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What Makes A Man?: An Alpha male's fight for masculinity against the media's muscular ideals

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What Makes A Man

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Honors Research Project

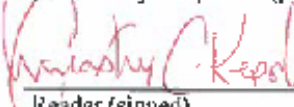
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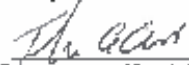
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Running header: WHAT MAKES A MAN

What makes a man?:

An Alpha male's fight for masculinity against the media's muscular ideals

Honors Project

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Abstract

Previous studies have focused heavily on media effects on women however growing trends in male ideals are finding that men are no longer static observers. The media constructs the ideal male body as lean, strong and muscular and men exposed to these idealized images may experience body dissatisfaction. Therefore, this project explores the effects of media ideals on men and the possible relationship between the media depictions of the muscular ideals and masculinity. Current research analysis shows that exposure to media ideals not only causes body dissatisfaction among men; trying to achieve the perfect body may result in unhealthy behaviors. For a feature story, in-depth interviews were conducted with six men and one woman ages 23 to 41. Results indicate the media's portrayal of men as being big and strong is generally believed to be the norm and that traditional male gender roles do, in fact, affect the way young men view themselves.

Keywords: Men, masculinity, media effects, male ideal, and self-esteem

What Makes A Man?:
An Alpha male's fight for masculinity against the media's muscular ideals

Introduction

Media, body image, and perceptions of attractiveness; growing trends suggest male body dissatisfaction. Currently, there are several studies on the media's effects on body image and the ideal body in regards to women. However, despite a growth in male body image trends, there are far fewer studies on its effects on men. Yet, there is growing research that has found men are influenced by the media's portrayal of the "muscular ideal" and thus, perceptions of their physical attractiveness and overall body dissatisfaction (Agliata & Tantleff-Dunn, 2004; Farquhar & Wasylikiw, 2007); Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2009; & Hobza, Walker, Yakushko, & Peugh 2007). Barlett, Vowels, and Saucier (2008), who conducted a meta-analysis of 25 studies, further agree that the media does focus on women's perceptions of body image more so than men's, although, their analysis found that men were just as likely to engage in the social comparison process when consuming media images, thus, leading to negative body satisfaction. Such comparisons have been found to have negative effects on persons high in social comparison, which is when people care than average about how other people see them or they see themselves (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2009). This may result in eating disorders, depression, low self-esteem, and body shame (Agliata & Tantleff-Dunn, 2004; Farquhar & Wasylikiw, 2007; Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2009; Hobza, Walker, Yakushko, & Peugh, 2007).

Based on the above studies, body image distortion and poor self-perception seem to be linked with mass media consumption. Therefore, the aim of this present study is to explore current research on media effects on self-image. More precisely, this study will explore the media influences on men.

Literature Review

Many studies show the influence of media on women, however, a growing interest in men and the effects of media consumption have researchers finding that there may not be as big a gender-gap as previously assumed. Researchers have begun to find that both men and women are affected by media influence. Within current research, there seems to be three categories of the media's influence: Influence of media and gender difference; influence of media images on men's self-images; and influence of media images and social comparison. This review will consider the above three categories in three sections in attempt to identify any possible behaviors likely to be found in men who compare themselves with media images of the "ideal male" and body dissatisfaction.

The first category to be discussed in this literature review is the influence of media on both men and women. Most past research has focused primarily on women, finding that women are more susceptible to media presentations. Furthermore, Hargreaves and Tiggemann (2009) found that women who spent as little as 30 minutes watching or viewing media that contained a woman with the thin ideal would suffer from poor perceptions of their own body image. Barlett, Vowels, and Saucier (2008) go on to find that a strong relationship exists between a woman's self-esteem and consuming the media's portrayal of the ideal woman. In other words, a woman may have low self-esteem and body dissatisfaction after viewing images of women who have a thin body type. However, today's research shows an increase in male subjects, thus, gender differences need further evaluation. Current research from Hargreaves and Tiggemann (2009) shows that men now desire the muscular body or the male ideal. Thus, both genders can be affected by the media's portrayal of the idyllic body, either the "thin ideal" for women or the "muscular ideal" for men (Agliata & Tantleff-Dunn, 2004; Barlett, Vowels, & Saucier, 2008;

Farquhar & Wasylkiw, 2007; Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2009; Hobza, Walker, Yakushko, & Peugh 2007).

