

## Beyond Eurocentric Imaginary Body

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### Abstract

*This paper aims to characterize the Body Imaginary as an evolving concept, considering its subjectivity and undeniable current presence yet rooted in a history of conquest and colonization. We intend to analyze how the body imaginary has been interpreted and assimilated by a group of student athletes from the Autonomous University of the State of Mexico (UAEMEX). This research shows how the students were able to characterize the concept through their own criteria and visions, displaying an evident influence of foreign models associated with aesthetics, egotism, beauty and the body image of themselves and others, all rooted in an Eurocentric image of the body.*

**Keywords:** body imaginary, aesthetics, culture, athletes, Autonomous University of the State of Mexico

### Introduction

Culture is a mediation through which we perceive reality. It determines the psychic structure of the individual among other aspects. The various manifestations of culture facilitate the interpretation of reality as it is observed and noted. The way we visualize the differences between men and women is determined by culture, beyond biological differences. The descriptions and characterizations that women and men make of their bodies in the present differ from those of earlier times. There are complex interactions between the symbolic and the role of the imaginary with regards to notions of taste, beauty, and aesthetics in a particular era. Those interactions constantly change as the sinuosity of shapes, curves and body lines suffer variations and lead to new interpretations over time. The analysis of the body imagery that young people in general and athletes in particular have, takes on new nuances as these latter are credited with showing greater concern over their bodies and exposing their bodies in public spaces; which may be related to issues of self-esteem, or to specific moods such as depression, anxiety or others.

Individuals can express their social and cultural belonging through various bodily manifestations. The body possesses a lot of potential and symbolic representations in different social and cultural systems. This research arises from the interest of examining the subjectivity involved in practicing sports and developing a body image related to such practice. In the Mexican context, it is important to analyze the Eurocentric influence in the imaginary body of athletes. This paper presents the preliminary results of an ongoing research that aims to characterize the imaginary body as an evolving concept and analyze how it has been interpreted and assimilated by student athletes from the Autonomous University of the State of Mexico.

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### ***Body Imaginary: Conceptual Approach***

The concept of the body imaginary attempts to unify the subjective and the objective, since it builds a bridge between the imagination of the individual – be it a man or a woman - with the physical body. The imagined vision that one has of herself or of another person then falls into a certain aesthetic pattern. The complexity of the concept derives precisely from dealing with ideas and assessments that shape the different stages of history. The study of the body imaginary has been based on processes ranging from the individual psychic to socio cultural patterns or archetypes. The imaginary is modeled between dogmas and the inevitable regression to the origins of humankind, from which the notion of archetype stems. Jung referred to an archetype as “any manifestation that permeates the unconscious, that from the recognition of the individual is transmitted to another [individual] to become collective (...), the contents of the collective unconscious are called original archetypes and need to represent, in order to generate knowledge, as a symbol and unity of social connection in the key issues of evolution and natural phenomena” (Jung, 1970: 11). In another sense, Lacan (1953) and Lash (1999) associated the body imaginary with the worship of the body represented in narcissism. Years later, Bauman (2001) delineated that aestheticism and seduction were the weapons employed by the body in order to create a new body imaginary, with an emphasis on individualism and narcissism.

We can also understand the body imaginary as the idea or image perception of the human body, whose meaning is defined by culture. According to Aguado (2004), the body imaginary is an ideological process in which individuals assign meaning to the body and it becomes a principle for the subject’s identity. The body image is constructed from a complex interaction of physical, biological, psychological, and social determinants in an intra-subjective and inter-subjective manner. To the representation of the body imaginary as a specific social archetype, we can add its narcissistic and aesthetic vision and the perception of its image as a component of culture. Furthermore, there is a relationship between the body imaginary and the concept of body beauty with its social, biological, and psychic components. From an aesthetic perspective, the eroticized body leads to a process of creation. In the arts and in sports there is also a pursuit of pleasure that transcends from the individual to the collective imaginary, to social desire. The body becomes a recurring theme in the aesthetics of all times, with an enormous power that reduces or synthesizes the collective ideas of an eroticized body to a displayed body (Serrano, Serrano, and Zarza, 2012).

