



## Threatened masculinity and muscularity: An experimental examination of multiple aspects of muscularity in men



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### ABSTRACT

Two studies examined the threatened masculinity theory of male body dissatisfaction, which posits that threats to masculinity result in increased muscle dissatisfaction. In Study 1, a masculinity threat was followed by tasks examining confidence in physical ability and perceptions of current and ideal body shapes. Results showed that men who experienced a masculinity threat reported lower confidence in their physical ability and perceived themselves as less muscular than men who experienced an affirmation of their masculinity. In Study 2, men were asked to report their intention to increase muscularity and their appearance anxiety following a threat to masculinity. Results showed that men reported lower appearance anxiety and drive for muscularity when their masculinity was threatened than when their masculinity was affirmed. This apparent contradiction can be explained by noting that men may be motivated to deny appearance concerns following a threat to masculinity, as such concerns are equated with femininity.

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### Introduction

In many Western societies today, men are under pressure to display their masculinity through their bodies. The currently idealised male form in Western society is defined by large and well-developed muscularity in the upper torso and arms, a flat, toned stomach, and a slim waist (Morrison, Morrison, & Hopkins, 2003). While this ideal form has existed for quite some time, it has evolved since the mid-1980s to become increasingly (and unrealistically) muscular (Grogan & Richards, 2002; Leit, Pope, & Gray, 2001). Images of male attractiveness are frequently presented through the mass media in representations targeted not only towards men (e.g., advertisements and editorials in men's magazines; Frederick, Fessler, & Haselton, 2005; Ricciardelli, Clow, & White, 2010; Rohlinger, 2002), but also towards women (e.g., Playgirl centrefolds; Leit et al., 2001) and children (e.g., GI Joe and Star Wars action figures; Pope, Olivardia, Gruber, & Borowiecki, 1999), with many of the presented images being highly eroticised and body focused (Rohlinger, 2002).

This increasing focus on male attractiveness is affecting how many men view themselves. It has been consistently found that exposure to images of idealised male bodies can result in lower

body satisfaction for men (Agliata & Tantleff-Dunn, 2004; Barlett & Harris, 2008; Diedrichs & Lee, 2010; Hatoum & Belle, 2004; Vartanian, Giant, & Passino, 2001). Indeed, a substantial minority of college-aged men (Frederick, Forbes, Grigorian, & Jarcho, 2007) and men drawn from general population samples (Frederick, Peplau, & Lever, 2006) are dissatisfied with their bodies, leading many theorists to attempt to understand why this may be the case.

The “threatened masculinity” hypothesis (Mills & D’Alfonso, 2007; Mishkind, Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1986) has been postulated to explain why images of muscular men, and the male body dissatisfaction associated with them, have been consistently increasing (Gray & Ginsberg, 2007). This theory posits that during the late 20th Century increasing gender equality left men with fewer domains in which to assert their ascendancy over women. This was thought to lead to an “identity crisis” in some men, who would then experience a compensatory need to publicly display their masculinity. This need may be embodied through a highly muscular body, as the development of lean muscle mass may prove one way to differentiate men from ostensibly thin and fragile women (Luciano, 2007; Mills & D’Alfonso, 2007; Mishkind et al., 1986; Pope, Phillips, & Olivardia, 2002), although other displays of hyper-masculine behaviour, such as aggression, are also possible (Bosson, Vandello, Burnaford, Weaver, & Wasti, 2009).

In support of threatened masculinity theory, men’s dissatisfaction with muscularity is consistently higher in societies with greater gender equality than where traditional gender hierarchies remain in place (Frederick, Buchanan, et al., 2007). Correlational work has found that men with greater dissatisfaction with their level of muscularity also show higher levels of masculine

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gender role conflict or stress (Mussap, 2008; Schwartz, Grammas, Sutherland, Siffert, & Bush-King, 2010), and endorse more traditional masculine gender roles or attitudes (Martin & Govender, 2011; McCreary, Saucier, & Courtenay, 2005; Steinfeldt, Gilchrist, Halterman, Gomory, & Steinfeldt, 2011; Tager, Good, & Morrison, 2006).

However, despite this supportive evidence, there has been relatively little experimental examination of the area. In one experiment, Mills and D'Alfonso (2007) examined the effect of losing on a competitive anagram task to a female confederate on men's feelings about their appearance and physical confidence. They found that while losing to either gender participant resulted in lowered confidence in physical strength, a loss to a female opponent resulted in a specific reduction in body satisfaction not seen after a loss to a male opponent. This finding provides preliminary experimental support for the link between threatened masculinity and body dissatisfaction, as failure on a task to a woman could be taken to be an indirect threat to masculinity. However, no study has yet examined the effect of a *direct* threat to masculinity on the drive for muscularity.

