

## THE IDEALIZED MALE BODY: THE EFFECT OF MEDIA IMAGES ON MEN AND BOYS

Today's children and youth are exposed to an overwhelming number of media sources on a daily basis. Recent U.S. statistics show that youth spend more than 7 hours a day accessing some form of media (Rideout, Foehr & Roberts, 2010). A significant proportion of images in the media involve some element of sexuality and present idealized body images for both males and females. Research on the sexualization of young women in the media has highlighted the effects that such messages have on the mental and physical health of women and girls. Boys and young men are also influenced by sexualized images and messages conveyed by various media sources. Studies are beginning to explore the particular challenges that young men face when presented with daily media messages about the ideal male body and appearance. In this issue of Check the Research, some of these recent studies about male body image and the media will be discussed.

## SEXUALIZATION OF YOUNG MEN AND WOMEN

When individuals are constantly presented with idealized body images and often unattainable standards of attractiveness, they may come to view themselves as objects to be admired and used by others, rather than as individuals with unique interests, abilities and drives. With this process of sexualization, sexual appeal and behaviour become the defining features of a person's identity and self-worth.

### SEXUALIZATION OCCURS WHEN:

- A person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behaviour, to the exclusion of other characteristics.
- A person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness...with being sexy.
- A person is sexually objectified – that is, made into a thing for others' sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making; and/or sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person.

Excerpted from American Psychological Association. *The Sexualization of Girls*, 2007.  
Accessed online July 19, 2013, <http://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report.aspx>

Research has shown that the sexualization of girls in the media may result in body dissatisfaction, low self esteem, self-objectification, and potentially dangerous efforts to achieve a desired body image such as disordered eating and extreme exercise regimes (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2013). Adolescent boys are typically concerned with muscle development and leanness while girls tend to be concerned with thinness and body shape. Some researchers have noted that even though young men are subject to the effects of media sexualization, society does not condone overt efforts on the part of males to achieve a desired body image. While girls and women are expected to shop, diet and follow various personal grooming regimes, men are expected to achieve an attractive and muscular body with a practical approach that generally includes fitness and good nutrition. Since emotion is equated with femininity, men are not encouraged to express concern or anxiety related to body dissatisfaction. This puts an additional emotional strain on young men as they try to achieve the body and appearance that society deems masculine and attractive (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2013). Just as young women may turn to unhealthy ways of achieving a desired body image, young men may also resort to the use of drugs, excessive exercise and restricted food intake in their quest for an ideal masculine body.



“...AS A RESULT OF MEDIA-INDUCED APPEARANCE PRESSURE, A BOY MAY INCREASINGLY MONITOR HIS OWN BODY AND BECOME DISSATISFIED WITH HIS APPEARANCE, WITHOUT HAVING THE OPPORTUNITY TO SHARE THESE FEELINGS WITH HIS PARENTS OR FRIENDS, BECAUSE THE SAME MEDIA HAVE TAUGHT HIM THAT TALKING ABOUT EMOTIONS IS TABOO.”

(Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2013, p.19)

## RESEARCH ON MEDIA AND BODY IMAGE

A recent study of students (16-19 years) at two Ontario high schools explored the effect that media had on attitudes towards personal body image (Spurr, Berry & Walker, 2013). A total of 28 female students and 18 male students attended focus groups and were asked questions about personal well-being, aspects of a healthy body, and media influences on body image. Both male and female participants stated that they felt pressured to conform to idealized body images as presented in the media. While male participants generally did not express as extreme negative body image views as did female participants, they did recognize that the media presented idealized images that were difficult to attain for most men. Boys commented that idealized body images in the media had the same affect on boys as they did on girls. For example, such images made them feel inadequate and created a desire to attain the desired body image, even if it involved potentially dangerous behaviour such as extreme dieting and exercising and using steroids.

“...MEDIA AFFECTS BOYS THE SAME WAY IT AFFECTS OTHER PEOPLE TOO. THEY SEE THAT FIGURE ON TV OF BEING TONED AND MUSCULAR AND WHATEVER, AND THEY WANT TO BE LIKE THAT...THEN THEY CAN DO ANYTHING FROM WORKING OUT AND GETTING TONED AND STUFF, OR ELSE THEY CAN DO ANYTHING FROM POPPING DRUGS TO MAKE THEMSELVES BIGGER.”

