

Image is Everything Health is Nothing: Health Implications of the Quest for Ideal Male Body Image

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Abstract

Most literature on body image perception is about women, portraying a false notion that men are not affected by the quest for an ideal body image. This paper reviews existing literature on ideal body image to bring out the fact that men are also culprits of an ideal body image and many times at the expense of their health. Included in the review are; what constitutes an ideal male body image, factors that influence body image and the health implications of the quest for an ideal male body image. The paper links the outcome of the quest for an ideal body image to issues of male reproductive health.

Key words: Ideal body image, male sexuality, reproductive health

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Introduction

Sexuality is an important part of people's lives, yet the diversity of human experience is all too often reduced to factual information, dire data and warnings (Cornwall and Jolly, 2006). Thus, there is little to anchor sexual connections to the real situation and the real bodies. Sexuality lies at the core of what makes us fully human; it is the key to our capacity to contribute positively and fully to society. And it matters because the silences, the myths, the taboos and the expectations that surround sex reinforce unhelpful, awkward and obstructive stereotypes that can be problematic for both men and women (Foucault, 1990). Sexuality is important to people because it is related to giving and receiving pleasure.

An important aspect of sexuality and pleasure is body image. And it is not just body image, rather the ideal body image that counts in pleasure seeking, giving and receiving. In

the context of this paper, the concern is the health dimensions of the quest for the ideal male body image in the contemporary Kenyan society.

Generally men's issues with body image are not much published possibly a result of two dissonant cultural attitudes; the first suggesting that any overweight is inherently negative and the second suggesting that a man who is preoccupied with his appearance is effeminate and silly. These two put men in a precarious position when they discuss or write about their bodies (Brown, 2005). Additionally, the conflicting cultural pressures put men in a difficult position with few sanctioned outlets for discussing their feelings about their bodies seriously, but with plenty of reasons and opportunities to measure, compare and become anxious. This paper reviews literature on the ideal male body image and brings out the fact that image at the expense of health is not everything.

So what is the ideal body image? In anthropological terms, the ideal body image has to do with the socially and culturally

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defined body size and shape and which is considered erotic or sexually attractive. In this case body image is not restricted to the physical body. In looking at the ideal body image, therefore, anthropologists have postulated that the body is physical, mental as well as spiritual. Thus, many factors influence the feelings we have about our bodies and whether or not they are ideal. Some of the common factors are media images, family attitudes; lack of accurate health information and facts, childhood experiences and the significant others.

Ideally men are virile, capable of impregnating women and producing their own biological children. Men are relatively invulnerable to danger; they are able to withstand the hazards and risks of the public world, and capable of denying the pains of the human body and the suffering of others. In many societies, men are the protectors of women, children and the society. Men can fight wars, accept threats of bodily harm and shield others from external risk. The man who fulfils these functions is a worker, soldier, and a father, dependent on no one and does not need protection or assistance from others. Then such a man has to be handsome, big, tall, athletic, wealthy, intelligent and strong. These are the images of an ideal man in many societies around the world including Kenya. To achieve the status of this image, one has to keep his body in shape, has to eat (a lot of 'masculine') food, dress appropriately and work in the 'appropriate profession'. Appropriate profession is culturally defined and concepts of appropriateness vary from one society to the next. But then, there are hurdles to overcome in the quest for this body image and some of the obstacles have grave health implications for the individuals pursuing the ideal image.

In many of the countries in the West, a slim figure is considered both attractive and

healthy. In addition, many fat people are discriminated by their employers and others who assume that they are lazy, and lack character or self-restraint (Bryant *et al.*, 1985). The image of the ideal body type of the slim, attractive female is portrayed throughout the popular culture. Film stars, television personalities, advertisements and fashion models, toys all reflect the definition of the beautiful female as the one who is thin. Men are also depicted as slim (Brown, 2005). The desire to be thin is also shared by the Cretans who reportedly had a drug that allowed them to eat all they wanted but remain slender. The Spartans as well as the Athenians were sticklers about fat. In the sixteenth century, some people swallowed sand in order to irritate their stomachs, thus limiting food intake (Bryant *et al.*, 1985).

