

Conformity to masculine gender norms linked to muscle dysmorphia among young people

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A new research study out of the University of Toronto sheds light on the intricate relationship between conformity to masculine gender norms and muscle dysmorphia symptomatology among a diverse sample of Canadian adolescents and young adults. The study titled "Masculinity and muscle dysmorphia in mixed gender Canadian youth" was [published](#) in the journal *Sex Roles*.

Muscle dysmorphia, characterized by an obsessive preoccupation with muscularity and dissatisfaction with one's [body size](#), has long been recognized as a significant mental health problem, [particularly among boys and young men](#).

Given the high prevalence among boys and young men, it was presumed that greater conformity to masculine gender norms (attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that young males are socialized to conform to as a way to display their masculinity) was associated with symptoms of [muscle dysmorphia](#). The new study aimed to empirically test this association among a gender-diverse sample of adolescents and [young adults](#).

Researchers analyzed data from the Canadian Study of Adolescent Health Behaviors, comprising 2,719 participants. The aim was to examine the association between conformity to masculine gender norms and muscle dysmorphia symptomatology, clinical risk for muscle dysmorphia, and lifetime anabolic-androgenic steroid (AAS) use across genders.

"Our findings revealed a notable positive association between conformity to masculine gender norms and muscle dysmorphia symptomatology, clinical risk for muscle dysmorphia, and lifetime AAS use among the diverse sample," says lead author Kyle T. Ganson, Ph.D., MSW, assistant professor at the University of Toronto's Factor-

Inwentash Faculty of Social Work.

"Strikingly, this association persisted across [gender identities](#), including boys, young men, girls, young women, and transgender/gender-expansive participants."

The findings highlight the significant impact of societal expectations surrounding masculinity on body image and behavior, irrespective of gender identity. The researchers also found that specific masculine gender norms, such as self-reliance, emotional control, and a strong desire to win, were most strongly associated with muscle dysmorphia symptomatology.

The findings also revealed unique gender differences. Specifically, boys and young men who had greater conformity to self-reliance and heterosexual self-preservation were more likely to experience greater muscle dysmorphia symptomatology compared to girls and young women.

These findings offer valuable insights into the complex interplay between gender norms and mental health outcomes, particularly concerning [body image](#) disorders. "We need to ensure that interventions and [support systems](#) are addressing the [harmful effects](#) of conforming to rigid gender norms," says Ganson.

Moving forward, the researchers advocate for further investigation into the underlying mechanisms driving this association across diverse gender identities.

More information: Kyle T. Ganson et al, Masculinity and Muscle Dysmorphia in Mixed Gender Canadian Youth, *Sex Roles* (2024). [DOI: 10.1007/s11199-024-01469-y](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-024-01469-y)

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