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ABSTRACT

In socializing young men, we seek to instil in them the notion that physicality is a key criterion for measuring masculinity. Consequently, many males invest a great deal of effort into masculinizing bodywork, such as weight training. Perhaps the most serious development of men’s quest for muscularity is the consumption of anabolic steroids. Males—some as young as ten—are consuming drugs once largely limited to elite athletes. The purpose of this conceptual article is to illuminate how adolescent males’ consumption of anabolic-steroids contributes to, and is affected by, the relational process of defining masculinity and femininity.

INTRODUCTION

Recent research reveals that body dissatisfaction has mushroomed among adolescent males (Grogan and Richards 2002; Page and Allen 1995; Pope et al. 2000; Womak 2005), and that the genesis of this dissatisfaction is not so much a desire to be thinner, as found with adolescent females (Dunne 2003), but rather, a desire to be larger and more muscular (Cohn et al. 1987; Grogan and Richards 2002; Pope et al. 2000). Many adolescent males fear that they are too small, too weak, or too skinny (Olivardia 2001). They feel like Clark Kent and long to be Superman (Olivardia 2001). For example, when asked about body shape ideals, body image expert Dr. Harrison Pope and his colleagues (2000), discovered that boys aged 11 to 17 chose a body ideal that possessed approximately 35 pounds more muscle than they actually had themselves. The boys reported that they aspire to a muscular mesomorphic shape characterized by well-developed chest and arm muscles and wide shoulders tapering down to a narrow waist, as opposed to a thin ectomorphic or overweight endomorphic body shape.

Given this preference, it may be reasonable to assume that the muscular mesomorphic body accrues various social advantages over other body types (Mishkind et al. 1987). This assertion is substantiated empirically. Research has shown that the muscular male is generally perceived by others as possessing more favourable personality traits and skills, and to be more physically capable than less mesomorphic males (Tucker 1983). Muscular males also tend to be well accepted by peers, are the first to receive female attentions, have positive self-esteem, and more social power as compared to less physically impressive males (Hasbrook and Harris 1999; Messerchmidt 2000; Swain 2003). In short, a muscular body can lend itself to many positive outcomes, and adolescent males assimilate this quickly.
Seemingly, the muscular shape enjoys cultural prejudices, because it is intimately tied to cultural views of masculinity, which prescribes that men be strong, powerful, and efficacious (Mishkind et al. 1987). A vast body of literature supports this conception. Several scholars suggest that muscles have historically and developmentally come to be regarded as customary signs of masculinity (Dutton 1995; Gilmore 1990; Kimmel 1994b; Mansfield and McGinn 1993; Mosse 1996). For instance, Marc Mishkind and his colleagues (1987) cite research which demonstrates that people have a propensity to rate the muscular shape as the most masculine, and that they apply stereotypically masculine traits, such as “active,” “daring,” and “a fighter” to muscular boys, but not to thin or overweight boys.

True masculinity, in other words, is almost always thought to proceed from men’s bodies (Connell 1995). Hence, a male who fails to resemble the muscular shape is, by implication, failing to live up to sex-role norms, and thus, may experience the consequences of violating such norms (Mishkind et al. 1987). This notion is corroborated empirically (Plummer 2001). For example, while researching the role of the body in the construction of identity in school boys, Kehily (2001), Messerschmidt (2000) and Swain (2003), discovered that the body was employed as the primary resource for establishing status within the pupil peer group. Specifically, physically small and less muscular boys were publicly degraded and labeled ‘wimps’ and ‘fags’.

To compound matters, the relationship between muscularity and prescriptive masculinity resonates even within popular culture (Wienke 1998). Depictions of the male body in comic books (Brown 1999; Pecora 1992), in magazines (Alexander 2003; Frederick, Fessler, and Haselton 2005; Kolbe and Albanese 1996; Patterson and England 2000), through action-figure toys (Pope et al. 2000), on television (Wienke 1998), and in the general media, have increasingly come to glorify images that emphasize physicality as a key criterion for measuring masculinity. As evidence of this, recall for example, the Charles Atlas commercials that first began appearing during the 1940s. The advertisements described the story of a ninety–seven–pound–weakling who, before building up his body to compensate physical weakness, was continually humiliated by larger men kicking sand in his face as they walked along the beach (Wienke 1998). Although the story quickly unfolds in several frames of a comic strip (Wienke 1998), the message to boys is clear: muscularity is one of the ultimate indices of manhood.

