

# What role do the media play in the tensions between men's health, body image, and the crisis of masculinity?

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## Abstract

Ever since the appearance of media outlets, major attention has been brought to their use and functions regarding sociocultural issues. Nowadays, media-portrayed scripts and the sense of masculinity are closely connected, media images being key to transmitting the socialization of a dominant model in gender roles within society. This undeniably brings forth issues when considering the mental and physical health of men. In this research paper, we present strong arguments to introduce this "crisis" of masculinity and how the mass media are enhancing the problem. The article shows that, at the same time, both men and women are trying to make a positive change and gain space to be heard through the media themselves. The movie industry, beauty shows, magazines, and other popular trends are at the core of this paper when explaining their influence in the socialization of men. Also important is the negative impact that the mass media have on the relationship between gender roles and their part in creating such dominant stereotypical models followed generation after generation.

## Keywords

Mass Media, Masculinity, Media Images, Gender Socialization, Media Scripts, Crisis of Masculinity



## Introduction

For a few decades now, major attention has been brought to the research on tensions and implications caused by the mass media—and their images—on issues like men’s health, self-esteem, body image, and the cultural construction of a dominant homogenous model of masculinity, to name a few. Brewer suggested that the cultural construction of genders is the result of an active exposure to the dominant model provided not only by extrafamilial sources, but especially by the mass media (2001, p. 223), hence her warnings about cultural determinism, that is, that genders are in fact socially constructed categories (p. 221).

A considerable number of researchers have discovered that the mass media have a high influence over men’s self-esteem and dissatisfaction with their bodies, as discussed by Castro and Mara (2014). They conclude that the most successful model is the dominant traditional masculinity (DTM), which goes hand in hand with desire, dominance, and violence (p. 185). In the same line of thinking, another study indeed concluded that men’s sense of satisfaction with their body image incredibly decreases after exposure to media stimuli of muscular men (Barlett et al., 2018, p. 301).

Nonetheless, this paper will be based on the following research question: *What role do the media play in the tensions between men’s health, body image, and the crisis of masculinity?* The aim of this study, although short for a topic in need of much more attention, is to offer a set of perspectives built on academic findings on this current issue and its sociocultural effects.

The paper will be divided in three main sections. Firstly, we will analyze the strategic role of the media in the reproduction of an ideology that affects the construction of men’s self-esteem and sense of attractiveness. Secondly, we will present media patterns and frames of the so-called modern “crisis” of masculinity where the media are seen as the main villains in the construction of gender relations. Finally, the last section will be dedicated to men’s health and its relationship to the media images that define the socialization of manhood.



## What is the crisis of masculinity?

According to Agliata and Tantleff-Dunn (2004)—who carried out research on mood alteration and body satisfaction in females and males after media exposure to commercials related with body images and health—males are indeed reactive to appearance-related commercials, and their negative impact on them goes from mood alteration, to depression, to even misconceived perceptions about gender roles (pp. 18-19).

Furthermore, the emerging discussion on men's health and how it is being portrayed in popular representations by the media called up the attention of many academics who, through research and findings, are trying to gather enough data to make the attempt of putting such an overlooked topic in the political agenda. In Gough's literature analysis (2006), he examines the discourse-related differences between women and men in their perceptions of specific scenarios, like going to the doctor or practicing sports, and how their understanding of hegemonic masculinity was linked to power relations, even among men themselves (p. 2477). Moreover, in their study about the movie industry, Shipley and Cavender (2001) openly argue that violence sells and that movies help to establish standards of how to be a boy or a girl, calling our attention to the fact that we must undeniably consider the relationship between images of masculinity and violent behavior in the movie industry (p. 11).

The desire to belong, to be attractive, and physically strong enough is in the core findings of the so-called modern "crisis" of masculinity. Hoover and Coats (2011) grasped a neoconservative critique on the influence of the mass media in the construction of masculinity. They argued that men are being negatively portrayed via public scripts transmitted by the mass media (p. 887) and that this crisis is rooted in historical trends that media representations have perpetuated throughout generations (p. 877).



## The strategic role of the media

As said above, the cultural construction of gender roles nowadays is profoundly determined by the mass media. Whether we like it or not, we live in an era where we find ourselves surrounded by technology and filtering algorithms that transmit images, propaganda, and to some extent—as some could argue— even ideologies, be it directly or indirectly. Taking

cultural determinism into account, Brewer (2001, p. 221) explains through a feminist lens how the traditional construction of gender is deeply intertwined with the media, and that models of both genders provided by the mass media become more influential in their cultural construction. This has thus shown to have a huge impact on men's sense of masculinity, self-esteem, and feeling of attractiveness.

In their study about the portrayal of muscular superheroes in movies, Young et al. concluded that men who are exposed to such images tend to become more unsatisfied with their own physique (2013, p. 174) and use the superhero movie concept of masculinity, and its embodiment in specific characters, as a model to imitate. This way, they hope to be considered attractive and manly enough, which would partly explain the popularity of such movies. (p. 175).

