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This literature review will explore how images of the male body within advertising impact body image. Although sociological analysis has successfully explored gender roles, particularly the unique experiences women face based on societal values and ideals, which construct the basis for these roles (Blackstone 2003). As questioned by Connell (2002: 13), “what affects the social position of women must affect the social position of men and boys,” responding to the lack of research on gender and the position of men within sociology. When the feminist movement managed to highlight the male role within society through the sex-role theory, there was an overly deterministic account of traditional male behavior that was rooted in sexism, violent behavior, and oppression towards women (Blackstone 2003). The sex-role theory is defined as the processes where children gain and embody the knowledge and values associated with either masculinity or femininity (O’Neil 1981).

Although it remains an influential theory for exploring gender roles and relations, it prescribes deterministic expectations of men as natural leaders, financially responsible and heads of the traditional family unit. Alternative perspectives on masculinity have been emerging since the 1980s, since criticism emerged that sex role theory may not explain the diversity in masculinities and how patterns of gender are constructed and practiced (Connell 2006). Sociology should deter from a fixed and deterministic perspective of masculinity, to one that draws attention to the various processes where men’s authority is differentiated, embedded and produced within culture and organizational networks (Itulu-Abumere 2013).

This begins my interest in the role of advertising that does not simply ‘represent’ masculinity but helps format conceptions and maintenance of dominant forms of masculinity. Advertising intersects with consumption, meaning the images of masculinity represented in this format are produced at the homogenizing representational conventions alongside.
transforming consumer markets and cultural politics. Pre-existing advertising and masculinity research has identified a dominant image of the muscular body as the ideal standard for men to achieve. Equivalenting the ideal male body to dominance and power (Pompper, Soto and Piel 2007), this symbolic image of masculinity serves as a standard for men to assess themselves and others against (Wienke 1998). The standard of muscularity among men leads to them feeling “more attractive, more accomplished and in control” (Klein 1993: 87) if they successfully achieve the physique. These muscular standards comply with a dominant form and conception of masculinity, which marks the male body, signifying an ideal that men feel pressure to conform to. This literature review will explore how the current body ideal of a muscular physique among men can lead to adverse effects on men’s body image. The overview of research indicated a correlation between having a muscular body and high self-esteem (Wienke 1998); this suggests those who cannot attain such standards experience low self-esteem and body shame.

BODY IMAGE

Before the 1980s, academic research on body image surrounded females and the risks of eating disorders and psychological distress. Prompted by the ideal among women to be thin and the subsequent over-estimation of their body sizes (Myers and Biocca 1992). The research indicated, body image dissatisfaction varied between men and women, but the vast amount of research on women’s pressure to conform to idealistic standards prioritized the dynamic over men. The overshadowing of men’s experience with body image, coexisted with dominant tendencies in male socialization to not discuss body image dissatisfaction or negative self-esteem (Montgomery 2017). Understanding the definition of body image can contribute to the differences in the way men and women interpret and internalize such standards. Pompper et al, (2018:526) defined body image as an “internal representation of his outer physical appearance,” the relationship between internal versus external body image are reflected in Cash’s (2004:1) understanding of the “inside view” of body image.

Noting body image as the complex psychological perception of an individual’s physical appearance (Cash 2004:1), men are experiencing body image issues as they internalize and
attempt to conform to the mass media’s images of muscularity and leanness. Aligning with (De Jesus, Ricciardelli, Frisén, Smolak, Yager, Fuller-Tyszkiewicz, Diedrichs 2015), finding of a drive for muscularity among men, a fascination and drive for men gaining large muscles. Pompper et al (2018) described muscularity as a key component of male body image, with dissatisfaction noted among males as young as six years old. As the ideal body type among men, muscularity is associated with a V-shaped mesomorph (Pompper et al 2018); defined as a strong positioned build with large chests and leaner abs was found by Hobza et al (2007). Understanding that men’s goal to conform to muscularity is affiliated with male gender norms (De Jesus et al. 2015), highlights how the mass media capitalize on dominant images of the male body, subsequently influencing men to internalize such standards.

HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

An increasing body of sociological theories focusing on masculinities has addressed contemporary transformations within masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity has been a prominent term within masculinity discourse, defined by Connell (1990: 83) as the “culturally idealized form of masculine character”. For a form of masculinity to be classed as hegemonic, it must reflect the prominent gender ideology of the surrounding culture. Reflected within Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) who recognize hegemonic masculinity as standardized behaviour among men. Although it doesn’t necessarily need to be the most dominant form of masculinity in society, it operates on the basis of cultural recognition, specifically what it means to be a man within society. This discussion highlighted a homogenizing power among men and prompted theoretical discussions of a hierarchal relation of masculinity. Although hegemonic masculinity is a “political, contested, and powerful topic,” (Itulu-A bumere 2013:43), criticism emerged that the concept was deterministic and harmful to men in assuming oppressive and powerful behaviors are central to the form of masculinity. Reinforced through the finding that the term emerged from the gay liberation movement, highlighting homophobia as a product of prejudice and oppressive behaviors between heterosexual men to homosexual men. Despite these concerns, hegemonic masculinity continues to be reflected within the mass media, and we can see
several of its features, such as “physical force,” “patriarchy,” and “achievement” in media imagery (Trujilo 1991: 290). The focus on hegemonic masculinity qualities such as competition and power within media representations mark the power of the male body.

THE ROLE OF ADVERTISING

The effectiveness of advertising is its ability to tap into pre-existing social and cultural norms related to beauty and body image, whilst convincing a consumer to compare their own physique against their advertisement. Through advertising’s use of narrative tropes and selective imagery, adverts are a space to observe both the political and aesthetic features of masculinity through the promotion of persuasive cultural ideals (Knudsen and Andersen 2020). Advertisements that target male consumers simultaneously constructs and reinforces dominant ideals of masculinity, aligning with Knudsen and Anderson (2020) understanding of hegemonic masculinity as a social construction which promotes ideals of the most powerful form of masculinity. Therefore, advertisements typically depict and target male consumers who embody hegemonic masculinity. Elliot and Elliot (2005) study exploring the male body in advertising found an increase in men’s bodies appearing in advertising since the 1980s, a prominent time for hegemonic masculinity which operated as the “masculine archetype of the time” (Vogel 2015: 464). It is the ‘strong’ and ‘hard’ male iconography, which takes its form through the aesthetics of the muscular body within advertisements typically related to cars, underwear, and fitness (Elliot and Elliot 2005). Wienke (1998) researched men’s lifestyle magazines, conducting in-depth interviews with college-aged men finding men use the physical ideals of hegemonic masculinity as a framework to organize their experiences with their own body and the body image ideal. Advertising’s iconography of masculinity aligns with “virtues of individualism, autonomy and self- sufficiency” (White, Oliffe and Bottorff 2012). The adverts that depicted men as active and exercising urged men to control their bodies according to Agilata and Tantleff-Dunn (2004), comparing the culture of thinness women endure to the standard of musicality for men.

FINDINGS

A shared hypothesis across the studies was the prediction that advertising images...
containing idealized, stereotyped, and dominant images of the male body could impact men's body image negatively. Hobza et al. (2007) predicted that participants would report lower levels of body esteem when exposed to images of men who were muscular, toned and lean. Both Hobza et al. (2007) and Leit et al. (2002) did test their hypothesis to be true, but had variations in their findings, with men’s dissatisfaction relating to their musculature rather than body mass or fat. Uncovering how images may only provide dissatisfaction to men’s own body image if the physical characteristics presented are “enduring and unchangeable” (Hobza et al 2007:167). This is related to the “drive for muscularity” noted by De Jesus (2015:3).

Agilata and Tantleff-Dunn (2004) found discrepancies between the level of muscularity respondents possessed and the level they would like to have, highlighting a disproportionate body image among men. This was layered by their conceptual framework of appearance schemas as cognitive structures that help to interpret and process self-relevant information. Exploring this in relation to body image, we can understand these appearance schemas as an individual’s susceptibility to a body image currency which will cause them to react more negatively compared to other participants. This angle of research helps to differentiate the findings among men instead of analyzing men as a homogenous mass.

MUSCULARITY

As previously established in this literature review, muscularity is a core component of male body image; the literature indicated a common finding of ‘muscle dysmorphia,’ defined as a type of disorder where young men construct a flaw in their muscles, viewing them as never large enough (Pompper et al. 2007). De Jesus (2015) noted a drive for muscularity among men, a fixation on large muscles in the upper body region, associating media internalization with the term. Understanding how the media reinforces gender role norms, body image concerns are “mediated by media internalization” (De Jesus 2015:5). (Leit et al. 2002) literature postulated muscle dysmorphia as having a dominant prevalence in society, particularly among men who become obsessed with the concept and application
of muscularity. Muscle dysmorphia is seen as an impact of cultural and media images that produce pressure for men to attain muscularity. This could be correlated with Agilata and Tantleff-Dunn's (2004) framework of exploring media imagery alongside body image disturbance. Defining body image disturbance as a “continuum of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with one’s physical appearance” (Agilata and Tantleff-Dunn 2004:7), their study confirmed that exposure to the ideal male body in media can have negative impacts on body satisfaction. Findings across the literature were consistent in the association of the mass media imagery and men’s drive and desire for muscularity, commonly resulting in muscle dysmorphia.

