

A Critical Analysis of Gender and Body Ideals in Images in Physical Education and Health Textbooks

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Abstract

The school subject Physical Education and Health (PEH) is responsible for discussing how gender norms and body ideals are expressed in different movement cultures. The body is central in PEH and images of bodies play an important role in shaping students' understanding of bodily expectations. The aim of this study is to explore how images in PEH textbooks for grades 7 to 9 display gender and body ideals and problematize how norms and ideals are conceptualized, reproduced, and challenged through these images.

This study uses a qualitative visual research method to examine how images are presented in two Swedish PEH textbooks for grades 7 to 9. A total of 324 images were examined, of which 158 showed bodies. With support from Connell's gender theory and Berge's analytical questions, the images were coded based on body ideals, gender representations, activity, and context. The recurring visual patterns were then identified and explored further through analysis of the images and the accompanying captions.

The study reveals a balanced representation of men and women in the images. Despite this apparent equality, stereotypical gender and body norms are made visible. Males are often associated with typical masculinity traits such as strength, muscularity, and physical performance, whereas females are linked to feminine characteristics such as health, emotional vulnerability, and bodily control. In images addressing body ideals, being fit and slim is interpreted as the normative ideal; however, some images challenge these norms by focusing on movement, joy, and gender-neutral activities. By highlighting a variety of images that maintain, reproduce and challenge norms, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how teaching materials participate in shaping gender and the body within PEH.

Keywords: body, femininity, images, masculinity, norms, sport, visual methodology

Introduction

One of the Swedish school's missions is to help students develop their ability to critically examine information, facts, and relationships, and to understand the consequences of different choices. Students shall also learn to critically examine gender patterns and understand how these can limit people's life choices (Swedish National Agency of Education SNAE 2022a). Furthermore, the school subject Physical Education and Health (PEH) has the responsibility to discuss how norms and body ideals are expressed in different movement cultures (SNAE 2022b). Still, a Swedish national review of PEH in school grades 7 to 9 (ages 13 to 16) revealed that body ideals and gender were almost completely overlooked (Swedish Schools Inspectorate 2018). Since PEH is responsible for issues like these, it is relevant to examine how norms about gender and bodies are expressed in PEH textbooks, specifically in images. Swedish teachers are quite free to choose teaching materials, and it is crucial that these materials do not reproduce stereotypical norms (SOU 2021:71). Images in teaching materials can support learning and simultaneously convey values that influence students' understanding of the body, gender, and activity (Wallin Wictorin 2013). Images of bodies are pervasive in contemporary society, not least through social media, where young people are continuously exposed to idealized and edited representations of appearance (Swedish Internet Foundation 2025). Such images contribute to the circulation of body ideals beyond the school context.

Research on PEH, students, and gender uncover complex relationships between norms, stereotypes, and attitudes embedded in physical activity and sports (Campbell, Gray, Kelly & MacIsaac 2018; Simon, Marttinen & Phillips 2021). Swedish research of PEH teaching situations shows that being a boy or a girl has been important to students, especially if teams were to be formed based on sex. Additionally, boys often receive more attention and encouragement than girls, and in general boys occupy larger spaces and more equipment (Alsarve, Jakobsson & Helgesson 2017; Fagrell, Larsson & Redelius 2012; Larneby 2020; Oliynyk 2021).

Regarding body ideals, PEH might contribute to creating a negative body image and be a potential site for addressing this problem (Azzarito, Simon & Marttinen 2016; Barker, Varea, Bergentoft & Schubring 2023; Schubring, Bergentoft & Barker 2021). Students themselves are aware that the body is a symbol of power and that PEH is a subject where the body is particularly prominent and active (Larneby 2020; Wiltshire, Lee & Evans

2017). Schubring, Bergentoft and Barker (2021) found that instruction regarding body ideals had a gendered nature, meaning that “boys and girls engaged with the content differently, but differences were not clear cut” (p. 242). One assumption was that boys performed strength training more than girls. Still, body ideals as subject area was equally important for boys and girls, and the context and didactic design of the teaching determined students’ engagement rather than gender. Further, in a study of boys investing in their bodies in PEH in the UK, Hill (2015) reports that gender, body, and ethnicity intersected in the construction of the sporting body. By using photographs and photo elicitation, boys expressed how strength and body size were seen as “images of adolescent masculinity for Asian boys” (p. 769). Fitness was a factor that would give them higher status. González-Calvo, Gallego-Lema, Gerdin and Bores-Garcia (2022) demonstrate how future PEH teachers in Spain understand the body and physical activity by choosing and reflecting upon images of active bodies. The student-teachers showed an awareness of socially constructed body ideals and norms related to the canon of beauty (i.e., slim for women and muscular for men), visual literacy, and the need to be prepared to work with issues of gender and body within the subject of PEH. While previous research demonstrates that gender norms and body ideals are negotiated in PEH teaching and students’ experiences of the subject, they say less about how such norms are communicated through the teaching materials that shape classroom practice.