On the other side of the coin, obesity is the ideal body image for many cultures. Fat is often viewed as a symbol of wealth and the luxury of inactivity and overeating as a sign of good health. In West Africa, the brides-to-be go through a fattening process and are secluded in special houses to indulge in food for several weeks and up to one year depending on their wealth. The Samoans traditionally placed a high value on obesity as a sign of high social status (Connelly and Hanna, 1978). Among the Peruvians, a slim person will be considered as looking sickly and unattractive and among the ladies, may not attract a husband. In the past European societies also admired the obese. This is depicted in their art. Many artists chose obese subjects to depict beauty. Thus, cultural definitions of ideal body types change through time.

One's perception of how their body looks forms their body image. Interestingly, a perfectly-toned 20 year old fitness model could have a very poor body image, while an average-shaped 50 year old man or woman could have a great body image. Regardless of

how closely one's actual figure resembles their perception; their body image can affect their self-esteem, their eating and exercise behaviors, and their relationships with others.

Chiseled pectorals, bulging biceps and a washboard-flat stomach are the societal images of today's 'ideal' male body (McDonald, 2002). In struggling to live up to this image, many young men in the United States are developing eating disorders. In Kenya attempts to achieve the ideal body image can be seen in the increase in the number of gyms and their attendance and even the mushrooming of homemade gyms using homemade equipment.

Appearance is strongly tied to readings of character, in essence, despite moral protestations against such judgments, how people look determines to varying degrees how others judge them, and often how they judge themselves (Brown, 2005).

Factors Influencing Body Image

Media: Portrayals of idealized masculine males in the media, like their female counterparts, are controversial for what some see as promoting an unrealistic or unachievable ideal.

The ideal male body image has been perpetuated over time and is depicted as military, big, strong and bulky. Such a man is equated with success and considered a hero. But since body image change cyclically, the question to ask is then who or what defines the acceptable body size at any given time in history? Recent theories propose that body image and its related disturbances are strongly influenced by socio-cultural factors, most notably through the mass media and through social interactions (Heinberg, 1996). A study by Pope *et al.* (1999) on the changing shapes of toys and characters in movies shows an increasing muscularity of boys' action figures. They further assert that the toys which in successive remodeling over the past 20 years

have acquired the physiques of body-builders. These body ideals are reinforced every day on television shows, movies, magazine covers, and even video games.

Young men are constantly exposed—through television, movies, magazines, and other sources—to an idealized male body image that is far more muscular than an average man (Pope *et al.*, 2000). According to Stibbe (2004), men's health problems and behaviors can be linked to the socialized gender role of men in our culture. In exploring magazines, he found that they promote traditional masculinity and claims that, among other things, men's magazines tend to celebrate 'male' activities and behavior such as admiring guns, fast cars and wrestling among others. In men's magazines, several 'ideal' images of men that may even entail certain health risks are promoted. The results of a study on attitudes toward male body image among the Arian community of northern Kenya (Campbell *et al.*, 2005) support the role that media exposure plays in forming attitudes about male body image.

Family/peer pressure: Pressure from family and peers is also another factor that influences one's body image. Great pressure to be thin or super muscular in order to be accepted by peers and potential romantic partners exists. By making constant comments about their weight or their friends or children and enforcing lots of food restrictions on themselves or their friends or children, friends and parents may be consciously or unconsciously passing a message that one needs to be thin or muscular in order to be accepted and loved.

Cultural and Socioeconomic factors: Socioeconomic status may be a factor affecting body image in traditional culture in which greater wealth means improved diet (Altabe, 1996). Thus a bigger fuller body especially in Africa, is associated with 'doing

well' and being 'well fed'. Bordo (1993) notes that the general feminine reluctance to describe size and the masculine tendency to emphasize both size and appetite corresponds to our cultural expectations for different gender relationships with size and appetite. However, Nasser (2005) asserts that there is a strong indication that cultural change, that is, the identification with Western norms in relation to body weight, is consistently followed with an increase in weight consciousness and the risk of developing eating disorders. These cultural meanings associated with fatness affects people's receptivity to professional advice thus an understanding of cultural conceptions of body image is important to health practitioners.