PERFORMANCE ENHANCING DRUGS

Hobza et al. (2007) found exposure to the idealized male body leads to increases in disordered eating, excessive exercise, and higher rates of steroid use among participants. Similarly, the study found a strong correlation between body image satisfaction and areas such as the upper body, deemed changeable via exercise. Steroids and other performance-enhancement drugs have gained prominence among men, particularly younger men who reportedly use steroids, diet products, and muscle supplement products in significant numbers (Martin and Govender 2011). Within Martin and Govender’s study, over forty eightof percent of participants had used drugs to attempt to gain muscle mass and improve the appearance of their muscles. Not only is drug performance use a symptom of muscle dysmorphia (Martin and Govender 2011), the usage is often rooted within other complex psychological and emotional factors. Hobza et al. (2007), noted that the increase in performance drug usage may be rooted to concerns of body image, suggesting the impact of media images goes beyond a drive for muscularity, but other mental, behavioural and physical health issues. The current body ideal warrants many dangers; the ideal male body is largely unattainable without the use of performance-enhancing drugs such as steroids. As such, if men internalize the idealized bodies portrayed in advertisements, this can contribute to disordered eating, and an increase in exercise and steroid use (Hobza et al. 2007).
As previously established, the ideal male body of muscularity is unattainable for men and can result in disordered eating, higher levels of depression and anxiety, and greater mood changes. Many studies also highlight how the muscular male body image allows men entry and belonging into the socially dominant forms of being a man. If we understand hegemonic masculinity to consist of attributes of strength, dominance, and self-confidence (Wienke 1998), this helps to interpret Pompper et al. (2007) linkage between hegemonic masculinity which encourages the ideal of competition. Describing how the male body becomes an arena for competition, Pompper et al. (2007) findings indicated her respondents felt a need to compete despite their insecurities, with other participants mocking those who failed to meet the dominant standard of muscularity. This competition and power element also manifested in men’s interactions with women; discovering men frequently overestimate how much muscle women find attractive Pompper et al. (2007). This suggests performances of masculinity which emphasise power are key to attaining entry and acceptance among a dominant group of men. Also indicating, men are not passive participants in identity formation and deliberately exert performances of power (Itulu-Abumere 2013). Although it may be too critical to assume men participate in their own subordination as proposed by Wienke (1998), it may not be wrong to say that men’s dependence on the ideal body can simultaneously produce and reproduce hegemonic standards of masculinity.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the literature presented does confirm my thesis, with the various studies finding that images within advertising and the wider mass media have an impact on male body image. Martin and Govender (2011:220) define muscularity as a “defining feature” of traditional hegemonic masculinity, suggesting men thrive within their masculinity once they attain the ideal body. Martin and Govender (2011) suggest the muscular body for men provides both the “solution and the problem” within hegemonic masculinity. Engaging in muscularity as the standard for male body appearance and performance provides men with dominance in the unique hierarchy of masculinity. Subsequently, men who reject the standards are stigmatized as weak and often develop their own body image issues. Men are
always on the boundary of hegemonic masculinity, highlighted through men who alter the
ideal male body if they cannot fully achieve it to correspond with their pre-existing abilities
and strengths (Wienke 1998). The literature addressed the increased concerns among men
and their body image. Yet, it is important to note that masculinity in sociology remains an
under-shadowed area of research, particularly among the variations of masculinity and body
image within race and social class. Carrigan et al. (2018) noted that masculinity demands are
interpreted differently according to social position and the capacity to fulfil them (Carrigan
et al. 2018). Therefore, men from a lower socio-economic background may not have the
same amount of time or resources available to invest in their bodies, compared to middle-
class men with the economic and cultural capital to improve their physique. Overall, images
within advertising perpetuate an ideal of muscularity as the “socially dominant conception of
what is appropriate masculinity” (Wienke 1998:2). The cultural discourse which posits the
male body in association with muscularity is having a negative effect on men’s body image
and their comfortability within their own masculinity.
REFERENCES


