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What does it mean to be masculine? A preliminary study¹

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Abstract

The meaning of masculinity is constantly changing and is influenced by a variety of factors. While consumption has become the core of capitalist societies, bodies have become a commodity to be well cared-for and well-groomed through diet, exercise and plastic surgery. As the standard for a desirable male has become increasingly more muscular, muscularity has become increasingly associated with masculinity. The purpose of this preliminary study is to explore this relationship between masculinity and muscularity akin to bodily activities and characteristics. Data was collected from two focus groups, with a total of nine participants. This preliminary study highlighted that masculinity is defined as being strong and fit. Even though the participants did not desire a hyper-muscular body, they described an ideal male body image as an athletic figure with a low fat-lean ratio and frequently cited hyper-muscular stereotypes as representatives of ideal body images.

Keywords: Masculinity, muscularity, ideal male image, gym.

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Maskülen olmak ne demektir? Bir ön çalışma

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Öz

Maskülen olmanın anlamı sürekli olarak değişmekte ve birçok etmenden etkilenmektedir. Tüketim kapitalist toplumların özü haline geldikçe, bedenler de diyet, egzersiz ve plastik cerrahi ile iyi bakılacak metalar haline gelmektedir. Arzulanan erkek vücudu zaman içerisinde daha kaslı hale gelirken kaslı olmak da maskülen olmak ile ilişkilendirilmektedir. Bu ön çalışmanın amacı bedensel aktiviteler ve özellikler üzerinden kaslılık ve maskülinite ilişkisini araştırmaktır. Çalışmanın verisi toplam dokuz kişilik iki odak grubu ile toplanmıştır. Bu ön çalışma maskülinitenin güçlü ve “fit” olmak ile tanımlandığını göstermektedir. Her ne kadar çalışmanın katılımcıları aşırı-kaslı bir bedene sahip olmayı istemeseler de düşük yağ-kas oranı ve atletik bir figürü ideal beden olarak tarif ederken çok kaslılık stereotiplerini ideal beden imajının temsili olarak sıkça dile getirmişlerdir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Maskülinite, kaslılık, ideal beden imgesi, spor salonu.

Introduction

The meaning of masculinity is constantly changing in relation to cultural, social, political, as well as economic vicissitudes. What it means to be masculine is something always in flux, changing in relation to various contexts; it is never in a clearly defined state. Connel (1995) in his detailed analysis of the changes in the meaning of masculinity in a historical context, observed the critical advancements in history that influenced the shaping of masculinity. Connel, referred to new understandings of sexuality and personhood throughout various time in history. He cited the first development as the spread of secular Renaissance culture. The next development was the creation of overseas empires, followed by the growth of the commercial, capitalist cities. The fourth historical development, during the period of 1450-1650 was the onset of the European civil wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Finally, during the 18th century, masculinity as a gendered individual character, defined in opposition to femininity emerged (Connel, 1995). According to Luciano, at the beginning of 19th century muscularity and masculinity were the concern of working-class men but eventually debilitating effects of modern life encouraged middle-class men to exercise as well. Exercise was considered a remedy for masturbation and homosexuality (Green, 1984 cited in Luciano, 2007) while also helping young men to control their aggressive tempers (Gorn & Goldstein cited in Luciano, 2007). Finally muscularity becomes the signifier of the superior American races over weak Europeans (Testi, 1995 cited in Luciano, 2007). However, this evolution of masculinity and muscularity, did not last long either when, right after the Vietnam war in the 1960s, many American middle class men tried to distance themselves from the macho marine look and the traditional masculine image lost its priority over lean, slim, androgynous bodies (Luciano, 2007).

With the transformation from production to consumption in late capitalist societies (Giddens, 1991), consumption and leisure activities became a central factor in the reproduction of masculine ideas (Edwards, 1997). Consumption ideologies of the modern subject transformed the body into a commodity; a commodity, which like other commodities, should be well-maintained by the owner. Featherstone stated that “consumer culture latches onto the prevalent self-preservationist conception of the body, which encourages the individual to adopt instrumental strategies to combat deterioration and decay (applauded too by state bureaucracies who seek to reduce health costs by educating the public against bodily neglect) and combine it with the notion that the body is a vehicle of pleasure and self-expression” (p.170). In the consumer culture, according to Featherstone (1982) magazines and newspapers images ascribed responsibility to individuals to maintain the way they look. With the help of cosmetic surgery, as well as the beauty and fitness industries any natural bodily deteriorations or betrayals (like signs of aging) can and must be prevented. Like cars, the body should be maintained to preserve its maximum efficiency through diet, exercise or preventive medicine (Featherstone, 1982).

