

“The Very Heavy Burden”: A Mixed Methods Investigation of Media and Masculinity Effects on Male Body Dissatisfaction.

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Introduction: Body dissatisfaction is defined as an overall negative attitude towards your physical appearance. Research in the past have focussed on body dissatisfaction and its detrimental consequences in females. Now recent studies have shown body image issues in males have grown considerably over the last decade. The experience of body dissatisfaction, in particular, is known to contribute to eating disorders, depression, and anxiety in males if left untreated.

Context and Research Aims: Male body image is a new focus in psychological research, so the causes are yet to be determined. However, there is strong support that objectifying images (of lean, muscular males or slender males) in the media are major influences of male body image. Also, many studies have demonstrated how lean, muscular males are seen as the physical epitome of the “ideal man”. However, no studies to date have accounted for masculinity’s influence over men’s body image. Therefore this study was constructed to find out whether (a) media representations of males affect body dissatisfaction and self-esteem, and; (b) if masculinity and conformity to media ideals regulate media’s influence on male body dissatisfaction and self-esteem.

Methodology: This research focussed on Australian males aged 18-35 years old. During the study participants were asked to complete questionnaires that measured their self-esteem, adherence to masculine norms, conformity to media, and body dissatisfaction. There were also additional written-answer questions ascertaining to body image and masculinity. The participants were shown one of three types of images: shirtless lean and muscular males, slender males, and geographical landscapes. The responses for the landscape images were used as a baseline comparison for the other two groups. Responses to the questionnaires were scored and calculated with statistical analyses. Written responses were analysed using a qualitative technique known as thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results: Exposure to images of lean, muscular males significantly increased body dissatisfaction in male participants, but did not effect their self-esteem. Exposure to images of slender males significantly decreased self-esteem, but did not change levels of body dissatisfaction. Furthermore, adherence to masculine norms had a small impact on male body dissatisfaction. But conformity to media ideals accounted for the increases in body dissatisfaction in our male participants.

Implications: Findings from this research encourages updating current scales used to diagnose eating disorders and identify body dissatisfaction in males. Additional qualitative research is required to investigate a possible need to redefine masculine “characteristics”. It is also imperative for researchers to understand how current masculine norms effect men’s willingness to seek help, not only with body dissatisfaction, but with other physical and mental health issues. Furthermore, it aims to encourage males to become educated on how to critically engage in media.