Since gender norms and body ideals are communicated in teaching and visual representations, it is relevant to examine how these are expressed in PEH educational materials. Textbooks should be used in teaching and function effectively within pedagogical practice, which will promote students’ learning. Texts, images, and tasks that form a didactic composition are of importance. It shall clearly correspond to relevant parts of the syllabus, such as aim and central contents of the subject (Swedish Parliament 2023).

Books and illustrations articulate cultural and social norms to young children. Already in early ages, children see pictures in books that are related to gender representation. In Adam and Harper’s (2021) study of children’s books in Australia and the United States male characters often dominated. In stereotypical books, boys were portrayed in active roles (i.e. walking a dog) while girls more often were portrayed in passive roles (i.e. nurturing and caring for a dog). When characters were ungendered, universal notions of actions “leaves the reader open to interpretations that could complicate

or disrupt traditional depictions of masculinity and femininity” (Adam & Harper 2021, p. 465). Sovic and Hus’ (2015) study on pictures in textbooks for young learners revealed stereotypical male and female roles, with some exceptions for challenging gender stereotypes. They argue that norms and values presented in textbooks could possibly lead to gender-stereotypical and prejudiced messages. Hence, the teachers’ role in teaching children to recognize gender stereotypes is significant. Handal (2020) conducted a critical discourse analysis of how Norwegian textbooks in social sciences deal with the subject content gender-equality. It revealed that parts of the textbooks reproduce norms that men and women do not have equal opportunities in society instead of problematizing equality issues. When men are overrepresented in textbooks, without explaining why, it might lead to a perception that men have a higher value than women. Handal (2020) argues this might be an example of gender blindness. Karisman, Supriadi and Friskawati (2025) studied gender stereotypes within Indonesian PEH textbooks, revealing that girls and boys are depicted differently in images and texts. Besides the fact that boys appear more frequently in images than girls do, girls dominate images related to typically female-gendered activities such as gymnastics and dance. The authors argue that this reinforces gender-stereotypical perceptions about physical activities. In sum, previous studies show that textbooks and images can reinforce gender stereotypes, but they underline that teachers could help students interpret images.

This study focuses on a Swedish context through the analysis of images in PEH textbooks. Inspired by Berge’s (2018) analysis of school textbook visual imagery on gender and gender equality, the aim of this study is to explore how images in PEH textbooks for grades 7 to 9 display gender and body ideals, and to problematize how norms and ideals are conceptualized, reproduced, and challenged through these images.

Theoretical framework

This study uses Connell’s theory on gender to critically examine how gender and body ideals are presented in images in PEH textbooks. Connell and Pearse’s (2016) understanding of gender as something constructed through social practices and cultural representations is therefore useful.

According to Connell (2002), some bodies and expressions are given higher status than others in social practices. Their theory of gender in-

cludes the concept of gender order, which provides a basis for understanding gender as something produced through social practices and power relations. An analysis of how body, activities, and visual representations are portrayed in PEH textbooks make it possible to examine how these depictions contribute to shaping ideas about masculinity and femininity.

Connell and Pearse (2016) describe the body as a biological object while at the same time being constructed in relation to societal norms and expectations. The concept of the body guides the analysis of how bodies in the textbooks are visually represented through various movements, positions, and interactions, as well as how these representations communicate ideals linked to gender and physical activity.

Based on the gender order, femininity can be understood as a socially constructed practice mostly related to girls and women, that is shaped in relation to masculinity (Connell 2013; Connell & Pearse 2016). Femininity is not a biological characteristic but a way of making gender through body and action. The emphasized femininity described by Connell and Pearse (2016) refers to forms of femininity that are positioned in relation to and often subordinated to hegemonic masculinity, and which is often associated with appearance, thinness, and emotional openness. The concept of emphasized femininity guides the analysis of how female bodies, activities, and appearances are visually represented and valued in the textbook images.

Further, the concept of hegemonic masculinity is used to understand power relations between different forms of masculinity (Connell 2013). Hegemonic masculinity refers to the form of masculinity, and mostly related to boys and men, that is given the highest status in society and that legitimizes gender hierarchies. This affects the practices of both men and women and contributes to the marginalization of other forms of masculinity and femininity. Although hegemonic masculinity is not the primary analytical focus, the concept is used to identify visual representations that privilege strength, competitiveness, and dominance.