As symbolic construction, the concept relates to the appearance of the body and to the notion of egotism, both have strong influence from the cultural models promoted by fashion magazines, advertising and marketing. When the mass media “constructs” a beautiful and sexy image of a man or a woman who represents a milestone in music, art, cinema, or sports, it becomes a paradigm or a role model for the younger audiences to follow. In that sense, the individual imaginary, assumed by the community, is absorbed from the symbols and meanings of an era or century, and become motivations that interact on a daily basis with tastes and modes of behavior. The gradual but insistent suggestion to follow the North American or Western model of beauty and body image sometimes has affected the health of many individuals who are not able to establish the difference between the symbolism that accompanies the possibility and the reality in the attempt to be beautiful (Arboleda, 2002). It is worth worrying about good health and appearance, but it is important to gain awareness of the body we inhabit and to recognize what can benefit or harm it. As Duch & Mélich (2005, p. 133) have suggested, modern society constructs discourses that affect “the human body and all its representations in a direct way. That is why the body or perhaps even better, the human identities expressed by means of the body appearance will become one of the most mobile and flexible artifacts of modernity”. The conceptualizations presented in this section allow us to consider the following research questions: How have the UAEMEX students perceived the cultural imperatives of modernity from the foreign models of aesthetics, image, and beauty? How did they value the body imaginary?

### ***Body Imaginary: Past and Present***

The story of the ideal body originated, according to tradition, in the Western classical world. However, the definitive role played by the Egyptian conception of the figure, was the first Apollonian resolution of body representation. Ancient Egypt was the first place where abstract and mathematical representations of the body were created (Figure 1). According to Issa Benitez (1998), the Egyptian body representation used a proportional system based on a flat grid transformed into images. The Egyptians conceptually solved the problem of beauty as a way to shape and limit nature. Art thus becomes the way we break from the world physically and mentally.

The ideal body in the West is the one that conditions the possibility of conceiving the world as an object that offers itself to the gaze. The consequences of this fragmentation are notorious. First we recognize the other, where we can also see ourselves as another and thus judge appearances -our own appearance - through an exercise of comparison. From this ideal model - with all the variations it goes through in time- not only were the physical characteristics built, but also the moral and spiritual ones that make up the perfect imagined figure – made figure, conformed - and forever absent, tireless, desired (Benitez, 1998: 122).

The human body has been idealized and stylized since ancient times, which affects and influences the perception of people, in every culture and in every age.

**Figure 1: Nefertiti**



**Source: Berlin Museum Collection**

Later, in ancient Greece, the cult of the perfect body is consolidated. A Eurocentric body aesthetics arises and is seen in the body of the Greek athletes (picture 2).

**Figure 2: The Discobolus**



**Source: British museum**

These cultural patterns of Western patriarchal society spread through the centuries and during the sixteenth century, they reached Latin America where they reproduced and consolidated. The military, spiritual and sexual conquest imposed by Spain after its domination and subjugation began to shape and accentuate the historical-cultural models that later became stereotypes. Even with the Spanish influence as the dominant power in Mexico, the indigenous worldview persisted in permanent contact with Eurocentric postulations. One would assume that there would be a total loss of the roots, traditions and culture of the former New Spain, but to the contrary, that magic, controversial, and ancestral cultural heritage was integrated and adapted to the new context. Proof of this is the image offered by Diego Rivera, who in the early twentieth century, represented the values of Mexican culture in the image of a Mexican woman preparing traditional foods from his native country (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Diego Rivera, woman grinding maize (1924)**

**Source: MUNAL (National Museum of Arts) INBA, Mexico City**

There has been an integration of the autochthonous Mexican values in the works of muralists and other artists who incorporated the original indigenous cultures in their paintings and engravings in the context of the Mexican Revolution. However, the handling of the body by the mass media has focused on the use of stereotyped images. According to Núñez (2008: 41): [...] the stereotype installs itself in a Manichean way between the good and the evil, between the positive and the negative, between the permitted and the forbidden, between health and disease. No variations, alternatives, possibilities, mixtures are allowed. Nothing can be relative or put into question." In this case, mass media has determined such things as: the relevance of what is visible in an era; the construction of what is fashionable or not; the trends that establish the path one must walk and shows that this path is under constant change. Mass media dictates the curves, the thinness, how long, short, narrow or wide the dimensions of the body should be (...) Eduardo Galeano (2005) pointed out that advertising offsets frustrations and feeds fantasies.