The media often depicts women who have unrealistic body types as normal. The “thin ideal” consists of unrealistically thin models usually very scantily dressed (Barlett, Vowels, & Saucier, 2008). When an “average” woman views such unrealistic images, her views on realistic and unrealistic may become skewed. Several researchers have found that a woman may go to extremes to achieve what she feels is normal, if she is unable to obtain this ideal, she may become depressed or develop eating disorders (Barlett, Vowels, & Saucier, 2008; Farquhar & Wasylki, 2007; Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2009; Hobza, Walker, Yakushko, & Peugh, 2007). Yet Barlett, Vowels, and Saucier and Hargreaves and Tiggemann indicate these days men as well as women desire to be thin and toned. The male ideal is known as the “muscular ideal” (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2009). This seems to link the idea that male and female differences, although they still exist, may not be as far apart as previously thought (Barlett et al., 2008, & Hargreaves et al., 2009). Although evidence shows that the ideal body in the media affects both genders, there seems to be a difference in the way men and women are influenced (Hargreaves et al., 2009; Hobza et al, 2007).

Hobza et al., (2007) found that feelings of personal attraction are linked to media consumption and that women were more likely to form negative perceptions after viewing. On the other hand, Hargreaves and Tiggemann (2009) found that women are affected by images of the thin ideal in general, whereas, men seem affected more so by celebrity male ideal images. One possible solution may come in the form of awareness, as the media ideals for women are less likely to change (Hargreaves et al., 2009).

Since, there is a multitude of research on media effects on women, a way to find more information on gender similarities would be to conduct more studies on men and the effects of media (Agliata et al., 2004; Barlett et al., 2008; Farquhar et al., 2007; Hargreaves et al., 2009; Hobza et al., 2007).

In summary, current studies are showing that both women and men are just as susceptible to media effects and continue to place unrealistic expectations on themselves. As found within all research reviewed, placing unrealistic standards on one's body can have negative effects (Agliata et al., 2004; Barlett et al., 2008; Farquhar et al., 2007; Hargreaves et al., 2009; Hobza et al., 2007). Such effects include, but are not limited to, eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia, depression, low self-esteem, and body shame. Such comparisons can be a gateway to these as well as other unhealthy habits.

Research still finds that women desire the thin ideal. However, with the media's ever-expanding masculine and metro-sexual male model images, new trends show that men desire the muscular ideal body. Thus, the gap is closing between men and women (Agliata et al., 2004; Barlett et al., 2008; Farquhar et al., 2007; Hargreaves et al., 2009; Hobza et al., 2007).

The effects of media on men have been largely overlooked. This may be due to the social norm that men are supposed to be the providers, thus, any sign of appearing vulnerable may cause a man to feel emasculated (Barlett et al., 2008). Moreover, men are to be strong and masculine, and not to complain at the risk of appearing too feminine, as suggested in Barlett et al., (2008), and Hargreaves et al., (2009). The long-held belief that women are the only gender to be vulnerable to the mass media messages is becoming less accepted as more media utilize perfect male models that fit the muscular body type as stated by Hobza et al., (2007). Current research finds that men are just as susceptible to negative self-perceptions, emotional states, and

unhealthy behaviors as women are (Hobza et al., 2007). A review of literature appears to have two main sections. First, what the media portrays as the ideal male physique. Second, the negative behaviors that result when unrealistic standards are cannot be met.

Images of the perfect woman with the ideal body size and shape sets the standard for beauty that is familiar to most. However, new research has found what the media says is the ideal male body. As the media become more and more saturated with the perfect male who has a masculine, muscular physique, broad shoulders, and a hairless body, research shows men are quickly developing negative body images with high to unrealistic expectations (Hobza et al., 2007). Studies by Hobza, Walker, Yakushko, and Peugh (2007) and Barlett, Vowels, and Saucier (2008) support this as the ideal male body men strive to achieve.

Furthermore, two rigorous meta-analyses, which included 25 studies containing 93 effect sizes, conducted by Barlett, Vowels, and Saucier (2008) revealed that the media's pressure to conform to the muscular "ideal" had significant effects on male self-image. In other words, results showed the media's depictions of the male ideal body had a direct effect on men's body satisfaction, body esteem, self-esteem. Barlett et al., (2008) theorized that the ideal body images the media presents cause the consumer to form a certain set of criteria for the perception of attractiveness and self-appearance. Therefore, the pressure to fit the ideal form may cause both physiological disorders such as depression, and behavioral outcomes such as excessive exercising or steroid use. Thus, a growing number of men set unrealistic standards of perfection and when unable to achieve those standards, men, just as women, are susceptible to resorting to drastic measures to obtain perfection (Hobza et al., 2007). Hobza et al., (2007) agree with Barlett et al., (2008) that men holding such views on perfection and their body may result in unhealthy eating habits. Moreover, as more and more slender and fit images of men are being displayed in

the media, eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia among men are on the rise (Hobza et al., 2007). Hargreaves et al., (2009) found male exposure to media images of the ideal man have a positive link to a man's desire for a muscular physique. Another concern resulting from the muscular ideal desire is the growing number of men suffering from body (muscle) dysmorphia, or reverse anorexia (Hobza et al., 2007). Research by Hobza et al., shows this disorder stems from the preoccupation with one's body and the compulsive fixation with dieting and exercise, mainly in the form of weightlifting. Along with unhealthy eating habits that can occur with failed expectations, men may start to work out excessively (Hargreaves et al., 2009).

