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The Body and Media

1. Introduction

The media, from print and newspapers, through radio and television, to the new digital media, are an inseparable element of social life (see Briggs, Burke 2009). It is the media that shape public debate, influence our self-knowledge and values, as well as disseminate images and lifestyles. The media constitute one of the basic socializing institutions, alongside family, school, peer group, and workplace. This means that through the media we learn social norms and expected behaviors, including those concerning our bodies.

The ocularcentrism of contemporary Western culture, i.e., the dominance of the sense of sight over other senses, has led to the media focusing on the body in an unprecedented way. The body has begun to be recognized as a determinant of self-identity and social status, something that we not only can, but should, shape (see Giddens 1991), despite the fact that we are often perceived through visible physical signs that are not so easily modified, such as gender, skin color, body size or disabilities. The British sociologist Chris Shilling, author of the book *The Body and Social Theory*, called this process **individualization of the body**. In his opinion, “growing numbers of people are increasingly concerned with the health, shape and appearance of their own bodies as expressions of individual identity,” (Shilling 2003: 1). The body is so important because people build their sense of self around it, and this process is additionally fueled by the commodification of body images present in the media, especially in advertising (see Berger 1977). We can see how strong and disciplinary the patterns transmitted through the media are by examining the impact of these images on young people. The growing criticism of the advertising industry and social media, bans on retouching photos in the fashion press (such as those passed in France in 2017¹) or the obligation to label retouched photos on

1 Nalina Eggert, *Is She Photoshopped? In France, They Now Have to Tell You*, BBC News, 30 September 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-41443027> (accessed: 22.03.2025).

social media (introduced, for example, in Norway in 2021²) stem from, among others, the belief in the negative impact of promoting unrealistic images of bodies.

Sociological research on the images conveyed by mainstream media (mainly opinion-forming press and television) is not only a critique of dominant patterns. It is also an area of analysis of gender and sexual stereotypes and the (in)visibility of bodies that are in any way non-normative, e.g., crippled or not fully functional. Thanks to media analysis, we can see which social groups are still underrepresented in the media and how this distorts the image of society. Think about how often we see transgender people in TV series, those with visible disabilities or at least physical flaws. Or how often women appear as experts in TV news. Media research shows that the gender balance is still far from being achieved.³ According to a report by Press-Service Media Monitoring, in the first quarter of 2021, the three most popular news programs in Poland (*Wiadomości* TVP1, *Fakty* TVN and *Wydarzenia* Polsat) featured significantly more comments from men (75%) than from women (25%), and as many as three out of four publications in the main editions of news services were signed by men. Even on topics directly affecting women, men were more likely to speak out.⁴ And this is not just a Polish problem. Scientific research confirms that we are dealing with a broader trend (see Beckers et al. 2023; Franks, Howell 2019).

Why is it important to study the representation of the body in the media? The simplest answer is: because the media define and explain the world to us. It is on the basis of the messages coming from the media – magazines, newspapers, television, the internet – that we shape our ideas about how we should look, dress, and behave. We build our identity based on the image that we like and that gains acceptance from our social group. Media images stimulate our aspirations and imagination. We can say that our **bodily socialization** takes place through the media – we learn which bodies are valuable, what bodily social norms should be met, and how to behave in public space. We learn that the body is an element of cultural consumption, but also a field of political struggle, as demonstrated in recent years in Poland by the Polish Women's Strike and worldwide by the Black Lives Matter movement. And we begin to realize that the body is partly a social product, and, thus, an object of social control.

In this chapter, we will familiarize ourselves with selected sociological concepts that can be used to analyze the relations between the media and the body. We will

2 Allyson Hiu, *Why Experts Say Norway's Retouched Photo Law Won't Help Fight Body Image Issues*, The Washington Post, 8 July 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/wellness/photo-edit-social-media-norway/2021/07/08/f30d59ca-df2c-11eb-ae31-6b7c5c34f0d6_story.html (accessed: 22.03.2025).

3 Charlotte Tobitt, *Male Experts Dominate Broadcast News (But Far Less Than a Decade Ago)*, PressGazette, 8 October 2024, <https://pressgazette.co.uk/publishers/broadcast/broadcast-news-gender-inequality-uk/> (accessed: 22.03.2025).

4 Justyna Dąbrowska-Cydzik, *Kobiety pomijane w mediach, najbardziej w „Wiadomościach” TVP*, Wirtualnemedial, 24 May 2021, <https://www.wirtualnemedial.pl/artykul/kobiety-pomijane-w-mediach-najbardziej-wiadomosci-tvp> (accessed: 22.03.2025) (in Polish).

discuss the reflections of contemporary sociological classics: Jean Baudrillard, Pierre Bourdieu, and Erving Goffman on the body in the context of media. Then we will move on to present research on, among others, the representativeness of media images, (self-)surveillance of the body in social media, and the building of bodily self-awareness on the example of Polish media during the transformation period in 1990s.

2. The most important theoretical concepts

A common element in the presentation of the body in the media since the mid-20th century has been the more or less clearly articulated belief that we are responsible for our bodies and can, and even should, change them; that by subjecting the body to appropriate rigors – diets, training, proper nutrition, and care – we can maintain health, fitness and beauty for longer; that a proper body is a social value, bodily capital. This belief was a reflection of broader tendencies of social life towards individualization and fragmentation, described by the German sociologist Ulrich Beck in his book *Risk Society* (Beck 1992). In his opinion, the consequence of individualization – which can be generally defined as the “removal from traditional life contexts” – is the condemnation of people to “external control and standardization”, which is achieved, among others, through the media. “Television isolates *and* standardizes,” Beck wrote (1992: 132). “On the one hand, it removes people from traditionally shaped and bounded contexts of conversation, experience and life. At the same time, however, everyone is in a similar position: they all consume institutionally produced television programs,” proposing the same set of patterns and values to everyone. Let us add that this is a set of patterns and values of the middle class.

Sociologists in the 1990s pointed out the emotional disarray of modern people and their identity dilemmas at a time of many different options to choose from – including those offered by the media and concerning the body. Every choice and life strategy was to be subject to observation, control, and reflection. Within these concepts, focused on the subject of identity, there was talk of the “saturated self” (Gergen 1991), the “reflexive self” (Giddens 1991), the postmodern body as a “recipient of impressions” (Bauman 1995), and a “vehicle of pleasure” (Featherstone 1991). Uncertainty, an unstable professional situation, cultural pressure for success and perfection in consumer capitalism found expression in the growing emphasis on physical fitness, hygiene, and maintaining a slim figure, as if body confidence were an antidote to the fluidity of modern life.

Kenneth J. Gergen, an American social psychologist, wrote in his book *The Saturated Self* (1991) about **the expansion of inadequacy** that haunts the modern individual, causing a continued sense of “ought.” This is a choir of social ghosts, voices in our heads admonishing us how we should behave and how we should look. The media contributes

to this: “newspapers, magazines, and television provide a barrage of new criteria of self-evaluation. Is one sufficiently adventurous, clean, well traveled, well read, low in cholesterol, slim, skilled in cooking, friendly, odor-free, coiffed, frugal, burglarproof, family-oriented?” (Gergen 1991: 76). Because if you are not – we can add after Zygmunt Bauman – it means that you have been assigned the role of a “flawed consumer.”

