

Social media portrayal of male body images: A review of literature

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Abstract

The digital age has witnessed a significant shift in the way men perceive and present their bodies, influenced by societal norms and online content. The influencers and fitness trends that are being presented on various social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube are playing a significant role in shaping the male body ideals. In this backdrop, the present study while relying on the existing literature aimed to study the social media portrayal of male body images in the contemporary times. It attempted to gain insights into the impact of media on individuals and society, and address its consequences on an individual's self-perception and body dissatisfaction. The findings of this study have been presented under five broad themes including: (1) evolution of masculinity from cleanliness to makeup and fitness, (2) ways of portraying male body images on social media platforms, (3) influence of male body portrayal across age groups, (4) implications of portrayal on men, and (5) the relationship between media portrayal of masculine body and culture. The study concluded that masculinity has evolved drastically from traditional concepts of cleanliness to makeup and fitness in which the emergence of social media has played a pivotal role.

Keywords

Social Media, Portrayal, Body Image, Fitness, Masculinity, Self-perception

Introduction

The widespread use of social media platforms has revolutionized communication dynamics in modern society, dramatically altering

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people's perceptions of themselves as well as cultural norms and perceptions of others. Of all the various representations that are spread via these digital channels, the representation of male body pictures has become a ubiquitous and significant phenomenon that warrants scholarly investigation. This review critically analyzes the large corpus of research on how male bodies are portrayed on social media platforms, examining the complex effects of this on people's views about masculinity, body image, and general well-being.

The objective of this review is to provide a thorough understanding of the complex relationship between social media, the portrayal of male body images, and their implications on individuals and society at large by synthesizing the various findings and insights obtained from the aforementioned and additional scholarly works.

Significance and Scope of the Topic

The analysis of male body image representations on social media is important because it can have a big impact on people's behavior patterns, body image satisfaction, and self-esteem. A growing number of online platforms are displaying idealized and frequently unachievable male body ideals, so it is imperative to comprehend the impact these representations have on a variety of demographics. In addition, the way that social media shapes cultural norms and ideals of masculinity calls for a thorough investigation in order to fully understand the effects that social media has on people's mental health and how society views masculinity.

The representation of male body pictures on social media platforms is the subject of several studies, theoretical frameworks, empirical investigations, and critical assessments, all of which are compiled and synthesized in this study. The scope encompasses investigating how these representations affect views of one's body, psychological well-being, health practices, and wider socio-cultural ramifications in diverse cultural contexts.

Themes of Study

1. Evolution of male body masculinity from cleanliness to makeup and fitness:

Traditional ideas of masculinity at the beginning of the 20th century frequently connected toughness and ruggedness to being a "real man." Frequently, this implied a disregard for personal hygiene and sanitation. Social standards began to shift in the middle of the 20th century, with a greater focus being placed on grooming and personal hygiene. Traditionally, cosmetics have been linked to femininity, and men have

often been discouraged from applying makeup due to social conventions. A "real man" was thought to not require such adornments. Over the past few years, males have become more accepting of makeup and cosmetics. Conventional gender standards have been challenged in part by celebrities, influencers, and the beauty business. Men's makeup brands have become popular, appealing to people who wish to break through preconceptions while improving their appearance. Men began to receive products specifically designed for them in advertisements and the media, which encouraged them to take better care of their looks, *Martin (2001)*. Makeup was not traditionally connected to masculinity. Nonetheless, opinions regarding men's makeup have gradually changed. Products like skincare, hair care, concealer, and foundation have been introduced by the beauty and cosmetics industry to appeal to men. Men are encouraged to experiment with and express their own style as a result of this change in gender norms, *Warhurst, & Nickson. (2007)*. Fitness culture has been more popular in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, as more men are actively involved in bodybuilding and physical exercise. Strength and physical prowess were traditionally associated with being a "real man." This focus on physically occasionally gave rise to stereotypes and strict expectations. With time, the idea of masculinity has expanded to include more qualities, such as an emphasis on physical well-being. The significance of leading a healthy, well-balanced lifestyle that includes regular exercise is now more widely recognized. Men looking to improve their physical and emotional well-being are drawn to the fitness sector because of its wide range of offers, driven by media-perpetrated societal ideals and a growing understanding of the value of leading a healthy lifestyle, *Sabo, D., & Gordon, D. F. (1995)*. It's crucial to remember that masculinity is a concept that differs among cultures, ethnic groups, and socioeconomic statuses. *Connell, & Messerschmidt, (2005)*, state that different groups of men shows their masculinity in varied ways, combining features of cleanliness, grooming, cosmetics, and fitness based on their cultural environment. The continuous transformation of masculinity is a dynamic process that is impacted by both personal displays of identity and societal developments. Realizing that there is no universally applicable definition of masculinity and that there is variability within it is crucial.

