

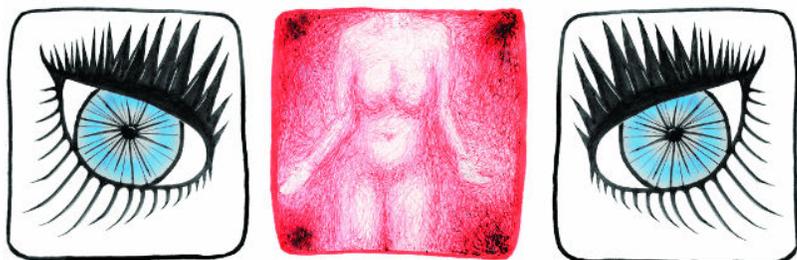
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## The Tube: On HBO's Girls, Lena Dunham's naked body gives audiences a body image reality check

March 13, 2014 Melissa Zimdars Arts & Entertainment, The Tube 1 comment

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What can *Girls* tell us about how we view our bodies? — illustration by Adam Burke

Since its debut on HBO in the spring of 2012, *Girls* has polarized viewers. Some consider it to be a refreshing and humorous portrayal of less-than-likable female characters, while others critique the show for its lack of diversity or being celebratory of selfishness and entitlement. Regardless of all these potential problems or triumphs, *Girls* is meaningful to me mainly for one reason: Lena Dunham's naked body. Although her character, Hannah Horvath, complains in the first season's final episode, "I am 13 pounds overweight and it has been awful for me my whole life," Dunham displays a body confidence rarely seen on television.

While news reports incessantly detail our ever-expanding waistlines, television depictions show us something else. According to media researchers, about 75 percent of women on our flickering screens can be categorized as being of below average weight. Thinness is undoubtedly idealized not only in magazines, films and television shows, but also on thinspiration Tumblrs and across "thigh gap" Instagrams. Our bodies are positioned as perpetual works in progress, and our worth is too often connected to not having a "muffin top" or numbers on a scale.

 **HBO Girls trailer**  
from [golden acapulco](#)



This social pressure to be small is often blamed on the monotonous television depictions of waifish women. Just like the way television researchers try to determine how viewers are affected by violent images, pornography or stereotypes, they also try to establish the impact of beauty and weight idealizations. In fact, some of them argue that televised images negatively affect perceptions of our own bodies, lower our self-esteems and screw up our relationships with food. While I don't think that a direct, causal relationship can be established between what we see and how we think and act, I do believe television to be a powerful social influence that reinforces body type hierarchies—namely that some bodies are more beautiful and desirable than others. And this is precisely why Dunham's embrace of her own not-so-socially-idealized body, and all of the surrounding discussions, are so important.

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For me, seeing Hannah Horvath/Lena Dunham in the nude produces a productive discomfort. As much as I support body positivity and fat acceptance, I still struggle with my own insecurities. When Hannah eats a cupcake in the bathtub, disrobes before having sex, wears a see-through mesh tank top during a coke-fueled night of partying or plays ping pong in the buff, I often find myself guiltily scrutinizing and judging her thighs, stomach and breasts. At the same time, it is pleasurable and empowering to witness someone appear nude so regularly and so nonchalantly. The more I've watched *Girls*, the more I've realized that my feelings of discomfort in seeing Dunham's naked body aren't resulting from being repulsed by what I am seeing (in fact, I quite like it!), but rather from my own lingering anxiety over the way others might see me. It forces me to confront my own relationship with my body, and reminds me to accept for myself the body love that I preach to others.

Of course not everyone has the same reaction to Dunham's nudity. Some may be appalled or disgusted by her, some may find it titillating and I'm sure others won't even think twice about it. Regardless of all the possible reactions, it cannot be denied that Dunham's exhibitionism resists the kinds of beauty and weight standards, and accompanying "rules" for "acceptable" behavior, that television has been so good at reinforcing over the years. Hannah donning a green bikini for almost the entire "Beach House" (Feb. 16) episode resonates with messages circulating in the body acceptance blogosphere. There, women are encouraged to fearlessly wear their "fatkinis" as opposed to fretting over getting their bodies "bikini ready." Even if Hannah's own bodily embrace does not yet resonate with the lived experiences of many women, it at least contributes to a space welcoming of self-acceptance, and maybe even self-love.

Unfortunately, a few nude scenes do not make a body revolution. The mere fact that Dunham is asked so much about Hannah's nudity suggests that we have a long way to go in acknowledging the worth of all bodies. A blog post on *Marie Claire's* website shortly after *Mike and Molly's* debut exemplifies how far we are from body acceptance: "I think I'd be grossed out if I had to watch two characters with rolls and rolls of fat kissing each other ... because I'd be grossed out if I had to watch them doing anything." Needless to say, a nude scene featuring Melissa McCarthy on *Mike and Molly*, or Rebel Wilson on *Super Fun Night*, would likely, and unfortunately, inspire a debate I really don't want to witness.

There are plenty of reasons to dislike *Girls*, Lena Dunham or the character Hannah Horvath (she is, after all, self-centered, privileged and rather whiny), but her nude body is not a legitimate one.

*When Melissa Zimdars isn't watching or writing about television, she co-hosts a radio show on KRUI called The Fuzz Fix.*

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### About Melissa Zimdars

*Melissa Zimdars is a doctoral student in Communication Studies at the University of Iowa, specializing in all things television.*

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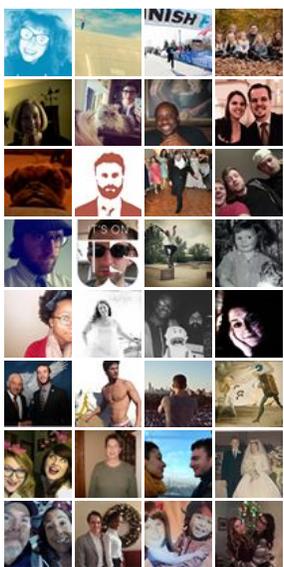
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