Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Studies

Research Article

*Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Studies*
*https://so02.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/hasss*
*ISSN (Online): 2630-0079*

# SOCIAL MEDIA, BODY NORMS, AND GENDERED BODIES: THE CASE STUDY OF CONFORMITY AND PLAUSIBLE NEGOTIATION WITH THE IDEAL BODY IMAGE

*Porranee Singpliam*

Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand

## ABSTRACT

Thai society has witnessed debates centering around body image in many arenas. This paper argues that the media, especially online media, acts as a site for ideological contestation, a site for body norm reproduction, and a site for power struggle. This research examines the recurring body norm, the gendering process of the body, and the negotiation process from social media users. The data gathered from a selected locality consist of written responses from Thai undergraduate students, which reveal normative body images that will later produce materialized and felt impacts upon the individuals' lives through their experiences. The data that were gathered from the generation Y cohort show that there is a possible negotiation with the hegemonic representation of body ideals in the media – the ideal that fits in the heteronormative genderscape. Such data disclose a new finding in the context of the Thai media. This article looks into three main themes which are the historical traces of the pervasive normative body images, the creation of gendered bodies through hyperreality, and the embodied feelings based on the perceived body images and nonconformity. The research ultimately contemplates further into the politics of representation and how media is a site of power relations which has the ability to discursively shape viable bodies in the society, as well as a site of contestation by youth's criticism in contemporary Thai settings.

**Keywords:** Social media; body image; gender; embodiment

***Corresponding author:***
*Porranee Singpliam*
*porranee.s@chula.ac.th*

***Received:*** *27 November 2020*
***Revised:*** *5 April 2021*
***Accepted:*** *16 April 2021*
***Published:*** *28 October 2022*

***Citation:***
*Singpliam, P. (2022). Social media, body norms, and gendered bodies: The case study of conformity and plausible negotiation with the ideal body image. Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Studies 22(3): 589-600.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Bodies are perceptible in Thai society. The Thai media claims to foster standards for body image, shape, and skin pigmentation, examples of which are abundant from supplementary drinks to instant noodles to medicines (Persaud, 2005; 2014). On the exterior, it can be seen that the conforming trend is visible in distinct opposites in terms of gender binary, while simultaneously the images of gender non-normative are increasingly occupying the Thai media. The Thai media is argued to reproduce the ideology of heteronormative bodies (Hesse-Swain, 2006; Niamsri and Boonmongkon, 2017), while also promoting the existence of queer

bodies and visibility (Duangwises and Jackson, 2013; Jackson, 2011; Prasannam, 2019). As a result, mediated messages on normative bodies become a site of contestation that sustains regulative modes of gendering of the self while permitting gender minorities' representation on screen, albeit with conditions.

What the media shares in terms of body image is the discursive construction of body perfection. Regardless of the sexes, the mediated messages portrayed on screen, whether through soap operas, news channels, or advertisements, all scream perfection, and they are visible and perspectival to the spectators' eyes. The media has the power to maintain, propagate, and reproduce certain ideologies in the society. Social media, in particular, is experiencing a critical conversation relating to bodies more so than ever (examples can be drawn from beauty pageant contests to melodramas to Thai politics). The politics of representation is thus an important task of which this article hopes to assert that bodies and the media's usage in Thai society is a contested space–heavily affected by body norms–and a potential site for power struggle.

The explanation for body perfection portrayed in the Thai media is largely derived from a very narrow set of determinants. In class, the author's students often relate the ideal body image they found on the Thai media as: women having fair, clear, smooth skin and a slim (and toned) body, with an appropriate height. While men ought to be tall, muscular, and with fair skin. These samples from class, at first glance, seem to be categorized in a dichotomous binary between men and women. Yet, likewise among transgender individuals, achieving femininity is considered their ultimate desire and a way to fully express their identity (Poompruek et al., 2014) effectively, reproducing hegemonic ideology of mainstream gender discourse, in order to "obtain approval from [Thai] society" (p. 800). The gendering of the self as portrayed in the Thai media can be argued to effectively enhance body conformity.

Media influences the notion of gender and, more importantly, how one partakes in the process of gendering of the self is related to the politics of representation. It is important to note that Thai society is the center of queer visibility (Jackson, 2000; 2011; 2017) and there is an increased public awareness towards queer media. Both online and on the broadcasted television (Prasannam, 2019), queer bodies are perspectival to the public eyes. While the Thai media may lean towards diversity, it is also promoting definite idealized attributes deemed perfect and presentable on many media platforms. Visibly, queer bodies on the media can be argued to stir the "national anxiety" (Käng, 2012), where traditional heteronormative ideology is at risk of being contested. In other words, queer bodies and their presence on the media platforms can stir the public's apprehensive interests.

Oftentimes, media influences genders on screen by situating the bodies into binary oppositions or portraying queer individuals in a homonormative manner (the famous Ma Ornapa, a previous host on *3 Zaap*, Art Arya from *Drag Race Thailand*, or Jenny from *Toeytiewthai* are a few of the many examples). It is vital to note that when bodies are very visible and are the medium of the messages as purported through the media, the queer narrative on the bodies, whether gendering of the self or of the appearances, tend to be subsumed and measured against the normative body ideal.