2. The ways of portraying male body images on social media platforms

Social, cultural, and personal variables all play a role in the complex phenomena of how men's body images are portrayed on social media platforms. Images on social media that have been significantly altered or filtered frequently promote unattainable physical standards for guys.

This includes incredibly slender, muscular, and often unachievable physiques, which can cause men who don't suit these ideals to feel bad about their bodies and poor self-esteem. Tiggemann, M., and Holland, G. (2016). A common trend emphasizes the importance of rigorous exercise, controlled diets, and frequently the use of steroids or supplements in order to achieve a specific muscular body type. Psychological anguish and unhealthy behaviors might result from the pressure to achieve a specific physical body, Fardouly group (2015). Body Shaming and Joking around men who don't fit the stereotype of an athletic or strong body type, target of bullying or derision on social media, which can negatively impact their mental health and self-esteem, Tiggemann, & Slater (2014). Men's eating disorders, anxiety, sadness, and body dysmorphia can all be attributed to prolonged exposure to idealized male body pictures on social media platforms. Chang and Chua (2016). A culture of comparison is fostered by social media. Men frequently feel unhappy with their physique and have a bad self-perception because they compare them to influencers or celebrities. R. M. Perloff (2014). There are also positive impact on the behaviour of people related to body images through social media. People on social media sites frequently post pictures of males with idealized, strong bodies, reinforcing an aesthetic standard linked to bodybuilding and fitness. Fitness enthusiasts and influencers use Instagram and other platforms to share their diet programs, exercise regimens, and body transformation stories. M. Kimmel (2019).

On social media, there is a growing movement to support body positivity and acceptance of various male body shapes. This includes initiatives that promote self-love and question conventional notions of beauty. In order to promote a more inclusive image of masculinity, content creators publish pictures and narratives that highlight bodies of diverse sizes, shapes, and ethnicities, *Ginsburg and Milne (2018)*. Social networking sites serve as venues for displaying style and fashion. These platforms are frequently used by male influencers to display a variety of fashion looks, which can support a range of masculine stereotypes. This entails questioning established gender standards in the fashion industry and advocating for a more adaptable and inclusive approach to attire and individual style, *Rocamora and Entwistle (2006)*. Authentic and vulnerable areas of their lives, such as difficulties with body image, mental health, and self-esteem, are shared by certain male influencers and celebrities on social media. This method challenges the idea of an ideal that is always flawless and unachievable and instead promotes a more relevant and humanized image of masculinity. *Dillistone, and Muralidharan (2018)*.

3. Influence of social media portrayal of male body images across age groups

The influence of male body portrayal on social media can vary across age groups due to differences in preferences, attitudes, and societal expectations. Social media's glorified portrayals of masculine bodies frequently expose adolescents and young adults, which fuels their desire for a muscular body and creates body dissatisfaction. According to research, this age group experience body image concerns, as a result of exposure to idealized body pictures on social media, which exacerbate pressure to meet social norms, *Peroff (2014)*. A range of body images on social media, such as those that promote fitness, health, and age-appropriate attractiveness, also have an impact on adults and middle-aged people. This age group is prone to social pressure to keep a young appearance, which encourages them to interact with wellness, fitness, and anti-aging content, *Phillips et al (2000)*. The elderly population may be less influenced by traditional standards of attractiveness seen on social media, but they can still be exposed to content promoting healthy aging, senior fitness, and positive representations of older individuals. Content featuring older men in active and positive roles can contribute to challenging ageist stereotypes, *Lamb, S. (2016)*. The influence of male body portrayal on social media can vary across cultural and ethnic groups. Different cultural norms and expectations regarding body image, shape how individuals from diverse backgrounds engage with and respond to body-related content. Studies have highlighted the importance of considering cultural factors in understanding body image perceptions and influences, *Murnen, et al (2017)*. The influence of male body portrayal on social media can also be affected by gender identity and sexual orientation. Different groups engage with content that aligns with their specific experiences and perspectives. LGBTQ+ individuals, for example, seek out content that reflects diverse body types and challenges traditional norms, *Yean et al (2013)*.

4. Implications of social media portrayal of body images on men

The way males are portrayed on social media can have a number of real-world effects on their actions, mental health, and sense of self. Men's false body ideals and body dissatisfaction can be attributed to exposure to idealized male body photos on social media platforms. According to research, seeing pictures of people with strong bodies all the time can make people feel less satisfied with their bodies and more driven to reach unrealistic goals (*Fardouly et al., 2015*). Men's representation on social media, especially when it comes to idealized physical images, can have a