(Male participant cited in Spurr, Berry & Walker, 2013, p. 27)

## SELF-OBJECTIFICATION

The concept of self-objectification is often discussed in research related to the effects of media on body image. Self-objectification refers to the tendency to view one's body from the perspective of another person. When self-objectification occurs, individuals may constantly evaluate and check their appearance and be overly concerned about how others may view them. A review of the research has shown that a high level of self-objectification among women corresponds with higher levels of depression, eating disorders and sexual dysfunction (Choma, Visser, Pozzebon, Bogaert, Busseri & Sadava, 2010). A recent study of 911 adolescent boys (mean age 15.4 years) focused on self-objectification among male participants when exposed to sexualized content in the media (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2013). Students from 13 schools in Belgium completed a written survey that included questions related to self-objectification, body surveillance, and the internalization of appearance ideals. The participants' use of sexualized media was also measured. The study found a link between the viewing of sexualized TV and pornographic websites and the acceptance and internalization of body ideals. As well, the researchers concluded that the more pornographic material viewed the greater the rates of self-objectification and body surveillance.



"...THE PERVASIVE FOCUS ON SEXUALIZED BODY PARTS MAY MAKE YOUNG DEVELOPING BOYS MORE CONSCIOUS ABOUT THE SEXUAL ATTRACTIVENESS/ UNATTRACTIVENESS OF THEIR OWN BODY, IMPLYING AN INCREASED TENDENCY TO EVALUATE THEIR BODY THROUGH THE EYES OF AN OBSERVER."

(Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2013, p. 17)

## IDEALIZED IMAGES OF MUSCULAR MALE BODIES

As previously noted, research suggests that an internalization of unrealistic portrayals of women's bodies may lead women to experience shame, body dissatisfaction, and self-objectification. A study by Canadian researchers Michaels, Parent and Moradi (2013) considered whether media images of idealized muscular male bodies had a similar impact on men. The authors also speculated that sexual minority men might be particularly susceptible to idealized body images. In this study of 140 undergraduate students, aged 18 to 51 years, participants were randomly assigned to either an experimental or control group. The sample included men who identified as exclusively heterosexual/straight (64%), exclusively homosexual/gay (23%), mostly homosexual/gay (9%), mostly heterosexual/straight (4%) and bisexual (1%).

Michaels, Parent and Moradi (2013) showed an experimental group images of muscular men in fitness magazines while members of a control group were shown images from science magazines such as robots, animals, landscapes. After viewing the images and completing some interactive tasks associated with them, participants completed study measures related to body image, drive for masculinity, self-objectification, body image anxiety, and sexual minority status. Michaels, Parent and Moradi found no difference between the two groups in their reporting of negative body image measures, thus indicating that short-term exposure to muscularity-idealizing images did not appear to lead to a statistically significant increase in the reported incidence of shame, anxiety, and self-objectification. However, when results for straight and gay men were compared, there was some indication that the two groups differed in terms of their reaction to idealized body images. Gay men showed a slightly higher incidence of body dissatisfaction and anxiety, but both gay and straight men were similar in terms of their drive for muscularity and their reporting of body shame.

Michaels, Parent and Moradi note that future research should include a sample of a more diverse group in terms of age and racial background. As well, the authors recognize that this study looked at short-term exposure to media and therefore did not consider the cumulative effects of long-term exposure to idealized body image messages. The authors also raise an interesting question as to whether the theory of objectification is equally valid for exploring the impact of media images on men as it has been when considering the effect of idealized body images on women. They note that images of muscular male bodies suggest strength and personal power as opposed to the messages of weakness and passivity that images of thin female bodies convey. While men may feel pressured to achieve unrealistic body images, these images generally suggest power and control in contrast to idealized images of women that suggest objectification and lack of personal agency (Michaels, Parent & Moradi, 2013).



## WHAT'S THE TAKE HOME MESSAGE?

Both men and women are subject to idealized and sexualized images in the media on a daily basis. This constant barrage of media presents unrealistic and often unattainable body images. The quest to attain idealized body images may lead to negative health consequences for both men and women, such as eating disorders, drug use and excessive exercise regimes. Studies of girls and women have shown that exposure to sexualized media images of women may result in low self-esteem and higher rates of body dissatisfaction, self-objectification, depression and sexual dysfunction. Boys and men are also subject to media pressure to conform to idealized images of muscular and lean bodies. Research on adolescent boys has suggested a link between viewing sexualized and pornographic material and increased rates of self-objectification and body surveillance. However, other studies have concluded that exposure to idealized body images in the media does not lead to significantly increased rates of objectification and body dissatisfaction among men. Societal expectations of men discourage displays of emotion which in turn may prevent them from expressing concern or anxiety about their body image. Researchers have noted that males are presented with idealized images that suggest power and control while women are presented with images of passivity and weakness.

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