In this context, it is not surprising that adolescent males aspire to resemble the muscular ideal, and report dissatisfaction to the extent that their body shape differs from this ideal. After all, our perceptions of our bodies are central to our self-images (Schouten 1991), especially for adolescent males (Messerschmidt 2000; Swain 2003), for whom other markers of traditional masculine identity—like economic power, fatherhood, or adult sexual relations—are but distant invitations (Salisbury and Jackson 1996). That means they may be particularly concerned about a ‘compensatory’ (Thompson and Holt 2004; Woodruffe 1997) body image. To paraphrase Salisbury and Jackson (1996, 190), adolescent boys are often haunted by fears of appearing unmanly and feminine. Lacking adult, male status they often put a great deal of energy
and time into masculinizing bodywork, such as weight training, as a means of countering the threat of effeminacy or unmanliness.

Recent research, however, has found that adolescent male efforts to enhance musculature go far beyond merely training with weights. Perhaps the most serious development of adolescent males’ quest for masculinity is the consumption of anabolic steroids. Males—some as young as ten—are using drugs once largely limited to elite athletes and to the confines of professional bodybuilding gyms (DuRant et al. 1993; Faigenbaum et al. 1998; Olivardia 2000; Phillips 2004). The purpose of this article is to illuminate how adolescent males’ consumption of anabolic steroids contributes to, and is affected by, the relational process of defining masculinity and femininity. We propose that if musculature and masculinity can be, and often are, conflated (Mansfield and McGinn 1993), then adolescent males who are consuming muscle-growth enhancing drugs are not social misfits or deviants, but rather, they are what leading men’s studies scholar Michael Kimmel (2004) calls, over-conformists to gender norms. We suggest that the consumption of anabolic steroids represents an extreme attempt to shape and reinforce masculine identity.

**GENDER DISPLAY**

Scholars have increasingly come to accept the premise that masculinity and femininity are socially constructed; that men and women are acculturated into their gender identities (Connell 1995; Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994; Kimmel 1994a; Phillips 2001). As such, masculinity and femininity are viewed as sets of social expectations, created to characterize the behaviours deemed socially acceptable for a person of a given biological sex (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994). In this sense, it is more coherent, according to West and Zimmerman (1991, 16) among others, to assume that gender is the ‘product of social doings of some sort,’ a type of display or performance (Goffman 1976) involving the reiteration or repetition of the norms by which one is constituted (Butler 1997; Phillips 2001). When an individual actively creates their gender identity and behaviour through interaction, the individual is said to being ‘doing gender’ or ‘displaying gender’ (Buchbinder 1994; Butler 1997; Hasbrook and Harris 1999; West and Zimmerman 1991). In essence, males need to “do” something to become or be masculine (Conway-Long 1994). In contemporary western societies, this often means fulfilling what Clinical psychologist Dr. William Pollack (1999) calls the “Boy Code,” or “Hegemonic” masculinity (Brannon 1976).

**THE MASCULINE GENDER IDEAL**

Hegemonic masculinity, as identified by psychologist Robert Brannon (1976) contains four themes. (1) No Sissy Stuff: masculinity is the repudiation of femininity. (2) Be a Big Wheel: masculinity is measured and evaluated by the possession or absence of such symbols as success, power, wealth and status. (3) Be a Sturdy Oak: masculinity requires an air of toughness, confidence, and self-reliance. (4) Give ‘Em Hell: masculinity is the emission of aggression and bravado.

