

The Effects of Muscular Images in Men's Fitness magazineon
College-aged Men's Body Satisfaction

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between muscular images in Men's Fitness magazine and the body satisfaction of college-age men. For decades, scholars and scientists have studied and exposed how the media affects women's perceptions on the ideal body type, and how it has affected women's body satisfaction. The depth of research in this area, sadly, is not matched in researching how the ideal male body image fed to consumers by the media affects men's body satisfaction. This study examines themes of masculinity, as well as several underreported effects of media on men. This study's purpose was to discover if exposure to idealized images of the male body in Men's Fitness magazine decreases college-age male's overall body satisfaction. After analysis of an online survey with 41 participants, and comparison to previous research completed by several researchers including Hargreaves and Tiggemann (2009), it was concluded that there was no evidence that exposure to these images affected the participant's overall body satisfaction.

Keywords: ideal body image, male body satisfaction, social comparison theory, themes of masculinity

Effects of Muscular Images on College-aged Men's Body Satisfaction

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between Men's Fitness magazine, published by American Media, Incorporated, and men's body satisfaction. Specifically, this research investigates relationship between the depictions of men within Men's Fitness magazine and how these depictions effect college-aged men's body satisfaction. In this introduction, a rationale for the research project is provided, as well as a review of the current literature relevant to the issue. The literature review provides information on how the media affects young adult's body satisfaction mentally and physically, especially those in Men's Fitness. Additionally, the literature review includes information on several themes that support this study: masculinity, body anxiety and body image distortion; as well as information on our body image and fitness-obsessed culture. Studying how images in Men's Fitness magazine affect young men both physically and mentally will help to shed light on a subject that hasn't been a popular research topic in the past and help us as a culture begin to right the wrongs we have made so that men no longer have to feel that they must 'measure up' to these Adonis-like figures.

Research Problem

For decades, scholars and scientists have studied and exposed how the media affects women's perceptions on the ideal body type for their gender. In studies of women, it was found that they paid attention more to the models than the products advertised (Bissell & Rask, 2010). As important as it is for this information to be public knowledge, I feel that the same principle is under-researched in the opposite gender.

Men are not as frequently studied, yet they face a very similar issue as women do. This issue tends to be under-diagnosed, or ignored all together. Yu, Damhort, & Russell (2011) found

that a negative impact of muscular media images on college-aged men has, in fact, been found (p.61).

In most fitness magazines, men are depicted as these extremely fit, or ‘ripped’, individuals. Men’s Fitness magazine is littered with depictions of Adonis-like men with rippling abdominal muscles and extremely defined, muscular arms. These male models are used in advertisements for new workout routines or equipment promising amazing results, meal substitutes and supplements, as well as workout wear. These models are used so that consumers will purchase or use the product due in an attempt to emulate the model selling the product. Men in ‘real life’ don’t look like a beef-cake, Greek God specimen. The average man on the street may have some muscle definition, but never like some of these magazines depict. In reality, men like this are few and far between. These unrealistic depictions are what make men feel inadequate and like they need to change their appearance.

This research seeks to examine a perceived correlation between a change in college-aged men’s body satisfaction and exposure to images from Men’s Fitness magazine. Print media is not something that will go out of style soon, especially in that all print media is online as well. Due to this, it is of the utmost importance to learn how it affects young men’s body satisfaction to help the next generation be happier and healthier.