Despite Connell's central importance in gender research, the theory has been described as too masculinity-centered (Connell & Pearse 2016; Connell 2002). Further, the role of girls and women in the construction of masculinity, and the tandem construction of femininity have also dropped out of focus (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). Researchers argue that a focus on hegemonic masculinity risks making women's experiences less visible and overlooking the complexities of femininity (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). Following this, Anderson (2009) suggests that Connell's

“notion of hegemonic masculinity is unable to capture the complexity of what occurs as cultural homophobia diminishes” (p. 7). Anderson further argues that Connell does not sufficiently problematize sport as a valued arena for constructing a narrative about the (male) athlete, and “as long as sports are gender-segregated, we will continue to privilege men” (p. 77).

We agree with these concerns of putting too much focus on masculinity in the study of gender relations, especially as the Swedish PEH is gender integrated. Still, as previous research shows, dominant masculine cultures pursue the school subject, and representations of both masculinity and femininity in PEH textbooks need to be scrutinized. We primarily use Connell’s concept of gender and use hegemonic masculinity and femininity where it is useful for interpretation of how gender, bodies, body ideals, and associated gendered performances are presented in the images in the context of PEH. The following section presents the methodological approach for analyzing and interpreting images.

Methods and material

Rose (2023) describes that visual research involves several methodological approaches. In this study, a visual content analysis is used to analyze how images in PEH textbooks construct gender and body ideals. According to Rose (2023), “visual imagery is never innocent; it is constructed through various practices, technologies, and knowledges” (p. 44). We use visual representations, i.e., photographs, paintings, and drawings which we term “images”. By using images (Rose 2023), we aim to gain knowledge about practices and activities presented in textbooks that teachers and students encounter in everyday PEH teaching in secondary schools.

Images in an audience context

According to Rose (2023), images have long circulated in society through mass reproduction. From this standpoint, the increasing production and representation of visual material on various online platforms is not a new issue, but circulation of images is faster and reaches more people. It is still relevant to examine visual data produced and published as printed materials. The sites of circulation and audiencing (where the image is received) are important (Rose 2023), in this case textbooks for schools. We argue that it is important to analyze visual imagery in school textbooks, since

the content is a construction and legitimization of the knowledge that is most significant for this period (Nordin & Sundberg 2018). We pay attention not only to the image itself but also to the interplay between the image, the textbooks’ backgrounds in the curriculum and PEH syllabus, and the representational practice the textbooks present. In doing so, we follow criteria for visual methodology, we take images seriously by considering their context, thinking about the mode of distribution (PEH textbooks in school), and reflect critically on our own way of looking at the images (Rose 2023).

Sample

The sample for this study is purposive. Two printed PEH textbooks related to the Swedish curricula and PEH syllabus for grades 7 to 9 were chosen, published in 2015 and 2021 respectively. Printed textbooks are few and increasingly less used in Swedish schools. Instead, PEH-teachers often create their own learning material, use videos and sports association related material. However, the textbooks analyzed in this study are in use in schools and are thus perceived as an extension and transformation of the Swedish general curriculum and PEH syllabus for secondary school.

Table 1 Images in the PEH textbooks.

Textbook and author(s)	Total images	Images of bodies	Images of both girls and boys	Images of only girls or women	Image of only boys or men
<i>Physical education: for grades 7-9</i> (Berglin 2021).	186	100 54%	27 15%	46 25%	24 13%
<i>Physical education 7-9</i> (Gardestrand Bengtsson & Gardestrand 2015)	138	58 42%	20 14%	19 14%	19 14%

The analyzed textbooks contain a total of 324 images, of which 158 depict bodies. The columns further present how often boys/men and girls/women are shown in the textbooks, individually and together. Most bodies are shown in some kind of motion, such as walking or exercising, while some are reading, resting, or simply standing still. When relevant for the analysis, we refer to individuals as ‘boy’, ‘man’, ‘girl’ or ‘woman’, based on our joint interpretation and reflection of characteristics typically associated with each sex. However, we strive to describe the appearance of the individual and what the body looks like (for example, “fit”, “slim”, “strong”). This

is not unproblematic, as body appearance can be interpreted differently. From a social constructivist perspective, it is of importance to enhance that what is ‘normal’, ‘ideal’, and ‘common’ is a social and cultural construction and open for interpretation (Lykke 2010). By carefully describing the bodies and their actions, and the context in which the images appear, we strive for transparency (Rose 2023). Of particular importance is what can be considered a “normal” body in general, but also for boys and girls respectively, as the PEH syllabus discusses body ideals and gender norms. Based on the social constructivist ontological approach, we consider what is “normal” and “norms” as fluid and unstable, and a construction of the context (Lykke 2010).