This article sets out to examine media usage to identify the recurring body norms, whether or not the idealized body image is as gendered as it had always been and whether or not there is any negotiation or criticism from the users or how much of an impact the ideal standards affect the social media users. Currently, the active social media users make up 51 million, which is 74% of the entire population. Among these data, generation Y social media users of the ages between 18 to 37 years have grown immensely (Mahittivanicha, 2018; 2020). Framed by poststructuralist framework on gender, body study, and phenomenological view, this article wishes to identify the body ideals and gendered characteristics of the body image, as well as the users' negotiation with the ideals: how they embody feelings that emerge because they cannot conform to the norm and how living in a nonconforming manner produces embodied feelings and material hindrances in their lives. The article ultimately wishes to explore how the recurring norms of the body image might be at risk of repeating the gender binary or homonormative appearances in terms of body appearances. The following sections include the theoretical framework, the methodology, the findings, and the analysis of the written responses through the diachronic trace of the pervasive body image, the gendering of the body image, and the experiences of the respondents who do not conform to the ideal standards. This article hopes to shed light on how there is always a possibility for resistance against the normative ideals, but that resistance should not be considered without contextually and culturally specific settings.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Research that has been done on the media and body image often emphasizes gender stereotypes and body norms. This paper takes the approach of poststructuralist framework as a point of embarkation to question the existing body norms where it is important to look for "the contemporary inclination toward the

unstable, fluid, fragmented, indeterminate, ironic, and heterogeneous, for that which resists definition, closure, and fixity" (Bordo, 2003: 38). Although it is suspected that the recurring body ideals might be more or less similar to what they had always been in the past, which are values asserted to a particular skin color and fixed characteristics expected from women and men. However, given the current politics of queer visibility (Käng, 2012; Prasannam, 2019), it can be hypothesized that there is an emerging negotiation toward the normative body image, which is deemed valuable for inclusivity although the negotiation process may be scarce.

First, drawing on Susan Bordo's (1994) studies on body image and culture of normalization where she refers to Jean Baudrillard's notion of simulations, Bordo highlights the characters of "hyperreal" images that are dominating the "era of image" (p. 236). The idea of hyperreal grants power to the images that later come to stand for reality and mean more than reality, which will inevitably create a culture of normalization or conformity. This can be adapted to analyze the recurring normative body ideals that can be gathered from the written responses. In addition to her analysis of the hyperreal images, Bordo also highlights the way standardized ideals are always gendered as well, all of which will be apt to analyze why it is that the normative body ideals are distinct for different genders–men, women, or the less recurring responses, non-normative gender individuals.

Second, the concept of affectivity that focuses on the "lived body" (Blackman and Venn, 2010; Jansen and Wehrle, 2018) of nonconforming individuals will be employed to analyze the data. As will be revealed in a section of this paper, the normative ideals leave a significant impact on youths who are most exposed to social media, all are evident from their written responses (the few individuals who provided their responses in written words). These are considered genuine feelings in relation to, and sometimes against, the normative body ideals which our society continuously disseminates. Embodied feelings that are felt through the bodies manifest themselves in various ways such as a lack of confidence or a feeling of being excluded from the societal processes as part of being Othered (Blackman, 2008). This theoretical framework puts the bodies at the center of the analysis and sees how the social process, which repeatedly creates the norms, interacts with the bodies and what sorts of impacts they produce materially.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

First, the data collection for this research was collected by using the convenient sampling method (this research has been approved by the Office of the Research Ethics Review Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects: the Second Allied Academic Group in Social Sciences, Humanities and Fine and Applied Arts, IRB2). In the task of identifying the ideal body image, diverse written responses from heavy media users are significant, not to mention that gathering the written responses from various genders can expand the possibility for heterogeneity and hence plausible negotiation with the body norms (where previous research mostly focuses on female respondents). With the assistance of two undergraduate students, the responses were collected in June of 2018 from one hundred undergraduate students within the premise of Chulalongkorn University. Students' assistance in distributing and collecting responses was imperative to reducing the tension and discomfort that could have occurred if the responses had been distributed by the author, a lecturer, herself. The student research assistants did not take part in writing the responses, nor did they take part in the data analysis. The generation Y cohort is the target group based on the hypothesis that they have an affective identification (Sampson et al., 2018) with social media. The data collected include tick boxes (namely how the frequency of social media use, most often used social media platform, reasons contributing to one's perceptions toward body ideal e.g. commonly seen in the social milieu, noticeable in the media, promoted everywhere in the body industries) and written answers to a set of questions as part of a larger project in body image and the lived experiences of respondents in contemporary Thai society.

The data used in this paper is part of the larger project that aims to explore the trend of normalization as opposed to resistance with regard to body image in Thai society. The selected parts from the written responses that were gathered from the listed questions below will be critically analyzed for the objective of this paper in an attempt to engage in an in-depth analysis and examine the body ideals, gendered bodies, and embodiment of nonconforming bodies. The questions listed below contribute to this article's scope on the body image which focuses on identifying normative body ideals, gendering of the bodies, and the embodied feelings that may emerge among social media users and their nonconformity:

1. What is your most often used social media platform?
2. What do you think is the ideal facial shape that you can see on social media?
3. What do you think is the ideal body shape that you can see on social media?

4. What do you think is the ideal skin color that you can see on social media?
5. What other body features that you think are the ideal characteristics aside from facial shape, body shape, and skin color?
6. What made you decide that those are the ideals for the body?
7. Do you think that the ideal bodies are different among genders?
8. Are you affected by the body ideals you see on social media?

Second, the normative pattern of the body image that emerges from the responses will be categorized. In order to pinpoint the body ideals that are deemed normative in the contemporary epoch, it is essential that genuine responses are gathered from those who are most exposed to social media, which is this generation cohort. In order to identify the normative pattern, repeated responses will be examined and organized, which will eventually connote what is considered normative in society. Drawing from Lynn Butler-Kisber's (2010) constant comparison perspective as the way of "the accessing and organizing of the data, through the initial unitizing of the material and assigning early, descriptive labels or codes. It shows, with an example, how to write rules of inclusion to define the categories so that they can be expanded and/or collapsed, and how to move to a process of renaming the categories in more conceptual/functional ways in order to reveal deeper understandings and connections" (p. 2). With constant comparison perspective, this article sets out to analyze the data in order to identify body norms by taking notes of the recurring keywords that are used to explain the ideal body features (face, shape, and skin colors). By comparing and contrasting data, a repeated and recurring pattern can be found. This paper then attempts to bring forth why the recurring pattern of the body ideals exist (and in some cases, remain the same) in the society, as well as how the ideal bodies are also discrete in separate gender categories.