LiteratureReview

Media, culture and body satisfaction

We live in a nation that is constantly focused on Hollywood starlets, movie-stars, music moguls, models, and athletes. Due to their fame, these people are always in the spotlight and try to diet and stay in the best of shape so that there is no room for ridicule in the public eye. It is

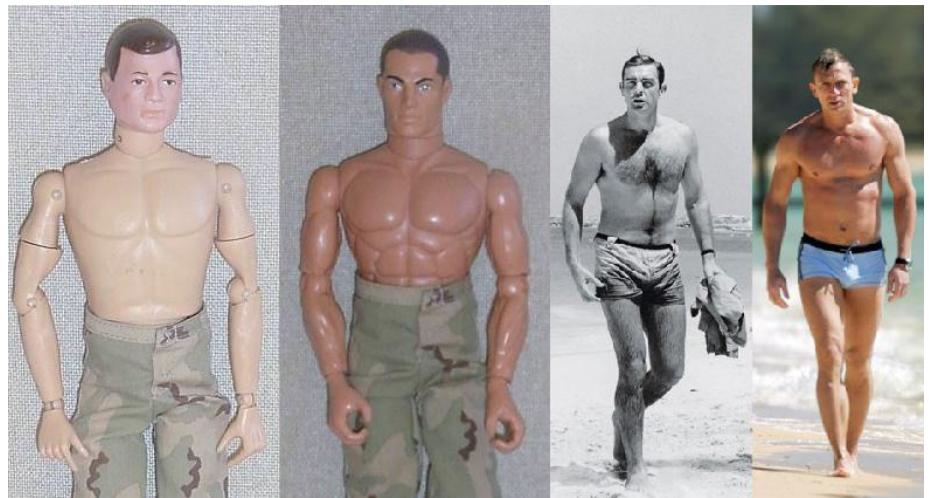
because of the advertising industry and media that Americans value body image and beauty to the extent they do; what these same Americans may not realize, is that the advertising industry and media rarely portray realistic, or even attainable, body images (Hill, 2009). Computer manipulation is used in almost all photographs that go into media. It is because of this that young adults have such a desire to be thin, fit, and ‘flawless’, just like the cover models on their favorite magazine.

Masculinity

Masculinity is the biggest overall theme in this study. Clinical sexologist, Michael Sand, Ph.D stated, “The media stereotype is that men are simple, testosterone-fueled creatures who are interested primarily in power, sexual conquest and success” (Melby, 2010, p.1). That is the media stereotype of the gender, but what is it really? Masculinity has many aspects that make it a multi-dimensional theme.

definition. How do you define masculinity? G. I. Joe and James Bond have long helped to define what it means to be a man, both in actions and looks, for teenage and adolescent boys for decades. Both of these characters have changed dramatically from the 1960s to the 2000s.

In an article in *Details* magazine by Ashlock et. al. (2011), a side by side comparison of Sean Connery and Daniel Craig shows a change in the icons legendary physique. The lean, hairy, young Connery in 1965’s *Thunderball* is a far cry from 2006’s *Casino*



Royal film in which a built, muscularly-defined, smooth-skinned Craig played the character of Agent 007 (p.98). This change is also seen in G.I. Joe action figures between the same years (Johnson, McCreary & Mills, 2007, p. 96). Both male characters became more chiseled, muscular, and less hairy. On that note, according to a 2009 study at the University of South Florida found that 80% of a 360-participant study had removed body hair (Ashlock et. al., 2011, p. 94).

These noticeable changes to two iconic masculine characters bring a question to light: Has there been a change in how we define what it is to be a man? Parasecoli (2005) stated that masculinity is not something fixed or defined once and for all. The definition varies in time and place in different environments (p. 18). The only constant in the ever changing definition of masculinity is that men are constantly being held to a higher, more idealized standard of physical fitness.

In an article in *Contemporary Sexuality*, according to a study published in the Journal of Sexual Medicine in 2008, the top six constructs of masculinity according to the male participants are to be seen as a man of honor, to be in control of your own life, to have the respect of friends, having a good job, managing problems on your own, and having an active sex life (Melby, 2010, p.1). These constructs coincide almost exactly with Julia Wood's themes of masculinity.

Five themes. In Julia T. Wood's (2003) book, *Gendered lives: Communication, gender, and culture*, there are five different themes of masculinity (p.).

