

# College Men's Perceptions of Ideal Body Composition and Shape

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This study sought to increase professionals' knowledge of college men's perceptions of ideal body composition and shape by a qualitative design. Based on data obtained from 30 college men, themes and individual differences emerged. Muscularity, leanness, height, and certain body areas were highlighted and their representativeness within the data was presented. Muscularity was found to be multifaceted with 5 components, and men varied in the overall and site-specific body areas that they emphasized. Discussions of how these findings can direct future research (e.g., construction of instruments assessing men's body satisfaction), theory, and practice are presented.

*Keywords:* college men, body composition and shape, muscularity, low body fat, height

Body image, often defined as individuals' internal representations of their outer physical appearance (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999), has been discussed widely and consistently throughout the theoretical and empirical literature during the past three decades (Pruzinsky & Cash, 2002). Although much of the preliminary literature focused on women's desire to become thinner and ignored or minimized how men experience body image (Andersen, Cohn, & Holbrook, 2000), some scholars (e.g., Drenowski & Yee, 1987; Mishkind, Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1986) addressed the fact that men also experience body image concerns. Expanding on this latter finding, theorists and researchers have

made substantial contributions to the literature on men's body image in the past decade (Pope, Phillips, & Olivardia, 2000).

This literature suggests that men likely differ from women in their perceptions of overall ideal body composition and shape as well as the specific body areas of concern (Andersen et al., 2000; Cohane & Pope, 2001; Olivardia, 2001; Vartanian, Giant, & Passino, 2001). Men want to gain muscle in different areas than women want to lose fat (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001). Specifically, men report wanting to gain muscle in areas from the "waist up" (e.g., arms, chest); women, however, report concentrating on losing fat from the "waist down," particularly in the hips, thighs, and buttocks (Andersen et al., 2000, p. 71). Theorists (e.g., Cafri & Thompson, 2004) have largely articulated and focused on one characteristic of men's ideal body composition: muscularity.

It is not surprising that men focus on gaining muscle because muscularity is reflected in the male body ideal portrayed in the media. In fact, this ideal prototype has become progressively more muscular over the past few decades (Spitzer, Henderson, & Zivian, 1999), with action toys marketed toward boys becoming more muscular and unrealistic in size (Pope, Olivardia, Gruber, & Borowiecki, 1999) and *Playgirl* centerfolds becoming more muscular (Leit, Pope, & Gray, 2001). Scholars (e.g., Leit, Gray, & Pope, 2002) have suggested that men could internalize these muscular-ideal messages and become preoccupied with gaining muscle mass.

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In its extreme form, this preoccupation could represent muscle dysmorphia, a disorder reflecting men's pathological preoccupation with their muscle size and misperceptions about their actual levels of muscularity (i.e., incorrectly perceiving themselves as extremely small; Pope, Gruber, Choi, Olivardia, & Phillips, 1997). Anabolic steroid use, severe food restriction, and excessive exercise have been found to be associated with men's preoccupation with gaining muscle (Blouin & Goldfield, 1995). Such literature has prompted professionals (e.g., McCreary & Sasse, 2000; Morrison, Morrison, Hopkins, & Rowan, 2004) to develop instruments assessing drive for muscularity.

Undoubtedly, the literature suggests that muscularity is a primary component of men's ideal body composition. However, are additional components and body areas important to men's evaluation of their body shape and composition that are not captured by previous theory and research? If so, how important are these components and body areas? For instance, body fat has received conflicting findings. Although some researchers have found that men are fairly satisfied with their body fat (Pope, Gruber, et al., 2000), other researchers have found that men have reported wanting to lose body fat (Drewnowski & Yee, 1987; Olivardia, Pope, Borowiecki, & Cohane, 2004; Vartanian et al., 2001). Men could perceive that a low percentage of body fat could help them display their muscle mass. Therefore, to appropriately assess body satisfaction among men, should desire for leanness in conjunction with muscularity be measured?

If additional components are important to men's evaluation of their body composition and shape, then assessing for muscularity may be necessary but insufficient in determining men's overall body satisfaction. Conducting in-depth qualitative analyses with men could permit the identification of these possible components and capture their relative importance (e.g., determining whether they are represented among all men, most men, or some men).

