Body Image and Sports Participation of the Intellectual Elite

ALLEN GUTTMANN

Department of American Studies, Amherst College, Amherst, Massachusetts 01002

Abstract

Body image, either as an independent phenomenon or in relation to participation in sports or in fitness programs, has become a much discussed topic. The present study investigates the body image and sports participation of the American intellectual elite. The evidence is drawn from the "personals" of the *New York Review*. The data are also compared to those from the "personals" of *Die Zeit*.

Initiatives in the Study of Body Image

Everybody wants his or her body to conform as closely as possible to the ideal, but conceptions of the ideal vary culturally. Art historians like Clark (1956) have long recognized that the ideal proportions of the human body represented in Greek statuary differed from the ideal shapes depicted in medieval art. Iconographically, Greek athlete and Christian saint represent radically different kinaesthetic worlds.

There is a similar difference in body image between those who do and do not participate in sports or in fitness programs. Studies by Snyder and Kivlin (1975) and others generally agree that athletes and participants in fitness programs have more positive body images than comparable control groups. Since American and European societies tend to associate maleness with intellectual functions ("culture") and femaleness with biological ones ("nature"), the preponderance of research into body image has been into the perception of the female body by the Self and by Others (e.g., Brown and Harrison [1986]). The role conflict experienced by female athletes and body builders whose bodies depart from the traditional aesthetic has been a field of intensive research by Lenskyj (1986) and others. Other research by Bourdieu (1979), Heinemann (1980), Featherstone and Hepworth (1984) and others has investigated the way that conceptions of the body are socially constructed in accordance with social class or with what Bourdieu refers to as "habitus". The coalminer's sense of his body as a powerful instrument to be exploited for its economical potential stands in contrast to the lawyer's concern to remain slender and "youthful". In addition to the "class struggle" of traditional Marxism, there is also what Bourdieu refers to as "the struggle of classification", in which "cultural capital" is drawn upon to validate the tastes and aesthetic judgments that are an aspect of social class (Bourdieu, 1979, 564). Ideology, too, is an important related variable, as Hoberman (1981, 1984) and Turner (1984) have shown.

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Method of Procedure

The present study examines the ideals of a relatively small but exceptionally articulate social stratum – the American intellectual elite. Particular attention is paid to gender differences. Since cross-cultural similarities and differences are often as intriguing as those of social class, the quantified American data are compared in tabular form with the results of a German investigation. [1]

The data are drawn from the periodical most frequently read by the American intellectual elite: *The New York Review*. This biweekly periodical has a national readership, the majority of whom have earned or are working for doctoral degrees. For the tabular comparison, German data are taken from an equivalent weekly: *Die Zeit*. If these periodicals had the sort of illustrations and advertisements that one finds in more popular magazines such as *Time* or *Newsweek* (or *Der Spiegel*), visual representations of the body might well have formed part of the evidence, but the nature of the periodicals obviates such an approach. Instead, the focus is on the presentation of self in the form of published "personal" advertisements in which men and women describe both themselves and the sort of person whom they hope to attract with such a description. The ultimate goal in most cases is either matrimony or some other form of stable partnership.

Advertisements of this sort have a history that reaches back to the seventeenth century. They have been the object of serious sociological inquiry since at least 1900, when Alfred Fried published *Kleine Anzeigen*. More recently, American and German scholars like Manheim (1961), Kaupp (1968), Lumby (1978), Berghaus (1986) and others have investigated the "personals" in a number of daily, weekly, and monthly publications. Although 1.5% of Kaupp's 1136 advertisements appeared in *Die Zeit*, he analyzed all his data as if the eight publications examined were one periodical. Thus the data from *Die Zeit* were swamped by those from the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (35.4% of his sample) and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (32.15) (Kaupp 1968, 44). None of the American studies has, to my knowledge, focussed upon the *New York Review*. The present sample consists of all the heterosexual "personals" appearing from August 1983 through February 1984. [2] The main sample consists of 412 American males, 607 American females. The German sample is made up of 1463 males and 2079 females. In both countries, therefore, nearly 60% of the partner-seekers are female, a figure which approximates the 61.4% in Kaupp's study (Kaupp 1968, 47). (Cf. Table 1.)