Don't be female. The first of Wood's themes of masculinity is don't be female. This is a theme that resonates with most young men because of their childhood and how the media portrays the childhood of boys. If you don't step up to the fight on the playground, if you hang out with girls, if you cried when you skinned your knee as a young boy, you probably heard from

someone “Don’t be such a girl!” Early in life, boys are taught not to act like girls. This means that they don’t disclose their feelings, they don’t cry, and they are always confident. This practice also teaches younger boys that girls their age are the inferior gender. Any boy that shows sensitivity ‘like a girl’ is ridiculed and reduced to being referred to as a sissy and being no better than a girl. This practice obviously is embarrassing and makes that young man strive to be a masculine, muscular manly man.

Be successful. Our manly role-models G.I. Joe and James Bond also had very good jobs. G. I. Joe was a military man, and Mr. Bond was a very highly trained, suave, sophisticated special agent. Both of these jobs are not for the faint of heart and are seen as very masculine professions. The second theme of masculinity according to Wood (2003) is to be successful. Men are expected to be the primary breadwinner and may feel that they won’t be respected if they choose to let their wives take that role. Being a stay-at-home dad, Mr. Nanny type isn’t the career most men dream about having. Young boys want to be policemen, firefighters, professional wrestlers; anything with drama and excitement tends to be at the top of the list.

Be aggressive. Men are also supposed to be take charge in their careers and lives. The third theme is to be aggressive. Boy’s or men’s sports are rougher than the female equivalent (men’s/women’s hockey), encouraging them to be more aggressive and confrontational. Girls often will talk about each other behind their backs stating things like “she’s such a guy” when a girl doesn’t mind playing a rough sport or doing something physically exhausting; for women, they are taught that they belong on the sidelines. This theme is also depicted in crime dramas on television. When women officers use force, it’s usually with a firearm; men may begin with a firearm, but it typically ends up in a chase that ends in a physical confrontation. Being aggressive is also depicted in weightlifting and fitness magazines. Men are supposed to work out to obtain a

physique that would scare a lesser man away. Weightlifting magazines can be extremely intimidating to some men and in most cases these images are not achievable by the average human male.

Be sexual. “Men adhere to the masculine ideal in different ways, such as participating in sports, drinking heavily, or pursuing women for sexual purposes” (Prohaska & Gailey, 2010, p. 13). The fourth theme of masculinity is being sexual. “One way for men to achieve status in their peer groups is by engaging in sexual acts with numerous women” (p. 15). Sex is supposed to not be an emotional act, but a conquest. Women are something to be conquered and collected to give men their sexuality (p. 16). We see this play out in movies and television shows all of the time (Look at the character of Barney played by Neil Patrick Harris on the popular television show, *How I Met Your Mother*), this also plays out in advertisements.

Be self-reliant. The final theme is that men must be self-reliant. They shouldn’t have to rely on anyone but themselves, ever. They are expected to be emotionally controlled and not let their feelings control them, like women sometimes do. If men are seen as emotionally controlled or like they rely on others to do things for them they are viewed as being needy, a trait that is used to sometimes describe women.

Body anxiety

The effects of exposure to the media’s ideal body type is more than just skin deep. For decades, women’s body dissatisfaction has been studied, and according to Hesse-Biber (2007), conservative estimates put the number of young women with eating disorders between 5 and 10 million (p.15). Diedrichs & Lee (2010) state that relatively little research has investigated the impact of exposure to muscular male media images on men, and none has examined their impact on women. Some studies have found no effect on young men’s weight satisfaction (Hargreaves

& Tiggemann, 2009), drive for muscularity, or body self-consciousness, a recent meta-analysis of 25 correlation and experimental studies found that, on average, exposure to muscular models is associated with lower body satisfaction and body esteem among young men (p.219). These findings coincide with what I hope to find in my analysis of college males. According to Ashlock et. al. (2011), the number of men having cosmetic surgery from 1997 and 2011 jumped an astounding 88% (p.96). This increase suggests that men do want to change their physiques in order to fill the body that the media shows us we must be. The media, print or digital, shows an idealized body that, most of the time, no normal human being is able to achieve. Computers are used to distort and ‘perfect’ the image for advertisements and magazine spreads; In some cases, to such an extent that it may not be medically possible for a human-being to look like that computer-corrected image.