These four themes do not define a masculinity that is biologically determined, nor do they even capture all masculinities in contemporary western society, but they do refer to a normative masculinity—the version of
masculinity that is often used as the standard against which other masculinities are compared (Kimmel 1997).1

**REPUDIATION OF FEMININITY**

According to Brannon (1976, 14) the most important, and all-encompassing test of hegemonic masculinity is confined in the first theme. A “real” man, he argues, ‘must never, never resemble women, or display strongly stereotyped feminine characteristics.’ Or, as put more bluntly by Kimmel (1994a), the first order of business in being a man is “not being like women.” Hegemonic masculinity is defined more by what one is not, rather than what one is (Kimmel 1994a). The assertion of one’s masculinity depends upon the continual renunciation of femininity (Conway-Long 1994; Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994; Pollack 1999), and nowhere is this notion more evident, according to recent research, than within the adolescent male peer group, as the following sections demonstrate.

**MALE PEER GROUP AS A KIND OF GENDER POLICE**

Within the male peer group, adolescent males assimilate that association to cultural definitions of femininity will pose gender identity risks (Hasbrook and Harris 1999; Plummer 2001; Swain 2003). They learn that adopting behaviours commonly understood to be associated with femininity will, to a large extent, lead to ridicule, stigma, and even alienation (Messerschmidt 2000). In this way, Kimmel (1994a) compares the male peer group to a kind of gender police, constantly threatening to unmask one another as feminine or unmanly.

Masculinity Requires Constant Validation

Elaborating on this view, Cornwall and Lindisfarne (1994) inform us that masculinity should be viewed as an essence or commodity which can be measured, possessed or lost. Boys learn that they must constantly prove their masculinity to themselves and to others (Hasbrook and Harris 1999; Messerschmidt 2000). They must always be on guard to reconstruct and reaffirm their manliness standing in the gaze of their compatriots (Gilmore 1990). As Phillips (2001, 14) remarks, ‘he (a “real” man) never takes his reputation for granted, but always has an eye toward aggressively and competitively staking his claims of the strength of his masculinity.’ Kimmel (1994a) adds weight to this conception when claiming, with certitude, that he can walk onto virtually any recreational area within western society where adolescent boys are ‘happily playing’ and provoke a fight by simply asking

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1According to Kimmel (1997), among others, definitions of masculinity vary across cultures, over time, among men within any one culture, and over the course of a man’s life. Masculinity is, therefore, not a constant, universal essence, but rather an ever-changing fluid collection of meanings and behaviours. Accordingly, we should not speak of masculinity in the singular, but of masculinities, in recognition of the different definitions of manhood constructed, articulated, and enacted in any society. Kimmel argues that by pluralizing the term, it is acknowledged that masculinity means different things to different groups of men at different times. To pluralize the term, however, does not imply that all masculinities are equal; or rather, according to Kimmel (1994a, 124) ‘we are all created equal, but any hypothetical equality evaporates quickly because our definitions of masculinity are not equally valued in our society.’ One definition of manhood continues to remain the standard against which virtually all men living in western society are measured. This definition of manhood, also called ‘Hegemonic’ masculinity, has been summarized by psychologist Robert Brannon (1976) into four themes.
one question: “Who is a sissy around here?” According to Kimmel (1994a, 131), once this question is posed, one of two things is likely to happen. ‘One boy will accuse another of being a sissy, to which that boy will respond that he is not a sissy—that the first boy is. They may have to fight it out to see who is lying, or a whole group of boys will surround one boy and all shout “He is! He is!” That boy will either run home, disgraced, or he will have to take on several boys at once, to prove that he’s not a sissy.’

Maintaining an Appearance of Physical Strength

Hasbrook and Harris (1999) argue that young males constantly engage in corporeal displays of strength to establish and demonstrate their manliness. Demonstrating one’s masculine worth, they argue, involves maintaining an appearance of physical strength and capability. Boys who are neither imposing physically or physically strong often receive ridicule or humiliation from their peers whom they cannot emulate (Kehily 2001; Messerschmidt 2000; Plummer 2001). A boy who does not measure up physically to the ideal masculine body may be dismissed as ‘wimpy’ or ‘girly’ (Plummer 2001; Swain 2003). Simply put, within the male peer group, boys receive the message that they must be bigger, stronger and far more heavily muscled than girls (Buchbinder 1994; Greer 1999; Pascoe 2003). In contrast to a woman’s body, a young man learns that men’s bodies should be hard, sharply defined and powerful (Buchbinder 1994; Greer 1999; Pascoe 2003). This notion is explicitly reinforced within popular culture (Wienke 1998), as the following examples illustrate.