Table 1. Personals from *Die Zeit* and *The New York Review*

Advertisers	N		%	
	American	German	American	German
Male	412	1463	40.4	41.3
Female	607	2079	59.6	58.9
Total	1019	3542	100	100

Unquestionably, such advertisements are a special kind of evidence. They have been labeled "a socially unacceptable method of mate selection" (Manheim 1961, 182) and "an alienated form of courtship" (Crane and Ino 1987, 242). On the

other hand, Berghaus has maintained that there is a common evolution in most people's experience from impersonal to personal relationships. Her point is well taken: "It can thus be established that the development of human relationships *always* includes a calculating phase of 'object adapted' rather than 'person adapted' criteria of selection" (Berghaus 1986, 60). While it is certainly true that those who publish such advertisements cannot be taken as representative of the intellectual elite in general or even of the readers of the *New York Review* and *Die Zeit*, their presentation of their physical selves sheds light on the habitus of their social group.

Not all the advertisers describe their physical selves. Many refer to their professions, their literary, musical, or artistic interests, their desire for travel, for companionship, for marriage, or for an unencumbered erotic relationship. Contrary to what one might expect from cultural stereotypes, Germans are more likely than Americans to comment on body image and sports interests. (Cf. Table 2.)

Table 2. References to Body Image and/or Sports Interests

Advertisers	N		%	
	American	German	American	German
Male	100	804	24.3	54.9
Female	182	1065	30.0	51.2

In addition to the body images of Self and Other, the study investigates the sports interests of the intellectuals who turn to the "personals" in search of love, friendship, or companionship. That there is a close relationship between body image and sports participation is obvious. Those men and women who describe themselves as "athletic" are often quite specific about their sport and about the sport of the person whom they hope will respond to their advertisement.

For a study of this sort, there is no way to be precise about the definition of the term "sport" because there is no way to be sure what the advertisers mean when they say they are interested in sports or seek a partner who is active in sports. All kinds of competitive and non-competitive activities, from tennis and basketball to backpacking and ballooning, are mentioned.

The concept of body image, however, can and must be defined. For the purposes of this study, the concept refers to the verbal description of one's own physical Self and that of the desired Other. Not included in this study are purely objective data such as height, weight, and age. [3] Purely subjective data are also excluded from this study on the grounds that they are too vague to be part of a body image. Almost all the advertisers refer to themselves as "attractive", which can mean almost anything. Consider the following example. "TALL MALE PROFESSIONAL, late 30s, nonsmoker, seeks intellectual, athletic woman, 25-35 ..." (NYR, 29.9.83). The relevant terms are "tall" and "athletic". Consider a second example: "SEMI-PRINCESS, 36, greeneyed blonde smartass-books, theater, baseball, bridge, and Boston ..." (NYR, 18.8.83). There is no attribute for body image either of the Self or of the desire Other, but sports interest is indicated. From the advertisement, "PERFECT MAN seeks perfect woman" (NYR, 22.12.84), we can conclude a great deal about egoism but nothing about body image or sports interests.

Results

As Table 3 indicates, American male advertisers seeking to attract some desired Other describe themselves physically as tall, slender, and athletic. There are presumably differences in mental image associated with the synonyms and close analogues of "slender", "lean", "slim", "thin", "trim", "willowy", but these differences are too fine for the present method. One suspects that those who call themselves physically fit are in good health but are not really athletic. By and large, one is struck by the paucity of description. The American intellectual is content with a few adjectives for his physical Self; he is much more detailed about his education, financial situation, and special interests. For example, "MONNTREAL ACADEMIC SJM [single Jewish male] handsome, charming, witty Yeshiva escapee seeks seductive woman 20-30 with whom to break some commandments" (NYR, 16.2.84)

Table 3. The Male Physical Self

Physical Attribute	N		% (of "physical" ads)	
	American	German	American	German
Tall	38	36	38.0	4.5
Small, Petite	0	2	0.0	0.2
Slender, Slim	31	284	31.0	35.5
Plump, Buxom	0	4	0.0	0.5
Athletic	28	300	28.0	37.3
Physically Fit	3	38	3.0	4.7

In comparison to the American sample, German males who describe their physical selves are somewhat more likely to admit to small stature and to a chubby appearance. They are also somewhat more likely than the Americans to describe themselves as slender and as athletic.