The purpose of this study, then, was to use a qualitative design to generate a framework articulating the components illustrating how college men describe their attitudes toward body shape and composition. This study adds incrementally to the literature on men's body image in four important ways. First, in order to study

all possible components of men's body attitudes, we did not specify certain components (e.g., muscularity) that would potentially constrict their answers. To date, four studies (Grogan & Richards, 2002; Klein, 1993; Morrison, Morrison, & Hopkins, 2003; Wienke, 1998) have conducted qualitative research on men's body image and have yielded important contributions to this area. However, three of these studies (i.e., Klein, 1993; Morrison et al., 2003; Wienke, 1998) queried men primarily on their drive for muscularity as this component was the area of body image of specific interest. We were interested to see whether men, without being prompted, would mention low body fat as an important component of men's body composition, as findings are conflicting as to whether this is an important characteristic for men (Olivardia et al., 2004; Pope, Gruber, et al., 2000). Second, we sampled 30 college men; Grogan and Richards (2002) included only four college men within their sample. Third, we used Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR; Hill, Thompson, & Nutt-Williams, 1997) that reduces bias by relying on the agreement between a team of judges (i.e., in our case, four judges and two auditors) rather than on one judge as to the meaning of the data. The extant qualitative studies did not use teams of judges to interpret the data. Fourth, we were able to categorize responses as *general* (representative of all the men), *typical* (representative of more than half but not all of the men), or *variant* (representative of at least several but fewer than half of the men). The previous qualitative studies did not discuss the representativeness of men's answers. Knowledge gained from this study would inform theory, research, and practice, such as by serving as a reference for the construction of instruments designed specifically to assess men's satisfaction with their body shape and composition.

## Method

### *Participants*

Thirty undergraduate men from a large Midwestern university participated. Although most studies using CQR sample between 8 and 15 participants, we doubled this higher number to ensure our findings were consistent across participants. Men were recruited from introductory

( $n = 23$ ; 76.7%) and upper-division ( $n = 7$ ; 23.3%) psychology courses. The average age of the sample was 21.42 ( $SD = 7.09$ ; range = 16–51) years. Fifteen (50%) were freshmen, 5 (16.7%) were sophomores, 5 (16.7%) were juniors, and 5 (16.7%) were seniors. Most men identified as White ( $n = 25$ ; 83.3%), followed by African American ( $n = 2$ ; 6.7%), Latino ( $n = 1$ ; 3.3%), Asian American ( $n = 1$ ; 3.3%), and multiracial ( $n = 1$ ; 3.3%). Two thirds of the men reported being middle class, 6 (20%) indicated that they were upper-middle class, 3 (10%) identified as working class, and 1 participant endorsed the upper-class category. Nineteen (63.3%) participants were single, 6 (20%) were involved in a long-term committed relationship, and 5 (16.7%) were married. All men reported a heterosexual orientation.

### *Judges*

The primary research team included four members: a 22-year-old multiracial (African American, White, and Native American) female undergraduate senior, a 29-year-old White female assistant professor in counseling psychology, a 22-year-old African American female undergraduate senior, and a 52-year-old White male professor in developmental psychology. Both students were psychology majors. All judges had clinical and research interest in body image.

Prior to questionnaire construction, the judges met to discuss their biases (i.e., perceptions about men's body image and notions about how men would respond to the items). Although judges' attitudes about the attractiveness of men's body composition were somewhat divergent (i.e., three judges believed that muscularity was more attractive, whereas one judge believed that leanness was more attractive), all believed that muscularity and a "V-shape" (i.e., broad shoulders, wide chest, narrow waist) would be common perceptions of desirable body shape. They thought that participants would describe a muscular build as the body type that society emphasizes as attractive. Because the faculty members did not want the students to be reluctant to challenge or disagree with them because of the power differential, the importance of everyone's contribution to the consensus process was discussed. Discussions of biases occurred periodically throughout the

data analysis. Team members were encouraged to be mindful of their biases and to set them aside.

### *Auditors*

A 25-year-old White female advanced doctoral student in counseling psychology served as the first auditor. She reviewed the work of the primary team and provided feedback to them at each stage of data analysis. A 25-year-old White male advanced doctoral student in counseling psychology also served as an auditor by comparing the participants' responses with the judges' interpretation of the findings to ensure that participants' responses were adequately represented. Both auditors had clinical and research interest in body image.

