

To look like Superman: Male body dysmorphia

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SUMMARY

Body dysmorphia (BD) is a severe mental condition where an individual has obsessive thoughts pertaining to their appearance. These individuals tend to see flaws in their appearance that are otherwise unnoticeable to the general eye. BD can get in the way of one's ability to live a normal life. Specifically, males tend to suffer from a specific subtype of BD called muscle dysmorphia (MD), where one fixates in achieving a muscular appearance. With the surge in social media use, various novel media outlets have become the biggest influence in our lives, specifically surrounding appearance. The notion of men experiencing body issues has not been typically and openly expressed by the media, which has resulted in the condition being under-diagnosed and under-represented. Today, ordinary males feel pressure to obtain potentially unreachable standards for a body by taking part in excessive workout routines grounded in weightlifting, consuming large amounts of protein and weight-gaining supplements, and possibly abusing anabolic steroids. Currently, there remains a lack of studies and existing literature on this topic, making it challenging to determine concrete data surrounding the prevalence of males experiencing this disorder and the effective treatment options.

ABSTRACT

Body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) is a psychiatric illness characterized by obsessive thoughts in relation to one's appearance. Body dysmorphia continues to gain attention in the media, academia, and scientific community. This mental health condition can happen to any gender and is evaluated to be a chronic and long-term condition. Although research and developed models have attempted to understand the etiology of BDD, there is limited amount of research regarding the illness in relation to men. This highlights the need to bring awareness surrounding this topic by expressing thought provoking questions, as without treatment, BDD will progressively worsen as one ages. In this piece, we present thoughts on why this area is under-represented, and briefly describe what body dysmorphia is and the main area of distress in men. Moreover, we discuss why men are fixated on achieving the "ideal male image", what this image appears to be, the possible body dysmorphia-inducing factors, and the overarching need to conduct more research on this topic.

Keywords: Male, body dysmorphia, muscle dysmorphia, image, media

INTRODUCTION

The opinion of an ideal human physique has become a staple primarily in North American cultures and Western societies.¹ For decades, the focus of body image and related studies on self-esteem and appearance has been on women.² Our culture has slowly progressed and become more comfortable with discussing unrealistic body and beauty expectations; however, most of these conversations and studies in this area of re-

search are focused on the female population.^{3,4,5} We strongly believe the media does not place as much emphasis on males compared to females, possibly because vanity and appearance are immediate attributes given to women and is often used to judge or select women compared to men. Despite this highly debatable topic of conversation, we believe that men are becoming increasingly concerned with body appearance, as body image is not just a woman's problem.²

Thoughts surrounding physical appearance has invaded the minds of every individual at least once in their life, as it is an intrinsic desire to want to look good to gain praise, attention, and be viewed as attractive. Conversely, we strongly believe the surge in obsession over physical appearance is the result of pressure inflicted by social media. The surge in social media use, the constant documentation of ourselves through selfies, and the ability to “edit” a photo has increased the pressure to look a certain way, in addition to questioning how we physically view ourselves. The accessibility of mobile apps that allows one to place a filter to alter the face and body has resulted in skewed perceptions of one’s physical appearance while changing the standards of beauty significantly.

Moreover, social platforms have allowed for continuously changing opinions of masculinity and desired body shapes and features. This puts pressure on men to try and fit the ever-changing views on the ideal male body. Consequently, this affects men’s desire to look good under society’s standards, to be perceived as attractive, and to validate themselves through popular slang that labels a man’s body (such as “six pack abs”, “dad body”, and “fat”). Society places increasing value, worth, and importance on physical appearance that can be modified or “fixed” through excessive diet, exercise, and plastic/cosmetic surgery. We believe that with increasing media usage, we are creating an environment where eating disorders flourish and body dysmorphia becomes the “norm”. Additionally, men are hesitant to reveal feelings of embarrassment and shame. We believe that men also fear being viewed as “weak”, “weird” or “delicate” if they are diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder, such as body dysmorphia (body dysmorphic disorder).³ Consequently, it is no surprise that we are living in a society where males feel the need to keep their feelings of unhappiness and lack of confidence hidden. This brings forth the fact that body dysmorphia is not restricted by gender nor age; hence, it is an area that requires more attention and research with regards to the male population. Moreover, if a so-called “ever-increasing” and “accepting” society is emerging, men deserve the right to access treatment without the repercussions of shame. Boys who struggle with body image issues are viewed as “less of a man” and their thoughts are deemed as socially unacceptable.^{6,7} Today, society fails to recognize the growing needs surrounding young males and body issues, despite the limited number of studies that do exist in this area continuing to acknowledge that men struggle in this regard.⁸

Issues such as eating disorders and body and muscle dysmorphia being rare topics of conversation may be the reason why male body issues are under-diagnosed and under-represented. This is due to a number of factors, including limited research and evidence, the uncertainty of inconsistent diagnostic tools, and the old-age view that it is taboo for men to be concerned with ap-

pearance of sharing feelings. While more studies have begun to include or solely involve the male population, very few tend to encompass adolescent boys (similar to studies that look at adolescent girls) and younger adult men, proving there is a significant gap. Therefore, with the rise and popularity of social media and the availability of different platforms, research is needed to gather more concrete results on the possible impacts of these forms of media on body image and the male population. This piece helps to inform readers on body dysmorphia, its possible cause, a subtype of the disorder known as muscle dysmorphia, as well as discussing the ideal male image men often try to attain.