Third, following John W. Cresswell (2013)'s phenomenological perspectives, which "focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon" (p. 76), toward the society's ideal body image, the responses are translated into English, all responses will remain anonymous, and this paper will underscore the notable responses in relation to the impacts the individuals may feel as they are exposed to the social media's body ideals. As Moustakas (1994, as cited in Cresswell, 2013: 76) writes, phenomenological perspective "consists of "what" they experienced and "how" they experienced it". The notable responses will thus be analyzed in the last part of this paper as embodied selves and their relation to the cultural body image in the media.

The author fully notes that there is a limiting factor that underpins the data collection, specifically, the location and the selected cohort of respondents. The author wishes to emphasize that the location also means the accessibility to the social media usage and the way in which the respondents may encounter and may be exposed to diverse types of standards online and on screen. This paper acknowledges that the data collection may disclose itself differently, should the location be set in the outskirts of the metropolitan (Hesse-Swain, 2006), for instance. In relation to this, it is noted that there is a tendency for expressing body discontentment or dissatisfaction among users of older generations (Rangkakulnuwat et al., 2008) due to their inability to conform to the norm. Since this contemporary epoch's trend leans towards gender diversity and negotiation with the long-lasting norms that are gendered, this paper will look into how this generation cohort expresses their negotiation with the existing norms and to what extent.

## 4. FINDINGS

The subsequent sections contain data that trace how and why prevailing body norms remain quite similar to the norms that are "commonly" perceived within Thai society. Next, the written responses will be analyzed in order to draw out the culture of homogenization that dominates the mediated space and hence the heteronormative and homonormative gendered bodies that are ubiquitous on screen and online. In the last section of the discussion, the selected written responses from the respondents will be analyzed from the embodiment approach, in order to pinpoint how their affects emerge from living up to the norms and deviating from them.

In this section, this paper will delineate the data that were gathered through constant comparative perspectives. The findings below entail the recurring pattern of the body norms, which expectedly reproduce and effectively reiterate the normative body image pervasive in the media, as well as in the existing literature. The findings also provide an insight into how the respondents are aware of the body norms. Moreover, the findings reveal how bodies are integrated into the society under the body's industry, especially bodies that wish to conform. Further, the findings show that the majority of the respondents agree that the body image is gendered and effectively reproduces heteronormative pattern. The way in which very few responses address

normative bodies from a gender diversity lens is also telling. These responses are the product of the culture of homogeneity (Bordo, 1994; 2003), especially in the politics of appearance. The findings, moreover, reveal that the respondents are to a certain extent bombarded by these dominant images, but, as will be explored in the following sections, a small number of criticisms lead to the beginning of a poststructuralist reading, challenging the long-lasting ideal.

The written responses show that the majority of the respondents spend six to eight hours daily on social media. Instagram, Line, Twitter, and Facebook are most frequently visited. The recurring responses regarding body ideals are to have an oval (v shape) face, clearly defined facial features, fair facial color, thin and slim, an hourglass body type, lean, toned, fit, and fair skin. Respondents also identify that for men, an oval face with clear and defined jaw lines, lighter facial color, muscular, lean and fit, and both fair and tan skin are considered ideal. Some respondents identify that the ideal characteristic for body image is to have an Asian look, which points out the increasing popularity of the cultural trend from the Intra-Asian region. Other less recurring responses state that women are expected to also be very thin, having large breasts, and few, distinct written responses state that the ideal body types only include able-bodied or physically complete bodies.

The respondents state that the body norms are most visible in the entertainment industry on screen and online. Next is the way body image is promoted in the industries of the body such as the fitness industry, skin care products, and plastic surgery. The last place where they find the repetition of the body norms is in their social environment such as in the university circle and their families. These written responses show that the majority of the respondents believe that the ideal bodies are different among genders. From organizing the responses through constant comparative method (Butler-Kisber, 2010), the recurring attributes show that women and men are culturally expected to look and appear differently, depending on their genders (it must be noted that the respondents understand the usage of *phet* as "sex/gender" merged together signaling how the respondents grasp body ideals that are standardized for men and women in both their biological make up and cultural expectations (Jackson, 2001).

Almost all the boxes are ticked by separating body ideals into genders. Almost all the other body features the respondents found commonly admired are also dichotomized in two genders. As a result, almost half of the responses write that they are affected by the pervasive body ideals that prompt them to go on a diet and clean-eating and start fitness training. Some respondents even wrote that they were unconfident, some received concerns from their parents, and were judged because of their appearance, which will impede their social mobility in the case of body nonconformity. The other half state that they are rarely affected. The written responses, however, show that they acknowledge the standards of the body, but that there is no need for them to be like that, while others express that they like how they look and that they are confident in their body image. After organizing the data, the normative body images can be identified as above. The constant comparison perspectives method allows us to define prominent categories and inclusion of what is deemed normative.

In the next section, this paper will engage with the data findings of the recurring norms in order to explain why a certain skin tone, namely fair skin, comes to have a deeper connection with Thai society. What the constant comparison perspective allows is the ability to identify, define, and include recurring attributes into normative categories. At the same time, it also encourages a deeper exploration of why fair skin has come to dominate the media representation and why distinct sets of body norms are attached to feminine bodies and masculine bodies, respectively. What about queer bodies? Although the written responses show a shared pattern of what they deem normative in the society, a few respondents state specifically that there is no mentioning of LGBTQ+ in what is considered ideal in Thai society. These issues will be discussed in the following sections. Moreover, in an attempt to gain an insight into the lived experiences of those who respond that they are most affected by the social media, this paper will discuss the responses that are often unnoticed and inexplicable by the employment of phenomenological view (Cresswell, 2013) of the body and experiences with the world (Blackman and Venn, 2010; Jansen and Wehrle, 2018), and their nonconformity in the last section of this paper.