### *Measures*

When designing the study, we carefully considered professionals' warnings that men may be reluctant to discuss their body concerns openly with another person, as they are often socialized to believe that such concerns are women's issues and fear others would judge them if their responses could be identified (Andersen et al., 2000; Pope, Phillips, & Olivardia, 2000). We felt that men may more accurately disclose their perceptions of body shape and composition when they were not tape recorded, when their answers were anonymous, and when they were allowed to answer the questions privately, as this method is the least likely to produce socially desirable responses on topics sensitive to participants (Wiseman, 1972). Thus, we chose a questionnaire format in lieu of interviews.

All participants received an open-ended questionnaire. We queried their perceptions of men's general ideal body composition and shape along with their ideal body composition and shape because scholars (e.g., Pope, Phillips, & Olivardia, 2000) have suggested that men offer more complete and less socially desirable descriptions of body image when both types of perceptions are asked rather than when only perception of their body image is solicited. Specifically, we asked participants to describe their perceptions of the overall body shape that men in general desire (Question 1) and do not desire (Question 2), the specific body areas that men

are concerned with (Question 3) and how men try to improve these areas (Question 4), and techniques that men use to try to improve their body shape (Question 5). We then queried the overall body shape that they desired (Question 6) and did not desire (Question 7), the specific body areas that they are concerned with (Question 8) and how they try to improve these areas (Question 9), and techniques they use (if any) to try to improve their body shape (Question 10). Next, we asked them to describe characteristics of men's bodies that society emphasizes as ideal (Question 11). Question 12 asked participants to report additional comments that they would like to share regarding body shape. They were instructed to answer honestly and in complete sentences and were given ample room to answer each question. After completing these questions, they answered demographic questions.

### *Procedures*

Participants completed the questionnaires (taking approximately 20 minutes to fill out) either in classrooms used as a research lab or outside of the classroom and then brought them back to one of the experimenters (94% returned them fully completed). The uncompleted questionnaires did not include a substantial amount of information to generate the within-case analyses and were subsequently excluded. Participants were given extra credit for their involvement.

To interpret the data, we chose CQR (Hill et al., 1997) in lieu of other qualitative methodologies because it decreases the likelihood that any one judge's perspective would disproportionately influence the findings. This method relies on words rather than on numbers to describe data, the context of the whole case is used to understand specific parts of the experience, and understanding is built from an inductive observation of the data rather than imposing an a priori structure to the data. The current study followed the CQR procedures set forth by Hill et al. (1997) exactly. These procedures are described next.

*Coding of domains.* First, the judges developed a start list of domains (i.e., topic areas) by grouping together items similar in content. These domains were refined throughout the analysis to provide the best representation of the data. New domains were also formed to reflect

emerging data. After this process, all cases were reexamined to ensure that they were consistent with the domain list. For the first 25 cases, each judge independently assigned each unit of meaning (a complete thought such as a one-word trait descriptor, a phrase, a sentence, or several sentences) into one or more of the domains and then discussed their classifications until agreement was reached. The first auditor checked the accuracy of the domain coding, making comments and suggestions for changes. The judges discussed her comments, reached agreement, and modified the domains accordingly.

*Coding of core ideas/within-group analysis.* For each case, judges independently summarized the data within each domain into core ideas. With the whole case in mind, they developed the core ideas and then discussed each until they agreed on its content and wording. The first auditor examined the consensus version of each case and gave the judges feedback. The judges discussed her feedback, reached agreement, and tailored the wording where appropriate.

*Cross-analysis.* The cross-analysis (i.e., clustering core ideas across participants) was completed independently by each judge using 25 out of the 30 cases, with 5 cases left out as a stability check. This process resulted in the development of a between-participants listing of domains and categories. The judges met to discuss these categories and arrived at consensus regarding their titles and the core ideas they represented. They reexamined the consensus versions of each case to ensure that they did not contain information that was not captured in any category. The first auditor reviewed the cross-analysis, and modifications were made in accord with group consensus. The second auditor reviewed the findings against the participants' responses and concluded that the findings adequately represented participants' responses. The judges then counted the number of cases representing each category. They considered categories to be general if they applied to all cases, typical if they applied to at least one half (but not all) of the cases, and variant if they applied to fewer than one half but at least 4 cases. Categories with less than 4 cases (e.g., penis size) were placed into the other category for that domain.

*Stability check.* Last, the five cases previously unexamined in the cross-analysis were added to this analysis to determine whether the designations of general, typical, variant, and other changed and whether new categories needed to be added to accommodate these cases. The team agreed that these cases did not change the classification of the data and that new categories did not emerge from the data. Consequently, the findings were considered stable.