The media became the main driver of the development of consumer culture, which changed the symbolic meaning of the body. Subjected to diets, exercise, and cosmetic treatments, it has taken center stage as a marker of identity in a society based on individual consumption. Hence, according to the pioneer of sociology of the body, Bryan S. Turner, terms such as David Riesman’s “other-directedness” or Christopher Lasch’s “culture of narcissism,” which appeared as descriptions of American society after World War II, were both diagnostic and symptomatic as they showed that the creation and management of image by individuals had become a key element of social life (see Riesman 1950; Lasch 1979; Turner 2008). The increase in real wages, rapid changes in the production and distribution of goods, the emergence of department stores, and the spread of press and television advertising created a wide market for commercial products and, more broadly, led to the development of consumerism and profound changes in customs. These changes were in line with the emergence of a “performing self,” a “self on display,” based on body, style, clothing, and impression management, especially within the new middle class – a flexible and mobile consumer class concentrated in the service sector, focused on new responsibilities: being full of life, smiling, optimistic, healthy, young, beautiful, and happy (see Jacyno 2007).

2.1. The consumer body, or the media as an expert on the body

According to social scientists, the process of individualization that took place in the second half of the 20th century was influenced by factors such as: demographic growth and the aging of society, the development of mass communication and consumer culture, urbanization, and industrialization. Increased social mobility and a more specialized division of labor led to the uprooting of individuals from previous social structures and local communities. A new type of society and a new urban lifestyle emerged, detached from religious or local traditions. A new middle class also emerged – left to itself and seeking answers to its questions mainly in the sphere of the media. It was in such a socio-cultural context that the body gained a new dimension. Popular interest in the body was visible in newspapers, magazines, and television, filled with materials on the subject of the obligatory bodily image: bodies that were necessarily slim, young, well-groomed, sexy, and healthy. Sociologists dealing with the culture of individualism also noticed diseases caused by eating disorders and the rise of self-help literature, body building, and plastic surgery. The media found itself in a new role: an expert on the body, disseminating knowledge about the proper appearance and care of the body, health, and illness.

The first theorist to be mentioned here is the French sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007). In his book *The Consumer Society*, originally published in 1970, he wrote about the body as “the finest consumer object,” through which products and services were sold, and, thus, a certain lifestyle. According to Baudrillard, the entire “liberation of the body” that took place in the 1960s was aimed at generating profits and was calculated to create a wide market for a whole range of cosmetic products: “From hygiene to make-up (not forgetting suntans, exercise and the many ‘liberations’ of fashion), the rediscovery of the body takes place initially through objects. It even seems that the only drive that is really liberated is the *drive to buy*,” (Baudrillard 1998: 134).

Baudrillard believed that we lived in a “hyperreality”: a world in which the ultimate guarantee of the authenticity of events was their presence in the media. It is the reality presented on the computer screen and transmitted by television that is, as it were, the “natural” environment of contemporary societies. This may explain the development of celebrity culture, in which the only reliable sign of success and significance is their presence in television schedules and glossy magazines. This hyperreal world is composed of simulacra – images whose meaning results exclusively from other images. Nevertheless, the images of the male and female bodies promoted in the media, however artificial and created, are valid in the real world, condemning us to constant comparison and striving for the presented ideal. YouTube, Instagram or TikTok influencers can be an example of this as they build their virtual brand using internet bots and sponsorship deals – most young internet users want to become them. Although the messages they create have little to do with reality, they are perceived as symbols of a lifestyle to which millions of people around the world aspire.

Baudrillard pointed out that sexuality itself has become an object of consumption, used increasingly often for sales purposes. This is clearly visible in the advertising market, where one may get the impression that being physically attractive and open to new sexual experiences is necessary to achieve success. This topic was analyzed by the British media researcher Brian McNair (2002), who has written about the “striptease culture,” which is characterized by the media availability of sex, nakedness, and exhibitionism. As he has noted, sex is “routinely used in advertising and pop video as a powerful promotional tool to sell other commodities in the marketplace. In all these ways sex is about money, and never more so than in the capitalist societies of today,” (McNair 2002: 6). McNair called the widespread availability of sex and sexual topics through the media “the democratization of desire” – and this did not only refer to the sphere of porn, but also to political sex scandals, the wide coverage of sex, increasingly not only heterosexual, in magazines for women and men or on television programs.⁵ The media have become a space for sexual confessions and confidences, innuendos, and jokes – even though for many people sexuality is an intimate experience that is rarely discussed honestly and openly.

5 An example is the popular British television dating game show *Naked Attraction*, the Polish edition of which appeared on Zoom TV on 3 September 2021. It is a dating show whose participants perform naked, showing a whole cross-section of different bodies and sexualities.

The commodification of the body and sexuality by the media was also pointed out by the British sociologist Mike Featherstone. In analyzing the body in consumer culture, he wrote about “calculating hedonism” or hedonism for show as an element of lifestyle, but paid for with significant expenditures on body care and maintenance. The belief that the body is plastic and that through effort and work on the body one can achieve the desired ideal was one of the elements of the developing cosmetic market, along with its commodity propaganda. Investing in the body was supposed to “pay off” – to be capital to be used on the job market and in interpersonal relations. According to the researcher, the development of the media was not without significance in this process:

Within consumer culture, advertisements, the popular press, television and motion pictures, provide a proliferation of stylised images of the body. In addition, the popular media constantly emphasise the cosmetic benefits of body maintenance. [...] Within the consumer culture the body is proclaimed as a vehicle of pleasure: its desirable and desiring and the closer the actual body approximates to the idealised images of youth, health, fitness and beauty the higher its exchange-value (Featherstone 1991: 170, 177).

It is easy to get the impression that media messages popularize a rather superficial and unified image of the body. Moreover, despite sexual allusions, they are far from sensual pleasures and are more focused on obedience to promoted models of body maintenance through appropriate diets, fitness training, and cosmetic or beauty treatments. This is a world of visual self-surveillance and self-assessment in relation to others. According to Featherstone, we are increasingly aware of how we look and what impression it makes on others. Then we give ourselves a rating, all the time having in the back of our minds how better we could be with just a little more effort. This is how the system of self-regulation works within consumer capitalism.

Another British sociologist, Anthony Giddens, in his book *Modernity and Self-Identity*, drew attention primarily to the influence of reflexivity on the perception of the body. In his opinion, with the advent of modernity, the body became a project, an area of choice and control, and a carrier of symbolic values and social position. As he wrote:

The reflexivity of the self, in conjunction with the influence of abstract systems, pervasively affects the body as well as psychic processes. [...] What might appear as a wholesale movement towards the narcissistic cultivation of bodily appearance is in fact an expression of a concern lying much deeper actively to ‘construct’ and control the body (Giddens 1991: 7).

Giddens (1991: 99) distinguished four aspects of the body having special relevance to self and self-identity: bodily *appearance* (all external features, including clothing, ornaments), *demeanour* (i.e., the way of using the body on a daily basis), *sensuality* of the body (i.e., the way of receiving pleasure, but also pain), and the *regimes* to which bodies are subject (diet, cosmetic treatments, training).

In Giddens’s considerations, the body is a sphere of individual creation – based on media messages, self-help literature, comparisons with close and distant acquaintances, people are actively responsible for their body. At the same time, he

has pointed out that our “uncertainty” regarding the body and the scope of control we have over it is deepening. This is most clearly visible in the amount of attention devoted to the personal construction of a healthy body. We increasingly search for knowledge about health on the internet, on forums, in online support groups; we want to find credibility for diagnoses and alternatives to treatments recommended by specialists on the internet. Chris Shilling (2002), observing these trends, has spoken of the increase in the number of “well-informed” health consumers who actively seek information on how to best take care of a healthy body and maximize its potential. This is probably the reason for the popularity of the thinking about health in terms of cultural consumption and the commodification of health, where the emphasis is placed on the entire group of products for eating, resting, losing weight, and body care in addition to other items provided by contemporary trade, as well as culture, and advertised by the mass media (see Blaxter 2004). Aggressive health marketing, promoting a young and fit body, advertising dietary supplements, as well as healthy food, and, at the same time, searching for “better well-being” – all this constitutes the expert message about the body in the media.