Western culture that was brought from the Old World to the Americas. This culture included a model woman who consecrated purity before the consummation of marriage, fidelity to her husband, devotion to children and domestic industry; mainly highlighting the virtues of loyalty, prudence, chastity, obedience, modesty, selflessness and sacrifice. This conception of the feminine contrasts with that of Pre-Hispanic cultures because "the feminine concept that men who arrived to the New World revolved around that cultural tradition (...), the erotic dichotomy between good and evil" (Barbosa, 1994: 79). On the one hand the popular imagination started to "construct" the basic characters of women; whereas on the other hand, a masculine imagery of domination accentuated two mythical female characters: the voluptuous, seductive and nymphomaniac, available for moments of pleasure and lust; and the chaste, faithful and submissive virgin ready for procreation and home care. The imaginary of the feminine is full of stories that demonstrate the danger of the "uncontrollable animal" that a woman symbolizes. Throughout history, women have been presented as either demonic or virtuous. According to Western tradition, women have to be enclosed, hidden, and harassed with prejudices, revulsion, and pudor.

Tradition dictates to alienate women from their bodies in order to "construct a world where the omnipresent threat of the untamed and fiery female sexuality does not prevail. Yet (...), the figure of the nymphomaniac flourishes to compensate the horror that aimed to banish the sensuality of our oppressive universe "(Moreno, in Serrano and Serrano, 2008: 43). The aforementioned ideas justify the dichotomy of a woman as a myth. Only through the gaze, perception, and reflection on what women bodies have represented along the mainstream Eurocentric aesthetic pattern of worship, can we understand a proposal to "denaturalize" an aesthetic of femininity that has omitted the beauty of diversity and the appreciation of representations outside the classical beauty cannon.

The human body, female or male, has been shaped by the social and cultural context in which the individual is immersed. The body is the semantic vector by which the evidence of the relationship with the world is constructed. All the following actions depend on the body: perceptual activities; the expression of feelings; the gestural and expressive conventions of the rites of interaction; the staging of the appearance; the subtle game of seduction; physical training and the relationship with suffering and pain.

In short, the very existence of an individual is bodily. In this sense, Le Breton (2007) believes that human beings are at stake in the realm of the physical, a set of symbolic systems: the meanings that form the basis of individual and collective existence stem and propagate from the body, so that the process of socializing the body experience is a constant in the social condition of individuals. However, the socialization of the body experience has its strongest moments in the periods when individuals exercise their sexuality.

From this perspective, the gendered organization of society is a social construction based on body markings. The subjectivized body lies at the center of the gendered organization of the world, understood as a system of power based on gender. In this culture, the body is considered critical to assigning identities. The notions of masculinity and femininity emerge from or are associated with the body, since they are deemed inherent to the body or express something about the nature of the body (the body drives, directs, or limits action). Thus, the body is seen as the bearer of social symbols where cultural notions concur. The limits expressed by social institutions that provide uneven interpretations of the anatomy of men and women also fall on the body (Jimenez, 2003; Butler, 2001). This situation is most clearly evident in the bodies of athletes (Figures 4 and 5).

**Figure 4: European woman athlete**



**Figure 5: European man athlete**



**Source: Darya Klishina and David Beckham**

Therefore, it is through various bodily manifestations that individuals express their social and cultural belonging, reflect social images of the body and power relations. The body entails a range of potential and symbolic representations in different social and cultural systems. In the words of Le Breton (2007), the body establishes itself as the meeting point of social discourse, in this case, the sports discourse on the body. The meanings of masculinity or femininity are constructed and represented on the body in such a way that it embodies a code with which messages are produced. This bodily code accommodates the perceptive and interpretive apparatus using various means such as the bearing or style and bodily gestures used by social agents to present themselves. That is to say, the body imaginary is implicit in the social discourse.