## Results

Table 1 displays the domains, categories, and illustrative core ideas reflected in the data of all 30 participants and the representativeness (i.e., general, typical, or variant) of each category. Next, we discuss our findings on a domain-by-domain basis, presenting and describing categories under each domain and examples of statements depicting each category.

### *Perceptions of Overall Body Composition and Shape Desired by Men in General*

Three categories emerged under this domain: muscularity, lean, and tall. All participants indicated that men prefer an overall muscular body composition. As the participants proceeded to discuss muscularity in greater detail, a total of five characteristics emerged from their responses: definition, large size, big . . . but not too big, strong, and athletic. Definition was typically mentioned, and the remaining characteristics were variably mentioned. Statements including terms such as *toned*, *firm*, *cut*, and *buff* were judged by the team to indicate muscular definition. Several participants reported that men desire large muscles (using terms such as *big*, *bulky*, and *thick* to describe muscles). Some participants, however, added a qualifier to describe how large men want their muscles to become (e.g., “large, but not too large”). Some also described men’s preferred overall body as appearing strong (e.g., “powerful”) and athletic (e.g., “fit”). The finding of these five characteristics suggests that muscularity seems to be multifactorial. Furthermore, individual differences were noted in the characteristics of muscularity they perceived that men prefer and em-

phasize, with different combinations of these characteristics mentioned across participants (e.g., “Men want to be fit and have a firm muscular look but not overdone” vs. “Men want to be big and bulky with their individual muscles showing”).

Participants typically perceived that men desire a lean (e.g., “slender,” “trim”) body and variably viewed that men prefer a tall body. These characteristics were often described in conjunction with muscularity, indicating that many participants felt that men want a lean and tall body along with being muscular (e.g., “Men want to be tall, slim, and have defined musculature”).

### *Participants’ Desired Overall Body Composition and Shape*

Participants typically reported wanting to be muscular. As a group, participants articulated the five characteristics of muscularity found in the former domain (all characteristics were variably represented). They differed somewhat when discussing specific characteristics of muscularity desired for their bodies (e.g., “I would like to be a bit more muscular, but not too much”; “I aspire to be more cut up, not so much bigger or stronger”; and “I want to be fuller and have more muscle”).

Additionally, participants variably mentioned wanting to be lean and tall. Approximately equal numbers of men discussed these terms together with muscularity (e.g., “I want to be leaner and taller, but add more weight in muscle”) and without mentioning muscularity (e.g., “I would not mind being a few inches taller and losing a little weight”).

### *Perceptions of Overall Body Composition and Shape That Men in General Do Not Desire*

Three categories emerged from the data: fat, short, and small girth (i.e., low body fat coupled with low muscle tone). Typically, participants perceived that men do not want to be fat, using terms such as *heavy*, *overweight*, *round*, *soft*, and *flabby*. They variably described *short*, *skinny*, *weak*, *scrawny*, and *bony* as qualities men do not prefer.

**Table 1**  
*Domains, Categories, Frequencies, and Illustrative Core Ideas Regarding Men's Perceptions of Ideal Body Composition and Shape (N = 30)*

