A Review of Men’s Body Image Literature: What We Know, and Need to Know

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Abstract In the contemporary world, fashionable bodies are socially constructed in light of current idealized images. Media portrayal of such images can have negative health implications. This issue has long been problematic for women. Nowadays, men are subject to more scrutiny regarding their bodies, although male body image has been studied far less than female body image. In this position paper based on a review of the major studies that have been conducted on men and body image, we summarize the findings from these state-of-the-art studies that have been recently published in academic journals. Three themes related to male body image were extracted: socio-cultural ideals, masculinity, and minority men. This study adds to the literature that it demonstrates that men experience and view their bodies differently from women, though some behaviors, such as disordered eating, are similar. Other behaviors, such as the drive for masculinity, are couched in the context of the social construction of gender and power. Most of the studies were done on white, heterosexual populations of young men, and nearly all used quantitative research methods. Little research has been conducted on ethnic and sexual minorities. We conclude with a discussion of what we need to know, and to that end, we suggest future avenues of research.

Key words body image, men, masculinity, masculinity, idealized images

Introduction

In the contemporary world, men are now subject to increased importance placed upon their appearances. In industrialized societies, the fashionable male body is well-dressed, and is literally constructed in light of the idealized images operant in culture. In the field of fashion studies, men’s fashion became a hot topic by the late 2000s, with the publication of two books on men’s fashion (Reilly and Cosbey, 2008, and McNeil and Karaminas, 2009) and writings in the popular press on the ‘metrosexual’ look (Kaiser, 2012). The media’s portrayal and promotion of unrealistic idealized images have negative health implications, such as eating and exercise disorders, an issue that has long been problematic for women.

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Non-verbal communication has become increasingly important in the contemporary world. While women’s bodies have been extensively studied, male bodies have been relatively neglected as sites of cultural analysis. Long used to exploiting idealized images for women, the media have now turned to openly promoting idealized images for men. In 1983, non-verbal communication accounted for 35 per cent of communication (Birdwhistell, 1983), while 30 years later it accounts for up to 90 per cent of communication in inter-personal communications and negotiations (U.S. Department of Defense 2012). Nemeroff, Stein, Diehl, and Smolak (1994) suggest that males may be receiving increasing media messages regarding dieting, the ideal of muscularity, and cosmetic surgery as an option for achieving the idealized image. While all of these behaviors could have implications for physical and mental health, they also drive marketing strategies and profitability in the cosmetic, apparel, and weight loss industries.

The physical body is an integral component of men’s appearance, and there is nothing more gendered than the dressed body. As underpinnings (undergarments) were used to provide the shape for outer-garments in the past, now in the contemporary era, the body itself is the underpinning that gives shape to fashion. Today, the basis of male fashion is the male body itself. Dress, and by extension the body, are sites where different symbolic meanings are constructed and contested. It is within and through the body that much of the social construction of masculinity takes place. At the micro-sociological level, the body is used to manufacture and negotiate the self within a socio-cultural context. Underlying these idealized images, but somewhat neglected in academic discourse, is the male body. The cultural ideal for body shape for men continues to favor athletic, V-shaped muscular men, whereas the ideal for women continues to be slender (Rosen and Gross 1987; Freson and Arthur 2008). Whereas women’s bodies have been seen as malleable and change to fit the styles of the times, it is interesting to note that the ideal body for men continues to resemble the muscular ideal from Greek times (Bensen and Esten 1996; Eicher, Evenson and Lutz 2000).

For males, body image is linked to sexuality, conformity, identity, and peer hierarchy with muscularity as the underlying foundation. Within western culture, the term masculinity has been used interchangeably with muscularity and is thought to represent strength, power, respect, threat, admiration, and sexual virility. Increased numbers of messages concerning physical activity and health have been found in popular men’s magazines. Extreme images of muscularity and fitness have been popularized by magazines such as Men’s Health, Maxim, and Men’s Fitness. Even brief exposure to these types of images has been shown to reduce self-esteem and increase body dissatisfaction in men (Arthur, Freson and Hayden 2006; Freson and Arthur 2008). The male body is now used to sell products as vigorously as women’s bodies have been. In fact, according to Lonngvist (2014), male fashion has been eroticized and fashion has transformed men’s power by exploiting the male body.

Cultural, societal and psychological forces shape the industrialized world’s current obsession with idealized images. Scholars of dress and those in the fields of sociology, psychology, anthropology, and gender studies have examined idealized images with regard to women’s bodies, but much less so with regard to men’s body images. Because idealized images confine and restrict men’s behavior through social control and the social construction of masculinity, body image issues can lead to behaviors that put