2.2. The legitimate body, or the class character of the media

Baudrillard, in his reflections on consumption, pointed to its class and gender structure. He even argued that consumption was a class institution, just like an educational system, and advertising belonged to the order of the “industrial production of differences,” (Baudrillard 1998: 59, 88). This meant that consumers strove to fit into a specific model, subordinating themselves to patterns transmitted through the media. Consumers do not strive for individuality, but to become similar to the group they aspire to, want to be a part of, or feel a part of, and “personalized” advertising serves only this purpose. In other words: advertising does not only sell a product – it sells an idea of who we will be if this product is ours. Baudrillard concluded from this that the message of the media, especially television, was not the images transmitted through it, but new models of relationships and perception, a change in traditional family and group structures.

Social scientists have pointed out from the beginning that the media are not neutral because they essentially represent the point of view and values of the middle class. By playing a key role in the transmission of information and knowledge, they serve to reproduce class inequalities. What is more, by propagating ideas that maintain the status quo, they make something natural out of social inequalities. This topic was analyzed by the outstanding French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002). He believed that the “ideal of thinness” disseminated by the media was a “subtle form of class warfare”.

The body became the prize in a struggle aimed at enforcing the acceptance of oppression (through submission of the body to scrutiny) and social integration. The perceptual norms of the dominant group were imposed on all of society in a process that coincided with the class struggle in that the characteristics of a particular group were extolled as exemplary, awarded legitimacy, and then imposed on others (quoted after: Vincent 1991: 234).

Thus, the dominant media message privileges the middle class, recognizing its ideas about the body as the norm, which results in **symbolic violence** exerted on the less privileged.

Symbolic violence is a term coined by Pierre Bourdieu, and described most fully in his work *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (Bourdieu, Passeron 1990), denoting the process of imposing the meanings and values cherished by the upper social classes on all other social classes. Bourdieu believed that in the course of school education, the middle class imposed its culture and way of seeing the world on the working (lower) classes, while, at the same time, discrediting the values proper to the working class. Symbolic violence also concerns the body – the ideal of a slim, modeled figure directly questions the value of physical work, as well as the lifestyle of farmers and the working class. Bourdieu argued that the body forms produced by the working class constituted a form of physical capital with a lower exchange value than those developed by the dominant classes. And even when individuals manage to move up the social ladder, the prevailing definitions of physical capital will still mark their bodies with the stigma of their origin.

In his works, Bourdieu emphasized that *habitus*, or our dispositions to act in a certain way, was inscribed in the body. This theme was most extensively developed in his 1979 book *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, in which the author showed how expert knowledge about **the legitimate body** was built in the new middle class. It found its expression in the attitudes promoted through the media, the ways of carrying oneself, walking, behaving, the ways of moving one's lips, speech, gestures, loud or muffled laughter, taking up space in public places, practicing specific sports, and, finally, cosmetic procedures such as make-up, changing one's hairstyle, plastic surgery, and clothing choices. Hence, doctors and dieticians working in the media, journalists and editors of women's magazines, all the new experts on image and etiquette defined – in Bourdieu's opinion – the “legitimate market in physical properties,” (see Bourdieu 1984: 152–153, 190–193).

The body is the most indisputable materialization of class taste, which it manifests in several ways. It does it first in the seemingly most natural features of the body, the dimensions (volume, height, weight) and shapes (round or square, stiff or supple, straight or curved) of its visible forms, which express in countless ways a whole relation to the body, i.e., a way of treating it, caring for it, feeding it, maintaining it, which reveals the deepest dispositions of the *habitus* (Bourdieu 1984: 190).

The building of **physical capital** should, therefore, be viewed as a form of positional consumption, an element of the struggle to gain and maintain a desired social status. As Turner has argued, this is inevitably linked to the changes associated with the development of capitalism and the middle class: “In the managerial class, in order to be successful it is also important to look successful, because the body of the manager is symbolic of the corporation,” (Turner 2008: 98). Image-management and image-creation are processes of continuous choices of physical strategies. This is clearly visible in media messages, an interesting example of which is the press

from the post socialist transformation period in Poland. For example, half of the Polish magazine “Businessman” in the 1990s was taken up by articles that were only seemingly not related to business: about the rules of playing tennis, the latest men’s fashions from Italy or where and how to drink port (see Dunn 2004). Counterfeit handbags on women or white socks on men, which became front-page topics, showed that in this process the body could be a valuable resource, but it could also be an unwanted stigma.

2.3. The ideal and excluded body, or removing stigma

The American sociologist Erving Goffman (1922–1982) is known mainly for his influential work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956) – the study of the impressions that we and our bodies evoke in the social arena, during interactions with others. An important role in this process of bodily work is played by **body idioms**, i.e., appearance, but also the behavior of a given person: clothing, posture, movements and positions, tone of voice, and gestures. In *Gender Advertisements*, Goffman (1976) applied semiotic analysis to the study of American press advertisements, specifically the portrayal of female and male bodies in them. And right at the beginning he noticed that despite the selectivity of the models presented – it is difficult to consider the bodies and behaviors shown in advertisements as representative of the everyday life of the population – they were treated as something obvious; they did not seem peculiar or unnatural. Only imagining a gender swap could give us insight into the sphere of stereotypes that these advertisements reproduced (Goffman 1976: 25).

With his usual insight, Goffman analyzed all the bodily details and micro-gestures present in the visual layer of advertisements: bending of the knees, crossing of the legs, touching of the hair, face and body, the touching of another person (holding hands, hugging), and facial expression (joy, sadness, fear, concern). On this basis, he described six aspects of presenting the gendered body in advertisements:

- 1) *relative size*: one way of emphasizing a higher social status is to present a given person (a man) as taller or superior to others (women, children, men of lower status); the exception when a woman is pictured taller than a man is when a man is dressed in a uniform indicating a lower social status or work in services, e.g., a waiter, a cook.
- 2) *the feminine touch*: advertisements often use women’s hands or just fingers to trace the outlines of the object or to cradle it or to caress its surface; self-touching can also be involved.
- 3) *function ranking*: a man usually performs the executive role, and not only in advertisements showing professional work; also in those showing hobbies or family life, he is in the foreground, playing an active role; in the context of spaces stereotypically assigned to women, e.g., the kitchen, male characters have no role, thus expressing their lack of involvement in “female” tasks, or they get involved for comic effect, e.g., they clumsily take care of a small child.

- 4) *the family*: a 2+2 family is usually shown, where the girl is pictured next to the mother, the boy next to the father; the father is often on the sidelines or dominates the rest of the family.
- 5) *the ritualization of subordination*: the classic arrangement is the lower position of the subordinate person's body – showing them bowing to the other person, bending down, making a bow; women are often pictured sitting on the floor or lying on the bed, often with their legs raised up; they are just as often shown in a canting posture or with crossed legs, in acrobatic positions, bending their whole body or parts of it; they are also more often shown smiling at the other person; moreover, Goffman drew attention to four ways of presenting intimacy between people of the opposite sex: close positioning of the body but without touching; walking arm in arm ("arm lock"); putting one arm around the other ("shoulder hold"); hand-holding.
- 6) *licensed withdrawal*: women are more often than men shown in a state of emotion – remorse, fear, shyness, and laughter; they are more often pictured sucking or biting their fingers, or in a finger-to-finger position; when they look away (with shyness, embarrassment), they lower their gaze or lower their whole face, look to the side or into space, focus on a small object (e.g., a button on the jacket of a man standing in front of the woman); Goffman has noted that even when we are dealing with a single character in an advertisement, fragmentation of the woman's body can still indicate withdrawal – the character can be presented at the edge of the image, from behind a person or object; women are also more likely to show caresses in advertisements – towards men, children, animals, and even touch objects with tenderness.