American women typically describe themselves as tall or seek some euphemism if they are not tall, e.g., "petite", "elfin". Compare two advertisements:

STATUESQUE NORDIC WOMAN, 28, former model, seeks wealthy man who enjoys the finer things in life. (NYR, 16.2.84)

DIMINUTIVE DAMSEL wishes wooing by daring romantic knight who is assertive enough to frighten dragons, accomplished at music and arts, ambitious and athletic enough to scale castle walls, and dedicated to achieving "happily ever after". (NYR, 26.1.84)

The tall woman seems confident that she has the aesthetic advantage; the small woman falls back upon the whimsical language of a fairy tale and hopes for a knightly champion.

Although the popular female body of the 1950s and 1960s, the era of Marilyn Monroe, Jayne Mansfield, and Raquel Welch, was said to be characterized by large breasts and a general voluptuousness, the woman who advertise in the *New York Review* are almost fifteen times as likely to claim to be "slender" as they are to claim to be "buxom", "busomy", or – the usual term! – "Rubensesque". One suspects that those women who are *not* slender have chosen to emphasize their other attributes, e.g., "A REDHEAD WITH GREEN EYES, I like wilderness

Table 4. The Female Physical Self

Physical Attribute	N		% (of "physical" ads)	
	American	German	American	German
Tall	37	35	20.3	3.2
Small, Petite	19	18	10.4	1.7
Slender, Slim	103	505	56.6	47.4
Buxom, Rubensesque	7	30	3.8	2.8
Athletic	12	296	6.6	27.8
Physically Fit	4	21	2.2	2.0

trails, the sound of cicadas, ballet, and George Bernard Shaw" (NYR, 10.11.84). Surprisingly, the American women are more likely to call themselves athletic, despite the alleged discrimination faced by female athletes, than to describe themselves as shapely or physically fit. The one female, out of over 600, who states flatly that she is "anti-athletic" is clearly swimming against the stream.

While American women are not more likely than American men to go into physical details about themselves, German women are more likely than German men to do so (as they were in Kaupp's study of eight German newspapers [Kaupp 1968, 68]). Like the Americans, German women prefer above all else to refer to themselves as slender. In contrast to American women, however, the Germans are much less likely to make any reference at all to height and – contrary to every expectation – more likely to describe themselves as athletic. As was the case with German men who emphasized their slenderness, it may be that German women want to counter popularly held stereotypes.

The American women who promote their chances by describing themselves as tall rather than as petite and as slender rather than Rubensesque and as athletic rather than physically fit or shapely have correctly assessed the "demand" in the romantic marketplace (Table 5). Men are twice as likely to ask for a tall as for a short woman and almost five times as likely to prefer slenderness to a large busom. Although only seven males specifically ask for someone athletic, none specifies that the desired woman be "shapely", e.g., "TRIM, MUSCULAR, easy-going Princeton academic male, 30, seeks attractive, athletic-looking, intellectually vibrant woman" (NYR, 29.9.83). The avowed Christian who shuns women who jog (NYR, 18.8.83) is almost alone.

Compared to American men, Germans are less likely to be specific about the height of their ideal woman, somewhat more likely to request an athletic female, and far less likely to mention slenderness as a desired attribute. On the other

Table 5. The Male's Desired Other

Physical Attribute	N		% (of "physical" ads)	
	American	German	American	German
Tall	8	18	8.0	2.2
Small, Petite	4	6	4.0	0.7
Slender, Slim	43	107	43.0	13.3
Buxom, Rubensesque	9	12	9.0	1.5
Athletic	7	96	7.0	11.9
Physically Fit	1	4	1.0	0.5

hand, German men don't seem to want buxom women either; only 1.5% request someone busomy while 9% of the American men who specify physical attributes make that choice.

American women are much less likely than men to indicate the precise kinds of physiques that interest them, but the composite portrait is nonetheless clear. The ideal man is tall, slim, and athletic rather than merely physically fit. Although very few female advertisers indicate what they do *not* want, one 33-year-old, single, white, artist-professor is adamant: "No Republicans, smokers or fatsos" (NYR, 29.9.83).

