

We asked 24 women to reflect on images of 'hot' men—and it's good news for those with 'dad bods'

10 November 2020, by Andrea Waling, Duane Duncan and Gary Dowsett



Participants were asked about their responses to men's sexualised bodies. Credit: shutterstock

Since the 2012 hit film [Magic Mike](#) explored the hedonistic lifestyle of men who strip for women, popular culture has exploded with [images](#) of sexy, muscular, athletic and shirtless (or pantless!) "hot" men.

In our contemporary digital world, [pornography](#) and [online dating apps](#) offer male bodies to look at in various states of undress.

Some people celebrate the growth of such imagery as an increasing recognition of [women's](#) sexual interests and desires. Others express concern about the [potential consequences](#) of objectification for young men, in a similar vein to that of women.

Researchers have argued sexualised images of men do not advance [feminist values](#), as they glorify "superficial" ideals of beauty and youthful, able bodies. Others say this [media representation](#) of a muscular male body ideal reinforces "[toxic](#)"

aspects of masculinity by emphasizing strength and power.

But what do everyday women think?

We [conducted focus groups](#) with 24 women living in Melbourne. We wanted to understand how they thought about the increased sexual visibility of men's bodies—and what this might mean for sexual equality.

Most participants were university educated and familiar with [popular feminist ideas](#) about sexual objectification.

We showed them a range of images of men's sexualised bodies from advertising, films and TV and asked various questions. We also asked whether they felt the phenomenon of men being more interested in their appearance affected their [sexual relationships](#) with women.

The women took pleasure in talking about sexualised male bodies. As one participant noted of the star of *Magic Mike*, "Damn! Channing Tatum can move!"

Yet despite this, participants did not talk about men's appearance alone. They did not want to be thought shallow, unethical, or "un-feminist." Some struggled to "objectify" men at all, and when it came to their preference for a long-term [relationship](#), sexy fantasy figures were out.

Personality over abs

Interestingly, some women described the attractiveness of men's bodies according to what men could do, rather than how they looked. They also discussed specific body parts as aspects of the whole person. This was partly about not

wanting to be seen as treating a man as just a body part, as women often see men doing to other women.

Kaitlyn, (24, bisexual, single), noted: "I can become fixated on somebody's hands because it shows how they're interacting with the environment, or how they're interacting with my body as well."

Some women thought themselves sexually deficient in not being able to objectify men. They thought men who posted sexualised images of their bodies on social media or dating sites might be shallow or superficial.

Scarlett, (30, heterosexual, single), said: "I'm looking for the personality in the picture of their body and I'm not getting that necessarily from someone that posts a picture of their washboard abs."

Others thought muscular and attractive men represented broader interests in fitness and athletics that might not align with their own values.

Yu, (19, unsure/pansexual, in a relationship), noted: "... I guess if someone's like super muscular, I don't think they're, like, a douche bro or anything but, like, I guess it gives me the impression that they really value fitness and stuff. So, that's not really, particularly within my interests."

Intensifying women's anxieties

Women described muscular and athletic men as sexual fantasy figures but discounted them as viable, long-term partners. They thought them too preoccupied with their own attractiveness. Indeed, these men's work on their muscles intensified some women's anxieties about their own bodies.

Jane, (34, heterosexual, in a relationship), said "Yeah, I want my superman to be really big [...]. But I think if I was married to someone that would feel a bit uncomfortable, like, I wasn't keeping up my end of the bargain."

Some women also thought that while conventionally attractive men were acceptable for sexual gratification, they were less certain about

Jane said: "I've had one boyfriend who was like, massive, perfect ... I'd show him off to people ... It wasn't a serious relationship; it was very shallow."

Asked if she had thought about a long-term relationship with this man, she replied, "No, no way, he fulfilled a certain role and, yeah, fun."

Added Abigail, (45, heterosexual, in a relationship): "The 'shut up and f..k me' role."

"A little bit of tummy"

Some participants described their preferences for ["dad bods"](#) over muscular physiques, gesturing to other qualities that could define a partner as attractive.

Harriet, (29, pansexual, in a relationship), said: "I really love that dad bods are in ... that's the perfect [body](#), guys who are having fun and a little bit of a tummy."

Our research found while women might consider a sexy hunk for a fling, they would not necessarily do so for a long-term relationship. "Dad bods" spoke to what were thought to be more easygoing, equitable and grounded personalities.

Elsa, (33, mostly straight, single), noted: "Most of my ex boyfriends have been, I guess—dad bods actually does describe it reasonably well, like, a little bit of weight, not super muscly ... And it's never really worried me as long as ... they've got nice hands, like, I can look into their eyes and feel a connection. The rest of it isn't super important."

In seeking to avoid treating men like "objects," these women struggled with familiar ideas linking vanity with femininity, monogamy with ethical sex, and the need to value men according to a wider set of attributes than appearance alone (unless in casual sex).

This suggests that beneath the veneer of sexual empowerment presented by Magic Mike etc., women's sexual lives are still often shaped by traditional values.

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