According to Goffman, the gendered body positions shown on advertising boards indicate the widespread concept of hierarchical relations between the sexes in society: men have more power and enjoy a higher social status than women. Advertisers draw on the body idioms available to them, and all they can do is conventionalize our conventions. Hence, the justified criticism of women's magazines and the advertising market in general by feminists – from Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* to Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth*, to which I will return. The media are saturated with gendered images, conveying normative guidelines about appropriate and inappropriate behaviors that influence the aspirations and imaginations of successive generations of women.

The emphasis in contemporary popular culture on the smooth, somehow clean, and sterile body distracts us from what might be described as the other side of the physical coin: a body marked by scars and cuts, deformed, and not fully functional. It seems that the current body ideal conveyed by the media is constituted by the negation of anything that might create the appearance of abnormality. Crooked teeth, a harelip, divergent strabismus, an unhealthy complexion, excessive obesity or anorexic thinness – all these signs of imperfection or **stigma**, as Goffman would say, affect the quality of life and chances for success, not only social but also professional, and as such are rarely visible in mainstream media messages.

Erving Goffman in his powerful study *Stigma. Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963) distinguished three types of **stigma**. First, “abominations of the body,” various genetic deformities, scars. Second, “blemishes of individual character,” attributed to weak will, dogmatic beliefs or dishonesty, which can be inferred from addictions, mental illness or unemployment. The third type of stigma was the “tribal” stigma of race, nationality and religion. Goffman also noted that stigma could be visible immediately – then we are dealing with a discredited person, but it could also remain invisible and then we are talking about a discreditable person who can be exposed at any time. In each case, contact with “normals” requires enormous physical work and emotional management.

Stigmatization is a form of depreciation, in which the individual is denied full social acceptance. **Weight stigma** is a “social rejection and devaluation that accrues to those who do not comply with prevailing social norms of adequate body weight and shape,” (see Tomiyama et al. 2018). We see this in the wave of anorexia (a Polish report on this topic, see Stabach 2023), but also in such phenomena as fat-shaming and fatphobia. Weight shaming, ridicule, unsolicited comments or advice are everyday life for overweight people, which have become common in the social media space and have an exceptionally negative impact. However, people with stigma, using Goffman’s terminology, can create their own media messages, an example of which is the body positivity and size acceptance movement: the affirmation of one’s own body regardless of what it looks like and how far it deviates from ideal patterns (see Rothblum, Solovay 2009; a Polish report on this topic, see Chowaniec, Skoczylas 2023, 2025).

Fat-shaming, or actions aimed at humiliating, shaming or ridiculing someone for their weight, and **fatphobia**, or aversion or hostility toward obese people, are common and well-known phenomena to people who deviate even slightly from the norm of thinness. This is how Roxane Gay, an American writer, described her experience of being shamed for one’s body weight in her book *Hunger. A Memoir of (My) Body*: “Fat shaming is real, constant, and rather pointed. There are a shocking number of people who believe they can simply torment fat people into weight loss and disciplining their bodies or disappearing their bodies from the public sphere. They believe they are medical experts, listing a litany of health problems associated with fatness as personal affronts. [...] It’s a strange civic-minded cruelty. When people try to shame me for being fat, I feel rage,” (Gay 2017: 125).

Gay has pointed out that the fat body is constantly exposed to display and commentary; that it is discussed by family, friends, and strangers, very often in the form of expressions of “concern.” “Everyone – siblings, parents, aunts, uncles, grandmothers, cousins – has an opinion, judgement or piece of counsel,” (Gay 2017: 44). If we consider the fact that, among Poles, the prevalence of overweight exceeds 62% for men and 43% for women (see Gajewska, Harton 2023), then in this context it is surprising how few fat bodies we see in the media.

On the one hand, the media influence social relations, and, on the other, they are their reflection. It is a space for negotiating meanings between what is (reality, how we live) and what could be (the ideal, the world of patterns or fantasies). For

this reason, body images are “never just pictures”: they do not only show attractive body sizes and shapes, but depict what is valued and admired in the dominant culture and at the same time promise a solution to the feeling of uncertainty and fear through body modification (see Karmakar 2021). Lisa Taylor and Andrew Willis, the authors of the textbook *Media Studies. Texts, Institutions and Audiences* (1999), have pointed out that minority audiences often reject views and media messages they do not identify with, and choose those that reflect their perspectives and experiences. Let us remember that as recipients we have the freedom to decide and now also to shape the media space in social media. We will return to this topic when discussing the most important studies.

3. Key concepts

Body fragmentation – the process of dividing the body into fragments and exposing only certain parts of it, e.g., only women’s legs or a man’s torso, often used in advertising.

Body image – a person’s perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about their body, which are shaped in a specific family and cultural context.

Body positivity – accepting one’s body; a social movement that was intended to be a space of the visibility for marginalized bodies that were not represented in the media.

Fatphobia – aversion or hostility towards fat people; it is revealed, for example, through stereotypical perceptions of fat people as lazy and incompetent, or avoiding cooperation with someone because of their fatness.

Fat-shaming – actions aimed at humiliating, shaming or ridiculing someone because of their weight; it can be both, verbal and non-verbal.

Individualization of the body – the process by which progressively more people are becoming increasingly interested in the health, shape, and appearance of their bodies, treated as an expression of individual identity.

Symbolic annihilation – being ignored, trivialized, and devalued in the media; originally, this term referred to the absence or underrepresentation of women in mainstream media, but we can also apply this term to the absence of people with disabilities or ethnic minorities in media coverage.

4. The most important studies

The issue of the body appears in media sociology and media studies mainly in the context of considerations about the influence of the media on social life. The main attention is paid to the influence of the media, once mass media, currently digital, on the disseminated image of the body and self-knowledge built on the subject of the body. According to the British sociologist John B. Thompson (1995: 42):

In receiving and appropriating media messages, individuals are also involved in a process of self-formation and self-understanding [...]. We are constantly shaping and reshaping our skills and stocks of knowledge, testing our feelings and tastes and expanding the horizons of our experience. We are actively fashioning a self *by means of* the messages and meaningful content supplied by media products (among other things).

“«You can’t be what you can’t see» – this short quote by Marian Wright Edelman is often used to describe the need for more representation in the mass media as it perfectly symbolizes the power of being visible and thus represented in the media,” (Beckers et al. 2023: 480). This is partly the answer to the question of why the media are so important in the process of body socialization and how the world presented by the media affects our understanding of it. The underrepresentation of certain social groups in the media – including ethnic and sexual minorities, the elderly, fat people, and people with disabilities – can lead to a false image of the world. Avoiding showing LGBT+ people in news programs limits our knowledge, while stereotypical representations of women or ethnic minorities reinforce existing prejudices in society.

A number of research methods are used in media studies to analyze the content of media messages, the most popular of which are the study of the hidden meaning of content (semiotics) and traditional, quantitative content analysis.

