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Mediatizing the naked truth - A re-conceptualisation of the ideal beach body in contemporary media

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This theoretical paper aims to deliver a new and enhanced definition of the ideal beach body based upon an extensive interdisciplinary literature review. It argues that the beach body theoretically comprises of two basic forms: (1) The *real beach body* as it appears on the beach and (2) the *mediatized beach body*, i.e. the one that prevails in the media.

An extended interdisciplinary perspective on this topic is relevant to inform future research as the ideal beach body commonly appears as a somewhat self-explaining, repetitively, and pervasively mass-communicated term on multiple channels. Past research has predominantly discussed the beach body's traditional function in the context of holiday and tourism consumption, while its prevalence in the media and impact on body image concerns is also noticed (e.g. Pritchard et al. 2007). Still, a lack of understanding exists regarding the growing usage of digital media and advanced communication technologies, which provide endless opportunities for women both to consume and actively communicate information and images regarding the beach body (Aguayo & Calvert, 2013).

In order to further conceptualize the real and the mediatized beach body in an interdisciplinary way, this paper proposes three dimensions that are based upon existing theories and findings in the broader fields of digital media, tourism and body image: (1) Exposure/nudity, (2) controllability/measurability, and (3) seasonality/temporariness.

When discussing the real beach body, its exposure occurs to a limited live audience on the beach. Secondly, its controllability is considered limited, as the beach can indeed be chosen, but it is also a public place of body reality, where nothing can easily be hidden or concealed (Joye, 2013). Likewise, physical exposure necessarily complies with women's actual self (Higgins, 1987). Thirdly, existing literature limits the beach body season in real life greatly to pre-holiday preparations and the duration of stay (Jordan, 2007).

In contrast, the *mediatized beach body* is one that both individuals and marketers expose to a mostly unlimited media audience. It allows for higher degrees of controllability as pictures can be intentionally chosen and digitally altered before exposing them to the public. This enables particularly women to present an idealized appearance to others (Manago et al. 2008) and is often cultivated by socio-cultural standards of beauty (Hughes, 1980). Moreover, digital tools like self-tracking apps facilitate quantifiable measurements of the beach body and can also reinforce processes of social comparison (Lupton 2015, 13). Finally, especially in the online media, no seasonality exists, as beach body discussions are always and anytime accessible.

While this paper presents a purely theoretical approach, further research may test the applicability of its conceptualization using primary data by investigating

potential sub-forms of the beach body, e.g. a mediatized one that appears in a non-idealized (realistic-looking) form.