Body image distortion

In a study by Diedrichs & Lee (2010), it was found that men who were exposed to advertisements featuring average-slim and average-large models reported a significantly higher positive body image. This could correlate with the fact that men feel more confident around other men that look close to what they look like. Similarly, Hargreaves & Tiggemann (2009) found that men who viewed television commercials depicting the muscular ideal felt significantly less physically attractive and less satisfied with their muscle shape and size. In my study, I will focus on one magazine (Men’s Fitness) and all depictions of men on the cover and beyond, whether it’s in an advertisement or a model used in an article. Some men don’t feel this way about all advertisements. In fact, there are two major body image issues that affect men due to this.

The adonis complex. Fabio Parasecoli discussed in his article, “*Feeding Hard Bodies*” that the enthrallment with the body image, previously imposed mostly on women, is now

becoming a common feature in masculine practices and identification processes. It has gotten so bad that the term “the Adonis complex” has been coined, and refers to the more obsessive forms of this phenomenon (2005). The Adonis complex uses the Greek god of beauty and desire, Adonis, to emphasize the issue that has risen. Pope et al. mentioned that Adonis is considered the ultimate in masculine beauty; that Adonis' body, according to sixteenth-century perspectives, was representative of the ultimate in male physique (2000).

Muscle dysmorphia. Another body issue that challenges men is Muscle Dysmorphia. Characterized by an unhealthy preoccupation and dissatisfaction with body size and muscularity, muscle dysmorphia is a common body image disturbance found among men (“Adonis complex”, 2008). Similar to how anorexia works in women, muscle dysmorphia works in men. They look in the mirror and see themselves as being unattractive and use that to fuel an unhealthy workout regimen or eating habit. The difference between the two illnesses is women see themselves as fatter, men see themselves as being more frail and non-muscular.

Theoretical Grounding

In analyzing how men’s level of body satisfaction changes due to exposure to fitness magazine depictions of men, it is appropriate to ground my research with Social Comparison Theory. Leon Festinger (1954), the theory’s creator, states that there is a drive in humans to evaluate his opinions and his abilities against others. He also states that the tendency to compare oneself with another person will decrease as the difference between his opinion or ability increases. If a man is comparing himself to another, he has the ability to max out the leg press machine but the man he is comparing himself to goes beyond the weight on another machine, He may stop his comparison because there is no longer one to be made.

Julia T. Wood (2010) defines social comparison theory in her book, *Interpersonal Communication: Everyday Encounters*, as the “process of assessing ourselves in relation to others in form judgments of our own talents, abilities, qualities, and so forth” (p. 53). Social Comparison theory claims that individuals always want to improve themselves, and will compare themselves to others to base their improvements off of something they aspire to be.

So the purpose of this study, I will direct my attention to only the following two aspects:

1. Individuals want to improve themselves

a. As humans, we are constantly looking to improve ourselves physically, mentally, and so forth. One of the top New Year’s resolutions every year is ‘to lose weight’ or ‘to tone up’ isn’t it? Using this study, I want to know whether or not these fitness magazine’s depictions of men make men want to improve themselves to measure up to the models they see in the media.

2. Individuals compare themselves to others

a. Naturally, as humans we also compare ourselves to others. Am I as strong as him? Am I as smart as them? In my survey, I plan on measuring whether or not individuals compare themselves to the models in the magazines.

Subconsciously, the reader analyzes the model without even realizing it. In doing this, they begin to measure themselves against airbrushed, oiled, unrealistic models in a variety of magazines. I am curious to find out how heavily this affects the personal outlook on the participants body satisfaction.