Furthermore, studies show that when a man has low self-esteem and is high in social comparison, he may begin to engage in other unhealthy behaviors (Agliata et al., 2004; Barlett et al., 2008; Farquhar et al., 2007; Hobza et al., 2007). Along with excessively exercising, more men are turning to performances enhancing supplements such as creatine and anabolic steroids to build muscle mass (Barlett et al., 2008; Farquhar et al., 2007; Hobza, et al., 2007). According to the U.S. National Library of Medicine, (2012) creatine is a dietary supplement used to increase muscle bulk by adding water to the muscles. However, when abused, there may be a link to digestive, muscular, and cardiovascular problems, and creatine use may even increase the risk of cancer. However, these negative effects have not been proven. Just as media effects on men may cause eating disorders and other unhealthy behaviors, media may also led to psychological issues such as low self-esteem and depression (Farquhar et al., 2007).

Recent studies have linked unrealistic media ideals with depression in men (Agliata et al., 2004; Barlett et al., 2008; Farquhar et al., 2007; Hobza et al., 2007). Although the formation of this disorder may not directly be caused by media influence, consumption and acceptance of those ideals may intensify depression (Barlett et al., 2008). Men who are more vulnerable to

media messages and images may take part in risky behaviors, as well as social comparison (Hobza et al., 2007). Not only do males and females desire a certain body, studies are finding that both genders engage in socially comparing his or herself to the images in the media (Hobza et al., 2007).

Finally, a review of literature appears to have found a third variable, the relationship of the media and social comparison. There have been countless research findings that state women exposed to the media's female ideals may feel pressure to conform (Farquhar et al., 2007; Hargreaves et al., 2009). As a female starts to view her body as less than that of her media counterparts, feelings of body dissatisfaction may occur. However, this occurrence, known as social comparison, is not restricted to only women, Farquhar and Wasylkiw (2007).

Findings from all studies researched found that men are also influenced by sociocultural norms set in the media (Agliata et al., 2004; Barlett et al., 2008; Farquhar et al., 2007); Hargreaves et al., 2009; Hobza, et al., 2007). Research on the effects of social comparison on males in the media is still in its infancy. Over the last three decades, the representation of the male physique in the media has evolved into the current ideal known as the mesomorphic body shape (Hargreaves et al., 2009). Two sets of research teams, Barlett et al., (2008) and Hargreaves et al., (2009), define the mesomorphic body shape as a muscular man who possesses a developed chest and shoulders that taper down to a narrow waist and hips, as if the upper body was in the shape of an upside-down triangle. Hobza et al., (2007) not only agree with today's media representation of what the male ideal body should look like, their research found that action figures such as G. I. Joe, Batman, and Superman have conformed to a more muscular ideal than they did 25 years ago. Furthermore, evidence found in Farquhar et al., (2007) further supported this change in the male ideal, finding that centerfold models appearing in the magazine

Playgirl have gained muscle mass and lost body fat over the last three decades. Thus, the media's presentation over the last few decades of what the male ideal body is creating unrealistic standards of comparison (Farquhar et al., 2007).

When presented with images of the ideal male body, researchers from all five articles studied agreed that men who view those images engage in social comparison creating an unrealistic belief that they do not measure up to the norm (Agliata et al., 2004; Barlett et al., 2008); Farquhar et al., 2007; Hargreaves et al., 2009; Hobza et al., 2007). Although, Farquhar et al., (2007) agree that men do engage in comparing themselves to images of their male counterparts, their feelings are not always negative. Farquhar et al. found that the way in which the male is depicted might affect how much a man participates in social comparison. For instance, a male viewing an image of an average man may not form negative feelings as he associates the person as an equal. On the other hand, if a man views an image of a male depicted as an object he is more likely to compare and thus form body dissatisfaction (Farquhar et al., 2007).

For many years, it was believed that men simply do not engage in socially comparing themselves with the images of men in the media. However, current research has found that men are just as susceptible when it comes to comparing their bodies to those depicted in the media. Agliata et al., (2004). Furthermore, Farquhar et al., (2007) agrees with the above finding that after exposure to the media's ideal, men too will evaluate and compare themselves to the ideal, which may result in body dissatisfaction. In other words, men who compare themselves to an image of a male possessing the mesomorphic body shape may feel unsatisfied with their own body. As a result, it can be concluded there is a positive link between body dissatisfaction and viewing media ideals (Farquhar et al., 2007; Hargreaves et al., 2009).