DISCUSSION

What is Body Dysmorphia and What are the Main Areas of Concern with Males?

Body dysmorphia, also known as Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) or Dysmorphophobia, is a psychiatric illness (disorder) that was brought into light in 1997; therefore, is a relatively new condition.^{9,10,11} It has been estimated that BDD affects 2.4% of the population, with symptoms beginning in pubescent years.⁹ This disorder is characterized by compulsive thoughts pertaining to an individual’s body, as they view one or more aspects of their physical appearance as flawed when in reality the imperfection(s) is/are often unnoticeable to others.^{9,11} The obsession with an individual’s perception of their “flawed” feature(s) results in daily acts such as mirror checking, skin pulling, excessive grooming, and experiencing strong feelings of mental stress due to constant comparison.⁹ These pre-occupied behaviours induce distress and/or impairment. This further causes social isolation, difficulty in occupational performance, or other areas of normal daily performance.^{9,11}

The main areas of concern for men with BDD are body weight, height, and muscle mass (also known as muscle dysmorphia) being the biggest insecurities.¹¹ Furthermore, issues regarding one’s skin (acne and/or scarring), hair (including thinning), body hair (which may be excessive), nose (size and/or structure), and genitals (penis size) are other major concerns.^{9,11} The physical features that men are often apprehensive about are often related to the degree to which it is visible or controllable. Men are also apprehensive of features that are a symbol of masculinity.

An excessive desire to appear a certain way by either losing weight, gaining body mass, or fixing the “defected” feature(s) makes individuals susceptible to psychological, environmental, and biological risks.¹ The strong desire to attain the ideal body has been linked with heart and renal failure, dehydration, and the abuse of illegal substances (for example, anabolic

steroids). These desires, by extension, also cause threatening side effects such as extreme dieting, addiction to/dependency on exercise, and illnesses such as depression and/or anxiety.¹

Muscle Dysmorphia: The Main Distress in Males

Muscle Dysmorphia (MD) is a newly recognized subtype of body dysmorphia that is more prevalent in males.¹¹ MD is based on compulsive distress surrounding the perception of a lack of muscular size and leanness.¹ MD is characterized by an individual's obsessive thoughts and behaviour to increase their body mass to appear muscular. This involves gaining weight without gaining fat.^{1,2} Thoughts include a hatred for their current body shape and a strong desire to change it through increased muscle mass. This causes affected men to follow excessive workout routines involving weightlifting, eating large amounts of protein and carbohydrates, taking weight-gaining supplements, as well as anabolic steroids.²

An individual who suffers from MD does not perceive themselves as lean or muscular. Instead, they view themselves as smaller than they appear despite being significantly more “built” compared to the average individual.² These men possess and display a number of psychological and behavioural symptoms, including relinquishing attendance to social events, occupational obligations or recreational activities in order to maintain a strict workout regime.² It also involves rearranging their daily lives to ensure that lifting weights and exercising are always prioritized.² Other symptoms include continuous training despite injury.² In addition, they actively avoid situations or events where their bodies will be exposed. If they are forced to remove clothing and reveal their bodies, they experience extremely high levels of anxiety.²

MD is said to have originated in bodybuilding groups.¹² In fact, common groups that experience MD are competitive natural and non-natural bodybuilders, weight trainers who are trying to attain a specific physique, and college football players.¹ Compared to the average weightlifter, men who suffer from MD dwell upon their appearance through “mirror checking”, taking part in social comparisons (for example, by camouflaging with other muscular men), and experience greater body dissatisfaction. All of these factors manifest through dysfunctional eating patterns, heightened use of anabolic steroids, and mood, anxiety and/or eating disorders.² It has been estimated that 5-10% of weightlifters experience MD.¹³

Although there are a limited number of studies in the area of muscle dysmorphia and more generally in males, some have been able to provide insights regarding participants diagnosed with MD.¹⁰

An important question to ask is whether certain male age groups experience more symptoms relating to body appearance than others (i.e., younger vs. older men) and are there differences in the types of body concerns they have based on age? It was found that symptoms of MD begin to show at 19 years of age; however, this can range anywhere from 16-18 years old.^{9,10} Specifically, researchers found that individuals with MD spend more than three hours a day contemplating on how to become more muscular, believe that they have little power over their weightlifting routines, justified a reason for exercise and diet regimes to interfere with their daily lives, and have an avoidance for social activities due to insecurities regarding their muscular appearance.^{10,14,15}

Looking like Superman: Achieving this Vision, the Ultimate Goal

A popular question on this topic is: Does having more muscle mean you are more of a man?