Semiotics, or the study of signs, primarily examines how signs participate in communication. As we have already seen, Erving Goffman used semiotics to study the depiction of gender in American press advertisements. The Dutch sociologist Liesbet van Zoonen (1994) used semiotics to analyze the cover of “Cosmopolitan” magazine: the photograph of a young, white woman in full make-up and casual attire prominently displayed on the cover, the headlines, including the color scheme and font style used, all served to convey the impression that the type of femininity presented by the magazine was urban, sophisticated, and overtly sexual. Van Zoonen believes that semiotics is a powerful tool for understanding how media sign systems can arouse emotions, associations, fears, hopes, and fantasies.

Another method, derived from sociology, is **content analysis**, which involves comparing and measuring the explicit content of a large number of media products over a given period. It assumes that the frequency with which topics/issues/bodies are presented in the media influences our perception of the world, including personal aspirations, life expectations, as well as the definition of “normality,” and that it can be used to derive information about the values and beliefs prevailing in

a given place and time or held by a social group. The American researcher John Naisbitt (1982) used the content analysis of press reports to identify dominant social changes (megatrends), indicating that the appearance of new content in the news always came at the cost of marginalizing others. Thus, what appears in the press reflects the priorities of a given society. Content analysis is used, for example, to study the presence of women in the media – and it is most often evidence that the media marginalize the role of women in the public sphere. As van Zoonen, quoted earlier, has stated, women hardly appear in the mass media, and if they do, they are presented as wives, mothers, daughters or friends; as performing traditional female jobs (personal assistant, nurse) or as sexual objects. Recent studies of the image of women in advertising in Poland have also confirmed that they do not take into account demographic realities: the women presented are almost always young and slim (see Kończak 2022).

In this part, I will present three research areas at the interface of sociology and the media. First, the often mentioned representativeness of media images; second, the impact of social media on body image; third, the building of bodily and moral self-awareness on the example of the Polish media during the transformation period in the 1990s.

4.1. Symbolic annihilation, or the representativeness of media images

A widespread mode of representation that appears most often – although not exclusively – in popular media texts is the **stereotype**. As indicated by the researchers Andrew C. Billings and Scott Parrott (2020: 3), media stereotypes are “mediated messages that communicate overgeneralized information about social groups, associating positive or negative characteristics, attributes, and/or behavior with the social group.” Therefore, the media representations of girls and women almost always reflect traditional gender roles.

Women are conventionally seen in domestic roles as housewives and homemakers, as objects of male sexual desire, or in working situations that extend the domestic role – such as nurses, carers or office workers. Such representations have been fairly consistent across news reports, drama and entertaining programming (Giddens, Sutton 2014: 148).

It is worth remembering that stereotypical representations are not the cause of discrimination or exclusion, but they can reinforce existing negative ideas about a social group.

The American sociologist Gaye Tuchman pointed out in the 1970s that such stereotypical representations lead to **symbolic annihilation** – women in the media were usually ignored, trivialized and devalued; either absent, or presented with an emphasis on sexual attractiveness or while doing housework (Tuchman, Daniels, Benet 1978). Much research has been devoted to the fact that popular culture and the media do not show the real lives of women, but serve to confirm stereotypical roles as wives, mothers, and housekeepers. In news programs, women are clearly underrepresented or they are shown as professionally less competent. Even in

the case of women in high public offices or female politicians, their behavior and appearance or family status are analyzed, while none of this information is given for men. The political scientist Pippa Norris has called the media representations of female politicians “a splash of color in the photo op,” (Norris 1997), arguing, based on research, that women are less visible in the media than men. Moreover, female leaders have usually been written into one of three narratives – about women’s leadership as a symbol of breakthrough for other women (the first female leader of a party, the first female prime minister, the first female president, etc.); about women leaders as outsiders in senior political positions who lack qualifications and political experience, which is why their rise to power was described as unexpected and their competences underestimated; and about women leaders as the agents of change that will cleanse politics of corruption – an expectation that is rather difficult to fulfil. As Norris has argued, this places women on a pedestal from which one can only fall.

Symbolic annihilation does not only affect women. Research shows that media representations of ethnic minorities and people with disabilities also perpetuate stereotypes; what is more, they are absent from prime time viewing hours, and when they do appear in news and documentaries, it is as a group that is somehow problematic. As Anthony Giddens (2009: 762) summarized it:

If ethnic minorities have been defined as *culturally* different, then the representations of disabled people in the media have routinely been as *physically* or *bodily* different, based on the ‘personal tragedy’ model of disability [...]. News stories involving disabled people are much more likely to get an airing if the story can be fitted into this dominant framing and typically, this means showing disabled people as dependent, rather than living independent lives.

Researchers of American children’s cartoons have also reached similar conclusions, based on a content analysis indicating that the significant underrepresentation of the elderly, women, ethnic minorities, and sexual minorities has not changed significantly over the years (see Klein, Shiffman 2009). This suggests that symbolic annihilation is not a problem of individual titles or genres, but a permanent feature of media coverage.

In Poland, research on the visibility of people with disabilities in mainstream media also shows the underrepresentation of this group (see Struck-Peregończyk, Kurek-Ochmańska 2018; Struck-Peregończyk, Leonowicz-Bukała 2018; Piróg et al. 2021; a more recent study about the self-image of disabled people on Instagram, see Struck-Peregończyk, Leonowicz-Bukała 2023). There is a lack of disabled presenters, a lack of people with disabilities in popular series, programs or articles on a wide range of topics; able-bodied actors are even used to play the roles of a people with disabilities. People with disabilities are usually presented in one of two stereotypical ways: either as people who cannot cope with life and need help (“victims”) or as heroes who perform extraordinary deeds, and who are noble and brave (“supercrips”). This image is important because fewer than half of Poles have people with disabilities in their circle of friends, which makes it impossible to verify the media message. In particular, using stigmatizing language can influence

a negative perception and a distancing from such people. An analysis of the content of the Polish weekly magazine “Polityka” from 1997–2016 conducted by Monika Struck-Peregończyk and Olga Kurek-Ochmańska (2008) showed that although the language of writing about disability changed over the last twenty years, there was still a lack of presenting people with disabilities as active members of society, in roles other than those focused on limited abilities.

Another example of media underrepresentation in Poland is the presence of non-binary and sexually non-normative people. Krzysztof Arcimowicz (2013) studied the most popular Polish drama series of the early 21st century (such as *M jak miłość*, *Barwy szczęścia*, *Na dobre i na złe*) and drew attention to the very low percentage of characters with non-normative sexual identity. Moreover, homosexual and bisexual characters played only secondary or episodic roles. Transsexual and transgender people appeared incidentally. According to the researcher, this resulted mainly from the dominance of the traditional division of roles and the patriarchal image of the family in the analyzed series: the division of the home into “male” and “female” spheres, the higher earnings of men associated with the role of the “breadwinner,” and women performing most of the housework. The vision of family life shown in prime-time soap operas in Poland turned out to be extremely conservative, and homosexuals were shown stereotypically (and only men, lesbian relationships were not present) as unhappily in love or sensitive gays looking for love – without social differentiation.