Few of the bodies in the textbooks’ images can be interpreted as overweight or underweight. We argue that this signals a body that is “normal” in these two textbooks. A few images show very slim or very muscular bodies, but besides that the images alone are not salient. For instance, the image of an adolescent who is hiding her face and looking down (the first example in the upcoming analysis), is not salient. It is the placement of this image in the chapter, its caption, and context that makes it salient.

Analysis of images

Our own backgrounds have been relevant for the analysis. Author 1 is a PEH teacher working with grade 7 to 9 students, and Author 2 is a PEH teacher educator. We are both women and have participated in various sports and physical activity contexts since childhood. Our pre-understanding of the studied phenomenon is acknowledged as an asset, albeit with a critical distance.

A deductive analysis was inspired by Connell’s (2002; 2013; Connell & Pearce 2016) theory of gender and the intersection of gender and body. In the first reading of the textbooks, all images were counted (Table 1). Then we sorted and analyzed the images in two steps. First, at an overarching level by “reading” all images through a gender, body, and normative lens, based upon Berge’s (2018) analytical questions about gender equality: “Are women and men equally represented? How are women and men represented in the text (the images)? Are they doing the same thing?” (p. 164). Further, we developed the questions to also ask about body ideals: How are gender and body ideals displayed in textbooks? What are the images communicating? How can gender and body ideals be perceived in relation to different movement activities?

Second, based on these analytical questions, we chose images that represented recurring patterns in each textbook. We “read” all images and also read the accompanying text to understand the context. It was important to note under what heading an image appears, and its captions. The first reading gave the impression that the images were mostly gender-neutral and displayed a variation in what way bodies were active. However, what is considered neutral is related to interpretations within a social and cultural context (Lykke 2010). We are aware that an interpretation of an image as gender-neutral is not unproblematic, as images always, according to Rose (2023), “have their own effects” (p. 43). Based on Rose’s (2023) criteria for a critical visual methodology, images “are not entirely reducible to their context” (p. 43). An image is related to its social conditions, in this case discourses of sport and physical activity presented in the introduction and related to the images’ modes of distribution. Thus, supported by the theoretical framework, when we interpret an image as “gender-neutral”, we argue that the image is not gendering the person or activity.

Moving on from the first reading, we specifically noticed a couple of images of lightly dressed slim female bodies, and that girls were more often passive than boys. We termed these *stereotypical* images, and they range from provocative to subtly reproducing gender norms and body ideals. One example of a subtle reproduction is the first image presented in the results, a teen girl who looks sad, and the heading reads “Mental health”. Further, although most images appeared gender-neutral and showed ordinary activities (i.e. push-ups, walking, and canoeing), some bodies and activities stood out as *challenging* or *reproducing body ideals*. Lastly, gender-neutral images had an important place in the analysis, and some images were chosen as examples of how they are *disrupting* gender norms and body ideals.

From this part in the analysis process we chose about 20 images that related to these three themes and further chose to keep four images per theme as illustrative empirical examples of how gender and body ideals are expressed. From this point, we worked individually with interpreting images based on Connell’s concept of gender. In a new dialogue, we agreed upon images that represented the themes. This process was iterative, as some images felt “spot on” from the start and were confirmed during the process, and the last image was chosen very late. Of relevance, we closely considered getting a fair representation of each of the textbooks’ contents of body ideals and gender norms. This iterative process strengthened the construction of the themes as they were not obvious from the start.

In the analysis, we place careful emphasis on describing each image. Further, our interpretations are made to illustrate what the image displays in the PEH context. For example, we reflect on why a particular image might have been placed under a specific heading and what the caption signals.

Research ethics

In order to create trustworthiness, sincerity, and rich rigor (Tracy 2025), transparency has been an important ethical criterion for this study. We have not created the images ourselves, and the images were not produced for this study. Since the images were selected for PEH textbooks by others, intended for use by teachers and students, we regard them as publicly available information (Rose 2023; Swedish Research Council 2024). Still, we have chosen not to publish any of the analyzed images, even though doing so would have contributed to the analysis. One reason is copyright. More importantly, we do not want to display images of young people who have (probably) given consent to appear in a PEH textbook but have not been asked or consented to appear in a research article. Instead, by being transparent in our choice of methods and materials, and the presentation of the images, we aim to demonstrate sincerity in addressing the methodological and ethical challenges of this study (Swedish Research Council 2024).