Moreover, those who compare themselves to the cultural ideals may feel inadequate thus resulting in negative behaviors (Agliata et al., 2004; Barlett et al., 2008; Farquhar et al., 2007; Hargreaves et al., 2009; Hobza et al., 2007). Researchers used for this study not only found a positive relationship between men and social comparison, they also agree that self-comparison may lead to unhealthy behaviors (Agliata et al., 2004; Barlett et al., 2008; Farquhar et al., 2007; Hargreaves et al., 2009; Hobza et al., 2007). With the media portraying an unrealistic male body ideal as being more muscular, men who feel the need to confirm may exhibit extremes behaviors such as eating disorder symptomatology, body dysmorphia, excessive exercise, and steroid use (Farquhar et al., 2007).

Hargreaves et al., (2009) suggests that the media's idealized images of the male ideal primarily affect a man's satisfaction with his muscularity, rather than his body weight. In other words, the most important quality for a man's body image is muscularity. However, Hargreaves et al. go on to say that, overall, men do not engage in social comparison as much as women do. This divide between men and women may be because men evaluate their appearance more highly, or place a lower value on the appearance of the ideal male images in the media (Hargreaves et al., 2009). This seems to contradict the findings of Farquhar et al., (2007), although both the studies agreed that more research is needed.

Several researchers agree that men and media effects need to be further studied (Agliata et al., 2004; Barlett et al 2008; Farquhar et al., 2007; Hargreaves et al., 2009; Hobza et al., 2007). However, there are mixed results on whether men equally engage in comparison and whether the media does or does not affect men as much as women in this area. Another limitation found in several studies was the ratio of research conducted on men (Barlett et al., 2008; Hargreaves et al., 2009; Hobza et al., 2007). Thus, the majority of present research skews heavily to women

(Barlett et al., 2008). Finally, limitations occur in how the research findings are collected (Barlett et al., 2008; Hargreaves et al., 2009). Hargreaves et al., (2009) concluded that gauging male social comparison with the idealized media images may be limited due to the setting in which the research is conducted. It was their belief that at home a viewer can choose to change the program, thus, it cannot be determined if results from laboratory studies would be comparable to the participants viewing the same images in a natural setting (Hargreaves et al., 2009). Therefore, future research needs to examine the relationship between men and cultural messages and body dissatisfaction among men (Barlett et al., 2008; Farquhar et al., 2007).

Media have long set the standards for the ideal body and of what is and is not attractive (Agliata et al., 2004; & Farquhar et al., 2007). Countless researchers have dedicated time and efforts in studying the media influence and effects on women. The overwhelming results found that there are strong links between the media and negative effects on women (Barlett et al., 2008). However, far fewer studies have looked into the media effects over both genders and even fewer have used men as primary subject matter. Yet, with the growing trend of ideal male body images beginning to saturate the mass media, there is a rise in the need for such research studying men (Farquhar et al., 2007). Recent studies have found that media have negative effects on men as well as women. Such body dissatisfaction leads to damaging self-perceptions, which, in turn may result in unhealthy behaviors (Agliata et al., 2004; Barlett et al., 2008; Farquhar et al., 2007; Hargreaves et al., 2009; Hobza et al., 2007). The majority of research reviewed found that media influence could cause such deleterious behaviors as anorexia/bulimia, depression, and excessive workout regiments that could lead to reverse anorexia (Farquhar et al., 2007; Hargreaves et al., 2009; Hobza et al., 2007). Once, a person feels they have exhausted every avenue and sees little change in self-perception worse behaviors could occur such, as dangerous

supplement use and illegal substances such as steroids (Barlett et al., 2008; Hobza et al., 2007). A possible aid in decreasing the chances of these harmful behaviors would be awareness and cutting down on media that one knows will trigger these influential behaviors (Hargreaves et al., 2009). One way to bring awareness would be through further research on media influence, particularly, in respect to men (Agliata et al., 2004; Barlett et al., 2008; Farquharet al., 2007; Hargreaves et al., 2009; Hobza et al., 2007). Lastly, men, as well as women, who spend a lot of time with the media, may form unrealistic views on what their bodies should look like. Even with the progress made in today's culture, the media still tends to set the social standards for beauty, both female and male (Agliata et al., 2004; Farquharet al., 2007).

As with any research, there are limitations as well as contradictions. The biggest limitation found is the uneven ration of women to men studies (Barlett et al., 2008). Another limitation discussed in Hargreaves et al., (2009) study was the question of how honest male subjects are in reporting media influences. In sum, more in depth research should be conducted on the media effects on men.

Feature Story

In the past, research on the effects of media has primarily focused on women with considerably less literature conducted on men. However, with the delineation of the muscular ideal in today's media men are feeling more and more pressure to attain the perfect male body. In turn, the media may be sending the message that a muscular body is the sign of masculinity. That, high muscle mass, low body fat and broad shoulders are representations of what it means to be a real man today. In an effort to achieve this ideal, some men are going to great lengths that can include excessive exercise, using performance enhancing supplements, cosmetic surgery,

and hair transplants. It appears that men are just as affected by the media's portrayal of body ideals as women.

