



# The effects of exposure to slender and muscular images on male body dissatisfaction



Rachel Galioto\*, Janis H. Crowther

Kent State University, Kent, OH, United States

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## ABSTRACT

This research examined the effects of appearance-based comparisons to muscular and slender idealized male bodies and the contribution of internalization and social comparison to change in body dissatisfaction. Participants were 111 male undergraduates who completed measures of body dissatisfaction, internalization, and social comparison and viewed images of either muscular or slender men in advertisements or product-only advertisements. Results indicated that exposure to both muscular and slender images was associated with an increase in body dissatisfaction, with no significant differences in the change in body dissatisfaction between the two image conditions. Internalization and trait social comparison were each associated with an increase in body dissatisfaction; however, upward social comparison was only a significant predictor of a change in body dissatisfaction for the males who viewed muscular images. These results highlight the impact of slender models on young men's body dissatisfaction and support the examination of media literacy interventions with this population.

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## Introduction

Research on male body image has found that dissatisfaction with one's body has become a pervasive problem for men, with between 68% and 95% of adult males in the United States reporting dissatisfaction (Jung, Forbes, & Chan, 2010; Mishkind, Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1986; Neighbors & Sobal, 2007). Body dissatisfaction refers to negative and dysfunctional feelings and cognitions regarding one's body (Garner, 2002), and has been linked to numerous negative outcomes among men, including steroid use, disordered eating, muscle dysmorphia, depression, and low self esteem (e.g., Blashill, 2010; Grieve, 2007).

The primary body concern for males is their muscularity. In a qualitative study, Ridgeway and Tylka (2005) found that most participants reported a desire to increase muscularity. In quantitative studies, dissatisfaction with muscle size has been found in 83–90% of participants (Frederick et al., 2007; Tiggemann, Martins, & Churchett, 2008). In addition, research indicates that males face pressure to be very lean, which leads to concerns about body weight. In two different qualitative studies, Ridgeway and Tylka (2005) and Bottamini and Ste-Marie (2006) found that an important component of the desired ideal body image was leanness. Research suggests that around 50% of adult males report a desire

to lose weight (Neighbors & Sobal, 2007; Phillips & de Man, 2010; Tiggemann et al., 2008). Taken together, it is apparent that males experience significant body dissatisfaction and have a desire to obtain a muscular and lean body.

These body ideals are portrayed in the media. For men, the current media standard for attractiveness is tall, muscular and lean (e.g., Tiggemann, Martins, & Kirkbride, 2007). This ideal has become increasingly dramatic as evidenced by the increases in muscularity in *Playgirl* centerfolds and male action figures (Baghurst, Hollander, Nardella, & Haff, 2006; Leit, Pope, & Gray, 2001). Paralleling the trend toward increasing muscularity is a trend toward toned rather than very muscular bodies (e.g., Ricciardelli, Clow, & White, 2010). In the past decade, the fashion industry has come to favor much slimmer fitting clothing styles (Jones, 2004), which has resulted in the slimming down of many male models (Trebay, 2008).

Research has shown a positive association between media consumption and body dissatisfaction in men (Jonason, Krmar, & Sohn, 2009). Morry and Staska (2001) found that increased exposure to male fitness magazines was related to a greater concern with physical appearance. In addition, many experimental studies support the idea that mere exposure to muscular images negatively impacts body esteem and is related to an increase in body dissatisfaction (Agliata & Tantleff-Dunn, 2004; Arbour & Ginnis, 2006; Baird & Grieve, 2006; Grogan, Williams, & Conner, 1996; Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2002; Lorenzen, Grieve, & Thomas, 2004). However, this finding has not been universal as some studies have found no effect on body dissatisfaction (e.g., Hobza, Walker, Yakushko, & Peugh, 2007; Johnson, McCreary, & Mills, 2007; Morrison, Kalin, & Morrison, 2004), highlighting the need to investigate other factors

\* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, Kent State University, 360 Kent Hall, Kent, OH 44242, United States. Tel.: +1 330 672 2166; fax: +1 330 672 3786.

E-mail addresses: [rgalioto@kent.edu](mailto:rgalioto@kent.edu), [rmgalioto@gmail.com](mailto:rmgalioto@gmail.com) (R. Galioto).

that may influence this relationship. Additionally, while much of the research in this area has examined the effects of exposure to muscular images, only one study has examined the effects of exposure to thin male models on body dissatisfaction. [Ogden and Munday \(1996\)](#) found that exposure to thin male models, defined as images that represent male beauty standards, decreased a male's perception of his own attractiveness.

The Tripartite Influence Model may provide a useful framework to explain media influence on body dissatisfaction in men. The Tripartite Influence Model ([Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999](#)) suggests that familial, peer and media influences, such as the portrayal of ideal body types, affect body dissatisfaction through the mediating pathways of internalization of ideals and social comparison. Internalization refers to adopting the ideal social body figure as a personal goal and standard ([Jones, 2004](#)). Social comparison refers to comparing one's standing on a dimension to that of another ([Festinger, 1954](#)). Although this model has not been widely investigated in men, research has provided empirical support for its utility in examining male body dissatisfaction ([Karzsia & Crowther, 2009, 2010](#); [Smolak, Murnen, & Thompson, 2005](#)).