The low presence of the transgender community in mainstream media is not just a Polish phenomenon. The American film industry has been criticized many times for casting heterosexual actors and actresses in the roles of transgender women. Examples include Jared Leto in the film *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013), Felicity Huffman in *Transamerica* (2005), Eddie Redmayne in *The Danish Girl* (2015) or Jeffrey Tambor in the series *Transparent* (2014–2019). The #GirlsLikeUs campaign on Twitter, started by the American activist Janet Mock in 2012, aimed, among others, to create spaces on social media to build community and visibility for trans individuals (see Jackson, Bailey, Foucault Welles 2018).⁶

4.2. Body image and social surveillance in social media

The media, alongside family and peer groups, are an important factor in the socialization of children and adolescents; hence, a new trend in research on the impact of social media and dating applications such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and Tinder on body image and the experience of corporeality and sexuality, mainly by young people. Exposing them to an advertising market full of sexism and **body fragmentation** (not only female, but also male) has an impact on their perception of their own bodily adequacy (see Brytek-Matera 2008). The media

6 See also Janet Mock, *Solidarity & Sisterhood: My Journey (So Far) with #GirlsLikeUs*, 28 May 2012, <https://janetmock.com/2012/05/28/twitter-girlslikeus-campaign-for-trans-women/> (accessed: 22.03.2025).

underrepresentation of bodies that differ from the ideal also creates a belief about what is a valued standard and what requires improvement. Imperfect bodies do not deserve media visibility and – in Bourdieu’s terms – this is a form of symbolic violence.

Body image can be defined as a person’s perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about their body, which are shaped in a specific family and cultural context. Psychologist Sarah Grogan in her classic book *Body Image. Understanding Body Dissatisfaction in Men, Women and Children* (1999) drew attention to the variability of body patterns. Currently, the ideal female body is a slim body, while the ideal male body is a slender body with average musculature. Nonconformity to these patterns leads to significant social consequences. This observation is confirmed by the Polish scholar Honorata Jakubowska (2009: 246):

Most of us not only adapt or try to adapt to the promoted standards, but also judge others based on these standards. Our attitude to the body influences the assessment of other people. We judge those who do not adapt to the applicable norms negatively, and the more effort we put into disciplining our own bodies, the more negatively we judge those who do not.

Hence the belief that fat people are lazy, have no control over their lives, and lack discipline and strong will (a Polish report on this topic, see Mamczur 2022).

Many studies have been devoted to the influence of the media, especially the internet and social media, on body image and eating disorders (see Perloff 2014; Saiphoo, Vaheri 2019). New media, characterized by interactivity, focus on visual communication and great control over shared images, primarily affect adolescents. The image of the ideal body created in the media makes adolescent boys and girls compare themselves in the media mirror and feel deeply concerned about their own bodies as being different from the admired model. Social media additionally deepen this feeling by adding appearance-related comments and assessments of peers. And it is the reactions of other users that are crucial for experiencing the body and its exposure in the media.

Psychologist Rachel F. Rodgers (2016) has pointed out that the internet works in two ways: on the one hand, it targets young women in particular with personalized advertisements about the body and a slim figure; on the other hand, it adds an element of peer feedback on Facebook or Instagram, which has a huge impact on body image and eating concerns among adolescents. People interested in this topic, e.g., by searching for information regarding body-related topics, like fitness or diet, on YouTube, may also be exposed to materials stigmatizing fat people, of which there is a great deal. The stigmatization or cyberbullying of fat people in social media, fat talk, i.e., conversations focusing on weight and appearance and involving statements depreciating oneself/others, fat-shaming, i.e., teasing and blaming for appearance that deviates from the “norm” – this is the everyday life of many teenagers. This was confirmed by the Polish research report *Nastolatki 3.0. Raport z ogólnopolskiego badania uczniów* – over 15% of Polish pupils have been the subjects of attacks on the internet because of their physical appearance, and over 50% have

witnessed such discrimination.⁷ When it is not possible to live up to the ideal, shame and dissatisfaction may appear, and, as a consequence, lower self-esteem and eating disorders.

Fatphobia is one of the most powerful social phenomena affecting the body. Susan Bordo has commented that although popular culture shows increased gender and sexual diversity, body weight still defines us – and this is regardless of the fact that a large part of the Western society does not fit the ideal of thinness (Karmakar 2021). This can lead to a distorted perception of one's own body, resulting in an exaggeration of the true size of or dissatisfaction with individual body parts: buttocks, breasts, legs. Naomi Wolf (1990) wrote about the fear of obesity and the mania of weight control as aspects of the **beauty myth** that deprived women of political agency. Instead of engaging in public activities, work, and careers, women fix their make-up and worry about whether they are thin enough. This “beauty myth” has the greatest impact on young women. Girls in their teens often adopt media models and begin to treat external standards as their own, while noticing the chasm that separates them from achieving them.

The Beauty Myth is the title of a well-known book by the American writer Naomi Wolf (1990), in which she argues that the almost unattainable ideal of female beauty serves as a weapon in the fight against women's social advancement. “The beauty myth is not about women at all. It is about men's institutions and institutional power,” (Wolf 1990: 13). Wolf asks: if you feel inadequate in your own body, how can you feel confident in the public space? If you constantly glance in the mirror and wonder if you look good, will you decide to speak at a meeting? According to Wolf, women fall into the trap of an endless cycle of beauty treatments and diets, which turns women's bodies into prisons. What's more, the beauty myth is reproduced by family, peers, and the media among increasingly younger children. A Polish scholar Beata Łaciak (2008) drew attention to this, examining how the market of toys, children's films, beauty contests and children's game shows socialized kids to care about their beauty. Shaping the belief in children that their success in life depends on their looks can have painful consequences during adolescence and cause lasting complexes. Later, the culture of transformation and television make-over shows prey on this, showing that with the help of medical interventions, make-up, clothing, and diet, one can change their life, and that changing their body will bring success and happiness in life (for more on this topic in Polish, see Lisowska-Magdziarz 2012). This topic is analyzed in detail in this book by Mariola Bieńko in the chapter *The Body and Beauty*.

According to Gorgan (1999: 189), one way to support the reluctance to internalize the norms regarding appearance imposed by the media is to teach young people that these norms are completely unrealistic and not only do not often correspond to the biological capabilities of the human body, but are also

7 More on this topic in the report: *Nastolatki 3.0. Raport z ogólnopolskiego badania uczniów*, NASK Państwowy Instytut Badawczy, Warszawa 2023, <https://thinkstat.pl/publikacje/nastolatki-3-0-raport-z-ogolnopolskiego-badania-uczniow-2023-r> (accessed: 22.03.2025) (in Polish).

inconsistent with the wide variety of body shapes and sizes. Meanwhile, the results of the *Spotlight on adolescent health and well-being* study published by the World Health Organization in 2020⁸ has warned that Polish teenagers have the highest rate of negative body image and ranked second to last in the health assessment ranking among 45 countries. Perceiving themselves as too fat or a little too fat by Polish teenagers placed Polish girls in the first position (with the highest rate) in the ranking of 45 countries in each age group (11, 13 and 15 years old). At the age of 11, 39% of girls considered themselves fat or too fat, at the age of 13 – 49%, and at the age of 15 – 52% of girls. The results of boys in these age groups were equally disturbing: boys aged 11 and 13 ranked second, while those aged 15 ranked first, with the highest rate (31%) in the ranking.

Adolescence is one of the most critical periods in a person's life. The transformations taking place in the physical sphere are accompanied by the fear of losing popularity and uncertainty about one's own future. The "appropriate" appearance of the body is seen at this time of life as one of the most important criteria for achieving life satisfaction – noted the Polish sociologist Anna Wójtewicz (2014: 97). Sports for boys, a sexy appearance for girls – for young people, physicality is the basis of self-esteem, which is fueled by popular culture and the entire youth industry. In these matters, young people subordinate themselves to their peers and current trends, seeking approval, among others, through hearts and likes on social media. "Adolescents who conform to social ideals of appearance are typically more popular and provide an example of the rewards of the conformity and the pursuit of social ideals," (Rodgers 2016: 122). Wójtewicz, but also other researchers, draw attention to the sexualization of young girls, especially visible in published posts and reels. As observed by the Polish psychologist Katarzyna Schier (2009: 176):

Teenage girls put a huge effort into creating themselves as sexually mature women; they learn to apply make-up, experiment with hairstyles, try out different ways of dressing, learn to walk in high heels, modulate their voices to make them sound sexy, decorate their bodies with piercings and tattoos.