I am writing a feature story for my senior honors project and it will explore what individuals believe makes a man a man. In an effort to investigate the effects that the media has on men, in-depth interviews were conducted with seven men and one woman. Research has found that although men are affected by the media, they are less likely to talk openly about their feelings due to the fear of appearing weak. In order to abate this as much as possible, interviews were conducted in an informal setting. The hope of this feature story is to examine how men feel about media ideals as well as shed light on the possible pressure they may feel to fit that mold.

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What Makes A Man?:

An Alpha male's fight for masculinity against the media's muscular ideals

What makes a man a man? Is it the close he wears or how much weight he can bench press? Does becoming a man involve acting tough and playing through the pain? For that matter, what is the ideal male body supposed to look like? Is it tall and muscular? Does he have facial hair? Does the size of a man's muscles make him more masculine?

Questions regarding media effects on men and self-image have been widely overlooked. However, to find content on women and self-image one only has to type in "Women and self-image" and there are around 36,000,000 Google results. Now add media to the mix and the number jumps to a staggering 159,000,000. For decades, it's been socially acceptable for a woman to not only obsess over how she looks but she is also encouraged to do whatever it takes to obtain the perfect body. This epitome of women in the media is known as the "thin ideal" where this idyllic feminine form is a slim physique with a small waist and very little body fat, (Hobza, Walker, Yakushko, & Peugh 2007). The drive for women to attain perfection can cause poor self-image. However, this catalyst for social attractiveness doesn't just instill the message of perfection for women. Current literature is finding that men are just as likely to be influenced by the media as women are.

"I feel that being fit goes past just muscle, a man needs to look like he can take care of business. Seriously, look at pro athletes, they're not only huge they've got money and women and they always seem to be living with swag. Yeah, the media may show us their lives but they're lives are obviously worth seeing. I mean, who would want to see me on television? It's just the way it is, athletic guys have it all and the media reminds us that they're more superior to us average Joes." -Ryan M.

Society's definition of the perfect male body has changed over the last several decades (Hobza, Walker, Yakushko, and Peugh, 2007). Today, Western culture promotes the "muscular ideal" (Farquhar & Wasylikiw, 2007). The media portrays the idyllic male as being tall, lean, and

muscular, with little body hair. The message being that in order to be considered masculine, one must be muscular and in order for society to consider him to be a man, he must also be strong and aggressive (Agliata & Tantleff-Dunn, 2004). “I work out twice a day, watch what I eat and have more muscle than body fat. But, in order to keep up looking this way I need to continue with this routine and it’s exhausting at times,” says Kevin F., 41, a tall African American male actor with what most would consider an above average muscular physic. However, the pressure to achieve the ideal body in the entertainment business is tremendous. For Kevin, the stress to maintain his perfect body shape is amplified as his very livelihood depends on his looks. The media’s depiction of the ideal male body is not only tall and muscular but generally, young and agile. For Kevin, this only adds to his anxiety and stress to sustain his body. He says,

Before I go to any audition, I can’t look at any magazine or turn on my television, because I’ll start second guessing myself that I’m not good looking enough to get the job or that I should have done more reps with my weights.

Research is just now catching up to the fact that the media does in fact affect men. Images depicting the ideal male form are everywhere. From magazines to television, men are exposed to countless images every day. However, it’s not just the muscularity of the male models. It’s the message that’s attached, such as a “real men” or “strong and durable.” The messages being, this is what a real man looks like and this is how a real man acts. The idea seems to be telling men of all ages that if they do not fit that mold, they’re somehow deficient. Similar to the media’s messages targeted at women stating that the thinner she is the more attractive she is, although not always in such explicit words. The notion of manhood and masculinity may not stem from the media alone. However, the media’s depictions of what it means to be a man can leave men feeling inadequate and if internalized, can have lasting effects. For most men, the thought of being seen as less than a man is enough to cause body discomfort

(Hobza, Walker, Yakushko & Peugh, 2007). This might be because images of the muscular ideal may be more about masculinity than the muscles themselves (Hobza, Walker, Yakushko & Peugh, 2007). In other words, the bigger the muscles the more powerful a man he is. Nick J. says, “This morning, I went to the gym and then this afternoon I played a game of flag football, when I got back, I was sweaty, dirty, and hungry, and I felt very powerful like a man.”

However, having a muscular physic is only part of what the media says makes a man. He must also have incredible strength and iron willpower. Movies such as “Fight Club” and “Wolverine” depict Brad Pitt and Huge Jackman as muscular Adonis’s that have almost god-like powers. Things like weather have little to no effect on them. The media feeds into the stereotype that real men don’t feel the cold, they’re told to be tough and play through the pain. It’s as though a real man would be able to will his body to withstand any temperature.

