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'Hercules and Xena' or 'Ken and Barbie': Males' and Females' Descriptions of the "Perfect Male" and the "Perfect Female" Bodies

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The aim of this study was to examine what men and women consider to be the ideal body for both sexes, as well as the role their overall body esteem and susceptibility to body-related mass media might play in constructing these ideals. College students (N = 287) completed surveys measures of body esteem and their susceptibility to appearance-related mass media messages. They also provided written descriptions of the "perfect male" and "perfect female" bodies. Two coders independently coded the extent to which those descriptions reflected emphasis of six dimensions of body image: Muscularity/Apparent Fitness, Thinness-Roundness, Height, Hair, Facial Features/Skin, and Specific Sexual Body Parts (e.g., breasts, buttocks). Percent agreement between the two coders was not less than 90% for any single dimension. Analyses of the distributions of the emphasis codes for each dimension yielded a number of interesting patterns: females' descriptions reflected use of more dimensions, and more specific use of them, not only for the "perfect female body," but for the "perfect male body" as well. Males and females who reported more susceptibility to media influence tended to emphasize common features when describing the "perfect" bodies, namely musculature/fitness in men and thinness in women. Although both sexes agreed for the most part on what makes for an ideal female body (with the exception of Specific Sexual Body Parts, which was emphasized more strongly by men), there was less agreement concerning male physical perfection. Interestingly, females stressed the importance of musculature to a greater extent in both sexes than did males. It seems that, even though mass media models appear to reinforce the stereotype of the muscular man and the thin woman, this scheme requires further qualifications. For instance, thinness also played a role in conceptions of "perfect male" bodies, while fitness and muscularity did so for "perfect female" bodies. It may be that for both sexes, a balance between being thin and muscular represents the ideal.