Results and analysis

The initial review of the images shows that the distribution of boys/men and girls/women depicted in the textbooks is relatively equal (Table 1). The following sections present three recurring patterns illustrated through images that are chosen to capture the essence of the pattern. Each image is described in italics, including its chapter or heading and caption. In some cases, surrounding text is mentioned for context.

Stereotypical gender norms

This section analyzes images from the chapters *Health* and *Strength Training* in Berglin (2021). These examples illustrate how contents of health education and strength training are linked to gendered bodies.

Under the heading “Mental health,” a photograph shows a teen girl with long hair and painted nails sitting on the floor, head turned downward, partially covered by hair. The caption reads: “It is normal to sometimes feel sad and down. If it happens often, it can affect your mental health” (Berglin 2021, p. 10).

Connell (2013) and Connell and Pearse (2016) argue that society shapes ideas about gender and emotional expression. In line with norms about women showing emotions (Connell & Pearse 2016), this image shows traditional feminine attributes where girls and women are often portrayed as withdrawn. Boys’ mental health issues are not represented in this chapter.

Under the heading “Different ways to vary your strength training”, a photograph depicts a girl lying on a bench, performing bench presses with a weightless bar. The caption says: “Good technique when strength training reduces the risk of injuries” (Berglin 2021, p. 67). Another photograph shows two boys doing the same exercise, one lifting a weighted bar while the other assists. The caption reads: “Bench press mainly trains the chest muscles, triceps, and shoulders” (p. 69).

The images give the impression that girls and boys are expected to exercise. The students perform the same exercise, but only the boys use weights. The captions also differ. While the girl’s caption informs about how the activity is to be performed, the boys’ caption signals that the goal of the training is to train muscles. In line with Connell’s (2013) understanding of masculinity as linked to strength and control, a male and masculine practice is confirmed and reproduced. Still, the girl is not portrayed as contrasting the boys in what they are carrying out, but the activity is differently gendered. Girls who train with heavier weights might be perceived as masculine. Since there are no images of girls lifting heavy weights, we interpret that the textbooks communicate that female bodies are constructed to differ from male bodies in strength training, and that girls should train using less weights or body weight only.

The absence of representations of boys in relation to mental health and girls using weights aligns with broader societal discourses on gendered body ideals. Contemporary Swedish media also illustrates how muscularity is strongly associated with masculinity. For example, the Swedish Radio documentary “The guys at the gym” (P1 Documentary 2026) shows how young men experience societal pressure to build muscles to embody

dominant and hegemonic masculine ideals. This reinforces the interpretation that the textbooks convey and reproduce stereotypical notions that male bodies and masculinity are associated with boys, and with strength, power, and muscles. Femininity, on the other hand, is linked to control rather than strength, which is visible in the images of girls in the textbooks (Azzarito, Simon & Marttinen 2016). Hegemonic masculinity, as the dominant and idealized form of masculinity in society, can affect how boys and girls are expected to behave and what characteristics they should exhibit (Connell 2013).

This section shows that although the main aims of health and strength training in the PEH curriculum are gender-neutral and focus on generic knowledge and competencies (SNAE 2022b), the bodies in the images are portrayed in a stereotypically gendered way: girls are associated with mental health issues, and boys are depicted as stronger than girls, even though girls are presented as capable of exercising.

Body ideals: Challenging and reproducing norms and stereotypes

This section analyzes three images illustrating how gender and body ideals intersect and show both challenging and reproducing stereotypes. All images are placed under headings concerning body ideals.

A photograph shows a boy and a girl, seemingly in their late teens, performing push-ups on kettlebells. The girl has short tights and a sports bra, the boy shorts and a bare upper body. Both appear fit and muscular. The caption reads: “Being fit has today become a body ideal for many” (Berglin 2021, p. 28).

The image could resemble a fitness advertisement. The kettlebells signal that these teenagers are in a gym, knowing how to exercise. It communicates that being fit is desirable and aligns with PEH’s responsibility to teach about health and body norms (SNAE 2022b). The text accompanying the image acknowledges that body ideals today are often to be slim and fit, and that striving for elite-level fitness can be unhealthy. This appears to be an attempt by the textbook to present a spectrum of bodies and body ideals. However, there is no reflection or imagery showing diversity in body types and appearances under this heading on ‘Body ideals’. Furthermore, the image conveys that both boys and girls can (and are expected to) engage in exercise to remain fit and healthy. In contrast to the strength training im-

ages described in the previous section, this image does not communicate any hierarchical gender order. The girl is in the foreground, which can be understood as a more gender-neutral image and a way to deemphasize the link between strength training and masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). The image can also be perceived as challenging the stereotypical gendered notion that boys are stronger than girls, as her body is presented in an equally strong and fit exercising position as the boy (Connell 2013). Still, the image reflects a normative female body ideal where slimness plays a significant role (Connell 2002; Connell & Pearse 2016). Therefore, the bodies could be interpreted as fulfilling normative body ideals: slim, toned, and muscular.