One young man interviewed seems to illustrate this point. Michael D. says, “No, I’m not cold. I’m a man and men don’t get cold.” Michael, 24, walks into the interview wearing cargo shorts, a t-shirt, and loafers. The autumn evening air had quickly brought the temperature down. His reply of “men don’t get cold,” isn’t uncommon. Going back to the media’s muscular ideal, admitting he was cold may come off as a weakness and therefore, appearing that he, himself, is weak. He says,

I’m single, working my way up in my company, and I’m highly active. Yet, I feel I can never relax. As if I have to work out before I go out on a Friday night. I guess it’s like, you know, this invisible law that I’m too skinny but at the same time I can’t say this out loud or my bros [friends] will tell me to stop acting like such a girl.

Michael isn’t alone in how he feels. Chuck H., 27, says sometimes he’s not satisfied with his body size, but admitting that aloud causes him anxiety due to feeling vulnerable. He says,

I'm not a big guy and I don't have a big personality, so when I see Huge Jackman or Ryan Gosling I sometimes think man I wish I looked like him. I wish could be that fearless. But I can't just go around telling people that or they'd say I was a sissy.

The media's depiction of the muscular ideal man seems to come with the message that in order to be a real man you need to not only have a muscular body, have amazing willpower, and nerves of steel, but also be void of emotion as well, (Hobza, Walker, Yakushko & Peugh, 2007).

Today's images representing what it means to be a man are not only how a real man acts, the media's messages encourage men to stay silent and not speak of feelings at risk of losing their masculinity. Just as with Michael's story, another interviewee, Nick J. a 24-year-old college student, has strong male gender beliefs. "If the building caught on fire right now who would get to leave first, you or me? You would, because I'm a boy and if I ran out first people would say I wasn't much of a man."

As a society, we tend to think of these gender roles as the norm, women and children first and manly men stay behind to save them. Action-packed movies repeatedly show men, whose bodies defy nature, fearlessly running back into burning buildings, jumping out of airplanes, saving the day, and usually the beautiful women. These men are depicted achieving greatness and notoriety by accomplishing heroic acts of bravery. What's supposed to entertain audiences seems to define what it means to be a man in today's society as though there's an unwritten code of male conduct that is can only be accomplished by those who can perform these rites of passage. A man should be strong and act tough. He should be dapper yet nonchalant with his feelings and definitely not care too much about his looks. Meanwhile, women are not just granted permission to care about their looks, they are encouraged to do whatever it takes to achieve the thin ideal, (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2009). Cultural expectations that guys have to be blasé when it comes to their physiques makes body dissatisfaction in boys more difficult to assess, but there is little doubt they are affected by media representations of idealized

masculinity. It appears that not only are images of strength and masculinity effecting how men perceive their bodies, but possibly their belief systems on how a real man should act. Nick J.

says,

Look at how we're [men] told to be. We're supposed to be strong and workout, but we're also not supposed to care. The whole thing's stupid to me, but at the same time, I still workout so maybe I'm the one who's stupid, because I don't even realize that I've been fooled.

Nick's insight seems to further media's portrayal of men and the pressure of society to fulfill those expectations. Every day, men are exposed to hundreds of images of the ideal male body and the messages that are attached to those images. From the time he starts his day, a man is surrounded by messages of perfection deliberately designed to tell him what he should be doing. From television to print, it's nearly impossible to escape the media's reach. In the media, men are featured more often than women are. The men are usually doing an action-packed activity and rewarded for their aggressive behavior, usually with a beautiful woman, money, or fame. However, more often than not, they are rewarded with all three. Brock L. says

What makes a man? Well, if I go by what the movies say, then I need to knockout five guys with a single punch, drive a sports car, save the damsel in distress, make a lot of money, and be able to wash my bloodied shirt on my washboard abs. The realty is, I drive a used car, I haven't been on a date in months, I don't know if I'll ever be rich, I don't have ripped abs, and you could probably take me. When I'm watching a show, sometimes I find myself comparing myself with the actors and wonder how any of us normal guys can ever measure up. I just have to remind myself that I like myself the way I am, and that what makes a man is his character and how he treats other people not how much weight he can bench press.

The thought was that the media did not affect men because they didn't care about their appearance as much as women did. Yet, if you look at how the average man feels, it seems like the gender gap is closing. Men are at just as much risk of internalizing media ideals and forming unhealthy beliefs systems as women (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2009). However, the media affects more than just television and print. Toys like G.I. Joe and Batman have changed in size

dramatically over the last couple of decades (Hobza, Walker, Yakushko, & Peugh, 2007). Jason Y says, "When I was a kid I remember playing with my G.I. Joe's and now my son plays with them. But, they're different now, I look at his action figures and they don't just have more muscles, they have veins."