ACTION FIGURE TOYS

In a study conducted to measure trends over a period of thirty years in the muscularity of male action figure toys, such as G.I. Joe., Pope (2000) and his colleagues, discovered that male action figure toys have grown far more muscular over the last thirty years in comparison to their original counterparts, with many modern figures displaying the physiques of elite bodybuilders, and many display levels of muscularity far greater than the outer limits of actual human attainment. Of significance, this finding suggests that many young men have absorbed unrealistic standards of muscularity long before they were mature enough to stop and question whether these images were realistic or reasonable goals for a man’s body (Pope et al. 2000).  

VIDEO GAMES

The message that muscles are one of the ultimate indices of masculinity continues as boys move into adolescence (Pope et al. 2000). Research reveals that video games targeted toward adolescent males highly espouse the conception that masculinity

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2According to health professionals, the requirement to constantly validate masculinity may help explain men’s poorer health in comparison to women. They argue that males jeopardize their health by engaging in dangerous practices, such as risk-taking, fighting, and avoiding treatment when ill, as a means to establish manhood (Courtenay 2000; Mansfield et al. 2003).

3It is worth noting that similar theories have been proposed for several years concerning cultural ideals of thinness in women (Wolf 1991); a vast amount of literature has documented the inappropriate thinness of Barbie, and the relationship that such an unattainable figure could have on a young woman. Incidentally, recent evidence has found that the modern-day Barbie doll now possesses a physique, which is far more humanly proportional (McPherson 1997).
is equated with one’s level of physical strength and size (Pope et al. 2000). Through video games, males are also taught dangerous solutions or remedies to their problems or feelings of inadequacy. Take, for example, ‘Duke Nukem: Total Meltdown,’ arguably one of the most popular video games among adolescent males. When Duke, the game’s muscle-bound proponent, is feeling fatigued, he must find and ingest hidden bottles of anabolic steroids to refill his energy reserves and become more muscular. As the game manual notes, “steroids give Duke a super adrenaline rush.” The game manual does nothing to educate players about the effects of using anabolic steroids and, therefore, can be seen to irresponsibly promote a potentially dangerous substance.

**COMIC BOOKS**

The message that comic books provide is similar to that purveyed by action figures and video games. One just has to recall, for example, the manner in which masculinity is depicted in superhero comics (Pecora 1992). According to Brown (1999) superhero comics are one of our culture’s clearest illustrations of the male duality premised on the fear of the ‘unmasculine other.’ One need only think of Spiderman and Peter Parker, or Superman and his alter ego, Clark Kent. Clark Kent is weak, clumsy, shy, cowardly, insecure, and easily bullied by others. Conversely, Superman is strong, brave, intelligent, handsome and kind. The superhero represents the masculine ideal to be aspired to, whereas the alter ego represents the ‘feminized other.’ As Brown (1999, 3) remarks, ‘while the superhero body represents in vividly graphic detail the masculinity that personifies the ideal of masculinity, the alter ego—the identity that must be kept a secret—depicts the softness, the powerlessness, and the insecurity associated with the feminized man.’ Essentially, the two characters are constructed in such a fashion as to make readers want to identify with the more traditionally masculine hero by contrasting him to a male who appears effeminate.

In addition, not only do comic books targeted toward a male audience depict that muscles are constituted as essentially masculine, but they also provide the reader with methods and tools which can be used in order to help resemble their favourite character or superhero. As pointed out by Fussell (1991, 19) ‘on the back pages of comic books, scrawny teens find advertisements for chin-up bars.’ The impact of comic books should not be underestimated. One professional bodybuilder, for example, reminiscing on his reasons for commencing a weight training regimen, has commented that: “when I was a kid I used to read a lot of the Batman and Superman comic books and also the Incredible Hulk. It used to inspire me because they made the characters look so built and muscular, I would wonder, wow can someone actually look like that…I was only twelve or thirteen years old but I said, I want to look like these guys” (Rich Gaspari, cited in Hansen 2004).