The following two images are similar and were selected from each of the textbooks. Both images depict the female body and were salient from our first reading of the textbooks.

A drawing shows a slim torso wearing a bra and short pants, with a measuring tape around a marked waist. The caption reads: "The pursuit of achieving a certain ideal can become unhealthy" (Berglin 2021, p. 29).

The caption emphasizes that the pursuit of a slim body may be problematic and highlights the potential unhealthiness of weight loss. However, the image and caption are somewhat confusing, as they do not clearly communicate that the depicted body ideals are problematic, only that the pursuit of certain body ideals is problematic. It does not communicate that it is particularly about female body ideals. Still, in this image girls' bodies are presented as objects for measurement, control, and improvement, reproducing gendered body ideals that tie in with gender as a social practice where bodies are shaped and regulated through norms of femininity (Connell 2002; Connell & Pearse 2016). This raises questions about female body ideals and whether the intention of PEH is to convey that this is an expected ideal for girls or not. It relates directly to the next image:

A photograph shows two sun tanned Barbie girl dolls in bikinis. Both are very slim and at least the tall one could be described as underweight. The caption reads: "From where do we get our body ideals?" (Gardestrand & Gardestrand Bengtsson 2015, p. 178).

The surrounding text has a critical tone. However, it does not refer to the bodies in the image, leaving the interpretation to the reader. This can be

understood in relation to Connell and Pearse (2016) who describe how femininity is shaped within a certain gender order and some bodies are valued more highly than others, for example, being thin. Swedish contemporary media and discourse report that young girls are increasingly exposed to harmful beauty ideals and that, among others, Swedish female influencers are criticized for promoting a trend of being slim. For instance, the slim waist trend from the 1600s–1700s is considered to have returned as the desired body ideals among young people (Kling & Frisén 2020; SVT 2025). By choosing to show body ideals of a doll girl wearing make-up and being slender which aligns with the societal norm of traditional femininity, the textbooks communicate that these body ideals are considered important to present in an educational context. Still, it does not describe to the reader what body ideals the Barbie dolls represent.

By using Connell and Pearse's (2016) perspective, we argue that these images reflect an expectation of the female body and appearance. The Barbie dolls and the torso are examples of images where it is unclear whether they aim to illustrate female body ideals to strive for or to highlight problematic ideals. Further, the scholarly interest in PEH and body ideals (Azarito, Simon & Marttinen 2016; Barker et al. 2023; Schubring, Bergentoft & Barker 2021), emphasize that the PEH subject has a significant responsibility to teach about body ideals. In Wiltshire, Lee and Evans (2017), PEH students reported awareness of the risks of being underweight and overweight; however, being overweight was regarded as carrying a greater "social risk." From this perspective, the slim female torso and Barbie dolls can be understood as signals to students (particularly girls) that they should be aware of their weight but avoid becoming caught in an unhealthy pursuit of this "certain ideal."

Disrupting norms

This section highlights examples of images that in some way challenges gendered norms and body ideals. The images are from both textbooks and from various chapters.

Under the heading "Body Ideals," two photographs show the same adult female face before and after digital retouching. The edited face wears makeup and hair extensions. Skin irregularities are edited and smoothed out. The caption reads: "Before and after retouching" (Gardestrand Bengtsson & Gardestrand 2015, p. 166).

The image illustrates how easily people can edit and alter their appearance. Gender norms are socially constructed and shape expectations regarding how people should look and behave (Connell & Pearse 2016). The edited female face can be linked to idealized femininity, which involves being young, wearing makeup, and being slim (Connell & Pearse 2016). Further, this can be considered as a part of patriarchal norms that reinforce girls' and women's roles as visual objects (Connell 2013). It conveys an understanding of how digital tools can manipulate reality and influence young people's perception of body and appearance (Swedish Internet Foundation 2025) and how this is used as a tool to reproduce and challenge norms.

The next image is from the chapter on *Sport and society* which explicitly deals with norms, gender, and gender equality. This image contrasts with those described so far.

Under the subheading "Community planning for public health", a photograph shows girls and boys exercising at an outdoor gym (Gardestrand Bengtsson & Gardestrand 2015, p. 194).