G.I. Joe's popularity sparked television series, comic books, and eventually, the iconic toy made it to the big screen. The action figure's message of, *G.I. Joe: The Real American Hero*, is yet another media ideal of what a real man is. G.I. Joe's message not only perpetuates media ideals, it also appears to tell young boys that it's their American duty to achieve that ideal (Stamp, 2013). In other words, the words *The Real American Hero* could be translated to mean that in order to be an American man and hero, a man needs to have big muscles and be aggressive. The problem is that primarily young impressionable boys take in this message and may grow up believing they need to be like Joe, yet the toy's body would be unrealistic as a human body shape (Hobza, Walker, Yakushko, and Peugh, 2007). For example, if you look back 30 years, G.I. Joe's biceps were 12.2 inches in circumference. However, the circumference of the action figure's bicep has over doubled to a 26.8 inch circumference (Hobza, Walker, Yakushko & Peugh, 2007). To put this into perspective, according to Farquhar and Wasylkiw's 2007 study, the size of G.I. Joe's bicep is larger than the bicep size of any body builder in history. While researching the evolution of the G.I. Joe action figure, another distinctive trait became evident that mirrors media ideals. The 1970's version of Hasbro's action figure had thick curly hair and a burly beard with the words, "Lifelike hair and beard," printed boldly on the packaging. Fast-forward to today, and "G.I. Joe Extreme's" hair looks more like popular celebrity Justin Bieber than an army crew cut (Stamp, 2013). Not only has he gained muscle mass and extreme definition, he appears to have no body hair. Therefore, young boys exposed

from a young age to this form of the muscular ideal may be receiving the same unrealistic messages of male beauty as Barbie sends to little girls (Hobza, Walker, Yakushko & Peugh, 2007). In fact, men's dissatisfaction with their overall physical appearance tripled from 15% in 1972 to 43% in 1997 (Agliata & Tantleff-Dunn, 2004; Farquhar & Wasylikiw, 2007). "The ideal male body of the new millennium is increasingly unattainable, resulting in real-ideal discrepancies that lead to lower self-esteem and depression in men," (Agliata & Tantleff-Dunn, 2004, p. 2). Jason Y. says,

When I was a little boy, my mom never let me play with my sister's dolls. She said that dolls are for girls and that I would be made fun of if anyone saw me playing with them. I remember playing with my action figures one time and thinking how I needed to grow up and be like Joe because I was a boy and I didn't want anyone to ever question that. I started karate because G.I. Joe had Kung Fu grip so that meant all real men knew how to fight, and when I'd watch TV, I saw guys kicking butt so I figured that's what I needed to do to be a man. That's stuck with me and caused me to do some crazy things sometimes all because I wanted to grow up to be like G.I. Joe in my cartoon.

The media's message of what makes a man has become an accepted norm to many, even though the depiction of the muscular ideal is unattainable for most men, (Farquhar & Wasylikiw, 2007). The media says a man is only a man if he looks like the men on the covers of fitness magazines or the latest action hero in a big budget blockbuster. A widespread belief that there is some special race of genetically perfect men exists, leaving some men feeling body dissatisfaction and even depression. When exposed to the media's muscular ideal, some men are taking more extremes to try to become that ideal. Chuck H. says,

I don't just go around telling people this, but I do feel depressed and inadequate sometimes after I see an action movie. When *Wolverine* came out, I remember sitting in the theater and thinking damn, Hugh Jackman's muscles are unreal. I went home and Googled his workout routine for the movie. I would look in the mirror every day waiting for me somehow to turn into him. But, usually I ended up just feeling really depressed. I did eventually see a little difference. I probably would've seen more if I was able to do his diet, but it was too much, so I just lifted a lot of weights. A lot, I mean, a lot of weights. In fact, I think I hurt my back and it still bothers me today. I guess it's worth it to have more muscle tone.

Chuck is not alone in his desire to obtain the muscular ideal that the media depicts as the male norm. Many men of all ages are going to extreme lengths to achieve the mesomorphic body. A mesomorphic body shape consists of a well-developed chest and shoulders tapering down to a narrow waist and hips (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2009). In other words, the current ideal shape for men is lean but highly muscular with the upper torso almost appearing as a perfect triangle.

As a culture, the belief is that achieving the perfect body will in turn make us happy. Images in magazines geared toward men seem to further the male ideal stereotype. Popular magazines such as, "GQ, Men's Health, and Fortune often portray the ideal man as muscular, wealthy, and prestigious," according to Hobza et al. (2007). In fact, Hobza et al., found that many men experienced body dissatisfaction and depression after viewing images of muscular models. The growing pressure from media for men to achieve the ideal body, may lead to a list of problematic behaviors, (Hobza, Walker, Yakushko & Peugh, 2007). Kevin F. says,

I started to use Creatine a couple years back as a way to gain some muscles. It started one day when I was on set rehearsing with this young fighter and the director kept putting him in all the best shots. Sure, the guy can fight, but so can I. The difference was he was younger and had about 20 lbs. of muscle on me. For the next three months I upped my gym game and cutout my cheat days. But I still was getting anywhere near that dude's level. Then, one day I was at training with another stunt person and he suggested I take it (Creatine) because it would help me to increase my muscle mass and give me energy. All I heard was that if I used this powder I would build more lean muscle mass. For men in the entertainment industry, it's all about go big or go home.