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated regarding this study:

H1: Exposure to muscular images in Men’s Fitness will change general body satisfaction.

H2: Increased identification with a “ripped ideal” will be positively correlated with increased dissatisfaction with one’s own body image.

H3: “Fit ideal”, or less muscularly defined, images of men will not change a man’s body satisfaction.

Method

For this study, I used a quantitative methodology and utilized a snowball sample targeting college-aged men between the ages of 18 and 26 years of age from two small, central Virginia colleges. A 27 question survey was created online for participants to take (see Appendix B). The survey included a 5-point Likert Body Assessment Scale (as cited in Lorenzen, Grieves, & Thomas, 2004) before and after as a pre-/post-test with 14 pictures from various covers of Men’s Fitness magazine in between to measure the change in the participant’s body satisfaction as well as expose participants to the average images used in the magazine. The survey also included questions regarding the participant’s current physique in regards to their ideal body, how often the participant reads Men’s Fitness magazine, whether the participant believes the media influenced their body image, sports participation, and how often the participant works out in a given week. The current physique in comparison to ideal body and the Body Assessment Scale are listed twice, once before the photo questions and once after the questions

The design is appropriate because I investigated a change in how men view their bodies after being exposed to the muscular images in Men’s Fitness magazine. The way I have designed my survey, I measured a change in the participant’s body satisfaction after being exposed to images in Men’s Fitness. They survey was 27 questions long, took roughly 10 minutes for participants to complete, and was distributed via emails, social media, and word of mouth. Two

questions were taken from a survey created by Pitura (2010), the Body Assessment Scale (as cited in Lorenzen, Grieves, and Thomas, 2004). All other survey questions were formulated by the author, in consultation with faculty research mentors.

Several variables were taken into account. These were the amount of exposure to fitness magazines, whether different levels of muscularity cause the participant to feel different in regards to what is a satisfactory body, perception of self compared to male models in Men's Fitness magazine.

Results

Data was analyzed using IBM SPSS data collection software with the assistance of the advising professor, Dr. William Stuart.

H1: Hypothesis 1 questioned if exposure to images from Men's Fitness magazine will result in a decrease in body satisfaction. Hypothesis 1 was tested using descriptives. This hypothesis was not supported, $N=38$, range on -18 → 20, $M=1.53$, max possible =125, min possible=25. Using Body Assessment Scale as a pre and post test, there was no change in participant's body satisfaction after viewing 14 cropped cover images from Men's Fitness magazine.

H2: Hypothesis 2 stated that increased identification with a "ripped ideal" will be correlated with an increased dissatisfaction with one's own body image. A Pearson product-moment correlation was performed to determine if increased identification with a "ripped ideal" will be correlated with an increased dissatisfaction with one's own body image. No statistically significant relationship was found $r(38)=.200$, $p<.228$. This hypothesis was not supported.