Ideal Body Image, is it Attainable?

People's weight and body composition are determined by a number of factors. Some of these factors (such as calorie intake and level of physical activity) can be manipulated. But other factors (such as your body type, bone structure, the way you store fat and other genetic variables) cannot be manipulated. Most people simply lack the raw materials to build the 'ideal' body, regardless of how strict they are with their eating and exercise regimens. Each person inherits a specific body type. Even though the media would have us think otherwise, there are really many healthy and normal body types. For ease of reference, body types have been categorized into three main types, and those types have been further categorized as blends of the three main types. Therefore, many individuals may not necessarily fit into a single body type but may fall somewhere in between. Each body type has advantages over the others for certain activities, but a person with any body type can be healthy and fit and look great.

Ectomorphs are generally tall and thin and have long arms and legs. These people have

difficulty gaining weight and muscle no matter how much they eat or how hard they weight train. They have the body type you tend to see in ballet dancers, models, long-distance runners, and some basketball players.

Mesomorphs are generally muscular, shorter, and have stocky arms and legs. These people are strong and tend to gain muscle mass when they do strength training. They may find it difficult to lose weight, but they excel in power sports like soccer, softball, vaulting in gymnastics, sprinting events in track and field.

Endomorphs are generally shaped like apples or pears and carry more body fat. Their bodies resist losing weight and body fat no matter how restrictive they are with their eating. In fact, the more they 'diet,' the more their metabolisms slow down to resist weight loss. These people are better able to handle long periods of starvation and famine (which was a benefit to early humans). Sports they excel at are distance swimming, field events, and weight lifting.

Body Image and Health

Thinness and muscularity may be desirable for aesthetics rather than fitness, health or social reasons. Those who desire thinness aesthetically may value that aesthetic above all other values including health. However, others may find that healthful benefits are a happy side effect of achieving weight loss motivated by aesthetics (Brown, 2005). The literature on body image perception in men is limited yet; accumulating evidence suggests that many men also suffer from disorders characterized by altered perceptions of their bodies (Olivardia *et al.*, 1995; Mangweth *et al.*, 1997). In some cases, cultural images of ideal body size and the methods used to achieve them have serious health consequences. Both very thin and very fat people have increased morbidity and mortality. Obesity is linked to increased risk of heart attacks, strokes,

diabetes, hypertension and other problems. Health problems linked to thin people are still not well documented but include greater risks from infectious diseases such as tuberculosis. Other health problems arise from culturally prescribed means of achieving the ideal shape. Today some men take hormones with potentially carcinogenic or other adverse health consequences in an attempt to build bigger muscles.

The physical and emotional consequences of chronic dieting are irritability, poor concentration, depression, apathy, fatigue and social isolation. Excessive exercise can cause overuse injuries (like stress fractures), fatigue, sleep disturbances, reduction of sex hormones. Furthermore, too much exercise can actually prevent fitness gains. For example, if one does not give their muscles adequate time to recover between resistance training sessions, they cannot rebuild and grow. In addition, use of homemade equipments as in Kenya; especially the weights which may not be standard could have a negative effect on one's body. The types of exercise men engage in have the stated goal to build muscles for the sake of building muscles and possessing a physique that takes up space. For men, the crucial issues are often not how big they are in terms of pounds, but what makes up their body, fat or lean muscle mass. Men celebrate the 'bulk' developed since enhanced muscularity is seen to correspond to enhanced confidence (Brown, 2005).

A study by Leone and Fetro (2007) on perceptions and attitudes towards steroid use in America shows that respondents were in agreement that media trends and perceptions of the ideal male body are becoming 'superhuman' and unattainable without chemical means. As body ideal moves steadily away from body reality, some vulnerable men may be more likely to develop muscle dysmorphia (Pope *et al.*, 1997),

anabolic steroid abuse or dependence (Brower *et al.*, 1994) or other psychiatric disorders.