Domain/Category	Frequency	Illustrative core idea
Desired overall body composition and shape:		
Men in general		
Muscularity	General	Defined, thick
Lean	Typical	Slim, trim, slender
Tall	Variant	Taller
Desired overall body composition and shape:		
Self		
Muscularity	Typical	Buff, tone
Lean	Variant	A lean build, slender
Tall	Variant	At least 6 feet
Undesired overall body composition and shape:		
Men in general		
Fat	Typical	Flabby, round
Short	Variant	Short
Small girth	Variant	Puny, bony
Undesired overall body composition and shape:		
Self		
Fat	Typical	Too soft, flabbiness
Small girth	Variant	Scrawny
Body areas of special concern: Men in general		
Abdominal region	Typical	Cut and sculpted six-pack
Arms	Typical	Big biceps, strong arms
Chest	Typical	Toned chest, strong pecs
Shoulders	Variant	Large, broad shoulders
Back	Variant	Strong, defined, thick back
Upper legs	Variant	Large, strong, defined thighs
Calves	Variant	Thicker calves, larger calves
Buttocks	Variant	Firm butt, defined butt
Neck	Variant	Bigger, thicker neck
Body areas of special concern: Self		
Abdominal region	Typical	Defined, chiseled six-pack
Arms	Typical	Bigger, more defined arms
Chest	Variant	Wider and bigger chest
Upper legs	Variant	Defined, bigger upper legs
Calves	Variant	More cut, bigger calves
Shoulders	Variant	Broader, wider shoulders
Back	Variant	Stronger, more cut back
Body type emphasized by society as attractive		
Overall muscularity	Variant	Strong, defined, and cut
Lean	Variant	Not fat, Slender, trim
Tall	Variant	Substantial height, tall
Abdominal region	Variant	Defined, cut, six-pack
Arms	Variant	Muscular, large, strong arms
Chest	Variant	Large, thick, defined chest
Techniques used to improve body composition and shape: Men in general		
Weight lifting	General	Bench press
Aerobic-Cardiovascular	Typical	Running, stair stepper
Recreational sports	Variant	Golf, basketball, baseball
Nutrition	Variant	Eating healthy, vitamins
Dangerous weight control techniques	Variant	Diet pills, Hydroxycut
Techniques used to improve body composition and shape: Self		
Weight lifting	Typical	Strength training
Aerobic-Cardiovascular	Typical	Running, exercise bike
Recreational sports	Typical	Playing catch, football
Dangerous weight control techniques	Variant	Hydroxycut, Creatine

Table 1 (continued)

Domain/Category	Frequency	Illustrative core idea
Reasons for concern about body composition and shape		
Appear attractive for others	General	Show off large arms and chest
Health	Variant	Fit, healthy
Sociocultural pressures	Variant	Pressure from the media
Ideal body type described across domains		
Overall muscular body	Typical	Increase muscularity for all areas
Overall lean body	Typical	Thin all over, not fat
Tall	Variant	Tall: between 6 feet and 6 feet and 3 inches
V-shape	Variant	Large chest and arms, small waist
Abdominal region	Variant	Thin stomach

*Note.* In all domains except Reasons for concern about body composition and shape, a category is described as general if it applies to all cases, typical if it applies to at least half but not all cases, and variant if it applies to less than half but at least 4 cases. Because only half of the participants ( $n = 15$ ) offered reasons that they and other men were concerned about body shape, a category within this domain is described as general if it applies to all 15 cases, typical if it applies to 7–14 cases, and variant if it applies to 2–6 cases.

### *Participants' Undesired Overall Body Composition and Shape*

Two categories were reflected in the data: fat and small girth (short was not endorsed by the participants when describing undesirable characteristics of their body composition and shape). Participants typically reported not wanting their overall body composition to be fat (e.g., "I do not want to be fat at all!"). Participants also variantly discussed not wanting to be too small in terms of their overall girth (e.g., "I really dislike my skinniness").

### *Perceptions of Body Areas of Concern to Men in General*

Typically, participants reported that men are focused on the abdominal region, arms, and chest. When discussing the abdominal region, participants felt that men emphasize muscular definition and leanness and do not desire fat around this area (e.g., "Men want thin and defined 'six-pack' abs and do not want the classic beer belly"). In addition, participants perceived that men desire the sides of their abdomen to be defined and lean (e.g., "Men want their love handles removed completely"). They felt that men prefer large, strong, and defined upper arms (e.g., "Men want strong, toned, and big biceps and triceps"). They used the large size, definition, and strong characteristics of muscularity to describe qualities men desire for their

chest (e.g., "Men want a toned, defined chest" and "They prefer a wide, thick, strong chest").

Participants variantly discussed several additional body areas they perceived to be important to men: shoulders, back, upper legs, calves, buttocks, and neck. Those who mentioned shoulders emphasized the large size characteristic of muscularity ("Men want their shoulders to be large and broad"). They stressed the large size, strong, and definition characteristics when describing qualities that men desire for the back (e.g., "Men prefer a thick back" and "Men want a strong, defined back"). Several participants reported that men desire large, strong, and defined upper legs (e.g., "They want large, strong, and toned upper legs") and large and defined calves (e.g., "Men focus on improving the definition in their calves" and "They want larger calves"). When discussing the buttocks, participants indicated that men want definition but not fat in this area (e.g., "Men do not want a fat butt" and "They want a firm butt"). Last, they emphasized that men prefer large necks (e.g., "Men want bigger, thicker necks").