Research has found that internalization is associated with increased body dissatisfaction in males (i.e., [Grammas & Schwartz, 2009](#); [Karzsia & Crowther, 2010](#)). [Daniel and Bridges \(2010\)](#) found that one of the strongest predictors of the drive for muscularity was the internalization of media ideals. Interestingly, [Knauss, Paxton, and Alsaker \(2007\)](#) found that adolescent boys had significantly lower scores on measures of internalization than adolescent girls. However, internalization predicted body dissatisfaction in adolescent boys, suggesting that although males may not internalize media ideals to the same extent as females, when they do, they may experience body dissatisfaction.

Social comparison theory ([Festinger, 1954](#)) hypothesizes that when people need information on some aspect of their own performance, they compare themselves to others. The theory makes three important assumptions: (1) people compare themselves to relevant others (such as peers) to gauge their standing on some dimension; (2) comparison to one who is superior on a given dimension, called an upward comparison, tends to lower self esteem, while comparison to someone inferior on that dimension, called a downward comparison, improves self-esteem; and (3) people tend to compare themselves to others who are inferior to themselves because of its self-enhancing or self-protective function. [Strahan, Wilson, Cressman, and Buote \(2006\)](#) found that when referencing appearance, men made more downward than upward comparisons and compared themselves to relevant others more than to professional models. Similarly, [Karzsia and Crowther \(2009\)](#) found that men make body comparisons to targets that they perceive as similar, such as peers, and targets that have desirable physical qualities, such as athletes, more frequently than other targets, such as siblings, fathers and men in the media.

However, [Strahan et al. \(2006\)](#) also found that when cultural norms about appearance were made salient, professional models were judged to be as relevant as peers and social comparisons were elicited. Upward comparisons to professional models resulted in participants feeling more negatively about their appearance. Recent research has suggested that the impact of upward social comparisons depends on the relevance of the comparison target, or perceived similarity, to the individual ([Collins, 1996](#)). In a study by [Arbour and Ginnis \(2006\)](#), men were exposed to images of either muscular or hypermuscular (e.g., bodybuilder) images. Participants who viewed the muscular images experienced an increase in body dissatisfaction. However, participants exposed to the hypermuscular images did not experience a change in body dissatisfaction. This suggests that men may not make comparisons when they judge the target to be irrelevant.

Experimental evidence supports the importance of social comparison in understanding the association between exposure to media images and changes in body dissatisfaction. For example, [Morrison et al. \(2004\)](#) found that while exposure to ideal images in media outlets did not predict body dissatisfaction or weight control practices, social comparison to those images negatively impacted appearance self-esteem and was associated with an increase in body image investment. In another study, men showed a significant decrease in body esteem after viewing images of ideal male bodies and the authors concluded that exposure led to upward comparison, which led to decreases in body esteem ([Grogan et al., 1996](#)).

To our knowledge, only two studies have directly measured (rather than inferred) social comparison ([Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2004, 2009](#)). Both of these studies found that it was not the absolute frequency of social comparisons that affected body dissatisfaction, but the direction. Specifically, participants who made more *upward* social comparisons experienced greater body dissatisfaction. These findings highlight the importance of including measurements of the direction of social comparisons, rather than assuming that any comparison made to a media image will be upward. Additionally, these studies may help to clarify the findings of studies which have found no association between exposure and body dissatisfaction.

### The Present Study

As an adaptation of previous studies (e.g., [Arbour & Ginnis, 2006](#)), the present study examined the effects of appearance-based comparisons to muscular and slender idealized male bodies as presented in the media using three conditions: (1) exposure to slender idealized media images in advertisements, (2) exposure to muscular idealized images in advertisements and (3) exposure to product-only advertisements, which served as a control condition. It was hypothesized that exposure to images of muscular and slender images would elicit an increase in body dissatisfaction. Furthermore, given that exposure to muscular images is more common (e.g., [Baghurst et al., 2006](#)), it was hypothesized that exposure to the muscular images would elicit a significantly greater change in body dissatisfaction than exposure to slender images. It was also hypothesized that greater internalization and greater upward social comparisons would each be associated with an increase in body dissatisfaction resulting from exposure.

The present study extends previous research on the consequences of media exposure in several ways. To our knowledge, no study has examined the impact of both muscular and slender images; thus, we included both conditions. Moreover, although one previous study found that images of thin males were associated with decreased body satisfaction among males ([Ogden & Munday, 1996](#)), the authors did not describe the selection of these images, which were presented in "varying degrees of exposed body" (p. 174). Thus, it is not known to what extent their images were representative of the muscular ideal. For this research, a pilot study was conducted to identify images perceived as very muscular and very slender for the two conditions, respectively. Moreover, all images in the present study were presented shirtless, thus controlling for degree of exposure. Finally, the measures chosen for the present study were those with good psychometric characteristics that have been used or adapted for use with male undergraduate samples (e.g., [Heatherton & Polivy, 1991](#); [Karzsia & Crowther, 2008](#)).

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 114 undergraduate males enrolled at a public Midwestern university. Three participants were excluded from the

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