Eating Disorders

The two most common types of eating disorders are *anorexia nervosa* and *bulimia nervosa*, more commonly known as anorexia and bulimia. The two disorders can be difficult to distinguish from each other because they have similar characteristics: With both anorexia and bulimia, the person will have a distorted image of his or her body. That person will seem to be obsessed with what he or she eats.

People with anorexia have an intense fear of being fat. When a person has anorexia, he or she hardly eats at all—and the small amount of food that is eaten becomes an obsession. A person with anorexia may weigh food before eating it or compulsively count the calories of everything. It is not unusual for a person with anorexia to also exercise excessively in an attempt to lose weight. A unique feature of anorexia is not only the strong desire to be very thin, but also the altered body perception that goes with it. Even though they might be shedding pounds at a dangerous rate, people with anorexia don't see themselves as thin. An individual with anorexia can look in the mirror and actually see a fat person.

Bulimia is a bit different from anorexia because the person with bulimia doesn't avoid eating. Instead, he or she eats a large amount of food then gets rid of it quickly by vomiting or taking laxatives. This is commonly known as 'binge and purge' behavior. Unlike anorexia, you can't always tell by looking whether a person has bulimia. In fact, someone with bulimia may appear average or even above average in weight.

Both anorexia and bulimia tend to affect females more than males, but 10% of the people with eating disorders are male and, because we typically think of eating disorders as only affecting females, male patients often

go unrecognized. Body image disturbance often goes unnoticed because men tend to look healthy or engage in what is typically seen as healthy behaviors, like working out. While working out is healthy, excessive exercise can be detrimental if it is done in order to allay the fear or anxiety accompanying an unhealthy body image (McDonald, 2002).

Also, recent studies of athletes have described a converse syndrome: men who perceive themselves as small and frail when in fact they are large and muscular. This syndrome was previously called 'reverse anorexia nervosa' (Pope *et al.*, 1993) but subsequently renamed 'muscle dysmorphia' (Pope *et al.*, 1997). Individuals with muscle dysmorphia may exhibit striking psychiatric morbidity. For example, they may refuse to allow their bodies to be seen in public settings; they may relinquish important social, recreational, or occupational activities to work out compulsively at the gym; and they may abuse anabolic steroids in an attempt to overcome their chronic preoccupation that they look too small.

Effects of Eating Disorders

While only a small percentage of people meet the strict diagnostic criteria for an eating disorder, many people struggle with food, weight, and/or body image concerns. These concerns may result in restrictive dieting, emotional overeating, compulsive exercise, use of various weight loss products or muscle building agents, cigarette smoking, or excessive caffeine consumption (Grogan, 1999). Not only can these disordered behaviors damage one's physical health, but they can also compromise one's emotional well-being, social life, and academic success.

Whatever the cause of an eating disorder, the effects can be damaging; if not downright devastating and life threatening. People who weigh at least 15% less than the normal weight

for their height may not have enough body fat to keep their organs and other body parts healthy. A person with anorexia can do damage to the heart, liver, and kidneys by not eating enough. The body slows everything down as if it were starving, causing a drop in blood pressure, pulse, and breathing rate. Lack of energy can lead people with anorexia to feel light-headed and unable to concentrate. Anemia and swollen joints are common in people with anorexia, as are brittle bones. Anorexia can cause a person's hair to fall out, fingernails to break off, and a soft hair called lanugo to grow all over the skin. In severe cases, eating disorders can lead to severe malnutrition and even death.

People with bulimia often have constant stomach pain. In fact, bulimia can actually cause a person's teeth to decay because of the acids that come up into the mouth due to vomiting. The person may also develop 'chipmunk cheeks,' which occur when the salivary glands permanently expand from throwing up so often. And, most dangerous of all, the constant purging can lead to a loss of the mineral potassium, which can contribute to heart problems and even death. The emotional pain of an eating disorder can take its toll, too. When a person becomes obsessed with weight, it's hard to concentrate on much else. Many times people with eating disorders become withdrawn and less social.