detrimental effect on mental health by raising tension, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. Research has indicated a link between men's poor mental health outcomes and exposure to unrealistic physical ideals, Tiggemann & Holland, 2016. In an effort to obtain the ideal body image, males who are affected by social media depictions may engage in extreme and unhealthy practices like rigorous dieting, excessive exercise, and the improper use of supplements or performance-enhancing drugs. Adherence to impractical physical ideals propagated by social media platforms might result in unhealthy food habits and hazardous health practices, Nagata & Murray (2019). Men's self-esteem and worth might be negatively impacted when they compare themselves to idealized images due to constant exposure to well-chosen and filtered social media information. Research indicates that people who regularly interact with social media content that upholds unattainable body standards could suffer from low self-esteem and a weakened feeling of value, McLean *et al* (2019). Men's views of relationships and social interactions can be influenced by how they are portrayed on social media, which can have an impact on intimacy and self-disclosure. According to Steers *et al.* (2014), unrealistic representations of masculinity influence men's perceptions of their duties in relationships, which also have an impact on communication and emotional expression. Men might feel pressured to conform to idealized body standards seen on social media due to fear of judgment or rejection by peers or society. Unrealistic body ideals promoted on social media, affect sexual health and satisfaction by creating performance anxiety or body-related insecurities among men and it contribute to the objectification of men, reducing them to their physical appearance. So, social media portrayal of male bodies can reinforce rigid gender norms, affecting how men perceive masculinity and their conformity to societal standards.

5. The relationship between Social media portrayal of masculine body image and cultural context.

Social media frequently reflects and upholds the cultural norms surrounding masculinity. For example, slender and strong male bodies are frequently idealized as norms of what it means to be a man in Western cultures (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). Social media representations of male values are heavily influenced by cultural circumstances. Different cultural perspectives, for instance, may elevate particular body shapes or characteristics as ideals of masculinity, which influences the portrayals found online (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014). Certain notions of the masculine body are spread among nations as a result of globalization and social media connectivity. In diverse cultural situations,

this may result in the acceptance of Westernized norms or the convergence of values (Pereira & Martins, 2020). Social media influencers and celebrities play a crucial role in shaping and upholding societal norms surrounding masculinity. Their representation of masculine bodies has the power to either uphold or subvert prevailing societal standards, which affects how followers see them (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014). Social media platforms have the potential to promote a variety of masculinity representations that challenge hegemonic male standards and accommodate a range of cultural perspectives. Community-driven narratives and user-generated content may be the cause of this variability (Pereira & Martins, 2020). The way that different dimensions of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status interact with cultural contexts is known as intersectionality, and it has an impact on how masculine bodies are portrayed on social media (Parent & Moradi, 2011). People's activity on social media is influenced by cultural conventions and beliefs surrounding masculinity. Through their interactions and postings, users have the ability to either challenge or conform to these standards (Chua & Chang, 2016). Cultural norms portrayed on social media can make men feel unhappy with their bodies, particularly if they don't fit the stereotypical ideas of what it means to be a guy in their community (Homan & Tylka, 2014). Hegemonic masculinity can be reinforced by dominant cultural norms that are frequently spread via social media, sustaining power relations and disparities both within and between cultures (Messner & Sabo, 1990). The way that male bodies are portrayed can be affected by efforts to promote cultural sensitivity and regulations governing social media content. These initiatives might try to broaden the scope of representations and lessen the negative effects of constrictive cultural norms (Perloff, 2014). As a result, these points of view highlight the intricate connection between how the masculine body is portrayed in social media and how it is influenced by cultural settings, which include diversity, intersectionality, cultural ideals, and the dynamics of power and representation.

Conclusion

Examining the amount of research on how men's body images are portrayed on social media, a worrying pattern emerges. Social media sites usually promote narrowly defined and unrealistic standards of the male physique, focusing on muscularity, leanness, and an aesthetic that is often out of reach for many guys. Numerous detrimental effects are a result of this representation. First of all, guys who don't meet these norms may experience body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem due to the persistence of unrealistic body standards. Furthermore, the pressure to

develop muscle and follow rigid exercise plans and diets can lead to negative psychological effects and bad habits. This pressure has the potential to worsen issues with body image, which can result in eating disorders, body dysmorphia, and other mental health problems. The culture of comparison fostered by social media further amplifies these negative impacts. Men may constantly compare their bodies to those portrayed by influencers or celebrities, resulting in feelings of inadequacy and perpetuating a cycle of dissatisfaction. Additionally, instances of body shaming and ridicule against men who do not fit the stereotypical muscular physique contribute to a toxic environment, affecting their mental well-being.

Although a growing corpus of study is illuminating these challenges, more investigation is necessary to fully grasp the extent to which social media influences male body image. More realistic and diverse depictions of male bodies are needed on social media to encourage acceptance of one's physical appearance, body positivity, and a positive mindset. One way to lessen the negative impacts of the unrealistic male body pictures that are spread on social media is to encourage conversations about body diversity, challenge stereotypes, and promote self-acceptance. In summary, how men's bodies are portrayed on social media greatly affects people's perceptions, which in turn fuels mental health problems, unrealistic body standards, and bad body image. To address these issues and promote a more welcoming and constructive atmosphere for men's body image depiction on social media, platforms, content producers, and society at large must work together.

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