Further literature used in this research is the interesting and insightful work of Cosma and Gurevich (2008), who found that, especially in North American television, programs such as Pick-Up Artist (PUA) used physically appealing men. Their purpose was to coach men on how to be attractive in the so-called game of casual sex, treating women as a commodity to sustain a patriarchal view in ratings. In said game, the men who scored—in other words, the men who achieved—the highest number of casual sexual interactions were considered to be the ideal and most attractive type of heterosexual men. This typology was based on the belief that the man is a superior being than the female. A belief where the practice of norms of constructed identity such as violence, aggression, confidence, and independence to gain the man's status of "winner" is seen as the rule (p. 2).

Furthermore, through their sociological lens, Castro and Mara (2014) turned their attention to the Dominant Traditional Masculinity (DTM), which media outlets transmit as necessary for a boy to succeed with girls, because actively defending egalitarian ways is by no means appealing or "magical", if you will, to females (p. 186). Moreover, they further argue that attractiveness is a biological human desire, and that human beings will naturally react to their impulses and biological instincts, which are in turn deeply constructed and influenced by our cultural atmosphere, i.e., the media. (p. 190).

All these studies enlighten us in showing that masculinity, self-esteem, and violence have been shaping the lives of men for many generations. With that, a majority of them are losing their own true selves—their natural way of being—and the possibility to become the men they actually want to be. It is thus hard for men to discover the type of man they truly aspire to become because this dominant ideology on masculinity has been perpetuated and is now the norm.



## **The modern “crisis” of masculinity: widening the gap between genders**

According to Agliata and Tantleff-Dunn (2004), just as women are subject to the media-projected “culture of thinness”—which defends that the thinner the woman the sexier she is—similar standards are being applied to men’s sense of attractiveness in what is called “a culture of muscularity” (p. 8), i.e., the more muscular a man is the sexier he is. As studies have found, the impact of media exposure, maintaining one’s body image, and the sense of masculinity are disturbingly creating negative impacts on men’s daily lives, not to mention on their mental health. Additionally, the authors argue that this modern “crisis” of masculinity is related with the fact that physical beauty is very much present in every aspect of mass media contents, which are the most influential and dominant source when stereotyping the importance of physical appearance in the lives of men (p. 9).

Furthermore, Hoover and Coats (2011) argue that the sociocultural perceptions behind the pressure to follow a dominant construction of masculinity are reflected in a crisis that is—ironically—both implicated and forgotten by political powers and public policies. In their research, they found that in the USA, for example, both the Bush and Obama administrations expressed concern in the political sphere about men’s well-being and sense of masculinity. Sadly, there were also evidences that little to no-change has been put into action since then (p. 878).

Regarding gender roles, distinctions between representation and reality found in mass media scripts openly stated that there is an apparent bias towards female communicators. This, although not entirely accurate or empirically proven, could be real because mass media outlets position women as reproducers of scientific knowledge rather than creators of it. The latter is reserved for men as a male-dominated area, both in statistical and cultural terms.

(Mendick and Moreau, 2013, p. 333). This brings together several implications to the relationship between males and females that constantly widen the climate of “crisis” in masculinity. For instance, in Hayes and Tariq’s research (2000), it is stated that the creation of scientific knowledge among women remains underrepresented and that, regardless of their educational and professional background, women constitute a significant minority within natural and social sciences (p. 434).

Nowadays this topic is being brought up by many scholars in their research, and men themselves are in the path of breaking this stigma in order to be fully satisfied within their personality and therefore improve their interactions and relationships with women. However, many have failed at such endeavors to this day because there are deeply—and even unconsciously—biased towards models engrained on their perceptions of reality through media images. Thus, the issue operates at a cognitive level between the sociocultural scripts perpetuated by the media and the real world, where both men and women are battling for the recognition of the effects of mass media on their own gender roles (Mendick and Moreau, 2011, p. 334).

Turning this study back to the work of Hoover and Coats (2011), the authors give us the clear understanding that the dominance of the hegemonic masculinity is rooted on mass media, which act as the core villain of the current “crisis” in men’s daily development of their own self. It also adds difficulties to the cultural perceptions of both genders, and to the universal masculinity model, which, inserted into the socialization of maleness, deserves more importance in cultural studies and public policy surveys (p. 882).

Further research as backbone to this conclusion is Brewer’s neoconservative critique (2001) about gender socialization and construction of elder caregivers. Therein she concluded that the burden of gender roles—partially transmitted by the media—falls heavily on women, and that the price that this stereotyped ideology of gender roles causes on them is deeply

negative. It makes them become socioeconomically limited by its consequences and, in contrast, the male perception of a woman's gender role, or little of it, is to consider female caregivers as the "normal culturally accepted way" to deal with the care of elders (p. 218). This is added to the internal pressure of being the man of the family who needs to provide, especially financially, for said elder care.

The stigmatization and rejection of one's true feelings and self has however sparked some positive actions among men who are deeply interested in reaching out for help and be heard. In a very recent study by Rome (2021), the author shows us some encouraging and positive data found online on male (in)fertility blogs, where men voice their emotions, fears, and scars to reach out, even if anonymously, and for this issue to become culturally accepted by the media platforms.