As a result of this irrational attempt to preserve bodies in their best shape a gigantic exercise industry emerged. The industry of foods supplements, diet remedies, fitness programs and cosmetic programs have manipulated the insecurities of women for many years. So today, according to Pope and colleagues women have adapted and are much more experienced and well-equipped to deal with the impossible ideals of beauty, while men are still extremely fragile in dealing with and attempting to attain images of male perfection (Pope, Phillips, and Olivardia, 2000). Men are inundated by media images of male perfection; the media has become a multibillion dollar worry-making industry that raises men's insecurities about their own bodies.

According to Baudrillard (1998) there is not any other object which is “more precious and more dazzling than any other – and even more laden with connotations than the automobile, in spite of the fact that encapsulates them all” (p. 277) than the body. According to Baudrillard (1998) the body has taken over the moral and ideological functions of the soul. He further states that the ubiquity of the body from advertising to psychotherapy and all the practices in place to aid in reaching (and maintaining) juvenility, stylishness and masculinity/femininity have served to make the body an object of salvation.

All these obsessions revolving around the body have the possibility of being catalysts for men to develop a syndrome with distorted ideas of being not muscular enough and thereby developing an obsessive desire to be more muscular. The syndrome has been labeled the “Adonis Complex”, while not a medical term or an official diagnosis (Pope, Phillips, and Olivardia (2000) it still is indicative of an alarming trend. According to Pope and colleagues (2000) the increasing number of men obsessed with their muscles might indicate a growing epidemic. In 1997, 45% of American men reported dissatisfaction with their muscle tone; this number is twice of the percentages in 1972.

While the standard for an optimal and desirable male body is becoming more muscular (Leit et al., 1999; Morry & Staska, 2001; Pope, Olivardia, Gruber, & Borowiecki, 1999; Thompson & Cafri, 2007) an overwhelming amount of empirical research data suggests that the desired male body is characterized by minimal body fat (Cohane & Pope, 2001; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2003 cited in Nowell and Ricciardelli, 2008), a mesomorphic shape (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2005; Smolak & Stein, 2006 cited in Nowell and Ricciardelli, 2008) and a muscular upper torso (Hoyt & Kogan, 2001; Stanford & McCabe, 2005 cited in Nowell and Ricciardelli, 2008).

Different factors can be related to the increasing preference of muscularity. Other people’s comments are one of the social reasons. Although there is solid evidence for women, the limited number of studies conducted with men indicates that negative messages from others are related with body dissatisfaction (Gleason, Alexander, & Somers, 2000 cited in Nowell and Ricciardelli, 2008) and the inclination towards muscularity (Vartanian et al., 2001 cited in Nowell and Ricciardelli, 2008).

Also the ideal male images represented in the media in movies, ads, and TV dramas also influence young men’s perceptions –and satisfactions- about their bodies. Based on the Markus’s Self Schema Theory, Grogan (1999) argued that body image is an elastic construction, which means it can and will change through new information, mood states, and reference points. The “socially represented ideal body” is constructed through media representations of ideal images and is also influenced by the references of close others, like peers and family. The “internalized ideal body” is a negotiation of one’s real body shape (i.e. the objective body) with the socially represented ideal. When there is incongruence between the internally ideal body and the objective body, individuals might experience self-criticism and low self-esteem. Media accelerates the gap by providing unrealistic images of the “socially represented ideal body.”

Paradoxically, the cultural importance of masculinity has increased while the actual need for muscularity has decreased according to Gray and Ginsberg (2007). Even though men do not need muscles for protection or labor they now attempt to be more muscular not because of any particular advantage of muscularity but as a marker of masculinity (Gray & Ginsber, 2007).

The purpose of the presented preliminary study is to explore how masculinity is described and understood by young men akin to bodily activities and characteristics. The central question of this research are how young men explain the relationship between muscularity and masculinity.

Method

Nine young men between the ages of 21 and 25 participated in the focus groups. All participants were from İzmir, Turkey and all of them participated on a voluntary basis and receive no monetary compensation. Participants were divided into two groups, one of the groups was composed of 4 participants, and the other one had 5 participants. They all engaged in different sport activities including swimming, running, body building, basketball, football and martial arts.

Each tape-recorded, semi-structured focus groups took approximately an hour and a half. A set of questions was prepared prior to the interviews. Interviewers tried to adhere to the prepared questions as much as possible.

Results

Reasons for Exercise

Participants reported different reasons for participating in sports including: social and recreational reasons, health and diet reasons, the feeling of doing one's duty and for recognition. Some of them reported gaining and losing weight and some of them reported being more muscular and well-built over the last decade.