The image focuses on physical activity and movement. It communicates joy, inclusion, and social health. In contrast to bodies in many other images, all are wearing long-sleeved sweatshirts, jackets, and long trousers. It is quite difficult to see the shape of any of the bodies. One interpretation is that the people are agents of their wellbeing. The image does not communicate any stereotypical gendered traits. These people are depicted as subjects in movement. This provides space for a more inclusive view of the intention of the activity and of the body. In contrast to a gender order that constructs certain attributes to fit our contemporary society's construction of gender (Connell 2013), we interpret that this image is more socially inclusive and thus disrupts gender norms.

The textbooks show some images of male teenagers or adults performing low-intensity activities like hiking, jogging, and walking which do not require any specific strength. All are relaxed and are dressed in clothing not explicitly showing the body.

In the chapter "Cardiovascular training" a photograph shows a man jogging in a forest. The caption reads: "Jogging at a slow pace is low-intensity cardio training" (Berglin 2021, p. 55).

Our impression is that this type of image focuses on the activity rather than the body. Through Connell's (2013) understanding of hegemonic masculinity, where strength, muscularity, and competitiveness are central for boys and men, these images can be interpreted as disrupting normative expectations of how male bodies should appear and act. Instead, they convey non-gendered attributes which challenge the association between masculinity and physical strength (Anderson 2009).

The images in this section illustrate a pattern in PEH textbooks where movement is emphasized and the bodily appearance are not gendered as the previous images (Nyberg et al. 2025; Schubring, Bergentoft & Barker 2021). The only individual portrayed with traditional gendered (feminine) attributes is in the image that problematizes edited faces, and they actively participate in physical activities that are not associated with conventional masculine or feminine norms. Boys and men in the images do not need to display strength or dominance to be active (Connell 2013).

Discussion

Several studies on PEH show that gender and gendered body norms are prevalent in PEH teaching situations (Alsarve, Helgesson & Jakobsson 2017; Barker et al. 2023; Hill 2015; Larneby 2020; Schubring, Bergentoft & Barker 2021). The Swedish PEH subject emphasizes that students should understand how norms affect participation (SNAE 2022b). It is therefore relevant to study teaching materials and specifically images from a gender and body perspective. The aim of this study was to explore how images in PEH textbooks for grades 7 to 9 display gender and body ideals, and to problematize how norms and ideals are conceptualized, reproduced, and challenged through these images.

What is considered normative, stereotypical or neutral in terms of body ideals and gender is not unproblematic as traditional perceptions, social and cultural constructions are easily re-produced. What is considered gendered in one context (due to time, space, social conditions) might be the opposite in another context (Lykke 2010). Therefore, textbook authors might not reflect on whether the images are gendering or un-gendering the individuals and activities. The discussion further develops the analysis of the images and reflects on the role that the textbooks might play in relation to gender norms and body ideals in PEH.

Our main finding is that gender and body ideals are displayed in various ways. Stereotypical gendered norms and body ideals are salient in several of the analyzed images, showing similarities to hegemonic masculinity, traditional femininity, and established norms of male and female body ideals: being strong, fit, and slender. These gender norms and stereotypical body ideals are pervasive. At the same time, there are images that challenge these norms by disrupting stereotypical norms. We also find more gender-neutral images, which contribute to a mix of norms and ideals.

The quite even distribution of boys/men and girls/women in the 100 images in Berglin (2021) and 58 images in Gardestrand and Gardestrand Bengtsson (2015), can be a significant initial message that gender and body ideals are conceptualized equally (see table 1). At first glance, the textbooks may appear relatively neutral, but our analysis shows that this neutrality is only apparent. There are images that can be linked to a notion that boys are stronger than girls, which reproduce stereotypes about gender. The lack of images of girls as physically strong reflects broader discourses where muscularity is primarily associated with males and masculinity (Connell 2013; Larneby 2020). In addition, in both textbooks, there are more girls and women than boys and men in images related to body ideals, suggesting that body ideals are a bigger issue for girls and women. We argue that this uneven distribution might communicate contradictory messages about body ideals, as both boys and girls deal with societal expectations on gendered body ideals. Contemporary media reports on young men who experience a pressure to build muscle to achieve a dominant ideal of masculinity (P1 Documentary 2026), and girls who are exposed to beauty ideals in social media (SVT 2025).

