

The media effect: male body image



Many men and women are in the midst of a fight for that “ perfect body” depicted by the media. In the UK the average man is 5ft 9ins tall and weighs 13. 2st while the average woman is 5ft 3½ins tall and weighs 11st (Whitlock, 2009). Researchers investigated the perception of ideal body weight in both men and women and found 38. 3% of normal weight women thought they were “ overweight,” while for men 32. 8% who were overweight thought they were “ about the right weight” or “ underweight.” (Christakis, 2003) Men tend to see themselves as being thinner than they actually are and have a desire to become bigger (Mintz, 1986). A study of around 1000 men found that over 50% were unhappy with their bodies. They were asked to draw their ideal body and researchers found that the body ideal was so muscular it could only be achieved by using steroids. (Croft, 2009). Some Psychologists speculated that media influences shaped people’s idea of body size by presenting thinner women and bulkier men than average. (McCreary & Sadava, Vol 2(2), Jul 2001). Studies by The Eating Disorders Association shows that around 1. 15 million men and women in the UK suffer from an eating disorder with 61% of women feeling fat compared to the media’s image of beautiful women. (National eating disorders Association). Another worrying thought is that most fashion models are thinner than 98% of American women (Smolak, 1996). As women are constantly surrounded by such models in TV adverts, magazines, news articles amongst other things; it’s not surprising that they find this level of thinness the ideal. Wiseman et al conducted a study on Cultural expectations of thinness in women. They found that the body measurements of playboy models for 1979 - 1988 were up to 19% below the average body weight for their age group. These findings were compared to an early study between 1959 and 1978 and found that

body measurements had decreased while there was a significant increase in diet and exercise articles during this period suggesting that there is a link between to the two. (Wiseman, 2006)

In studies on media and body image, most of the research is directed towards women. This means that men are often forgotten. As men are increasingly characterised by their body, I aim to highlight the effect of media on them. (Henwood, 2002), says that the media presents ideals for men as well as women. “ patterns of consumption, life style choices and media representation of men now often focus on men’s appearance and the male body...media advertising routinely depicts in positive ways youthful toned muscular male bodies.”

Psychology Today readers completed questionnaires on body image in 1993 and found “ The muscle-bound body build was highly rated by men, while women preferred a medium, lightly muscled build in their ideal males.” (Neimark, 2009) It seems that men are influenced by the media and not by real women.

The use of men in media may have a substantial effect on the way males view themselves. A muscular toned body is being used in much the same way as the thinness ideal for women. Men’s Health magazine is split into 6 subsections comprising of Fitness, Health, Weight loss, women, nutrition and grooming. This shows that males are being made to think that their weight is not ideal and to bulk up to look like the men portrayed in the magazines. On the men’s health website, there are links to “ a new way to

sculpt your abs” and “ build the body you want” on a back ground of a super toned male’s torso. (Moore, 2010)

Attitude is the best selling gay magazine in Britain and is also distributed worldwide. (Gilmour, 2008) In the latest issue of the magazine, Gareth Thomas, a gay rugby player, is the front cover. He has huge leg muscles, a big chest, and muscular arms, making it seem that this is what men like, and so the readers will strive to become like this. (Attitude Homepage, 2010)

It has been proposed that males have become more muscular and toned in an attempt to be more masculine. Soft and rounded is traditionally seen as the female ideal, while males are the opposite. So by working abdominal muscles to achieve the much desired “ six pack” is an attempt to hold this masculine ideal. (Henwood, 2002)

Studies into male body image have begun to show that men have as much displeasure with their shape as do women. This is not just found in the UK but all over the world. Pope et al (2000) found that men from France, US and Austria chose an ideal body shape that was heavier and more muscular than them. They also believed women preferred that body shape too. Women are willing to settle for their own mate’s appearance, accepting extra weight, even though their ideal male is different. Males are not as worried about being overweight as women, but more troubled by muscle mass, showing our cultural ideals of men. The muscly body build was preferred by men, while women liked a medium, lightly muscled build in their ideal males. (Neimark, 2009)

The old ideal of “maleness” has been replaced. The New York Times writer Natalie Angier says that boys of school age are now being diagnosed of hyperactivity and having learning problems just by being a typical male. So as the behavioural ideal has changed so has the ideal male body. It is more muscular but also in contradiction, quite feminine. Schwartz conducts studies in America on gay men he says that the male body “clean skinned...No longer stiff and upright but sinuous” representing the feminine side. (Blashill & Vander Wala, 2009)

Men are now exercising more than ever with around 8.5 million having a gym membership. The American Sports Data company found that those men with memberships spend a mean of 90.8 days a year in a gym. This could be linked to males trying to become what they believe women want, judging by how the average male is portrayed in the media.