### 4.1. Normative body images: A historical trace and the suppression of women's bodies

Having defined facial features, fair skin, slender and toned body is considered normative for feminine women. A slightly "robust" rendition of this exact same set of physical features, as the constant comparative perspective shows, is considered ideal for masculine men. These ideal physical features materialize on social media today. At first glance, these characters are nothing "new," nor are they characters that the Thai media had never experienced before (not to mention its ceaselessly endorsement on the media platform). What strikes me, however, is why the contemporary epoch with the trend of diversity shows a very limited set of norms? What contributes to this culture of homogeneity in terms of body image, to refer to Susan Bordo's (2003) assertive claim? What could possibly be the root of the repeating and recurring normative body ideals? Before this article sets out to trace the social and cultural root of this normative pattern, it is imperative to look

at the existing works that were done in relation to body images and see how those leave the historical trace and how the male-dominated mindset was overlooked in their analyses.

Existing research on bodies in Thai society places the bodies in binary oppositions. Research frequently focuses on women's body dissatisfaction (Chaipraditkul, 2013; Rangkakulnuwat et al., 2008; Rongmuang et al., 2011), the feminine transformation (Aizura, 2009; Poompruek et al., 2014), and the impact that leads to body transformation to fit the body ideals that are closest to the norm. Further, much like the Western discourse surrounding the media and body image, Thai society also witnesses the thin ideal (Hesse-Biber, 2007; Slater et al., 2019), particularly among women (Feltman and Szymanski, 2018; Lonergan et al., 2019; Mills et al., 2018; Tiggermann and Barbato, 2018). Bodies that visibly fit into this discourse are deemed normal (Dolezal, 2010), while women who fall outside the thin ideal or the non-normative ones may experience "normative discontent" (Rangkakulnuwat et al., 2008: 40). It is important to ask: why is this the case?

Thai society's capitalist patriarchy system bears witness to the male dominated industry in terms of its androcentric perspectives and political economy that are the buttress of the media. In Thailand, men foster the hourglass body type and increasingly lean, toned, and fit ideals as identified from the constant comparison method above and impose the norms on women. Men are not as affected by sexist (thin, hourglass, and fair) ideals, to the extent that women are (Persaud, 2005). When male-led perspective rules the ownership, production, and distribution of the media representation and mediated messages, it thus becomes an arduous task to challenge and contest the ideal that overwhelms the Thai media. The data gathered from the respondents also acknowledge this, hence their identification of the normative ideals that are "expected" on the media for different genders. The message that serves to ideologically suppress women's bodies in Thai society is at men's disposal where "profound sexism in this global flow of images is readily transparent as the advertisements are not aimed at Thai males. In fact, Thai males participate from the side of power by reducing women to the color of their skin while gazing, evaluating, and commenting on them" (Persaud, 2005: 217).

Media representation thus matters. Stuart Hall (2011) elucidates the way in which representations are at once political and about the struggle of power at the same time as representation produces material and lived consequences. The data, which reveal that for women, the ideal body image would be for them to have a certain facial shape and embody a slim figure with fair skin, suggest that these limiting attributes are in no way politically innocent. Other examples such as the infamous charcoal donut's advertisement (2013) and the internationally criticized Snowz dietary supplement product (2016) unknowingly *de*politicize the images. The representations blatantly express the admiration for fair skin and the privileges that come with such a skin tone. Body visibility such as these examples not only depoliticizes skin colors to mere hues of preferences, but to ones that are deeply rooted in "the colonial economy of desire" (Persaud, 2005: 221). To this day, this ideology of color still lingers and they dominate the majority of the written responses collected.

Additionally, such representation often portrays women at the center of the spectacle. Women's bodies, or parts of them, are displayed to be seen, observed, and even criticized lest they were to deviate from the invisible body, the normative body. As mentioned in the data findings section, other ideals that are deemed visible in the media would include minute scale scrutinization of women's body parts as the written responses state that the respondents look at hair, nose, eyes, height (long legs and limbs), lips, high nose bridge, and large breasts. All of these are explicitly gendered and in line with the way the respondents regulate and monitor their bodies, similar to Dolezal's words on the body that is "a healthy body, untroubled by illness, discomfort, or disability, which is furthermore socialized and normalized to behave within the standards dictated by its sociocultural context and to display a neutral physical aspect through a meticulous self-regulation with regard to appearance and comportment within intersubjective encounters" (Dolezal, 2010: 363). It is overt here that the male gaze is being adopted by all genders, not just "masculine men", who use social media. The masculine gaze is casted upon the spectacle that is women's bodies, leaving the power relations unbalanced.

The written responses present discrete ideals for the dyadic sexes as the majority among those who responded with written words (rather than ticking the boxes) are heterosexual. The majority of the responses include the heteronormative body ideals and implicitly elide the ideals for gender nonconformity. Among the written responses for the relations between bodies and genders are: "Liberal ideas stand with the idea that gender is malleable, and thus some people who identify as non-binary may not consider the normal bodies the norm." or "The physical shape is different so ideal bodies vary but still similar in terms of goals (example: slim, not fat, clear skin) and each gender shows these goals differently. Women: slim with breasts. Men: slim with muscle". Some wrote down that the ideals are about portraying "masculinity, femininity" and that "there are different sets of expectation towards each gender" and in the same vein, one wrote, "men, women, and non-binary genders all have different standards" (all of these are verbatim written responses originally in English).

This paper wishes to point out that the way in which nonconforming genders' body image does not manifest itself in many responses has to be investigated and elaborated further. As existing literature shows, gender non-normative bodies, too, are to be pressured by the societal view on femininity that is casted upon

*kathoey*–"non-gender-normative females, males and intersexual individuals" or a term for "transgender women" (Poompruek et al., 2014: 798). This leaves them to be placed in the same standards as women where thin, fair, and beautiful are to be mastered. It is important for the feminine body to be achieved in order to be accepted regardless of their sexed body. The underlying message in Thai society is vividly clear–to conform to the either/or gendered appearances (p. 799). Consequently, the dominant representation not only maintains the heteronormative trope where women are bearers of the looks and men (or the masculine gaze that can be exercised by all sexes/genders) are the spectators (Mulvey, 2006), but proliferates the ideologies of whiteness and dominant gender constitution contingent upon gendered bodies in the Thai media.