Weight and Diet

Weight issues were addressed by many of the participants during the interview. R., one of the participants mentioned that:

I was overweight until 12-13 years old. I am little overweight now, but I was more overweight back then. It became an obsession. From time to time I lost and gained weight, this still continues. When I graduated from high school I was 84 kilos. It was really an obsession, psychologically and physically. That summer I lost weight and became 68 kilos. I dieted, exercised, and swam regularly. Then I heard it is unhealthy to lose weight that fast so then I started to gain weight, but slowly. Later I started to turn this excessive weight into a muscle.

The Ideal Male Body

When they were asked to describe the ideal male body, the majority of them referred to a "fit body". Other descriptives mentioned included proportions, athletic, well-built bodies. "Not having a belly" was also another referral. One of the participants explained the belly issue as:

A man with a belly might be recognized as lazy, leisured, and hedonistic by a woman. Also by men as well.

While describing an ideal man G. mentioned the fitness and explained that:

There is no compulsory measure for fitness. Women who are size zero for example, are not that pretty. Or a very skinny man wouldn't be admired by women. A man

should be well-built but not fat. He should be muscular but not body building type muscular, that might also be a disturbing look. The outfit must befit him. He shouldn't wear XL, you know. But if he is satisfied with himself he doesn't have to be fit. But he has to be medium weight. His body mass index should be in the middle.

Whose Body is Ideal?

Participants generally cited actors and sport players as having an ideal male image. Kıvanç Tatlıtuğ, a famous Turkish drama actor, was frequently mentioned by participants. He became very famous for his part in a TV soap where Kuzey-Güney portrays a professional boxer. For this part he worked with a personal trainer and altered his figure dramatically in six months.²

Kenan İmirzalıoğlu, another well-known Turkish actor, and Cristiano Ronaldo, the far-famed football player of Real Madrid, and Arnold Schwarzenegger were also mentioned by several participants. One participant explained it as:

Athletes especially have a zero fat-muscle ratio because of their diet. They are careful with their calories and they exercise daily.

So a low "fat-lean ratio" is one of the indicators of an ideal male body. The minimum fat-lean ratio is 5% and the maximum is 25% for men. Generally the average is around 15 to 18% for men³. A man's degree of muscularity has been measured by a specific formula that uses the man's weight, height and approximate percentage of body fat and offers a number called the "fat-free mass index" (FFMI) (Pope, Phillips, Olivardia, 2002). They argued that a FFMI of 25 to 26 is the upper achievable limit without using *anabolic steroids*.

Pope, Phillips, and Olivardia (2002) analyzed the centerfolds of Playgirl magazine from 1973 to the 1998 and observed that the FFMI has escalated from around the 20s to over 22, in another words the centerfold men of Playgirl magazine have added extra 12 kilograms of muscle over the last 25 years. While Wheaton (2003) also mentions the lean, muscular (and tanned) body as highlighted in the photographic techniques used in windsurfing magazines, skin color was not mentioned by the participants of this research.

When they were asked to compare their bodies with their peers, the majority of the participants evaluated their peers as "unhealthy". Drinking, smoking and not exercising regularly were stated as unhealthy peer behaviors. R. explained not exercising in relation to cultural factors:

We are not growing up with that culture. Even I, who love sports, I really love watching sport games, don't exercise regularly School work, courses, private classes...we are tired mentally. At the university I finally have some time to exercise. Especially if you drink and smoke, it is a habit. Maintaining training requires self-discipline. I have great difficulty in exercising regularly. When I signed up for a class I would go, but other than that I have difficulties (exercising regularly). An irregular life-style also has an effect on the frequency of exercise.

The Ideal Sport for the Ideal Body

Sports have played an important role among the other leisure consumptions of masculine cultures and identities said Wheaton (2003). In many Western societies, historically, sport is

² <http://www.sabah.com.tr/magazin/2014/01/20/kivanc-fit-bir-vucut-icin-alti-ay-calisti> retrieved 03.12.2014.

³ <http://blog.withings.com/2012/10/12/what-is-a-healthy-body-fat-percentage-lean-to-fat-ratio-2/> retrieved 03.12.2014.

one of the key signifiers of masculinity. However, in Great Britain at least, from 1960s to 1990 more individualized and progressive types of exercises have manifested. Alternative, life-style or extreme sports from body building to skateboarding have become more prominent (Wheaton, 2003).

When participants were asked about an ideal sport, interestingly only two participants referred to body building as an ideal sport. However, swimming and tennis were cited frequently. G. mentioned swimming as an ideal sport:

If I have money and time I would swim every day, because in my opinion, it is the most beneficial (amongst the other sports). It creates a beautiful body, swimmers have beautiful bodies. They are not disfigured like football players. So if I could I would like to swim every day...I used to swim 3-4 days a week. I want to start doing it again.