In line with Handal's (2020) results that gender awareness, gender neutrality and gender blindness co-exist in social sciences textbooks, we argue that the PEH textbooks are to some extent gender blind. This might be due to traditional perceptions about gender in physical activity and sport (Swedish School Inspectorate 2018), and the fact that body ideals connected to gender can reinforce stereotypes (Connell 2013). Considering research showing that gender and gendered body norms are prevalent in PEH teaching situations (Alsarve, Helgesson & Jakobsson 2017; Barker et al. 2023; Hill 2015; Schubring, Bergentoft & Barker 2021), normative images might legitimize such teaching. In contrast to research on stereotypical perceptions present in PEH (Alsarve, Jakobsson & Helgesson 2017; Campbell et al. 2018; Larneby 2020; Oliynyk 2021) such as boys being dominant and acting as if they are better than girls in sports, our results show that

some images disrupt this pattern. Images in which boys perform low-intensity activities such as walking and jogging, without exposing their bodies, challenge the connection between males, masculinity, and muscularity that often dominates in the context of PEH. Further, we find that images showing more relaxed boys and girls without emphasizing the body and muscles are disrupting stereotypical norms in a subtle way. We argue that these images play an important role in the overall message communicated by the PEH textbooks to young students.

An important finding is that the images in the PEH textbooks are often left for the audience to interpret. Berge (2018) argues that this creates ambiguity and places demands on the audience (in this case 13 to 16-year-old students) to interpret the images. Furthermore, this contrasts the function of a textbook to provide “good knowledge development in accordance with the goals of the education” (Swedish Parliament 2023, p. 8). We argue that “good knowledge development” should be supported, with for instance clearer captions and texts. According to Adam and Harper (2021) and Sovic and Hus (2015), children use illustrations to see themselves in various roles in society and to help define who they are. Two clear examples of ambiguity in our study are the female torso with the measuring tape and the Barbie dolls. It is not clear what these images want to communicate with PEH students. When teaching materials are omitted for students to interpret images, Wallin Victorin (2013) argues that the encounter between image and viewer without critical guidance creates a risk to reproduce norms that are already circulating in viewers’ visual reevaluation.

PEH students and student-athletes are aware of gendered body ideals (González-Calvo et al. 2022; Wiltshire, Lee & Evans 2017). Schubring, Bergentoft and Barker (2021) emphasize that this connection creates a didactic challenge in teaching about body ideals. Although the PEH textbooks presumably aim to problematize the pursuit of slim body ideals, we contend, in line with González-Calvo et al. (2022), that there is a risk that images showing stereotypical female bodies communicate to young girls and boys that this is how girls should look. As Gyberg and Kling (2021) show, social media reinforces differences between girls’ and boys’ bodies. This is particularly relevant in a time when young girls are exposed to narrow beauty ideals, and influencers are often criticized for reinforcing thinness norms (SVT 2025). It may also reinforce stereotypes about femininity and masculinity.

Based on our study we cannot speculate on how students or teachers understand these images. Still, we know that students play a significant role in

constructing what is regarded as valuable in athletic competence, gender, and bodies in PEH and sport in school (Larneby 2020; Wiltshire, Lee & Evans 2017), and that teachers bring experiences and assumptions on gender and body ideals into teaching (González-Calvo et al. 2022; Larneby 2020). Schools are responsible for making gender patterns visible and actively counteracting them (SNAE 2022a). We do not argue that images expressing normative or stereotypical gendered body ideals and norms should be excluded from educational textbooks; however, they might reproduce norms instead of challenging and disrupting them (Karisman, Supriadi & Friskawati 2025; Schubring, Bergentoft & Barker 2021; Sovic & Hus 2015). Images that present prevailing body ideals for young people may risk signaling that the slim, fit, and muscular body is desirable, which affects identity development and can create pressure and reduce self-esteem among young people striving to meet these ideals (Kling & Friséen 2020; Simon, Marttinen & Phillips 2021). Therefore, we agree with Schubring, Bergentoft and Barker (2021) that “teachers must actively engage and be prepared to challenge students in order to question the reproduction of normative body ideals and create conditions for positive body–self relations” (p. 247). One way could be to present images that contrast typical gender-connoted sports, such as boys doing ballet or girls doing weightlifting.

Future teachers in the subject of PEH should be prepared, through their teacher training programs, to critically analyze visual representations in educational materials and to develop the ability to reflect on how images can both reproduce and challenge gender norms and body ideals. This may strengthen teachers’ ability to make informed pedagogical choices when selecting and using images in textbooks and other teaching materials. Our findings may also inform the future development of PEH textbooks and teaching materials by encouraging a more deliberate selection of images that challenge and create spaces for reflection, rather than reinforce, gender norms and body ideals.

Images should not be underestimated (Rose 2023), especially as the circulation of images is faster than ever (Swedish Internet Foundation 2025). PEH teachers who include and actively discuss images that show complex movements, varied activities, and various bodies in different forms and expressions, can contribute to broadening students’ understanding and knowledge of health and physical activity (Nyberg et al. 2025). In this way, teaching materials and teachers can counteract limiting norms of gender and body ideals that otherwise risk being cemented in school and in young people’s everyday lives.

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