Kevin illustrates a growing concern regarding the media's effects on men. As the muscular ideal continues to become larger and more defined, the pressure on men also continues to grow. That's because, unlike women who are told they're too big, men are told they're not big enough, (Barlett, Vowels & Saucier, 2008; Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2009). It seems for some men, having more muscles equals more of the man he must be. According to Matt B.,

We're (men) expected to have it all, massive muscles, successful career, and be athletic. It's hard for us as men, we supposed to do all that and never be bothered or stressed because manly men don't sweat the small stuff.

The belief that men need to be emotionless is causing some to take actions that are not only risky, but dangerous as well. Jason R. explains.

I mean I'm never going to be on the cover of some fitness magazine or be a runway model and I'm cool with it. However, I hate feeling that because I have a little more weight on me than some I have to be the funny guy. It's as if Hollywood's telling us if you're tall, thin, and muscular than congratulations, you're leading man material. However, if you're short, a little round, and have more baby fat than muscle mass than you're sidekick quality. What really gets me is that people think that because Seth Rogan is funny and found then I must be too. At one point, it had gotten to me so bad that I even considered taking drastic action. I tried diet pills and even looked into plastic surgery. I didn't end up getting any work done and I only took diet pills a couple times. I may be able to find the humor in my body for the most part. However, I would like to see the media lay off saying that gender of a man is only perfect if it fits their standards. An average guy like me could go nuts trying to keep up.

A recent study found that steroid use among males is on the rise resulting from poor body satisfaction and low self-esteem (Hobza, Walker, Yakushko & Peugh, 2007). Along with the use of dangerous performance enhancing supplements, excessive exercise and eating disorders are on the rise with man as well. Under more and more pressure to fit the muscular ideal, evidence shows men forming unhealthy preoccupation with dieting and weightlifting can result in body (muscle) dysmorphia, (Hobza, Walker, Yakushko & Peugh, 2007). With the constant bombardment of the media telling men they're either too fat or too skinny, and at the same time telling them if they were real men they would be able to do it and not complain while they're doing it, it's no wonder some men have started to feel inadequate. Mike D. explains.

What makes a man seems as silly as asking me why I'm white, it's just how I was born. It's my gender I'm a man. But, it's as if the media has come up with this idea that in order to be a man there's this macho rite of passage we need to accomplish. I see these ads that tell me if I drink this shake I'll be as strong as LeBron or if I use this body spray, all the ladies won't be able to stay away. So, if you don't do what they (the media) tells you too, then you're not allowed in the men's club, you'll just be stuck with the boys and boys don't get the hot chicks, or make the mad money. The ironic part of all of this is that I still find myself working out and buying protein powder. I guess that just shows how much hold the media has over all of us.

There's a growing trend indicating that men are just as affected as affected by media ideals as women are. Men today face images that depict a male body as being muscular and lean. The problem is that most men aren't able to achieve that amount of muscle mass and therefore, left feeling incompetent. Many believe that if they don't achieve the ideal shape that will make them somehow less of a man. The message being that muscles equal masculinity. The media depicts men as strong, aggressive, and adventurous and are often rewarded with money, prestige, and beautiful women by his side. The thoughts of those who were interviewed for this piece give a unique and unbridled look into how much pressure young men today feel to be the ideal man. The media is entertainment and they'll say that's how their content should be taken. The fact is what the media tells the public has a way of becoming the norm for what a person should or shouldn't look or act like. It seems ironic women have been concerned with losing weight because of the media's thin ideal and that men are concerned with gaining weight because of the muscular ideal. Size has always been a concern for men and the thought of being seen as small or tiny leads many men to take drastic measures. From extreme dieting and exercising, to taking dangerous supplements or even cosmetic surgery, it's clear that the media has at least something to do with the rise of these behaviors. Boys are told from a young age what being a man means through cartoons and their toys. Young men are told that the amount of power and prestige they achieve depends on the size of their muscles. That the bigger the biceps and triceps the more of a man he is. They're told to be strong and show no emotions, while at the same time run in to burning buildings and that a real man would go down with the ship. From the big scene action heroes that show no mercy and always get the girl, to the strapping Adonis's gracing fitness magazines that line the supermarket checkout aisles, the media's influence today seems to be everywhere one looks with little chance of escape.

The gap is closing between men and women and evidence is showing that men are just as much victims of media stereotyping. However, there is still a lack of societal acceptance and understanding. The lack of support from their peers may be why men still feel they can't express how much they are actually affected by what they see, hear, or read in the media. It's important that as a society, people come together and recognize that this is a real issue and provide an environment where a men's masculinity isn't defined by the size of his muscles but should be measured by the deeds he does as a person. As Brock L. says,

I think what makes a man is understanding what kind of person he is with other people. That decides whether he's funny, kind, gentle, hostile, a jerk or has good manners.