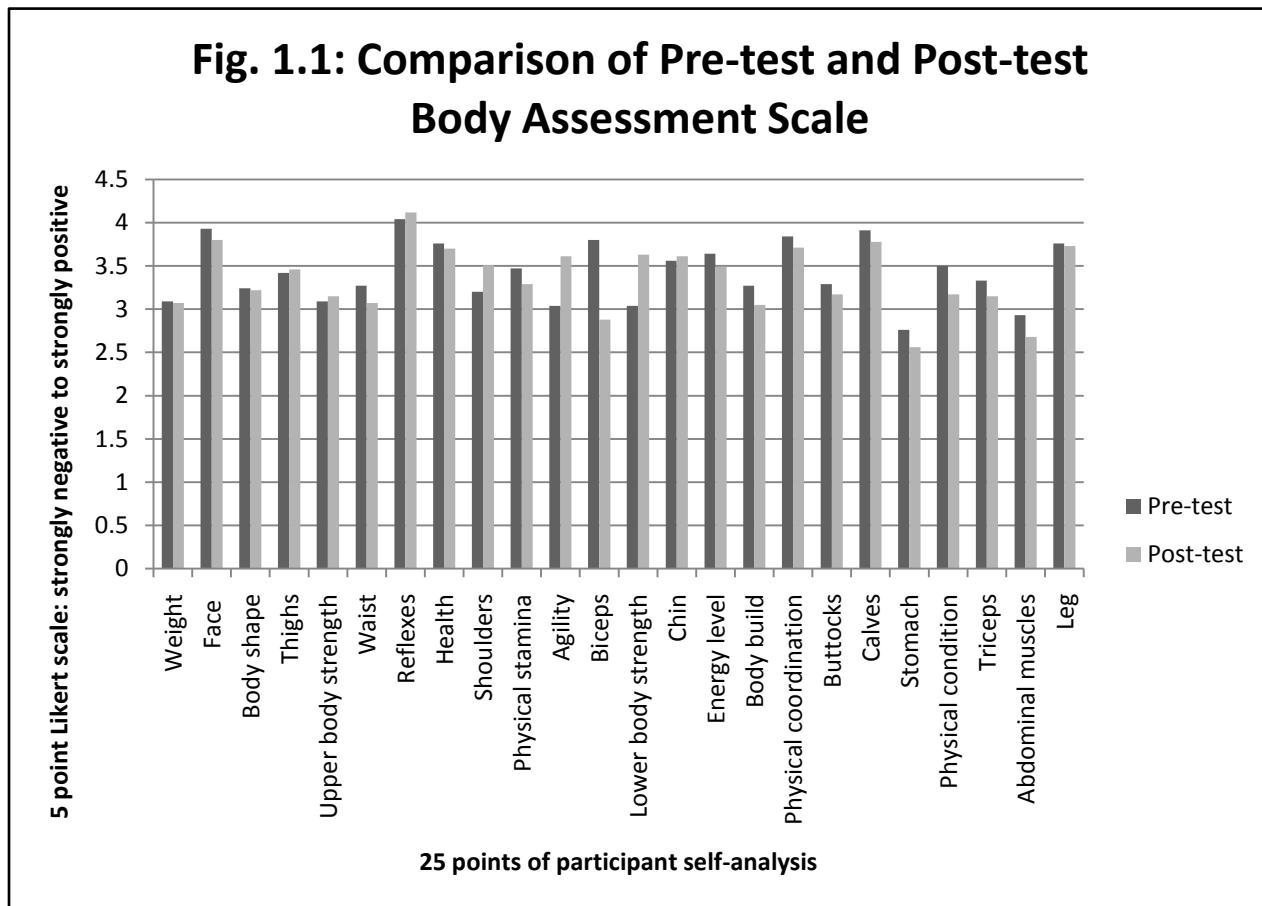
H3: Hypothesis 3 states that muscular ideal or muscular models that are wearing clothing will not change or alter one's body satisfaction. Using a Pearson product-moment correlation was performed to determine if muscular ideal or muscular models that are wearing clothing will not change or alter one's body satisfaction. There is no correlation between "fit ideal" score and a change in body satisfaction $r(38)=.065$, $p<.700$. This hypothesis was supported.

Discussion

The purpose of this investigation was to assess the impact of muscular ideal images in the media on college age males. My findings do not all correlate with those found in other similar studies. One such study was by Hargreaves and Tiggemann (2009) whose findings indicated that men who viewed commercials depicting the muscular or "ripped" ideal felt significantly less physically attractive and less satisfied with their muscle shape and size.

In hypothesis 1, I was surprised that my findings revealed that there was no change in participant's body satisfaction. In previous studies done, most listed at least some change in their participants' feelings, whether on their own body or psychologically (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2009;). While my study didn't dive into the psychological or emotional aspects, I did focus on their feelings on their own bodies. I used a body assessment scale twice, as a pre- and post-test. The body assessment scale is a 25 question assessment; each question is measured on a five point likert-type scale from strongly negative to strongly positive. I expected that after viewing the examples of images from Men's Fitness, participant's assessments of themselves would change.