#### **The body imaginary of young athletes from the Autonomous University of the State of Mexico (UAEMEX)**

The body image is a unity in its final form. This unity is not rigid but variable and rather mutable. According to Bover (2009), the body scheme will be the interpreter of the body image. This latter would be a non-communicable ghost without the former's support. "The way each person lives her body, and what she feel within it, establishes a vital truth that colors and gives meaning to all experiences, and [the body] emerges in the gesture, the act or the word, but never presents itself completely naked in the exterior" (p. 24). The body is not a primary reality: we are not born with a body. It is constructed thanks to the symbolic body that precedes the subject. It is a social and cultural construction that responds to a specific time, place, and mores. We carry our nation's history as a cultural baggage, so it is possible to understand the fascination with the opposite and the unknown. The Aryan male and female beauty aesthetics is recurrent in media products, which present blonde and slim women protagonists, tall men, and bodies marked by exercise or even the manipulation of the body (Figure). All styles of body manipulation, according to Martínez (2011), are conditioned by the system of power ruling in every society and culture, though in the specific issue of corporal imaginary among athletes, Western canons widely guide the models involved in the construction of femininity and masculinity.

In this case, it is important to differentiate between the concepts of sex and gender. Sex refers to the physical, morphological, biological, and physiological characteristics that distinguish men and women, whereas gender is related to the construction of roles of what it means to be a man or a woman in a particular society. Gender relations are expressed in power relations between women and men. Within general studies, sex is an epidemiological data usually taken into account, so the objective of this research is not directed to the influence of being a man or a woman, but to know the influence of the feminine or masculine roles on various moods of young athletes and their link to their body perception. The body imaginary of athletes is closely related to various moods, product of self-esteem and body perception.

In the context of sports, competitions produce different moods that can affect the health of an individual if they are not adequately managed. Stress and emotions should be examined as a single theme in order to understand and explain performance in competitive sports (Lazarus quoted in Cervantes, Rhodes, and Capdevila, 2009). However, each athlete has her own level of anxiety and activation as well as individual intensity zone. Therefore, the optimal level of precompetitive intensity can be high or low depending on the individual and situational characteristics. Each athlete has an optimal performance depending on the particular cognitive, physiological, or emotional intensity that manifest in both psychic and bodily manners. In addition to this, the type of proofs that young athletes face also influences the activation of the pre-competitive state (Abinaga and Caracuel, 2005), but "adequate strategies to regulate the activation level, facilitate and prepare the athlete to optimize performance" (Gould and Udry, cited in Pozo, 2007: 37). In addition to self-confidence, cognitive anxiety was significantly related to the performance of sporting competition.

The same level of anxiety can be perceived by an athlete as a facilitator for a good outcome, while another athlete may consider it disturbing, favorable or unfavorable, to achieve good performance. Also, the type of sport influences the intensity of anxiety as practitioners of contact sports, individual sports and those who are judged subjectively in the competition have greater cognitive anxiety and lower self-confidence than athletes who do not compete in contact sports, who play in teams or are judged objectively in the competition (Pozo, 2007). Applied sports psychology is the science that deals with all the psychic aspects present in any physical or sports activity. Psychological preparation involves developing a mental plan to be used before, during and after the competitive behavior (Gonzalez, 1996). This is one of the reasons why it is important to research the moods of athletes and their link with the perception of body.

Nowadays, the body is not only shaped by the natural forms that the individual is born with and molds through the years, but has become an instrument of conscious design. Crisorio (2006) points out that the body is "a construction of symbolic order or meanings that goes beyond the pure physical organism", therefore it makes sense for women to want to shape their bodies and adjust them according to a given style; while men insist on marking their muscles. Gyms and outdoor parks become the preferred spaces for women and men to carry out physical exercise and socialize around the common goal of molding the body.