### *Participants' Body Areas of Concern*

Typically, participants mentioned their abdominal region and arms and wanting to remove excess fat around the front and sides of their abdominal region (e.g., "My stomach is flabby, which I dislike. It is too large and round" and "I could lose my love handles"), and they empha-

sized the definition characteristic of muscularity for the front of the abdomen (e.g., "I want the other four muscles that are missing from my six-pack"). Participants reported that they wanted large, strong, and defined arms (e.g., "I want bigger, stronger, more defined arms"), with many specifically wanting to increase the size of their biceps and triceps.

Participants variably identified the chest, upper legs, calves, shoulders, and back as body areas warranting improvement (buttocks and neck were not articulated in this domain). Men who mentioned their chest discussed wanting it to be larger, more defined, and stronger (e.g., "I want a wider and stronger chest" and "I want a more defined and firm chest"). Those mentioning upper legs and calves revealed wanting these areas to be larger and more defined (e.g., "I try to get more definition in my legs by running"; "I want bigger upper legs"; and "My calves are too small. I want them to be larger and more defined"). Men expressing concern with their shoulders discussed wishing they were larger (e.g., "I want my shoulders to be broader and wider"). Last, for the back, the large size, strength, and definition characteristics of muscularity were mentioned (e.g., "I want a larger, stronger, more cut back").

#### *Perceptions of Body Composition and Shape Emphasized by Society as Attractive*

Several categories under this domain, each variant in their representativeness, emerged from the data: muscularity, lean, tall height, abdomen, arms, and chest. Some men discussed muscularity as the ideal overall body composition stressed by society (e.g., "Society portrays the ideal body shape for men to be strong, defined, and cut"); each included some of the five characteristics of muscularity within their responses. Some men also reported that society underscores leanness and tall height as ideal qualities of men's overall body composition and shape (e.g., "Trim and tall men are portrayed as attractive"). In terms of body areas, some felt that society emphasizes a defined and lean abdomen; a large and defined chest; and large, defined, and strong arms as attractive, often mentioning these areas together (e.g., "Society pressures men to look good from the waist up, including their chest and arms").

#### *Perceptions of Techniques Men in General Use to Improve Body Composition and Shape*

Data in this domain were classified into five categories: weight lifting, aerobic-cardiovascular activities, recreational sports, nutrition, and dangerous weight control or muscle enhancement supplements. All men indicated that weight lifting is a strategy men use to improve their body composition and detailed specific types (e.g., "ab crunches," "narrow grip bench press," "squats," "bicep curls," and "calf raises"). Participants typically discussed aerobic-cardiovascular activities (e.g., "running," "walking on the treadmill"), and variably mentioned recreational sports (e.g., "basketball"), nutrition (e.g., "eating healthy," "taking vitamins"), and dangerous weight control or muscle enhancement supplements (e.g., "Hydroxycut," "diet medications," "steroids," "Stacker 2," and "Creatine") as strategies men use to control body composition and shape.

#### *Techniques Participants Use to Improve Body Composition and Shape*

Participants typically identified weight lifting, aerobic-cardiovascular activities, and recreational sports as strategies they used to achieve their ideal body composition and shape. Dangerous weight control or muscle enhancement supplements were variably mentioned as methods used in hopes of modifying body composition and shape.

#### *Reasons for Concern About Body Composition and Shape*

Fifteen participants offered reasons for their and other men's concerns with body composition and shape. Therefore, the judges created a domain for these reasons. Because of the reduced number of participants, a category was considered general if it applied to all 15 cases, typical if it applied to 7-14 cases, and variant if it applied to 2-6 cases. All 15 participants reported that they and other men monitor their bodies in order to appear attractive for others (e.g., "Men want big pecs to impress women. Also, girls love nice abs on men"). Health concerns (e.g., "I want to slim down my stomach



for health reasons”) and sociocultural pressures (e.g., “I feel pressure from the media to look muscular and built. This pressure makes me try to achieve this appearance, but I haven’t been successful so far”) were variably mentioned.

### *Ideal Body Type Described Across Domains*

Judges formed categories to reflect the ideal body composition and shape (overall body as well as body areas) that each participant described in his responses across all open-ended items. Five categories emerged: overall muscular body, overall lean body, tall height, V-shape, and the abdominal region. They typically described an overall muscular body. However, of these 22 men, differences arose in the characteristics of muscularity they considered ideal: Repeatedly, 14 discussed large muscles, 13 mentioned definition, 6 stated strength, 4 articulated large, but not “too big” muscles, and 4 mentioned an athletic body. They also typically emphasized being lean and not fat, with a subset ( $n = 9$ ) stating that the ideal body composition and shape was “lean, but not too skinny” and a subset ( $n = 5$ ) mentioning leanness without a similar focus on muscularity.