Social media promotes comparisons – teenagers compare their bodies to models from the media, they also compare themselves with each other. A common procedure in the media is the so-called makeovers – comparing oneself before and after losing weight, after a visit to a stylist or make-up artist. Another issue is the creation of a physical self-representation on social media, which is most often digitally modified to meet the requirements of the ideal. Profile photos on social media are improved not only by influencers, but by most users. Applying filters, rejuvenating, smoothing the complexion or enlarging the lips and eyes – the photo should be above all "attractive" and this is a key skill for young people, because attractive photos are used to gain popularity on the web. Media visibility, oversharing or obsessively

8 More on this topic in the report: *Spotlight on adolescent health and well-being*, World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe, Copenhagen 2020, <https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/332104> (accessed: 22.03.2025).

informing others about oneself, as well as hyperactivity on social media are supposed to indicate a person's high status and popularity, which is often achieved through sexually charged posts and photos.

Media researchers have pointed out that what is crucial for our physical self-esteem is not what kind of social media users we are, but whether and who we compare ourselves to and what users/topics/hashtags we follow.⁹ That is why researchers have examined posts with the hashtags #fitspiration, #fitspo, #fitspogirl (a combination of the words "fitness" and "inspiration"), i.e., photos from the gym and training, motivating and intended to inspire others with messages to work on their own bodies through regular exercise and a healthy diet. For example, research has shown (Carrotte, Prichard, Cheng Lim 2017) that following #fitspiration posts can have a negative impact on both women and men (although women are responsible for two-thirds of posts with the #fitspo hashtag) – especially since they usually show a perfectly fit body in tight workout clothes, focus on diet and exercise, and promote only one body type, while every healthy body does not necessarily look the same.

In contrast to #fitspo, posts celebrating the diversity of human bodies and showing the very wide range of the body that we can attribute to the body positivity trend have a documented positive effect on social media users (see Fioravanti et al. 2021). Viewing photos of natural bodies with the hashtags #BodyPositive, #BoPo, #loveyourbody reduces appearance-related concerns. The "Instagram versus Reality" comparison is an interesting online phenomenon, i.e., comparing the photos of influencers and ordinary women in similar poses (such as @celestebarker). Marika Tiggemann and Isabella Anderberg (2020), who looked at this phenomenon, have claimed that it has the potential to disenchant the "ideal world" of Instagram by showing its artificiality. When browsing Instagram, we mainly encounter over-stylized images of slim women. Most of the photos are professionally prepared, with appropriate lighting, and edited in graphics programs. It is no wonder that comparing oneself to them can have a negative impact on women's self-esteem and perception of their own body, especially when the photo is not backed by a team of professionals responsible for the proper media image. This is clearly demonstrated by #instagramversusreality comparisons – most often with a comment not to believe everything you see in the photos or indicating the role of professional make-up or proper body positioning for the photo.

Social media have permanently changed our daily routines, but also social relationships. Following friends and strangers on the internet has a similar effect on us to a traditional peer group. According to the American media researcher Alice Marwick (2012), social surveillance takes place through the media – it is the way we use social media to check what others are doing. At the same time, every social media user consciously creates their digital image: they comment, post photos or videos with

9 On this topic see Kelly Oakes, *The Complicated Truth about Social Media and Body Image*, BBC, 12 March 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20190311-how-social-media-affects-body-image> (accessed: 22.03.2025).

the recipients in mind, sometimes adapting the message to specific individuals. Thus, using social media is characterized by the fact that we watch others, but we are also fully aware of being watched by others. We monitor and shape our digital identity and bodily self to meet the expectations of the target group. This is Goffman's "impression management," which has its stage (online) and backstage (offline).

4.3. Bodily self-knowledge

Conclusions about social changes can be drawn on the basis of an analysis of the content of media messages. The media react to changes the fastest, commenting on them and reporting them – in positive or critical way. They look for novelties, which can only become a dominant social trend after some time or pass as a seasonal fashion. In any case, the choice of a specific topic indicates that the recipients find something attractive in it. The noticeable presence of topics related to the body and health promotion in TV series and popular magazines indicates the importance of this subject for the audience. This is the assumption made by sociologists who use **discourse analysis** in their research (see Łaciak 2005; Breczko 2013; Szcześniak 2016).

As Beata Łaciak (2005: 22) pointed out, "press articles, films, and series may not only be a more or less distorted reflection of reality, but also an attempt to consciously and intentionally propagate specific attitudes, views, or customs." We saw this in Poland during the transformation period, when the group of directors from the socialist era was transformed into a group of capitalist managers. This was described perfectly by the American anthropologist Elizabeth Dunn in her book *Privatizing Poland. Baby Food, Big Business, and the Remaking of Labor* (Dunn 2004). In the 1990s, Polish business magazines such as "Businessman" placed great emphasis on creating a new "self," devoting a great deal of space in their pages to ways of spending free time, styles of dress, and consumption characteristic of the new, Western model. This expert function of the media was very visible during the period of the systemic transformation in Poland.

The Polish scholar Magda Szcześniak (2016) conducted research on the subject of bodily "normality" and "normalization strategies," reconstructing visual codes based on media messages around which the identity of two social groups was built from the end of the 1980s to the beginning of the 2000s: the new Polish middle class and sexually non-normative men. The main element of the formation of the middle class in Poland was the issue of image and appearance.

While in the early 1990s practices of demonstrating class status (through clothing, material objects, ways of using the body) were appreciated in the public sphere, over time the ideas about the middle class will turn towards a model of prosperity, but transparent and devoid of conspicuous excess (Szcześniak 2016: 28).

The author analyzed the "Sukces" magazine, which appeared on the Polish market in 1990 and was aimed at creating a class of managers (men): by teaching business etiquette, through choosing the right outfit and accessories (no white socks or counterfeit accessories), to cosmetic and hygiene recommendations.

How the developing mass media market in Poland after 1989 became a source of new patterns regarding the body and gender can be seen in research on women's press ("Przyjaciółka," "Kobieta i Życie," "Filipinka" from 1974 and 1994) conducted by the Polish sociologists Mirosława Marody and Anna Giza-Poleszczuk (2000). The authors juxtaposed the model of the "brave victim," dominant in magazines from the 1970s, based on fulfilling the traditional role of a mother and wife responsible for family life, with the new model of a sexually open and professionally fulfilled woman. The focus on physical attractiveness, the search for "femininity," and discovering oneself – mainly through appearance and clothing – began to be visible in the press of the 1990s. Combined with the new model of a man, which sociologists described as the "return of the Man with a capital M" – active, energetic, and taking matters into his own hands, as well as attractive – this was a questioning of the previous rules and values. It can be said that consumer culture with its individualistic ideas was a welcome opening for some, but for others too big a breach, making it difficult to find one's way in the new political and economic reality.