In a similar fashion, athletes maintain a body aesthetics, beauty, and imaginary based on performance and the effective achievement for a specific competition or event. The research conducted by Valdés, Reyes, Aguilar, Sánchez and González (2014) to assess the body attractiveness considered by teenagers, based on gender and body complexion, at the Autonomous University of the State of Mexico (UAEMEX), shows that the assessments both men and women make about their own bodies is embedded in an ideal of beauty. The attractive ideal for men is strength, so what they value the most is their muscles, back, arms, genitals, build, and abdomen. On the other hand, women value more the body parts that denote beauty and delicacy; therefore, they give points to facial aesthetics, breasts, and hips. Both men and women are influenced by body imaginaries that are external to the set of features that characterize them.

**Figure 6: Mexican sportswomen****Figure 7. Mexican sportsmen**

**Source: Team of the UAE Méx and Mexican Foot ball**

As for the body imaginary of student-athletes at the UAEMEX, the results are summarized as follows: 46% of those surveyed felt that physical beauty is a cosmetic issue that each human being possesses (being attractive, or fit; having a nicely-shaped body and a pretty face); 29% of the population considered that physical beauty meant being both physically and mentally healthy; whereas 24% of the population felt that beauty is satisfaction, that is, to feel good about yourself and having confidence in who you are. 1% did not answer the questionnaire. 57% of those surveyed expressed that taking care of their body is more of a health issue; 26% considered that there must be a balance between body and mind; 11% said they needed to take care of their body in order to have an optimal athletic performance; while 6% mentioned that taking care of their body responded to an obligation. 58% of those surveyed said they had gradually constructed their own image, but did recognize the influence they had from role models they admired. Most of those role models proved to be relevant sports athletes featured in television and/or social media. They expressed their admiration for the athletes' efforts and dedication to the sport, their body, their style, among other features that made those characters look good. Most respondents look up to famous athletes and desire to have similar accomplishments. Some mentioned the names of athletes they admire and none of those role models share the body imaginary specific to the Mexican socio-cultural context.

### **Conclusions**

The academic literature presents a rather diverse set of criteria on the conceptualization of the body imaginary, as is understandable for a concept in frank evolution. A set of elements make the concept visible in contemporary theoretical frameworks, because it encompasses aesthetics and beauty aspects assigned to the male or female body, as well as issues of health and body care. We should not forget that the material reality of the body is imagined from a series of symbols and representations that are perpetuated in modern times through mass media. Through the implementation of body perception surveys, this research analyzed the body perception held by a group of student athletes at the UAEMEX, considering the various moods that the respondents presented. In this first part we chose to work primarily with the categories of anxiety and depression, since if these were present in a chronic or serious manner, they could become highly disabling in the labor, family, personal and social spheres (Halgin and Krauss, 2009). In this research, young student athletes at the University did not express issues of anxiety or depression in any of the cases.

With regards to the body image of young student-athletes, they reported that they had constructed their own image but that image had been influenced by the media. The results noted above led to conclude that men and women have been influenced by role models portrayed in the media, however, some respondents are making their own choices about how they want their body image; whereas others are completely influenced by some specifically artistic or sports figure. Women are more influenced by external notions of aesthetics and beauty to construct their idea of "good-looking"; while men are more concerned in body shape or structure (muscles) and the strength they must portray. Student athletes also expressed to a lesser extent that health and internal body care were also important aspects to consider, and did not focus solely on their physical appearance. In that sense, a few respondents recognized specific elements that grant significance to each person's individuality such as: feelings, values, and attitudes toward themselves and others. Each respondent (male or female) expressed idea that reinforce ancestral gender stereotypes such as beauty and delicacy in the case of women, or manhood and virility in the case of men.

We still ponder if there are gender stereotypes at all levels and whether these stereotypes get perpetuated regardless of the body imaginary in each society. Nonetheless, our survey showed that both male and female student athletes had a strong filiation to a sport activity as a manifestation of culture, but more importantly, as a response to beauty cannons imposed by the aesthetics of pampering and caring for the physical appearance of the body. In that sense, the student-athletes respond to a body imaginary that seeks to assimilate the symbolism of the XXI century, influenced by a foreign model that fails to incorporate the diverse symbolic expressions of Mexican heritage and values.

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