As stated before, this did not occur (see Fig. 1.1 below). This finding is similar to Johnson,



McCreary & Mills (2007), who found in their study that viewing objectified images of males did not negatively affect the participants' ratings of their bodies (i.e. their desire to become more muscular).

For hypothesis 2, it was anticipated that it would correlate with the anticipated outcome from hypothesis 1. It was thought that the more 'ripped' the model in the picture was, the more the participant would begin to look at their bodies more critically, therefore ending in an overall dissatisfaction of their body. This finding gives me hope that collegiate men will continue to have stable mentalities when it comes to their body satisfaction and stay healthy. I do hope that if this study is repeated in the future, the results here are the same.

It was a nice surprise to have my third hypothesis supported by my data collected. Most of the models in this category wore tank tops or t-shirts in their picture leaving only their arms bare. Finding that this doesn't change the participants body satisfaction reveals to me that perhaps in order to see any change in men's body satisfaction you must show huge muscles like you would see in a body building competition. It also speaks to that seeing these pictures of generally fit-ideal models didn't make the participants feel too over-confidant in themselves either. They still have a line of what is too much and what is realistic.

In the fight against media and image, I believe my study shows that men are more grounded than women. While women become anxious and body conscious while viewing magazine model images, men don't seem to be affected. This is at least a point on the board for image in the fight, all men and women need to realize what is achievable and what is not. The gentlemen in these two small college communities seem to have their heads on their shoulders.

During analysis, Hypotheses 1-3 were examined for correlations to determine if a relationship existed between the level of muscularity and amount of body shown in the media and a college male's body satisfaction.

Limitations and Future Research

There were several limitations within this study. One of these was the amount of participants. Having under 50 participants, I feel my study struggled. My findings may have been different had I had 100+ participants. Another limitation is I fear that some participants may have clicked the same answer for all questions, this may have not been their accurate feeling, therefore not aiding my data. I feel there is still a lot to be discovered in this topic area. A study that uses more than 100 participants and perhaps organizes a guided survey may achieve better and more

accurate results. A third possible issue with the resulting numbers of participants in my survey may be the cropped cover images from Men's Fitness magazine. Sometimes your brain doesn't realize what it is looking at until you strip away the text, the face of the model, and the title of the magazine. The images used were of bare chested, defined males. I feel that this may have deterred some participants from taking the survey. A way I could have prevented this particular limitation is by maybe holding a guided survey, in which the researcher invited ten participants at a time into a room like they are performing a focus group. Instead of a focus group, the participants take the survey at a similar rate and the researcher explains as they go. Another limitation that was brought to my attention was that perhaps I should have focused on another publication that more of my participants had been exposed to. None of my participants had very heavy, constant exposure to the magazine.

It is my hope that this study, working with the few previous studies before it, continues to open the door to this under-researched area. There are plenty of aspects of this topic that have yet to be researched to the same depth of women's body satisfaction and the media. Future research could be completed in an attempt to answer such questions as: To what extent of physical fitness does a model have to be to persuade a participant that their body isn't up to par?; What age group of men is more susceptible to influence by the media?

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between Men's Fitness magazine, specifically muscular male images from the publication, and men's body satisfaction. This research identified the need for an investigation of the relationship between the depictions of men within Men's Fitness magazine and how these depictions effect college-aged men's body

satisfaction, the definition of masculinity, a review of the five themes of masculinity, reviews of health implications this can have on the population, a description of the theoretical grounding, an explanation of the methodology, results of the study performed, and a discussion of the findings in conjunction with what previous studies have found. It was found that there was no statistically significant correlation between exposure to Men's Fitness magazine and an overall decrease in body satisfaction. While there were several limitations, this study hopes to pave the way for more research to investigate this topic.

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Appendix A:Survey