Muscle mass is a primary dimorphic characteristic between the sexes.¹ For many decades, the male figure has become a defining feature in classifying gender and separating the two groups.¹ Specifically, men with a mesomorphic body shape (the traditional “V-body shape”) have been portrayed as the ideal.¹ The desire for men to achieve this vision stems from the fact that men are habitually judged by their muscularity and their ability to represent signs of power.¹ In particular, researchers have connected “the muscular physique” to power, authority, strength, sexual chivalry, and self-esteem.¹ Therefore, any man appearing as physically weak, small, or faint are immediately associated with femininity, hence the feeling of inadequacy.¹ Therefore, men have acknowledged that the only way to prevent this is by maintaining a muscular body to demonstrate their masculinity.¹ Society must address how cultural factors and other variables relate to the “ideal male” body, simply because men are naturally more muscular. Based on this idea, men may feel the need to consistently appear leaner/more muscular to represent their dominance. Therefore, the value that society has placed on muscularity may provide a justification as to why MD is becoming more common in men and emerging as a psychiatric condition.

The Etiology of Body & Muscle Dysmorphia Disorder

The exact cause of body and muscle dysmorphia is a complex and partially answered question.¹ Researchers have tried to create models that are able to define key traits and characteristics to better analyse the disorder.¹ It has been argued that these disorders originate as a result of sociocultural factors—describing

men that encounter pressures to appear a certain way to meet societal norms set by the media—and cultural factors, as well as family and friends who have a strong influence.¹ However, according to Grieve, the 3 most significant attributes that induce MD are an irregular and unhappy view of one's own body, as well as possession of a specific ideal body image.² In addition to these defining attributes, feelings of perfectionism, low self-esteem, and standards of beauty set by the media have all been identified as underlying causes that lead to the development of body and muscle dysmorphia.¹ Reasons that may account for one's strong fixation on achieving and preserving a muscular physique include fear of powerlessness, feelings of insecurity, childhood bullying, or attempts to compensate for illnesses that make them appear smaller in size.¹ Therefore, these individuals begin a fitness journey rooted in self-control, ambition, aspirations, commitment, and self-achievement.¹

However, it is important to mention that not all men who follow a rigorous diet and prioritize regular exercise suffer from body or muscle dysmorphia.¹ Instead, it is specific attributes, such as a fixation on muscle tone and healthy (non-fat) weight gain, that are key indicators of men who suffer from this illness.

The Influence of the Media

The media is a broad term encompassing various types of platforms that have become a major influence in our lives. Various outlets, such as magazines, billboards, the radio, movies, television shows, video games, and action figures have conveyed increasingly impossible body standards. Although pressures from family members, peers, school, athletics, and health professionals influence the perception of oneself, the mass media has become the leading source of pressures related to physical attractiveness.² Traditionally, males have been assumed to be sheltered against the effects of media pressure because the body shapes depicted in media in the past have typically been described as “average”.² However, in the past two decades, male models used in the media (particularly billboards, movies, and television shows) have moved toward a hypermorphomorphic (muscular) shape.² This transition has increased pressure on ordinary males to obtain unreachable standards as a physique.² For example, the number of fitness magazines targeted for men (including the inclusion of unclothed men in such campaigns) have become the norm.² Therefore, there is an increased opportunity for men to be influenced by these muscular models, the same way females have been influenced by skinny women.²

In general, the media creates a social comparison through advertisements. As the number of specific male body types in posters increases, the opportunity and likelihood for such comparison increase amongst

the general public.² A social theory coined by Festinger (a cognitive psychologist who discovered the social comparison and cognitive dissonance theories) states that people evaluate themselves based on a comparison to others.^{2,17} Therefore, if the media constantly portrays men as muscular, this body type becomes a standard that men use for comparison. Consequently, men will be more likely to view their own bodies negatively.² As such, males are becoming increasingly affected by media standards, resulting in a heightened chance of developing BDD or MD.

CONCLUSION

This opinion piece brings forth thoughts on why this area is underrepresented, briefly describes body dysmorphia, and discusses the main areas that cause distress in men. Moreover, it discusses why men are fixated on achieving the “ideal male image”, the possible influences of body dysmorphia, as well as the increasing need to conduct more research on this topic.

Today, research on body and muscle dysmorphia continues to grow in Western and non-Western societies, as the issue of these disorders are becoming more frequent in the population and amongst males. The existing literature has a limited understanding of individuals who suffer from this disorder, and fail to recognize the well-known and obvious features of BD and MD. Furthermore, there is a limited comprehension of these disorders, including diagnosis and categorizing its subtypes, the frequency of the illness (particularly beyond Western societies like in North America, Britain and Australia), its causes, and the effective treatment.¹⁰ The lack of studies on this topic has made it challenging to determine supporting data.

We believe body and beauty standards for both men and women will never fade. Society will always place importance on one's physical appearance. However, it is important that we discuss these challenges as a society, particularly in a manner that allows one to express their true feelings. Women have suffered and worked harder to counter the current cultural standards to achieve inclusive beauty. Despite these steps towards the right direction, we must also recognize that men are newer candidates to this struggle. To conclude, acknowledging this issue is the first step in realizing that this is a problem that men face, and it is through research and helpful conversations that we can make a positive change.

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