

Wykes, M. & Gunter, B. (2005). *The media and body image: If looks could kill*. London, England: Sage.

Reviewed by: [Susan Fountaine](#)

Maggie Wykes and Barrie Gunters *The Media and Body Image* provides a comprehensive overview of the complex relationship between media representations and the way people, particularly women, feel about and behave towards their bodies.

However, its not a book to read if you are looking for answers or a fresh perspective. On one level this is hardly surprising because writers who grapple with the thorny issue of media effects must acknowledge the limited and often contradictory findings which characterise this area of communication research, and therefore are unable to provide clear-cut conclusions or simple solutions. But after pointing out that blaming the media has almost become a popular truism, and then delivering an excellent review of wide ranging content and audience research, it is disappointing that the authors conclusion does not break any new ground, consider a way forward, or even take a particularly strong stance on the nature of the relationship between media and body image. After working through some fairly dense material I was left with a vague sense of dissatisfaction at the end of the book. If reading is a journey, it was as if I finished my trip in the same place I started.

That disappointment aside, *The media and body image* delivers in many other ways. It draws from sociology, gender studies and psychology to provide a broad yet thorough overview of research into body image and the media, and while the main focus is on women (as the authors note, empirical evidence shows that women remain more body conscious than men) research on male body image is incorporated at various points throughout the book. The book is usefully organised into two main parts, media representations and audience impact, seemingly written by Wykes and Gunter respectively (although there is no noticeable stylistic difference between the sections). Chapters in the first section cover the theory surrounding the way womens bodies are viewed, including a particularly interesting historical overview covering the similarities between female hysteria and anorexia nervosa, and print (newspaper and magazines) and screen (film, television and Internet) representations.

The authors also make their own original contribution in this first section, with a case study of newspaper coverage following the United Kingdoms Body Summit in 2000 and a look at newspaper and magazine content three years later to see if any of the concerns discussed at the Summit had led to change. Disappointingly but perhaps not surprisingly, there was little evidence of progress since the Summit, or indeed since the early 1980s when Gaye Tuchman first argued that women are 'symbolically annihilated by the media. This case study makes for interesting reading but the accompanying, poor quality black and white reproductions of magazine covers ? which should bring visual interest to a book short on illustrations ? add little to the analysis.

The second section, which moves readers from media representations to audience impact, is also usefully organised. It begins by providing a theoretical link between representation and media influence, then devotes a chapter to media exposure and survey data about body image, before turning to causal relationships. The focus in these chapters is research on general populations, whereas the final chapter considers media influence on clinical subjects. The limitations of surveys and experiments are nicely covered here and this would be useful reading for graduate students studying research methodologies as well as those with a particular interest in body image issues.

Material about body image has a potentially wide readership including professional communicators, health practitioners, and community workers but this book is clearly targeted at an academic audience. It is well referenced and fairly up to date (although there are few academic references more recent than 2000). The back cover (rightly) claims the book will be useful to undergraduate and postgraduate students but it is worth noting that, in design terms, it is not particularly student friendly. The few illustrations are, as mentioned earlier, poor quality and the overall impression is of pages of text with little variation in presentation. Disappointingly, there is also a handful of spelling and punctuation errors.

Wykes and Gunter conclude by saluting the strength and imagination of women who, for the most part, survive the onslaught (p.221). However, the authors also deserve commendation for bringing together and evaluating a range of research findings from various disciplines. By doing so, they provide students and academics with a useful and comprehensive text. While *The Media and Body Image* may not satisfy all your cravings, it will give you plenty to digest.

**Purchase information:** This book is available from all good booksellers, or can be purchased direct from Footprint Books at [www.footprint.com.au](http://www.footprint.com.au).

**About the reviewer:**

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