The androcentric view toward the body that embraces shapely, beautiful, and fair skin is kept intact in the media representation and the written responses seem to acknowledge this dominance. Body ideals that tend to reiterate heteronormative trend are deemed to be normalcy. This section provides cultural reasoning to the recurring mantra for ideal body image in the Thai media, which is slim, having fair skin, and gendered beauty. The written responses show that the respondents are exposed to the media which go on to deepen their familiarity with the normative body images. As it appears, the normative body images can potentially maintain heterosexual norms while increasingly fostering homonormative norms for transgenders as well. Two issues that will be explored in the following sections are the hyperreal images of gendered bodies that are the cause of the ideal body images on the media and the phenomenological account of body ideals and lived experiences.

### 4.2 Gendered bodies: Reproducing "hyperreal" images

Bodies are sites for power struggle (Bordo, 1994). Mediated messages about the ideal body are discursively shaped and formulated and they, too, can engender contestation and negotiation. This part will examine the process of negotiation that takes place in youth engagement with social media. Given that social media is very common in Thai society, it promotes internalization of the messages on body ideals that are perpetuated on the platform. As Lonergan et al. (2019) writes "Internalization of sociocultural appearance standards exerted by media, including social media, have been implicated in the development of body dissatisfaction" (p. 39). Generally, written responses that were gathered confirm the body ideals on the media are portrayed in a bifurcation *either* for men *or* women. A small number of respondents deviate from the normalcy and their written responses will be analyzed in detail below.

Bifurcated gendered body ideals could be found easily on the media, one that creates a gendered focus on the body. Respondents write that "among men, they tend to have big and muscular body but for women, they should be very slim or have the weaker ideal bodies for men to protect" (translated into English) or some pointed out that "For women, the ideal feature (mostly) is skinny/slim, but for men, it's the muscular body" and along the same line, one specified that "women don't need to be fit but skinny is preferred. Men should have fit and healthy body" (verbatim responses originally in English). Binary gendered body images and the proclivity to normality remain the majority of the responses that were gathered. The responses show that men, too, bear the effects of societal expectation on their bodies. Equally to women, men and gender non-normatives do face repercussion when they do not fit the expectations. Mediated representation does not enhance body positivity, but rather proliferate the possibility for body transformation as a way to express one's gender identity–the case of *kathoey* is one evident example (Aizura, 2009; Poompruek, 2014). When body visibility is juxtaposed with queer perceptibility in the media, it becomes a contested space where the issue of genders and bodies is not to be taken as mere acceptance.

As a result, a conforming milieu is created. Drawing upon Jean Baudrillard's notion of simulations, Bordo (1994) underlines the element of the "hyperreal". Devoid of societal, cultural, and historical background, the images have come to "establish the new norm" (p. 240) achieved by the help of body transformation, be they dieting, exercising, taking supplementary diets, or consulting the dermatology (to name recurring responses). By pursuing the norm, it will only sustain the relations between the dominant and the subordinate. The written responses show the demarcation between the sexes and genders based on the body ideals they perceive on the media. Male body, to the respondents, ought to have certain masculine attributes. Likewise, female body also experience the same gendered, feminine, expectations upon their body. The power of the images come to stand for reality, mean more than reality, and ultimately create a conforming milieu which, this paper argues, is accountable for the conforming body pervasive in Thai media today. Evidently, the respondents state (translated to English) that "Each sex/gender has different taste [in ideal body] depending on the [media] trend" (respondent 81) and "Each sex/gender is seen differently. Each has different sets of expectations [put on] their bodies" (respondent 87).

However, while images that are pervasive in the media come to establish the norms on the body, resistance is always possible (Bordo, 1994; Slater et al., 2019). Two characteristics of the body ideals emerged against the existing literature. The first is the increased preference of darker shades for skin color. Though

appearing only in minimal number among the written responses, they indicate that rather than being subjugated by normative beauty where fair skin is admired, a darker skin tone or tanned skin is gaining popularity (this is something that is notable in today's media platform whether it is in the famous Miss Universe Thailand competition, television programs, or melodramas). The recurring responses that acknowledge the extension to the existing preferred skin colors wrote: "tan skin," "healthy tan," "not too dark not too white," "glowing tan," (verbatim responses originally in English) and "a western tan," and "tan is very popular at the moment" (translated into English). The responses, however, do not indicate that the shift from fairness to other hues means the overthrowing of the hegemonic ideology of color, but rather that socially shared meanings toward darker skin in Thai society prevail. Symbolic meanings and possible associations with social and cultural capital are kept intact, though the visibility of darker shade allows for the audience engagement with the media signaling room for negotiation at the margin. Further, body appearances which show signs of "Intra-Asian" preferences could be argued as resulting from East-Asian globalized influence (Cho, 2016).

Further, a binary gendered focus that the media portrays is deconstructed. These written responses transcend existing research as the youths who engage with social media are at once acknowledging the body images, yet, at the same time, negotiating and re-shaping the rigid gendered focus on the body ideals. In Thai society, the regulation of genders is done through bodies and their presentable appearances that should fall into normative categories both in the regulatory ideals and in everyday practices. To explicate, Thai society does acknowledge non-normative genders and sexualities, but mere acknowledgement can sometimes be insufficient. The hegemonic ideology on gender/sexuality in Thai society interpellates individuals into the two sexes–two genders–one (cross-sex) sexuality (Boonmongkon and Jackson, 2012). The genderscape thus acknowledges the binary system (Käng, 2012). The youth's engagement with the media, however, poses questions to the ideal body image as one writes: "Expectations are spelled out in the entertainment media and beauty industry. These platforms tell women and men how to be, but never mention LGBTQ+ and their visibility" (anonymous, verbatim response originally written in English).