Tall height, V-shape, and the abdominal region were each classified as variant categories. Men who emphasized tall height throughout their answers also stated that they felt that an overall muscular body was ideal. Several men repeatedly underscored the V-shape as ideal. Last, some men frequently mentioned the abdominal area without a similar emphasis on other body areas.

## Discussion

This study’s findings extended the literature on men’s body image in several ways. First, our findings suggested that muscularity, while salient, is not the only characteristic of importance to men; leanness and tall height were also mentioned. Second, we uncovered different dimensions of muscularity perceptions. To date, different facets of muscularity perceptions have not been discussed, as muscularity is considered a unidimensional characteristic in the extant literature. Third, our data revealed specific body areas of concern to men, disagreeing with the-

ory that only body areas from the waist up are considered important to men. Fourth, we identified the frequency at which overall body characteristics, specific dimensions of muscularity, and particular body areas were represented within the data. We joined these findings together within an initial framework that can be used to understand college men’s perceptions of ideal body composition and shape.

### *A Preliminary Framework of College Men’s Ideal Body*

*Importance of individual differences.* Although all participants shared some similar perceptions of men’s ideal body composition and shape, individual differences emerged. For example, all men in this study considered muscularity to be important to ideal overall body composition, but they defined muscularity differently. In all, five characteristics appeared within participants’ responses: definition, large size, strong, athletic, and big . . . but not too big.<sup>1</sup> In addition, many qualities of overall body composition and shape as well as specific body areas were mentioned by less than half of the men. These findings suggest that men’s body image should not be oversimplified (i.e., conceptualized as one ideal type), and that this framework should be flexible in order to account for differences.

*Overall ideal body.* Throughout their answers, men emphasized muscularity, but did not focus on muscularity exclusively; they typically discussed muscularity and leanness together (e.g., wanting to be lean, but not “too scrawny”), and variably discussed muscularity, leanness, and tall height. Therefore, it appears that leanness and tall height are also components of men’s body image and should be evaluated in conjunction with muscularity.

Participants’ focus on muscularity was not unexpected; scholars (e.g., Cafri & Thompson, 2004; McCreary & Sasse, 2000; Morrison et al., 2003) have documented that muscularity is the essential component of men’s body image to evaluate. However, the extant literature has not considered muscularity in conjunction with

<sup>1</sup> Although it could be argued that the strong and athletic characteristics reflect muscular function, it appears that some men also consider these characteristics integral to muscular shape.

leanness and tall height when assessing men's body satisfaction. From our findings, we suggest that it is necessary to assess men's attitudes toward their muscularity, leanness, and height to arrive at an index of their overall body satisfaction.

*Body areas of special concern.* This study's findings assert that viewing body areas from the "waist up" as important and body areas below the waist as unimportant may not be the best representation for men. Our findings refine the theory (Andersen et al., 2000; Franzoi & Herzog, 1987) stating that men are more focused on body areas at and above the waist. From our data, more men stressed the abdominal region and arms (and the chest for other men but not themselves) over other body areas. However, body areas below the waist (e.g., upper legs, calves) received a considerable and similar amount of attention as two areas above the waist (e.g., shoulders, back). Body areas below the waist were mentioned by many participants, and therefore should be considered when assessing men's attitudes toward body shape and composition.

### *Implications for Theory, Research, and Practice*

This study's findings have additional implications for the use of extant measures of body satisfaction with men. Our findings concur with previous researchers' findings that men desire to increase their muscle mass and reduce body fat (Olivardia et al., 2004), whereas women desire to decrease the size of their overall body (with the exception of their breasts) and their upper legs, hips, thighs, and buttocks in particular (Andersen et al., 2000; Stanford & McCabe, 2002). Collectively, research findings appear to suggest that measures of body satisfaction that equate body dissatisfaction with large hips, thighs, and buttocks may be more appropriate for women and should not be used to assess men's degree of body satisfaction.