Such online spaces, which in the beginning were mainly aimed for women to express their difficulties with their infertility, are now growing more popular among men. Infertility is traditionally portrayed by the media as a feminine issue only, whereas in the real world the percentage of infertility among men is equal to that of women. In fact, the RMA Network blog confirmed that infertility is 35% due to a male and 35% to a female factor, and 20% to a combination of both a male and female problem (2021).

Those organized forums for men to express their failure in the hegemonic model of masculinity are creating broad communication spaces for such emotional challenges in order to break down the dominant ideology of masculinity portrayed in the media. However, this matter is still in need of much more attention from the field (Rome, 2021, p. 45). Nonetheless, Rome also argues that in such spaces, men can embrace weakness as a sign of strength and of their manhood without them feeling like less of a man, or inferior to their peers, because (in)fertility is another symbol of "crisis" in masculinity and depression among men (2021, pp. 45-46).



## **The problem with men's health and hegemonic masculinity**

Recent reviews on men's health put into perspective how delicate this topic is. Gough (2006) stated that men generally join sports, not to improve their health alongside other mental benefits, but to enhance their masculinity.

That is, sports and exercise are associated with self-esteem for the sake of protecting one's sense of masculinity, competitiveness, and toughness (pp. 2477-2478).

The dots connecting hegemonic masculinity and health are yet to be fully comprehended for their relationship with mass media representations to be fully implemented and recognized in the public debate. Another interesting point of view based on Gough was the conclusion about the portrayal of men's health in magazines, which undeniably focus on further stereotyping this traditional "real masculine identity" instead of constructing and promoting a new model of health among males (p. 2478).

To all the knowledge gathered for this paper we can add that men are generally reluctant to seek help and fear being seen as feminized or sensitive if, for instance, they were to ever create or follow a self-care routine, because such acts are associated to females. Additionally, the model of masculinity being indirectly (albeit intentionally) perpetuated by the mass media ends up labelling men as emotionally repressed and incapable of handling health concerns, both physical and mental, which creates further barriers to deconstruct the dominant ideology (Gough, 2006, p. 2845).

Swiftly shifting our attention to the work of Shipley and Cavender (2001) about the movie industry and its reproduction of violence within masculinity, next we will present more conclusions about the role of media in this matter.

Although researchers repeatedly remind us that violence in movies and in human behavior is not simply a matter of cause and effect, evidence was found in the relation and importance of the movie industry, more specifically action movies, with criminality rate among young boys. Shipley and Cavender say that "Hollywood even became an issue in the 2000 presidential campaign" (2001, p. 11).

Even though the relationship between movies and reality is more complex and should not be generalized, there is enough data to infer that such violent images—intended for young boys—profoundly help to construct, sustain, and transfer the dominant model of masculinity. Furthermore, the producers of such contents only aim at profits and bigger audiences and, what's more, apparently set the record and sociocultural scripts to be followed. An example of this is the belief that making movies that do not need translation or are as violent and heroic as possible is more important in the industry than actually considering the consequences that they might generate in their audience's psyche (Shipley and Cavender, 2001, p. 4).



## Conclusion

The role that the media play in the tensions between men's health, their body image issues, and the "crisis" of masculinity is, according to this paper's findings, incredibly present and dominant in society. The stereotypical masculinity model is a way of forming one's identity by means of a socialization mainly transferred via media images and scripts. It is continuously portrayed generation after generation, which leads to certain features of masculine identity becoming an instrument to increase the patriarchal feeling among men.

Moreover, the historical development of gender roles and the perceptions of reality represented by the media helped build on the concept of toxic masculinity and amplify the modern "crisis" of masculinity. Furthermore, we have also found insights on how this traditional model of masculinity ideology has limited men's psychological development of their inner self, and also how it has been influencing the fight for gender equality, not only in society per se, but in its major source of influence: the mass media.

Additionally, we can argue that the many notions of masculinity have led men to depression, mood swings, and low self-esteem, not to mention their struggle within their role in their own communities, close groups, and to achieve body satisfaction. These sociocultural and moral barriers are strongly influenced by the mass media and, even though some positive and considerably progressive steps are currently in action to break this stigma, the relationship between conformity with masculinity norms and mental health among men is still a very long way to be positively transformed. In other words, we are still far from becoming a utopian society where masculinity will not be a matter of frustration, lagged adaptation, or even intimidation.

To finalize, we can argue that, ever since the rise of the mass media, men's gender formation—or their cultural osmosis, if you will—has been based on manipulation and active exposure to a dominant model of masculinity sufficiently rooted in society to ever be fully challenged. Nonetheless, our studies have helped build on the fact that to ever achieve a non-toxic predesignated masculinity, the fight to change its representation in the media needs to be taken into initiative, and voluntarily, by men themselves. Thus, instead of fueling the fight between gender roles for more recognition and acceptance, we could turn all eyes to one positive common goal: eliminating stereotypes and allowing everyone to embrace their masculinity or femininity however they wish to.



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