}386$, $p = 0.303$, $r_{bs} = 0.06$). Results showed that women wanted less body fat than men found attractive ($U = 13{,}086$, $p < 0.05$, $r_{bs} = 0.15$). However, there was no difference between women's self-selected ideal muscularity and the level of muscularity that men found most attractive ($U = 15{,}273$, $p = 0.921$, $r_{bs} = 0.01$).

3 Discussion

This study aimed to extend the findings of Talbot and Mahlberg's [11] study using a North American sample. H1 was partially supported, showing that men wanted to have less body fat and more muscularity, and women wanted to have less body fat than they perceived themselves to have. Notably, differing from that found by Talbot and Mahlberg [11], there was no discrepancy between women's actual and ideal muscularity. This might represent a generational difference in ideal body preferences as the present study examined an older cohort ($M_{age} = 36.40$) compared to that of Talbot and Mahlberg [11] ($M_{age} = 21.23$). Given that the fit female ideal is a newly endorsed Western ideal [15], it may be that an older cohort is focused more on being thinner than being toned.

Results partially supported H2. Unlike that reported by Talbot and Mahlberg [11], men's ideal body was in-line with women's preferences. However, analogous to Talbot and Mahlberg [11], women wanted to be thinner than what men found most attractive. This result aligns with the more historic notion of body image that women must be thin to be considered attractive [16], and might reflect that societal pressures on women to be thin are more deeply ingrained in Western society and therefore more consistent across different Western nations compared to body image expectations on men.

Limitations of this study are noted. First, the sample size was small and only included heterosexual people, thus limiting generalizability. Second, the sample was on average 15 years older than those in the comparator Australian study, which may have accounted for some differences in body image selections between the samples. Third, given the differences in body ideals across different nations/cultures [17], researchers should be cautious about generalising these results to non-Western countries.

In sum, the findings of this study provide additional evidence for the discrepancy between actual and ideal bodies, as well as the relationship between ideal bodies and attractiveness preferences. These results highlight the importance of

Table 1 Descriptive statistics for actual and ideal bodies, preferred body of another sex

	Men ($n = 226$)		Women ($n = 136$)	
	M (*SD*)	Range	M (*SD*)	Range
Actual body fat	5.41 (1.91)	2–10	4.91 (1.77)	2–10
Actual muscularity	5.17 (2.04)	1–10	5.42 (2.31)	2–10
Ideal body fat	4.57 (2.04)	2–10	4.03 (1.41)	2–9
Ideal muscularity	6.23 (1.99)	2–10	5.43 (2.38)	2–10
Body fat preference	4.48 (1.67)	1–10	4.44 (1.60)	2–9
Muscularity preference	5.38 (2.12)	2–10	6.01 (2.00)	2–10

Comparisons across ratings on male and female bodies are not appropriate due to sex differences in muscle and body fat size and shape (i.e., a rating of '3' on the NSM-M is not equivalent to a rating of '3' on the SM-F)

addressing body dissatisfaction and promoting healthy body image ideals. It also opens pathways for the potential role of psychoeducation – if individuals are made aware that their ideal body is more extreme than what the other sex finds attractive, it might contribute to a healthier self-perception of their current body. Future interventions should focus on challenging societal beauty standards and promoting body acceptance, considering the influence of media and social factors on body image perceptions and preferences.

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Data availability Data will be made available by author on request.

Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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