Table 6. The Female's Desired Other

Physical Attribute	N		% (of "physical" ads)	
	American	German	American	German
Tall	21	40	11.5	3.8
Small, Petite	0	2	0.0	0.2
Slender, Slim	9	57	4.9	5.4
Buxom, Rubensesque	0	4	0.0	0.4
Athletic	8	96	4.4	9.0
Physically Fit	2	15	1.1	1.4

Once again, German women are reluctant to specify heights. The only moderately strong preference seems to be for an athletic man. German women are more than twice as likely as American women to ask for an athletic man, but only 9% of those mentioning physical attributes named this one.

One of the unexpected results of this empirical research is that American women are more likely than men to incidate that they have an interest in sports that they wish to share. This may be because the female advertisers imagine that this is an unusual attribute which must be underlined. It may, on the other hand, be that the kind of woman bold enough to offer herself to the world through a

Table 7. Sports Interests Mentioned by Males

Sports Mentioned	N		% of All Sports Mentioned by Those Mentioning Sports or Physical Attributes	
	American	German	American	German
Tennis	8	74	8.0	9.2
Hiking	8	92	8.0	11.4
Diving, Swimming, Surfing	6	34	6.0	4.2
Cycling	5	22	5.0	2.7
Skiing	4	100	4.0	12.4
Boating, Sailing, Canoeing	3	48	3.0	5.9
Jogging, Running	3	19	3.0	2.4
Ball Games	2	1	2.0	0.1
Body Building	2	2	2.0	0.2
Horseback Riding	0	7	0.0	0.9
Miscellaneous Named Sports	4	14	4.0	1.9
"Sports"	15	87	15.0	10.8

Table 8. Sports Interests Mentioned by Females

Sports Mentioned	N		% of All Sports Mentioned by Those Mentioning Sports or Physical Attributes	
	American	German	American	German
Tennis	27	71	14.8	6.7
Hiking	22	103	12.5	9.7
Diving, Swimming, Surfing	10	26	5.5	2.4
Cycling	8	39	4.4	3.7
Skiing	15	93	8.2	8.7
Boating, Sailing, Canoeing	2	21	0.1	2.0
Jogging, Running	12	17	6.6	1.6
Ball Games	9	0	4.9	0.0
Body Building	1	0	0.1	0.0
Horseback Riding	2	16	0.1	1.5
Miscellaneous Named Sports	9	9	4.8	0.7
"Sports"	15	78	8.2	7.3

personal advertisement is also the kind who genuinely likes the self-assertiveness associated with sports. That tennis heads the list for Americans of both sexes is no surprise in light of the fact that the vast majority of the advertisers are professionals (and a number describe themselves as millionaires!). Quite unexpected is the fact that nine of the eleven advertisements specfically referring to baseball, basketball, and American football came from women! Somewhat less surprising is the fact that women were much more likely than men to refer to skiing and four times as likely to mention jogging-running. In the "personals" of the *New York Review*, there is no hint of the alleged discrimination against female athletes. One wonders what the Victorians might have thought about the 57-year-old woman from San Francisco who proclaims her enthusiasm for "jazz, opera, lacrosse, ballet, horses, success, art, Europe, honesty, oceans, wine, humor, reality" (NYR, 18.8.83).

German males and females advertising in *Die Zeit* seem to agree on the joys of hiking, tennis, and skiing. German men are more committed to sailing than women are, but the two sexes seem somewhat closer in their sports interests than the two sexes in the United States. For neither the advertisers in the *New York Review* nor *Die Zeit* can one say in respect to sports interests what a team of researchers concluded about the advertisiers in *Living Single*: "One paradoxical conclusion ... is that the men who placed profiles [i.e., "personals"] in this magazine were not looking for the women who placed profiles (nor were the women looking for these men)" (Bolig, Stein and McHenry 1984, 592).