Is there hope?

People with eating disorders can get well and gradually learn to eat normally again. Because anorexia and bulimia involve both the mind and body, medical doctors, mental health professionals, and dietitians will often be involved in a person's treatment and recovery. Therapy or counseling is a critical part of treating eating disorders—in many cases, family therapy is one of the keys to eating healthy again. Parents and family members are

important in helping a person see that their normal body shape is perfectly fine and that being thin doesn't make anyone happy.

Ideal Body Image and Reproductive Health

Ideals of reproductive masculinity codify the male body as relatively invulnerable to external harm and as a result produce a general denial of men's illnesses and injuries, especially when they are disorders of the reproductive system. There is a general and well entrenched belief that a man's masculinity is directly proportional to his ability to satisfy a woman's sexual needs. Auxiliary to this belief is the idea that a man's masculinity is proportional to the size of his penis. Thus, it is very clear to many men that penis size represents not only "him" but also his male power: and if that is true then the larger the penis, the greater the sense of male power they would have, and the more fully they would feel that their basic male instincts were being fulfilled. In other words, a large penis represents the power of masculinity a man feels during sex, when he is taking the body and - perhaps - the soul of the woman with whom he is mating.

Additionally, many receptive partners, in this case women, believe that they (will) get more pleasure if their penetrative partner has a large penis. Hence, males with (presumably) large penis are preferred as they are perceived to be more masculine and, therefore, more pleasure giving (Hazra, 2006). This is the basis of the adage "size matters". And of course this 'size matters' belief contributes the enhancement or diminishing of a man's sexual appeal, which is the basis of male body identity (Hazra, 2006). There is a stereotype of penis size (and masculinity) varying between races ranging from small for Asian men and huge for Black men. There isn't much data to support this stereotype, and it could be difficult to find any volunteers, but most

literature appears to support this impression (Daniels, 2006).

Because of the increasing number of people who think that having a larger penis is worth all the effort, several companies have been coming up with different ways on how to help those who are not so gifted down there. For instance, penis enlargement tools are rampant in the market, including penis pumps. Some men even undergo surgical procedures such as phalloplasty, a male organ enlargement surgery, just so that the size of their penis gets the necessary approval.

But for those who are not yet convinced to go all out and take drastic procedures for the penis enlargement desires, supplements that are made of natural ingredients are also available. For many men and women, going for the alternative option of supplements is deemed safer and less risky, and thus, is much more appealing.

It is imperative to examine and interrogate such ideals of masculinity as regards body image. Such ideals are double edged, for while they perpetuate assumptions about the superior strength of the male body, they lead to neglect of male reproductive health needs. They also lead to the pursuit of an unrealizable male body image. This indeed may lead to serious health complications for men who are besotted by the quest for this body image (Daniels, 2006).

When we examine the assumption that men are powerful and strong, the logical conclusion is that the male reproductive body is seen as less susceptible to hazards of the world than the female body. Because of this, andrology, the study of male reproductive health has been historically ignored. Men are assumed to be virile, ideally capable of fathering their own children. Thus, although reproductive technologies and medical interventions exist that can make it possible for infertile men to become fathers, the

infertility of men is still understudied, a source of personal shame, and shrouded in comparative secrecy. This is because male infertility and physical vulnerability is an affront to the ideal male body image.

Conclusion

The ideal male body image is a generalized picture perpetuated by the media. It is unrealistic because given our biological differences and diversity, not everyone can be tall, muscular and lean. Also physical attractiveness is about much more than body shape and size. It also matters how you present yourself (sometimes a good hair cut or bright smile can make a big difference), or if you are a fun person to be with, just as examples. People who come across as too perfect are often intimidating. It's important to know that one can do other things to improve their appearance without focusing exclusively on their body shape and size. One must realize that they cannot change body type, and try not to compare himself to others. Each one is unique.

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