This article wishes to create a dialogue between the genuine response that was collected and the prominent work done on homonormativity. When gender non-normatives gain public presence in the media, their body appearances tend to become normalized or to conform to the mainstream body norm. Homonormativity could explain the visibility of non-normative genders in the Thai media, only in the condition that they either conform to an existing category e.g. *kathoey* or *sao lor* (tomboy woman with masculine appearance). Should they succeed, only then may they appear on the media with the same admiration the normative gendered bodies receive. For instance, increasing numbers of *kathoey* that dominate the media become socially normalized or in Käng's words (2012):

> as the number of *kathoey* increases and their representations proliferate, they become socially normalised. With an increasing number of media representations of specialised events such as *kathoey* beauty contests and commonplace interactions with *kathoey* in daily life, Thais, both urban and rural, have become accustomed to seeing and being around *kathoey*. With their increased visibility and occupation of social space, more *kathoey* are daring or courageous to "show" themselves, to literally wear their identity on their bodies. (p. 483)

In other words, with the increased visibility, it also proliferates a homonormative norm. Body visibility indeed has an impact on how one may fit into the society. Although appearing only in the slightest number, one written response that is noteworthy problematizes the institutionalized gender norms that are thought to be expressed through the body. Not only that, the respondents acknowledge how the body images are encouraging the conforming culture through the reproduction of hyperreal images. Visibly, some pay attention to how the mediated representation is at risk of repeating the standardized heteronormative ideals. Ideals that no longer correlate with the lived experience of the individuals and ideals that forge the cult of sameness where simulations become more genuine than what is underneath make up the conforming discourse in the Thai media that is significant to criticize. In the next section, this article sets out to identify the written responses that show nonconformity and how they experience this in their lived interaction with the society where they live.

### 4.3 Embodied selves: Mediated influences

As the written responses show, Instagram, the most used platform by the respondents, perpetrates body norms and encourages body transformation. Even though there are responses that disagree with the rigid gendered body ideals, heteronormative and homonormative appearances dominate in the public sphere. This section will show how the written responses, considered genuine reflection, toward body nonconformity are experienced by the respondents of the group most exposed to social media. These responses, considered often unnoticed and immeasurable through the concept of the lived experiences of the individuals in the society (Blackman and Venn, 2010; Jansen and Wehrle, 2018) or phenomenological view (Cresswell, 2013), will be

explored. Moreover, this paper will look into the body affectivity and how the body cognitively feels, perceives, and responds to the constituted images (Blackman, 2008; Howson, 2013; Sender, 2012).

Notable written responses show how the media impacts lived experiences of the individuals who use them. Because Thai society values a sense of conformity, anything that may stand out faces ramification. Bodies, too, are conspicuously encouraged to conform especially when represented on the social media, a contested space that not only fosters fruitful debates but also effectively suppresses heterogeneity as Schaffar (2016) writes: "social media in general display[s] a tendency toward fragmentation. Instead of making use of the possibility of exchanging views with people from all strands of life, users link up with those they already know . . . [creating] homogeneous groups" (p. 219). Information that is dispersed in the media impacts how one experiences the world. These experiences accumulated from media usage can be perceived through affectivity as "the heightened interest in the non-verbal, non-conscious dimensions of experience is a re-engagement with sensation, memory, perception, attention, and listening" (Blackman and Venn, 2010: 8). By being different or outside of the norm, non-conforming body causes unwanted gazes and deepens the insecurity; distinct written responses state that:

"Sometimes expectations emerge even if I don't find my body images troublesome." (respondent 75)

"My friends always tease me about my look." (respondent 13)

"I am aware of stereotypes and looks. But it still makes me want to be like the [ideal bodily] stereotype sometimes." (respondent 77)

"There are times they [existing ideals on the media] make me feel insecure about my own self." (respondent 84)

Affectivity should thus be considered alongside media constructed body ideals. This is because body ideals could potentially lower one's self-worth or promote the lack of confidence, and even shame. Similar to the objectification of the body–how individuals view their bodies as something to be looked at and judged, this process can cause "a variety of negative psychological consequences such as increased anxiety, decreased 'flow' states, shame about one's own body, through internalization of appearance ideals" (Moya-Garófano and Moya, 2019: 58). The aforementioned written responses show that lived experiences through the body and the world by acknowledging ideal body images on the media, a direct interaction with the media itself, result in damaging embodied feelings. Similar to Dolezal (2010)'s work on "The (In)visible body," the direct interaction with online or on-screen images can result in mediated intimacy, where bodies are visible and encouraged to be transformed, it is as if "almost everybody is now 'failed' in some respect" (p. 364). From the distinct written responses above, it can be argued that the media users situate themselves by self-evaluating and self-scrutinizing their bodies based on the "standards" on screen and online.

The respondents write that they feel that they lack something even when unintentionally comparing their bodies to the ideals. They embody the inability to fit in with the normative looks, hence their awareness and their insecurity. Unlike the existing research that was done in the past, body affectivity resulting from media influence should be taken more into account as all genders and all types of bodies experience certain affects with the world of normalized images. This embodied experience does not disregard how bodies can come to feel certain sentience on their own as Jansen and Wehrle (2018) write: "As a living (human) being, I also live, feel (and suffer through) my body, in virtue of which I am not only vulnerable, but also open to the world. My lived body is my center of orientation, to which all objects I perceive are relative" (p. 37). As the responses show, the media can induce how the body embodies certain affects and may internalize such feelings that are the product of the Othering process (Blackman, 2008: 64), i.e., of being objectified by others and actively objectifying themselves under the ruling images.

This openness to the world is felt through the body. It is undeniable that body images urge the audience to conform in the sense that today's media culture comes to adore normative images more than the real itself. Those images in the media culture can be harmful on the level of lived experiences expressed through the lack of self-worth, body shame, and self-consciousness. All of these lead to the attempts to transform their bodies through dieting or fitness training as the most recurring responses suggested.