**TELEVISION AND FILM**

Recent evidence also demonstrates that popular film and television divide masculinity into two distinct categories (Brown 1999; Feder 2002). For example, in a study conducted to investigate the portrayal of men in movies, Feder (2002) discovered that masculine-gender depictions are commonly reduced to one of two extremes: the “whiny wimp” or the strong and courageous action hero. The
male who views these images, according to Feder (2002) will likely be simultaneously impressed by the action hero and dismissive of the wimp. The action hero represents those social attributes prized in men, while the ‘whiny wimp’ is associated with those social attributes commonly understood to characterize femininity, and is thus, feared as unmasculine. As evidence of this, recall, for example, the hugely successful film ‘Fight Club,’ starring Brad Pitt and Edward Norton. The leading character, played by Norton, lives an extremely empty and meaningless life. His character is weak, cowardly, insecure and soft. He seems to be almost feminine. To become the man he aspires to be, he develops a split personality, with his ‘other’ self vividly representing the strength and power that personifies the ideal of masculinity (Brown 1999; Feder 2002).

FITNESS AND LIFESTYLE MAGAZINES

Adolescent males are also exposed to a burgeoning array of fitness and lifestyle magazines. And, just like action figure toys, video games, comic books, television shows and films, male-audience magazines present images of male models that have the physique of the traditional male icon—strong and muscular (Frederick, Fessler, and Haselton 2005). For example, in the most in-depth study to date of the portrayal of the male body in male-audience magazines, Kolbe and Albanese (1996) discovered that the male models were overwhelmingly judged to have bodies that were strong, tough, and capable of exacting strenuous, physical activity. They found that few of the models had bodies that were soft and rounded, and even fewer had bodies that were thin and frail. These findings coincide with Patterson and England’s (2000) content analytic study of the promotion of male bodily norms in three UK male lifestyle magazines. The researchers found that the muscular male body was utilized overwhelmingly within all product categories and for all types of body exposure. Similarly, in a content analytic study of the covers of Men’s Health magazine, Susan Alexander (2003) discovered that the most significant message about masculinity was that males should build and maintain a hard, muscular body.

In short, the relationship between masculine identities and consumer culture is significant (Alexander 2003). Visual representations serve as agents of masculine gender socialization (Alexander 2003; Schroeder and Zwick 2004). Media masculinities not only create standards against which males measure themselves, but at the same time, they encourage us to measure and evaluate the masculine worth of others by those same standards. Simply put, the institutions of consumer culture are central in the constitution of the message that muscles—literally—make the man.

MASCULINE VALIDATION VIA BODYWORK

In this context, one may argue that it is not surprising that boys want to resemble the muscular shape. Building one’s body may become, for many adolescent males, a necessity for validating masculine identity, or for ‘doing gender.’ Increasing one’s level of muscularity may, in other words, be a way for adolescent males to exude manliness (Salisbury and Jackson 1996) thus, repudiating any threat of being ‘unmasked’ (Pollack 1999) as effeminate. Unfortunately, however, the pursuit of this muscular idealization appears to be damaging to the physical and emotional health of a growing
number of adolescent males; the muscular ‘model’ of masculine perfection is unattainable by most males (Pope et al. 2000) and the over eager pursuit of it has been directly implicated in the virtual increase of exercise dependencies, eating disorders, and the abuse of food supplements and diet aids (DuRant et al. 1993; O’Dea and Abraham 2002; Pope et al. 2000; Zmijewski and Howard 2003). Perhaps the most serious development of adolescent males’ quest for muscularity is the consumption of anabolic steroids, a class of dangerous muscle-growth enhancing drugs.