The gender gap in the way the media present the body has closed. The unattainable female bodies shown now have a male equivalent, the V shaped physiques of male models everywhere in today's media. George Gerbner the founder of the Cultivation Theory, which looks at whether the media has a long term effect on audiences, such as body image, said that what we see on TV and in magazines eventually becomes our standard of reality and desire. (Seed, 2006)

Schooler and Ward measured the male real body discomfort due to media consumption. They found that by watching television it made men feel uncomfortable with their bodies. “People see the same images over and over and start to believe it's a version of reality, if those bodies are real and

that's possible, but you can't attain it, how can you not feel bad about your own body?"

Men's bodies are being used more often to sell products. Dolce and Gabbana's (<http://amandagore.files.wordpress.com/2009/01/dg-ad.jpg>) ad contains 4 males with the V shaped body that has become so popular today. The male modelling for Jean Paul Gaultier in the advert for aftershave has a body most men are striving to achieve. He has very muscular figure and is topless in the picture. (<http://www.mimifroufrou.com/scentedsalamander/images/Le-Male-2009-Billboard-B.jpg>). Men are spending more time and money on fragrances, facial creams and hair products. By presenting males in the media this way to sell products, males may believe if they take more care with their skin and buy all this products they will achieve the look of the airbrushed models. In this sense the media is endangering men's health by promoting these images, but will not stop willingly as the beauty industry has such high revenue.

The big question is whether the media and our culture are truly to blame. Jeffrey Yang from Harvard University looked at the differences in body image in men from the west (Europe and America) against men from Asian countries. He found that men in Taiwan were satisfied with their bodies and had a lower use of steroids compared to men in the West. Also, unlike in the west, there were no Taiwanese magazines for fitness or bodybuilding. (Cromie, 2005) This seems to suggest that the media are to blame as there were no pictures of super fit males in magazines promoting exercise, and fewer men used drugs to achieve the figure desired. If someone has a poor

body image, they might take steps to change their body, even if it taking potentially harmful substances.

Anabolic Steroids are described as being “ any of a group of synthetic steroids or hormones used to stimulate muscle and bone growth; sometimes used illicitly by athletes to increase their strength” by steroid. com (<http://www. steroid. com/drugprof. php>)

Anabolic steroid abuse has been associated with a lot of side effects. Examples include acne, and breast development in males, which although unsightly are not severe. However other consequences of taking steroids can be life threatening such as heart attacks due to high cholesterol levels and liver cancer (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2006). Those who inject the drug also risk getting HIV (InfoFacts: Steroids (Anabolic-Androgenic), 2008). Is taking steroids to get a hench body worth it?

The U. S. Census Bureau says there is a total population of around 301 million people. The National Centre for Education Statistics believes that of this 301 million, 16. 5 million are school children between 9th and 12th grade. The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) says the percentage of students who admit to a lifetime steroid use was 4%. This means there’s an estimated 660, 000 students (14 to 17 years of age) who’ve admitted to steroid use. (ASA) Not to mention those unreported. This is a huge figure. Although this doesn’t make a direct link with steroid abuse and the media, it can be inferred that these teenagers are taking steroids to get the body of the media male. Boys and men who are not happy with their

body have been found to try and put weight in the form of muscle. (McReary & Sasse, 2000) And steroids do this.

The media's depiction of what is "normal" keeps getting for women and more muscular for men. Female models 25 years ago weighed only 8% less than average; currently the figures stand at around 23%. Male models are seeing similar things. In the past 25 years the media male has lost 12lb of fat but put on 27lb of muscle. (Body Image Website)

With these ideal bodies represented in the media, it's not surprising that males and females are turning to extreme measures to deal with their bodies. According to the ladies room, only 5% of women have the right genes to ever attain the Barbie shape. The body ideal for men is also almost unachievable, without illegal steroids and there is a limit to how much muscle a man can get naturally. (Tart, 2009)

Although there is not a direct link between male's body image and the media, it is implicated in many previous studies. Further research would be beneficial.