



Ideal body image: A male perspective on self

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ABSTRACT

Societal notions of masculinity have changed greatly in the last two decades and males appear more interested in improving or maintaining their appearance in ways traditionally reserved for women (such as the use of cosmetic grooming products). Where female body dissatisfaction and drivers of appearance-related image modification have been studied from a feminine perspective, little research has focused on the perspective of men in relation to these issues. The current study thus examines how males of different ages perceive their physical appearance and what motivates them to undertake activities related to changing or maintaining that appearance. The study does this by asking males to compare themselves to male body images as constructed in the media and by society more generally. An exploratory approach to research is undertaken, utilising focus groups and depth interviews with males in two age cohorts (18–25 years and 33–45 years). Results suggest that there is a difference in overall perceptions of body image between the two groups, with younger males striving for a lean and muscular body and older males focused on health and lifespan concerns. In contrast to research examining female body perceptions, this study indicates that the media and social comparison act as positive motivators rather than sources of body dissatisfaction.

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CHINESE ABSTRACT

男性对自身外表的观念

男性应有阳刚之气的社会观念在过去二十年间发生了巨大的变化，现在男性似乎更热衷于使用女性传统的[美容]方法改善和保持自己的外表（例如使用美容护理产品）。当我们从女性的角度研究女性对自己身体外形不满时会修改身体外形的照片，然而我们却极少研究或关注男性遇到这些问题时的观点。因此本次研究探讨不同年龄阶段的男性是如何意识到自己的外表，以及是什么激发他们采取相关的行动改变或保持自己的外表。我们要求[受访的]男性将自己和媒体上的男性身体形象图片进行对比，以及从更普通的社会角度[进行比较]。

我们采用了探索性的研究方法，利用各种焦点小组并对两个不同年龄组别(18 - 25岁、33 - 45岁)的男性进行深入访问。调查结果指出两个组别之间对身体形象图片的整体感知存在差异，年轻男性更在乎减肥以及练就结实肌肉的身体，年长的男性更为关注健康和长寿的体魄。和研究女性身体外形的观念相比，本研究指出媒体以及社会的攀比，比起对身体外形不满更能发挥正面的激发作用。

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1. Introduction

Body image concerns have typically been perceived as a woman's problem, focused on the portrayal of the 'thin ideal' in modern media (Fay and Price, 1994). More recently, male body image concerns have become apparent, with evidence such as increasing cases of male anorexia cited in the media. Some authors claim that modern males are struggling with their notion of masculinity as they try to fit into a new masculine role defined by a

changing society (Walzer, 2002). These new roles include a stronger focus on appearance, contradicting traditional perceptions of masculinity. The tension created between the old and new portrayals of masculinity supports a call for further research that examines a male perspective on body image (Blond, 2008). While some research on male body image exists, it has generally focused on the effect of body dissatisfaction amongst men. There are relatively few studies examining the antecedents and influences of male body dissatisfaction and male perceptions of ideal body image more generally. Work that compares men of different ages is also limited, with most studies concentrating on males of a college age.

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2. Changing notions of masculinity

Traditional notions of masculinity are said to develop from hegemonic ideals as well as the rejection of femininity and homosexuality (Courtenay, 2000; Vigorito and Curry, 1998). Other definitions of masculinity, however, suggest there is in fact more of a continuum between ideals of masculinity and femininity (Gerson and Peiss, 1985). Biological difference is not the central foundation of masculinity and femininity, with these concepts constructed socially and embedded throughout one's life (Levant, 1996). Socially constructed gender identities that are not mutually exclusive, but in fact fit somewhere on a continuum, make sense in a changing world where traditional boundaries of masculinity and femininity are blurred by the influence of the media and changing social practice.

Traditional, hegemonic notions of masculinity are often linked to control, discipline, power and material values (Johansson, 2011). Changes in the workplace however, including an increase in the number of working women in roles commensurate to men, have led authors to speculate that modern males may indeed be struggling with their notions of the 'new' masculinity and are feeling uncertain about how this role is defined in society (Walzer, 2002). Where authors note a shift to a more "gender-equal masculine and structural position", different masculine positions are acknowledged, including those contradictory of traditional notions of masculinity (Johansson, 2011, p. 167). A man more in touch with his feminine side, and more aware of his appearance, is now often referred to as 'metrosexual' (Simpson, 1994 cited in Harrison, 2008). The metrosexual man is said to be concerned with their appearance yet fighting hard to hold on to traditional ideals of masculinity (Lorenzen et al., 2004; Schroeder and Zwick, 2004).

