

Boys and their bodies

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Male bodies are increasingly objectified by mass media. Consider Michael 'The Situation' Sorrentino, a cast member of MTV's Jersey Shore reality show, who garnered fame by flashing his chiseled abs before cameras.

Such objectification should send young men running to gyms or fretting before mirrors, right? Not quite. A new study from Concordia University and the University of Manitoba, published in the journal *Men and Masculinities*, found most boys simply want an average physique.

"Not all boys aspire to have lean, muscular or idealized male bodies that are commonplace in popular culture," says Moss E. Norman, who led the study as a post-doctoral fellow at Concordia's Simone de Beauvoir Institute.

"In many cases, boys who took part in our study were staunchly critical of idealized male images," he continues. "They found it problematic, feminine or vain to be overly concerned with appearances. Sculpted bodies were seen as unnatural, the product of steroids or zealous weight-lifting."

A total of 32 Toronto-area boys, aged 13 to 15, were recruited from a community centre and private school to participate in this research. While the sample group was small, the study lasted nine months and included four in-depth interviews and 19 focus groups.

Discussions centered on male bodies, health, diet and physical activity.

Participants were asked to comment on popular culture images, such as the animated character Homer Simpson, shirtless models featured in Bowflex home gym commercials and cut athletes from Ultimate Fighting Championships.

"One of the surprises from this study was how comfortable boys were in expressing, analyzing and comparing bodies — their own, their peers' and those ideals depicted by media," says Norman, who is now a professor at the University of Manitoba's Faculty of Kinesiology and Recreation Management.

"Although they felt pressure to be fit, they displayed a distant, disinterested and cool relationship to their bodies," he adds. "Some participants also admitted to desiring particular masculine ideals and working on their bodies to achieve such idealized forms."

Some body concerns

This study builds on previous research that found boys can face the same anxieties, fears and body image disorders experienced by girls and women. Common body concerns among boys who took part in this particular study included height, muscularity, obesity, skin complexion and style.

"Being overweight was seen as undesirable and associated with a sedentary, immoral lifestyle," says Norman. "

The majority of participants viewed sports as a fun and masculine way to build muscle, while managing calories and body fat. "They felt sports could naturally produce a healthier, fitter and more attractive man," says Norman. "Sports are used to deflect, obscure and erase their bodily anxieties and desires."

Most teenaged boys, Norman concludes, simply want an average physique that doesn't stand out: "Any bodies that fell outside that norm were labeled unnatural, unhealthy or just too much. [Boys](#) want a body that's neither too fat nor too skinny; too tall nor too short; too muscular nor too weak."

More information: jmm.sagepub.com/content/early/.../84X11409360.abstract

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