The other point mentioned frequently mentioned the importance of choosing the proper sport for balanced body development. One of the participants explained it as follows:

In reality there are two sports (when ideal sports for an ideal body had been asked): swimming and body building. Swimming helps you to build all of yours muscles, but not evenly. When you do body building, of course with the help of the trainers you can work on your muscles, build them evenly.

The Meaning of Muscularity

In describing muscularity participants generally referred to positive qualities, such as being fit, being strong, and well-groomed. One participant mentioned the slightly V-shaped body. Only one participant declared that muscularity had ugly and negative connotations for him. Not having muscles is associated with laziness according to X.:

A man should be muscular. It is proof that he is taking good care of himself. A man with a skinny arm is a lazy man to me.

When discussing the meaning of muscularity, one participant pointed out the cultural differences:

(In reply to another participant, who equalized extreme muscularity with masculinity). In my opinion they (body builders) have been perceived as more masculine by many people but at the same time some people perceive them as disgusting. It depends on one's perspective as well as their social environment. In Yozgat⁴ being muscular might be a representation of manhood but ... I don't know, let's say in İzmir⁵ it is not related with masculinity rather it is a reflection of self-care.

The Meaning of Masculinity

Being fit, strong, and powerful were stated as characteristics that are related with masculinity. R. explained this relation as:

Masculinity evokes strength, strength evokes being muscular physically. Male-strength, strength-muscle, that type of association.

⁴ Yozgat is a small and conservative city located in the Central Anatolia Region of Turkey.

⁵ İzmir is the third populous city of Turkey, which is in the west extremity of Anatolia. İzmir is a metropolis which is composed of several metropolitan districts

Some participants associated masculinity not only to physical characteristics but also to personality qualities. Y stated that:

Until you talk to him in person you may not know him easily. Appearance may create an idea, but you have to talk to him in order to understand (him). I have witnessed so many times, people judge the person by the appearance, but his actions might be so different. Yes, looking masculine may change the way you walk, may change the way you look but when you engage in a conversation with this person, it is only then that you know him well.

Muscularity, strength, and majestic images were other attributes associated with masculinity. The tone of one's voice is also considered part of the masculine image.

One participant associated masculinity with heterosexuality.

There are many gay sports player. I don't know whether anybody mentioned Ibrahimović's body here. His body is not that bad but I heard that he is gay. So, the issue is not being masculine, but being appreciated. Appreciated by whom does not matter but being appreciated does.

When participants were discussing their reasons for exercising (or not exercising) the topic of alcohol consumption was mentioned, with a majority of them evaluating alcohol consumption with masculinity. R. said that:

...In my opinion people living abroad do not consume alcohol as much as we do. But maybe they would say "ok I drank too much last night, so I have to exercise now." It might be the difference. But we have a culture of the "beer belly." In conversation, I have heard from my friends, this is an attractive culture. I mean, the more you drink the tougher you are...yes, it is related with the perception of masculinity and the beer belly is the indicator (of masculinity).

Plastic Surgery

One participant described plastic surgery as a last resort and another one verbalized that he might think consider plastic surgery if it is absolutely necessary. The rest of them clearly rejected the possibility. Furthermore, one participant admitted about thinking about using a supplement for losing weight, but he said that:

I thought about (using) X (over the counter diet pill with an allegedly herbal content), for example. I asked the pharmacists but none of them could give me any guarantee. It is supposed to break the fat (tissue). But you cannot trust it in the end.

Conclusion

Messner (2009) stated that organized sports are constructed by gender relations and they reproduce masculinity (and femininity), they are "part of this construction of gender accomplished through the "masculinizing" of male bodies and minds" (p.134). Unexpectedly during the interviews participants did not only refer to the physical qualities of masculinity but also referred to "typical" masculine attitudes as well. When they were describing a masculine man being muscular, fit or strong were all widely cited. Connel (2004) highlighted the cultural definitions of gender and argued that masculinity has been built on a historical context inherently relational to femininity. Defining masculinity linked with heterosexuality could be an attempt to de-feminize it.

Another point made was that the majority of the participants do not want to be “super muscular.” They described an ideal male image as well-built but not extremely muscular, athletic with a low fat-lean ratio. Even though we can be relieved that those descriptions do not reflect impossible images of a super muscular male body, it is still evident that young men do not comfortable with their appearances. The examples they chose as a representative of the ideal male body all reflects hyper-muscular stereotypes from the movies, sports or TV soaps.

Historically, sports is a masculine sphere which is mainly associated with power, strength, and muscularity –at least for many men- This preliminary study revealed at least a partial understanding of how masculinity has been constructed through sports and the exercise habits of young men, as well as how they construct their ideal male image. In future studies, how the postulate of “masculine as muscular” has been established and how this relation has been shaped by diverse foundations should be centralized.

Conflict of Interest

The author has not declared any conflicts of interest.

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