Established ideals of masculine gender identity have been in question since the feminist movement of the 20th century (Bakewell et al., 2006; Shields and Elaine, 2011). Where once a woman's place was said to be in the home, women are now much more involved in contributing to the income of the family (Bakewell et al., 2006). Perhaps in a bid to strengthen their masculine identity and overcome the loss of power in the workplace, males are said to be striving to increase the muscularity of their bodies (Gill et al., 2005; Mussap, 2008; Pope et al., 2000a,b) and thus cement their masculine identity. There is a fine line between striving for muscularity and being vain or appearance conscious, which are seen as feminine traits (Gill et al., 2005), however it has been suggested that males see muscularity as one of the only things they have control over when trying to show they are masculine to others (Pope et al., 2000a). The male body could thus be used as a tool for gaining social capital, whereby a muscular man may have more claim to masculinity than a man who is less so.

3. New masculinity and the media

The media has a significant role to play in constructing changing notions of masculinity. While some say that certain types of media portray the ideals of hegemonic masculinity and help us to understand what masculinity and femininity are (Kacen, 2000; Vigorito and Curry, 1998), others suggest that the media shapes the changing nature of what is masculine (Elliott and Elliott, 2005; Patterson and Elliott, 2002; Schroeder and Borgerson, 1998; Schroeder and Zwick, 2004). Images of the male body in advertising have increased markedly in recent years and men are being shown more and more in sexually provocative fashions, often with very lean or muscular physiques (Elliott and Elliott, 2005; Pope et al., 2000b). The way males and masculinity are portrayed in the media challenges outdated images of masculinity

(Schroeder and Zwick, 2004), with the successful 'man in a suit' image replaced with an image more focused on bare skin and a muscular physique. Indeed, even the representation of men in the toy industry is changing, with Baghurst et al. (2006) noting that children's male action figures have increased notably in total body muscularity over the last 25 years. With the 'new masculine' imagery pervasive even in children's products, it is little wonder that research has begun to link modern images of the male body in media with body and, specifically, muscle dissatisfaction in men (Blond, 2008).

4. Social comparison and body dissatisfaction in men

The theory of social comparison says that we evaluate important characteristics of ourselves against others (Festinger, 1954). It is this theory that provides a link between images of muscular men in the media and body dissatisfaction in men, because it is assumed that men compare themselves to these images in the media (Blond, 2008). Body satisfaction in men is seen to be made up of three core areas; physical attractiveness, upper body strength and physical condition (Franzoi and Shields, 1984). It has been shown that males who have the highest levels of internalised media body ideals have the highest drive to increase muscularity (Daniel and Bridges, 2010). It has also been shown that there is a relationship between seeing images of muscular men and male body dissatisfaction (Blond, 2008). Males with a high level of muscle dissatisfaction, before seeing images of muscular men, were more likely to see a large jump in muscle dissatisfaction once seeing the images (Arbour and Martin Ginis, 2006). This however, was not the same for males with high body satisfaction, where the images had little or no impact on body dissatisfaction. Interestingly, the Arbour and Martin Ginis (2006) study showed that images of muscular men had a much greater effect on muscle dissatisfaction than images of hypermuscular (bodybuilder size physique) men suggesting that it is not a muscular physique *per se*, but rather the social ideal of the muscular physique that is the most damaging.

There are factors that moderate the impact that images of muscular men have on males. It has been found that people involved in some sort of activity that was aimed at changing body shape (i.e. lifting weights, running) were less negatively affected by images of muscular men than those who were not actively trying to change their bodies (Halliwell et al., 2007). It could be argued that the results of the Halliwell et al. (2007) study and the Arbour and Martin Ginis (2006) study reaches the same conclusion: people who are actively changing their body shape could be happier with their muscles. In contrast to these findings, an earlier study conducted in Australia found that people who exercised were more negatively affected in terms of body satisfaction when viewing media images of the male body shape, than those who were not exercising (Fawkner and McMurray, 2002). This could be because differences in methodology; Fawkner and McMurray (2002) used a qualitative methodology whereas Halliwell et al. (2007) and Arbour and Martin Ginis (2006) both used quantitative designs. The more in depth and context specific study by Fawkner and McMurray (2002) may not be able to be generalised as easily as the more rigid designs of Halliwell et al. (2007) and Arbour and Martin Ginis (2006). While most of the research conducted uses print images as visuals of ideal male bodies, Agliata and Tanteff-Dunn (2004) used TV advertisements for both test and control subjects, and found that this form of media also has detrimental effects on the body images of the males in the test group compared to the control group.

Jonason et al. (2009) examined the impact of other variables on the levels of satisfaction males had with their body. They found

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