The difference is size between the two national samples and the small numbers mentioning some of the sports, like body building, makes cross-cultural comparisons difficult, but German men seem much more likely than American men to mention skiing while American women are much more likely than German women to be joggers or runners. American women are keener on ball games but less drawn to horseback riding. On the whole, the similarities between Americans and Germans seem more striking than the dissimilarities. If one looks specifically at the "prestige" sports of skiing, tennis, sailing, horseback riding, surfing, golf, and flying/gliding, all part of the habitus of the upper middle class,

one finds that 36.6% of American males and 35.6% of American females who mention physical characteristics or sports mention these sports while the comparable German figures are 55.7% (for men) and 49.5% (for women). In this limited sense, then, the American intellectual elite seems more democratic in its tastes than the German equivalent.

Possibilities for Further Research

As has been suggested by Bourdieu (1979) and others, social class is a more important variable in body image and sports preference than national or ethnic differences. Since "personals" are a common feature of newspapers and magazines appealing to various social strata, one can hope that this present study will stimulate explorations of the class variable as it appears in this extremely personal form. Historical studies can also be revelatory, as work by Banner (1983) on American conceptions of physical beauty and Fairs on body image and religious tradition (1976) have shown. One can, therefore, also hope that future research will use the "personals" to chart changing conceptions of body image and sports participation.

Notes

[1] The author wishes to thank Prof. Dr. Gunter A. Pilz for suggesting the topic and for providing the German data from *Die Zeit*.

[2] Homosexual advertisements have been excluded although Laner (1978) and Lumby (1978) both conclude that the pattern of the homosexual "personals" is quite similar to that of the heterosexual.

[3] Attitudes toward height, weight, and age are, of course, socially constructed, but the objective data are less informative than other statements about the body. All studies of the "personal" indicate that men specify their interest in younger women while women indicate a willingness to accept if not a perference for older men, but the 45-year-old woman may cherish the *ideal* of a 35-year-old lover even if she realizes that her chances are better with the 55-year-olds. In fact, the advertisers in the *New York Review* and *Die Zeit* almost never request respondents of specific heights and weights and usually indicate a broad range of acceptable ages.

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L'Image du corps et la participation Sportive de Pelite Intellectuelle

Résumé

L'image du corps, soit en tant que phénomène isolé, soit en relation avec la participation dans les sports et les programmes de gymnastique d'entretien, est devenue un sujet très discuté. La présente étude a pour objet d'enquêter sur l'image du corps et la participation sportive auprès de l'élite intellectuelle américaine. Les témoignages sont tirés des petites annonces de la New York Review. Les données sont également comparées à celles des petites annonces de Die Zeit.

Körperimage und Sportenagement der Intellektuellen

Zusammenfassung

Elite ist sowohl als unabhängiger Tatbestand als auch in Beziehung zur Teilnahme am Sportgerät ein viel diskutiertes Thema geworden. Die vorliegende Untersuchung prüft Körperimage und Teilnahme am Sport der amerikanischen intellektuellen Elite. Die Daten werden gewonnen aus Personenanzeigen in der „New York Review". Sie werden verglichen mit denen die aus „Die Zeit" erhoben wurden.

Imagen del cuerpo y prácitca deportiva en los medios intelectuales

Resumen

La imagen del cuerpo, tanto si es analizada independientemente como en relación al deporte o a los programas de mantenimiento, ha sido un tema muy discutido. El presente estudio analiza la imagen del cuerpo y la participación deportiva entre la élite intelectual americana. El análisis se basa en las personalidades de la *New York Review*. Los resultados tambien se comparan con los obtenidos de las personalidades del *Die Zeit*.

Телесный образ и участие в спорте интеллектуальной элиты

Резюме

Телесный образ,то ли как независимый феномен,то ли как соотношение с участием в спорте и оздоровительных программах, стал широко обсуждаемой темой.В настоящей разработке исследуются телесный образ и участие в спорте американской интеллектуальной элиты.Подтверждение основывается на заметках о личных делах,помещенных в "Нью-Йорк ревью".Данные сопоставляются также с заметками о личных делах,почернутыми из "Ди цейт"

知的エリートのボディ・イメージとスポーツ参与

〈抄録〉

独立した事象としても、スポーツやフィットネスプログラムへの参与に関しても、ボディ・イメージはよく論じられる話題になってきている。本研究は、アメリカの知的エリートのボディ・イメージやスポーツ参与を調べている。資料はニューヨークレビューの「人名録」から取られている。そのデータはまた、ツァイト紙の「人名録」と比較される。