In addition to the media's relations with the body experiences that one may embody, especially when their bodies do not conform to the norms, the media also conveys that success stems from good looks. The respondents claim that bodies are a source of social, cultural, and even economic gains. Bordieu's notion of capital states that "human bodies are a form of social and symbolic capital that can be exchanged with other kinds of capital; altering the body is thus a form of capital accumulation" (Poompruek et al., 2014: 801). His notion is applicable to these responses: "the capital influences of beauty and body ideals have many impacts on careers and other opportunities in Thai society" (respondent 76) and that "a lot of jobs require good looks" (respondent 90).

Respondents acknowledge how body ideals in Thai society mean more than mere images in the media. It is not only about transforming the bodies to fit in with the norms. Rather, the transformed bodies are a result of the ideological effect of the normative looks, the messages which, thanks to the media, are loud and clear about how one should look and how one should stylize themselves. Normative looks also actualize the hegemonic ideology of the bodies, be they beauty or gender, and are used as capital to affirm their place in the society. The young adults absorb the mediated messages early in their interaction and online engagement on various media platforms. Career opportunities, societal treatment, and even romantic partnerships are some of the occurring responses that reiterate how the media can discursively impact how one may experience the society through their lived body (Jansen and Wehrle, 2018: 37) and the material chances they may have, or may be deprived of in life.

## 5. CONCLUSION: QUESTIONING AND EXPANDING THE NORMS

Bodies, it seems, will remain the most visible site where power relations take place. In the normative way, body image can produce real effects upon people in the society, particularly those who consume mediated messages about ideal bodies such as this particular cohort group. Body norms, as can be identified from the written responses, still show a limiting set of preferable skin tone and particular body shapes and size deemed apt for distinct genders and these, in turn, reproduce heterosexual norms and homonormativity. This research analyzes findings and expands on what had been done in the past. Where previous research focuses on body discontentment amongst women, this research shows that individuals exposed to the social media are indeed impeded by the mediated body images. Though appearing in a smaller number, the trend toward criticizing the body norms could be argued to rise in the future given the current cultural milieu of inclusivity and diversity.

Some questions remain to be explored further: Will the body norms change? Will the media users or audience conquer the battle of discourse that constructs bodies? Will body norms expand more than narrow sets of what are considered ideal e.g. on diverse representation of various skin colors, body sizes, and multiple genders? These are significant sets of questions that even the end of the research needs to contemplate further.

In addition to identifying the contemporary epoch's normative attributes of the bodies, and the reproduction of the norms through hyperreal images, this paper underlines how body images that are disseminated through the media are never politically innocent. Norms will go on to reproduce material impacts and oftentimes how bodies are lived through the individuals' experiences with the world and their social mobility. This paper contends that this is how the study of the social media, body images, and embodiment of feelings could be engaged with one another, producing a novel account of negotiation with the normative ideals, as well as providing insights into the burgeoning of gendered images. Analyzing the ideals of the body on the Thai media, thus, shows that the negotiation that emerges against the normalcy are signs of how dynamic the power between the media and its users can be.

Yet, as the responses on the embodiment of lived experiences and the material gains show, it may be inevitable that at a certain point in time, there will always be a dominating image, a hegemonic body ideal that gains its power from the individuals' complying self-surveillance. The representation of Thai society's admiration for fair skin, thin, and beautiful ideals is not to be thought of *sans* historical context. Fair skin, for the time being, will signify the more sophisticated implications be the societal class, type of career, or even upbringing, whilst other skin tones will potentially undergo less preferable perception. Thus, it is important that future research focus on the responses from other localities as well, such as in younger cohorts who are also experiencing heightened exposure to social media usage and can thus be argued to be prone to internalization. On the other hand, it is plausible that future research could conduct interviews in a much smaller scale to gauge how media users and audience express their negotiation with the body image and hence with the politics of representation on screen and online in any way. Although this latter suggestion might be possible on the embodied experiences from the individuals, it may hinder the task of identifying normative images due to smaller samples.

It seems that the media does have the power to reproduce certain material consequences any individual may face when it comes to body images. This paper argues that the politics of representation is one aspect that must be contemplated as it is not about criticizing the media or establishing what the norms are as previous research had done. Rather, the politics of representation is about consequences that are as concrete as material gains. Future research should put efforts into the questioning of the rather fixed and mainstream gender regime in Thai society. Bodies that exist in the media can both exert power on the audience and equally meet contestation along the way, as power is never absolute (Bordo, 1994; 2003). Individuals will always face the condition of constitutive stability (Harris-Moore, 2014) as the ideals can always alter and so do the discursive constructs of genders, beauty, and the viable bodies.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research was funded by Ratchadapiseksomphot Endowment Fund, Chulanlongkorn University, Thailand.

## REFERENCES

Aizura, A. Z. (2009). Where health and beauty meet: Femininity and racialisation in Thai cosmetic surgery clinics. *Asian Studies Review* 33(3): 303-317.

Blackman, L. (2008). *The Body: The Key Concepts*. 1st ed. Oxford: Berg Publishers.

Blackman, L. and Venn, C. (2010). Affect. *Body & Society* 16(1): 7-28.

Boonmongkon, P. and Jackson, P. A. (Eds.). (2012). *Thai Sex Talk: The Language of Sex and Sexuality in Thailand*. Chiang Mai: Mekong Press.

Bordo, S. (1994). Feminism, Foucault and the politics of the body. In *Reconstructing Foucault: Essays in the Wake of the 80s*, edited by R. Miguel-Alfonso and S. Caporale-Bizzini, pp. 219-243. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

Bordo, S. (2003). *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. California: University of California Press.

Butler-Kisber, L. (2010). *Qualitative Inquiry: Thematic, Narrative and Arts-Informed Perspectives*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Chaipraditkul, N. (2013). Thailand: Beauty and globalized self-identity through cosmetic therapy and skin lightening. *Ethics in Science and Environmental Politics* 13: 27-37.

Cho, Y. (2016). The Yellow Pacific: East Asian Pop Culture and East Asian Modernities. In *Contemporary Culture and Media in Asia,* edited by D. Black, O. Khoo and K. Iwabuchi, pp. 49-66. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Cresswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches.* 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Dolezal, L. (2010). The (In)visible body: Feminism, phenomenology, and the case of cosmetic surgery. *Hypatia* 25(2): 357-375.