Measures have been developed that assess men's drive for muscularity (e.g., Swansea Muscularity Attitude Questionnaire [Edwards & Launder, 2000]; Drive for Muscularity Attitudes Scale [Morrison et al., 2003]; and the Drive for Muscularity Scale [McCreary & Sasse, 2000]). To date, no published survey assesses men's satisfaction with the three over-

all body characteristics, specific characteristics of muscularity, and specific body areas reflected in our findings. The Somatomorphic Matrix (Gruber, Pope, Borowiecki, & Cohane, 1999) does include indices of muscularity and body fat; however, its temporal reliability is poor (Cafri, Roehrig, & Thompson, 2004). We argue that, in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the different facets of men's body satisfaction, professionals need reliable attitudinal measures that assess more than muscularity. Our findings could be used as a base to guide the development of such measures. Prominent body image researchers (e.g., Thompson, 2004) have recommended that assessment instruments contain questions assessing overall and site-specific characteristics. Therefore, based on the representativeness of the overall and site-specific body areas uncovered in our study, items assessing degree of satisfaction with (a) overall muscle, leanness, and height; (b) definition and leanness in the abdominal region and buttocks; (c) largeness of the shoulders and neck; (d) largeness and definition in the calves; and (e) largeness, strength, and definition in the arms, chest, back, and upper legs should be included measures of men's body satisfaction.

We also found men's perceptions of ideal body composition and shape to be very similar to their perceptions of the ideal body composition and shape considered attractive by society. Researchers could examine whether media and other social (e.g., family, friend) pressures to be muscular, lean, and tall encourage men to self-objectify or internalize this valued cultural stereotype and the effects of this internalization on their well-being.

Limitations of this study need to be addressed. First, our sample was mostly young-adult, middle-class, single, heterosexual, White college men from the Midwest, and our findings may not generalize to older men, men of color, gay men, married men, non-middle-class men, and men from diverse geographical areas. Second, although 30 participants is considered a large sample for CQR, a larger sample would have been more desirable. Third, there are clear trade-offs with using an open-ended questionnaire in lieu of interviews to lower socially desirable responding. We could not ask participants to clarify or elaborate their responses (e.g., query as to whether "strong" refers to

stronger looking or stronger in strength). We could not identify their nonverbal behaviors or certain emotions when answering the questions. Fourth, men received extra credit for their participation, which could have contributed to selection bias. Fifth, participants may have had different levels of motivation to become muscular and lean, which could have influenced their answers. Men with lower motivation in this area may have stated that muscularity was important because of the ideal muscular societal prototype, whereas men with higher motivation may have been more invested in changing their body shape or composition. Last, this study concentrated on only one component of body image. Other characteristics (e.g., baldness, body hair, facial features, disability) could be important to men's body image, and this study should not be considered to reflect the comprehensive domain of this construct. Despite these limitations, this study used a team of judges to generate a framework from which professionals can use to understand the components (and the relative frequency of the components) of men's perceived ideal body shape and composition. On the basis of our findings, professionals should (a) not oversimplify men's body image by conceptualizing it as one ideal characteristic type, (b) recognize individual differences among men, and (c) construct instruments that include a variety of items representing the range of overall body qualities and body areas of concern to men.

Furthermore, practitioners can use this study's findings to more easily identify certain body characteristics and areas that may be of concern to their male clients. Because our findings indicated that college men differ somewhat in their perceptions, practitioners need to be aware that there is not one clear characteristic of ideal body composition and shape that all college men strive toward. Practitioners need to be cognizant of signs of their male clients' uses of dangerous strategies to alter body composition, as these themes emerged within our data. Practitioners may also need to be under alert for internalized weightism among their male clients. Many of our participants vehemently expressed not wanting to be fat (e.g., "I want to remove all the fat from my body" and "I do not want to be fat at all!").

We also noticed a trend for participants to list more qualities and body areas of concern for

men in general than for themselves. There may be several reasons for this finding, one of which may be social desirability. Indeed, scholars (e.g., Pope, Phillips, & Olivardia, 2000) have asserted that men are socialized to not discuss their body image concerns in a direct face-to-face manner. This social desirability could be problematic for practitioners, who most often interact with their clientele in this manner. Another plausible explanation may be defensive denial (Shedler, Mayman, & Manis, 1993). In this case, some men may try to maintain an illusion of their mental health through defensively denying and minimizing their body concerns. Social desirability and defensive denial are likely to prevent many male clients from outwardly expressing their body image concerns. Therefore, practitioners may need to pay particular attention to the subtle ways their male clientele express these concerns.

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