ANABOLIC STEROID USE

The use of anabolic steroids can cause numerous psychiatric and other adverse effects, including liver problems, high blood pressure, heart failure, impotence, severe depression, brain damage, extreme aggression, and even death (Hotten 2005; Kimmel 2004; Olivardia 2000; Wright et al. 2000). Research has also shown that individuals who abuse anabolic steroids are far more likely to abuse cocaine, marijuana, alcohol, heroin, morphine, and other opiate drugs at a later stage in their lives (Arvary and Pope 2000; DuRant et al. 1993). Furthermore, it is an offence in some countries to possess anabolic steroids. The maximum penalties in the United Kingdom, for instance, are currently five years imprisonment or an unlimited fine, or both (Wright et al. 2000). Despite these risks, researchers are discovering an alarming increase in the use of anabolic steroids (Pope et al. 2000) particularly among adolescent males (Buckley et al. 1988; DuRant et al. 1993; Faigenbaum et al. 1998; Olivardia 2000; Phillips 2004), many of whom may not even understand the dangers or care about the side affects of steroid use until it is too late. Recent studies have shown that close to 20% of American boys aged 11-17 have admitted to using steroids to boost muscle growth (Faigenbaum 1998; Pope et al. 2000), and those are just the ones who have admitted it, says Dr. Roberto Olivardia (2000), a clinical research fellow at Harvard Medical School.

According to the Drug Enforcement Administration, the percentage of all American male high school students who have used steroids has increased by 50% between 1996 and 2000 (cited in Cloud 2000), and the trend is spreading to European countries like Ireland and Great Britain. For instance, in May of last year, Irish health specialist, Kevin Dawson, who runs an advisory clinic specializing in performance-enhancing drugs, reported marked elevations in the use of muscle-growth enhancing substances among young Irish men. Specifically, he stated that the use of such substances had “gone ballistic” (cited in Keogh 2005, 5). Likewise, Steve Bowden, head-teacher at Porth Secondary School in Wales, speculates that many of his 1,500 male pupils may be using steroids. He stated: “we see physical changes where boys suddenly bulk up around the chest and shoulders. This is over a short spell of time, and we know it is not possible to get results like these simply from working out in the gym” (cited in Phillips 2004, 17). That is to say, the male body simply cannot attain a certain degree of muscularity without the help of muscle-growth enhancing drugs (Pope et al. 2000). Anabolic steroids allow males to surpass their normal biological “ceiling” of muscularity (Pope et al. 2000). As Grogan (1999, 72) remarks, ‘steroids enable the user to build muscle bulk much more quickly than they would be able to do through weight training alone, so they are an attractive option to
some young men who wish to become more muscular.’

Essentially, what we are witnessing in present-day western society is the emergence of what Dr. Harrison Pope, a professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, calls a ‘health crisis’ (Pope et al. 2000). In ever greater numbers, adolescent males are engaging in deadly practices (Hotten 2005), with relatively little hesitation (Olivardia 2000), in order to resemble the masculine ideal. In spite of this, there has been a conspicuous lack of empirical research on the consumption of anabolic steroids (Kanayama, Pope, and Hudson 2001). Research on steroid use is in its infancy (Olivardia 2002). The time has come, therefore, for academic consumer researchers to better understand what may be an evolving epidemic of body image drug abuse (Kanayama, Pope, and Hudson 2001).

**CONCLUSION**

In an attempt to broaden our understanding of the relationship between the body and masculinity, this article examined adolescent males’ consumption of anabolic steroids, a class of muscle-growth enhancing drugs. Anabolic steroids are of interest, because their increase in consumption among adolescent males is believed to have grown to ‘epidemic proportions’ (Buckley et al. 1988). We argue that the demands placed on young men to constantly validate their masculinity, and the increased cultural attention given to the relationship between the male body and what it means to be a man, is causing boys to take the quest for muscularity beyond the bounds of ‘normal’ (Pope et al. 2000) behaviour. Elaborating on this view, we postulate that, if indeed, muscularity is synonymous with masculinity, as a wealth of empirical evidence suggests (Dutton 1995; Hasbrook and Harris 1999; Kimmel 1994b; Mansfield and McGinn 1993), then boys who are abusing muscle-growth enhancing drugs are not social misfits or deviants, but rather, they are what Kimmel (2004) calls, over-conformists to gender norms.

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