Duangwises, N. and Jackson, P. (Eds.). (2013). *Cultural Pluralism and Sex/Gender Diversity in Thailand*. Bangkok: Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre.

Feltman, C. E. and Szymanski, D. M. (2018). Instagram use and self-objectification: The roles of internalization, comparison, appearance commentary, and feminism. *Sex Roles* 78: 311-324.

Hall, S. (2011). The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media. In *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Critical Reader*, edited by G. Dines and J. M. Humez, pp. 81-84. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Harris-Moore, D. (2014). *Media and the Rhetoric of Body Perfection: Cosmetic Surgery, Weight Loss and Beauty in Popular Culture*. 1st ed. London: Routledge.

Hesse-Biber, S. N. (2007). *The Cult of Thinness*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hesse-Swain, C. (2006). Programming beauty and the absence of *Na Lao*: Popular Thai TV and identity formation among youth in Northeast Thailand. *GeoJournal* 66(3): 257-272.

Howson, A. (2013). *The Body in Society: An Introduction.* 2nd ed. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Jackson, P. A. (2000). An explosion of Thai identities: Global queering and re-imagining queer theory. *Culture, Health and Sexuality* 2(4): 405-424.

Jackson, P. A. (2001). Pre-gay, post-queer: Thai perspectives on proliferating gender/sex diversity in Asia. *Journal of Homosexuality* 40(3-4): 1-25.

Jackson, P. A. (2011). Queer Bangkok after the millennium: Beyond twentieth-century paradigms. In *Queer Bangkok: 21st Century Markets, Media, and Rights*, edited by P. Jackson, pp. 1-14. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Jackson, P. A. (2017). Preface. In *The Sexualized Body: Neoliberal Power, New Media Trends and Transnational East Asian Influences on Sexuality in Thailand*, edited by N. Duangwises, pp. 10-23. Bangkok: Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre. [in Thai]

Jansen, J. and Wehrle, M. (2018). The normal body: Female bodies in changing contexts of normalization and optimization. In *New Feminist Perspectives on Embodiment*, edited by C. Fischer and L. Dolezal, pp. 37-55. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Käng, D. B. (2012). *Kathoey* "in trend": Emergent genderscapes, national anxieties and the re-signification of male-bodied effeminacy in Thailand. *Asian Studies Review* 36(4): 475-494.

Lonergan, A. R., Bussey, K., Mond, J., Brown, O., Griffiths, S., Murray, S. B. and Mitchison, D. (2019). Me, my selfie, and I: The relationship between editing and posting selfies and body dissatisfaction in men and women. *Body Image* 28(4): 39-43.

Mahittivanicha, N. (2018). *Thailand Internet User Profile 2018.* TWF Agency. [Online URL: https://www.twfdigital.com/blog/2018/07/q3-2018-digital-usage-stats-thailand/] accessed on September 16, 2022. [in Thai]

Mahittivanicha, N. (2020). *Thailand Internet User Profile 2019.* TWF Agency. [Online URL: https://www.twfdigital.com/blog/2020/04/thailand-internet-user-profile-2019/] accessed on September 16, 2022. [in Thai]

Mills, J. S., Musto, S., Williams, L. and Tiggermann, M. (2018). "Selfie" harm: Effects on mood and body image in young women. *Body Image* 27: 86-92.

Moya-Garófano, A. and Moya, M. (2019). Focusing on one's own appearance leads to body shame in women but not men: The mediating role of body surveillance and appearance-contingent self-worth. *Body Image* 29: 58-64.

Mulvey, L. (2006). Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. In *Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks,* edited by M. G. Durham and D. M. Kellner, pp. 342-352. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Niamsri, P. and Boonmongkon, P. (2017). Bio-power, medical gaze and negotiation: Narrative experiences of anti-aging practices among Thai women. *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences* 38(1): 62-67.

Persaud, W. H. (2005). Gender, race and global modernity: A perspective from Thailand. *Globalizations* 2(2): 210-227.

Persaud, W. H. (2014). Thai globalization through postcolonial lens. *Journal of Education and Practice* 5(6): 167-173.

Poompruek, P., Boonmongkon, P. and Guadamuz, T. E. (2014). 'For me... it's a miracle': Injecting beauty among *kathoeis* in a provincial Thai city. *International Journal of Drug Policy* 25(4): 798-803.

Prasannam, N. (2019). The *Yaoi* phenomenon in Thailand and fan/industry interaction. *Plaridel* 16(2): 63-89.

Rangkakulnuwat, P., Pothiban, L., Metzger, B. L., Tiansawad, S. and Teaukul, S. (2008). Development of the body image self-schema scale and the body image possible selves scale for Thai middle-aged women. *Thai Journal of Nursing Research* 12(1): 40-54.

Rongmuang, D., Corte, C., McCreary, L. L., Park C. G., Miller, A. and Gallo, A. (2011). Salience of physical appearance characteristics among young women in Thailand. *Body Image* 8(4): 396-403.

Sampson, T. D., Maddison, S. and Ellis, D. (Eds.). (2018). *Affect and Social Media: Emotion, Mediation, Anxiety and Contagion*. London: Rowman & Littlefield International.

Schaffar, W. (2016). New social media and politics in Thailand: The emergence of fascist vigilante groups on Facebook. *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies* 9(2): 215-234.

Sender, K. (2012). No hard feelings: Reflexivity and queer affect in the new media Landscape. In *The Handbook of Gender, Sex, and Media,* edited by K. Ross, pp. 207-225. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Slater, A., Cole, N. and Fardouly, J. (2019). The effect of exposure to parodies of thin-ideal images on young women's body image and mood. *Body Image* 29: 82-89.

Tiggermann, M. and Barbato, I. (2018). "You look great!": The effect of viewing appearance-related Instagram comments on women's body image. *Body Image* 27: 61-66.