Moreover, no study has examined how individual differences in trait masculinity or conformity to masculine role norms interact with a masculinity threat to influence body image variables. Trait masculinity refers to the degree to which individuals report possessing personality traits that are traditionally ascribed to men (Kahn, 2009), and conformity to masculine role norms refers to the degree to which individuals attempt to conform to the dominant masculinity norms in contemporary Western culture (Mahalik et al., 2003). A recent meta-analysis has shown that these variables are consistently linked to dissatisfaction with muscularity in men, with trait masculinity displaying a negative relationship and conformity to masculine norms a positive relationship with body dissatisfaction (Blashill, 2011). Previous research has also generally found that men with higher levels of masculine traits or of conformity to masculine role norms show a stronger response to masculinity threats (Maass, Cadinu, Guarnieri, & Grasselli, 2003; Parrott & Zeichner, 2003; Reidy, Shirk, Sloan, & Zeichner, 2009; Schmitt & Branscombe, 2001; Siebler, Sabelus, & Bohner, 2008). Thus, it is likely that men higher in trait masculinity or conformity to masculine norms would show greater effects on body image related variables compared to men lower in trait masculinity or conformity to masculine norms. This hypothesis was examined in the current studies.

The aim of the current studies was to examine a full range of different aspects of the drive for muscularity and how they are influenced by a threat to masculinity. A prototypicality threat to masculinity, which involved threatening an individual man's status as a typical man, was used (Schmitt & Branscombe, 2001). This form of threat was selected as it involves a direct challenge to individuals' masculinity. Based on threatened masculinity theory of male body dissatisfaction (Mishkind et al., 1986), it was hypothesised that men would show increased dissatisfaction with their muscularity following such a direct threat to masculinity. A variety of measures of men's body image were chosen, with Study 1 utilising an indirect measure of physical confidence and a measure based on perception of body shape, and Study 2 utilising more direct measures of affective and cognitive aspects of body image.

### Study 1: Physical Confidence and Appraisal of Current Body Shape

Study 1 examined whether a masculinity threat would decrease men's confidence in their current level of physical strength and lead them to appraise their body as being less muscular. As a behavioural index of confidence in physical ability, participants were asked to

complete push-ups, and to estimate how many they thought they would be able to do. This paradigm has been used previously to demonstrate changes in men's confidence in their physical ability (Mills & D'Alfonso, 2007), and it was hypothesised that a threat to masculinity would decrease men's confidence in their physical ability.

As a measure of appraisals of body shape, participants were presented with an array of male figures, and asked to identify which one best matches their current figure, and which one best matches their ideal figure. Individual selections of figures were examined, rather than the discrepancy between the ideal and current figure, given the conceptual and psychometric problems inherent in examining difference scores on figure array measures (Cafri & Thompson, 2004; Cafri, van den Berg, & Brannick, 2010). It was hypothesised that a masculinity threat would alter men's appraisal of figure representations, such that their perceived current level of muscularity would be lower than when men are affirmed in their masculinity, or their ideal level of muscularity would be higher, or both.

Finally, the individual difference variable of conformity to masculine norms was examined. It was predicted that men who score higher on this construct would show greater dissatisfaction with their current level of muscularity (Blashill, 2011). More importantly, given that individuals who feel more committed to their gender group display greater effects of a masculinity threat (Schmitt & Branscombe, 2001), it was predicted that those higher in conformity to masculine norms would display greater effects of a masculinity threat in the directions hypothesised above. Items related to variables that may influence men's perception of their physical strength or their body shape, such as body mass index and current level of gym use and fitness, were included as potential covariates.

## Method

### Participants

Sixty-nine male first year psychology students participated in the study. Eighteen participants were excluded from analyses for reporting a non-heterosexual sexual orientation ( $n=10$ ), poor English comprehension ( $n=3$ ), or reporting some suspicion regarding the experimental manipulation ( $n=5$ ; although no participants correctly guessed the true hypotheses of the research, the excluded participants noted that they were either suspicious of the false feedback or correctly identified that body dissatisfaction was under investigation). Non-heterosexual participants were excluded as they may react differently to a threat to masculinity, and were not present in large enough numbers for a statistically valid comparison to be made. The remaining 51 participants on whom analyses were conducted had an average age of 19.00 years ( $SD=2.07$ ), and an average BMI based on self-reported height and weight of 22.39 ( $SD=2.19$ ). The majority reported European ethnicity ( $n=26$ ; East or South-East Asian,  $n=14$ ; South Asian,  $n=3$ ; Middle Eastern,  $n=2$ ; Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander,  $n=1$ ; Other,  $n=5$ ).

### Measures

**Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory.** The Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory (CMNI; Mahalik et al., 2003) was used to assess the degree to which participants attempt to conform to the dominant masculinity norms in contemporary Western culture. The CMNI is a 94-item inventory that examines behaviours and cognitions related to 11 different masculine norms (Emotional Control, Dominance, Power over Women, Disdain for Homosexuals, Primacy of Work, Playboy, Risk Taking, Self-reliance, Pursuit of Status, Violence, Winning). Each item is scored on a 4-point scale

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