Beata Łaciak, based on, among others, press research ("Gazeta Wyborcza," "Twój Styl," "Przyjaciółka" from 1990, 1991, 2002 and 2001 and "Życie na Gorąco" from 2002 and 2003) showed that in Poland during the period of political transformation, the number of articles concerning body appearance, and especially its slimness, health, doing sports, diets, and sexual issues, increased significantly. As she wrote, "meeting contemporary canons of beauty has become a moral compulsion," (Łaciak 2005: 210), noting that the moral imperative of being slim has been more widely adopted than the customs concerning a healthy and active lifestyle. This was related to the imitative nature of the patterns adopted from the West at a time when the middle class, which was the natural recipient of these disciplinary commands, had not yet fully developed. As Łaciak (2005: 248) summed it up: "The latest achievements in cosmetics, cosmetic or plastic surgery are inaccessible to most Poles, and most of them define themselves as elderly people relatively early on and withdraw from active life." Nonetheless, the social acceptance of publicly presenting the naked body came relatively quickly: the commodification of the body (mainly female) and nudity used in advertising became commonplace.

Agnieszka Maj also analyzed Polish models of the body, drawing attention to the changes that occurred in the area of body care and attitudes towards the body (see Maj 2010, 2012, 2013). In her opinion, there was a huge gap between body care guides from the turn of the 1990s and those present on the publishing market twenty years later, not only in terms of the cosmetics on offer and knowledge in the field of cosmetology. Above all, the main narrative line was different, where taking care of one's appearance ceased to be an element of hygiene, and began to be treated as an element of self-creation. Media celebrities, i.e., people known for being famous, who began to appear in Poland in the early 1990s, began to popularize a new trend of "creating an image," inspiring people to imitate their clothing and body choices. An example was Kasia Cichopek, an actress in the popular TV series *M jak miłość*, who published the guide *Sexy Mama. Bo jesteś kobietą!* [Sexy Mom.

Because you're a woman!], where one could find, among others, a unique program for mothers developed by a celebrity trainer, a plan of exercises for the abdomen, stylists' tricks or lessons on how to choose a bra, not forgetting recipes for Kasia's favorite dishes. In turn, TV personality Krzysztof Ibisz published a guide entitled *Jak dobrze wyglądać po 40* [How to look good after 40], where he proved that anyone could achieve success if they followed the rules presented in the book and exercised systematically. The researcher noted that "we are so commonly dealing with media images as representations of other people's identities that we have become accustomed to treating the appearance of ordinary people we meet on the street as the result of their intended creation," (May 2012: 30). To some extent, this is what lifestyle magazines, programs on styling, and drawing attention in the media to all kinds of spectacular body metamorphoses serve. During the period of political transformation, this segment of the media (popular press and television) was very widespread, introducing Western models of success through disciplining the body.

This topic was taken up directly by the Polish scholar Piotr Rymarczyk, who analyzed lifestyle magazines intended for women ("Cosmopolitan," "Glamour," "Twój Styl") and men ("Playboy," "CKM," "Men's Health") from 2006 (see Rymarczyk 2014). The researcher distinguished three goals of physical activity promoted in the media: pleasure (resulting from the aesthetic appearance of the body), striving for social recognition (through branded clothing and following stylists' inspirations), and the realization of one's own femininity or masculinity (usually requiring serious shopping). The media are populated by "real men" and "superwomen" – male bodies are usually presented with developed muscles, while photos of women are focused on sexual attributes (breasts, thighs, buttocks) or with an indication of their submission and subordination (ingratiating smiles, lying positions, which we never see in images of men, as Goffman wrote). Rymarczyk drew attention to an interesting discrepancy between increasingly open writing about women's sexuality and the extraordinary restraint in showing male nudity – verbal encouragement was not followed by iconography and showing the male body in a subordinate way was extremely rare. Regardless of gender, the glamour model dominated – a body without wrinkles, pimples, sweat, skin folds, and the media message to achieve it was clearly prescriptive in nature. In addition, this message was also very uniform: not once in the analyzed writings was the bodily model of a slim woman or a muscular male body questioned.

Another example of building bodily self-awareness through the media is the phenomenon commonly referred to as **Dr. Google**. It is nothing more than searching for the first information about the body and health on the internet. As indicated by the internet researcher Dariusz Jemielniak (2019: 25, 27): "the internet has currently become the primary source of medical and health information [...]; the extent to which many people are currently ready to use information that is completely unverified, and which has a huge impact on health and life, is very large. This is clearly visible in the example of medical knowledge." This can be seen as a crisis of expert knowledge and a lack of trust in the medical profession. One

can also see the power of digital media itself, which enables people with similar experiences to gather and connect in difficult moments. Internet forums have become a place of accumulated everyday knowledge about the causes of disease and possible remedies.

5. Summary

According to Denis McQuail, a British communication theorist, “everyday *social life* is strongly patterned by the routines of media use and infused by its contents through the way leisure time is spent, lifestyles are influenced, conversation is given its topics and models of behaviour are offered for all contingencies,” (McQuail 2005: 4). In short, we live every day with the media and through the media. Listening to the radio, watching television, and browsing the internet are activities that we combine with social interactions, eating meals, doing housework or professional activities. What is more, we are dealing with an increasingly complete computerization of society. In 2024, more than three-quarters of adult Poles (77%) were online at least once a week. The younger generation, especially people aged 18–24, declared a constant online presence; they were also the most present on social media.¹⁰

New media based on participation quickly connect and engage in joint activities increasingly larger and more diverse groups of people. They enable the spontaneous expression of emotions, and change the language of describing the world. Thus, in the context of the body, the media can be viewed, on the one hand, as a transmission belt of dominant patterns concerning the body, and, on the other, as an area of social emancipation and the expansion of individual freedom. The model-creating role of the media is not limited to showing the prevailing bodily ideals and providing tips on how to approach this ideal. It also provides space for the dissemination of alternative patterns and building communities around them. In turn, we, as users, can use this knowledge and resources or not. When analyzing such a deeply mediatized reality, it is worth remembering the active role of the media audience – we decide which media messages we consider credible and worth following, and which we reject. In order to increase the skills of young people and, at the same time, reduce their susceptibility to distorted and negative media images of the body, media education is necessary. **Media literacy**, or the ability to use the media, is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create messages in a variety of forms (see Livingstone 2004). Combined with knowledge about the body, it would enable the separation of one’s own body image from media images, and, consequently, it would broaden the media imagination and the spectrum of bodies present in the mainstream media.

Finally, it is worth emphasizing that the media is a privileged space for politics. The commodification of body images and representations occurs in conjunction with increasingly stricter social control. Abortion, gender, and LGBT+ are topics

10 More on this topic in the report: *Korzystanie z internetu w 2024 roku*, komunikat z badań no. 70, CBOS Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej, Warszawa 2024, https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2024/K_070_24.PDF (accessed: 22.03.2025) (in Polish).

that inflame public opinion not only in Poland and directly concern the body. The politicization of the body in the media is a broad topic that is connected with beliefs about gender and sexuality, women's rights, and, more broadly, social change (see Breczko 2013). The body is a field of identity struggle: racial, gender, but also a struggle for the recognition of the body as it is. In this sense, the body positivity movement would be directed against the too-tight corset of dominant media messages, which has indirectly led to the epidemic of diseases related to eating disorders. Recognizing the political dimension of the body is also one of the important aspects of reading media messages.

6. Review questions

1. Browse recent studies on gender in the media. Where from do you think the lack of gender parity in the construction of mainstream news outlets comes?
2. Watch the documentary *Fake Famous* and consider what elements of the main characters' bodies convinced the producers to choose them for the social experiment. What bodies will we not see in this documentary? Support your argument using the described sociological theories.
3. Consider the problem of fat-shaming. Does body size affect your peer and professional relationships, and why?
4. Pick up the latest issue of a weekly opinion magazine or a magazine for women or men and review the advertisements in them. To what extent are Goffman's categories useful for analyzing contemporary images of gendered bodies?

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