

Male Perceptions of Media Influence on Self-Image and Romantic Relationship Expectations

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Abstract

Characters portrayed in media are highly popularized and curated to be admirable and aesthetic, the influence these characters have on the audience can be evidently seen in most individuals. Although the media influence is highly regarded to be one that women fall victim to, it has been understood that men too are influenced by these depictions but have not been studied as widely. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the influence that the media has on not only the self-image of men, but also the romantic relationship expectations they develop due to media depictions. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data collected from semi-structured interviews, Masculinity and Physical Ideal along with Breaking the “Perfect Couple” Script emerged as the two major themes. The men expressed the pressure and need to match the stereotypical, well-built body image that is widespread in media as “attractive”, along with also feeling the need to match the masculine characteristics, to be seen as a competent man. They were also open to expressing the high standards they set for themselves in a romantic relationship due to the depictions and expectations. The study highlights the need to understand the pressures men face, trying to match the expectation built and the extent they might go to achieve these standards.

Keywords: Romantic expectations, Men, Self-image, Masculine

Introduction

Media has been a major aspect of the growing and changing world, this encompasses not only recent media such as social media, but also traditional media forms including print media. It has aided in the spreading of information and also indirectly, or sometimes directly influenced people perceive this information in various ways. Earlier media forms notably consisted of books, television programmes, magazines and radio channels, this has now shifted by a huge leap into media such as social media applications, dating applications, movies; with this shift came a big difference in not only the content but also the accessibility to this content. The content that was portrayed in the older media included lots of structured, curated characters who were not necessarily built for relatability but rather to be seen as “heroes” or similar superior- than-audience roles.

Male representation has consistently been that which depicts a chiseled body, macho characteristics, and the typical “masculine” features expected from a man. However, over time the hyper focus on these characteristics have escalated rapidly, and created a sort of tension between the extent of content portrayed in the media; on one end, content that pushes the masculine man concept is being continued, and on the other end, a new, modern perspective of progressive masculinity is being popularized recently.

Among these characteristics that a male is expected to have, a significant role that they play is being the one “who leads” in a romantic relationship, in most, if not all the portrayals of a romantic relationship, the

male is seen to be the one who takes an active role in the initiation and controlling of the relationship; this has been the depiction from the earlier media and is one that continues even today in majority of the representations. Additionally to this “leading role” over recent times romantic relationships have been overly exposed content on forms of media such as social media, creating a largely false sense of reality to the public regarding the “couple goals” and expectations of intimacy and conflict resolution in a relationship.

Studies have been conducted using these ideas and philosophies to determine the degree to which media characters and stories impact people's lives. Returning to the statement that people believe it is essential to establish and maintain relationships with other people, it has also been suggested that romantic love is something that everyone aspires to; people have been conditioned to value love by being overwhelmed with messages about romantic relationships. (Moss, 2019). From the feminist perspective, the expectations set by the society plays a major role in the hopes, dreams, aspirations, and behaviours of people; when the society as a whole promotes and flaunts the idea of passionate love and heterosexual marriage, they set up a model for the typical adult life (Illouz, 2012), and this societal influence creates an added stress and pressure for the individuals, they feel as though they have to necessarily be in a “perfect relationship” as proposed by the society (Moss, 2019).

The psychological link that explains how men assess their own status in relation to those observed models is provided by Social Comparison Theory (SCT), which builds on Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, which highlights how people learn and model behaviors through observation. While Festinger proposed that people have an inbuilt tendency to evaluate their own and other people's value by comparing them to others (Festinger, 1954), Bandura illustrates how social scripts are learned. This process is sometimes hijacked in the internet era by upward social comparison, when males evaluate their own lives against the "Adonis Complex" and hyper-stylized "alpha" stereotypes that are common in the media. In terms of self-image, this comparison frequently leads to a notable disparity between the media-ideal and the perceived self (Galioto & Crowther, 2013).

Objectives of the Study

The aim of the study is to understand the perception of males on the influence of media on their self-image and romantic relationship expectations. The objectives of the study are-

To understand how media portrayals influence male self-image and identity.

To examine the impact of romantic media on men's expectations in romantic relationships.

To see how media-influenced beliefs affect men's real-life relationship behaviours.

Review of Literature

Research highlights the distinct impact of social media, compared to traditional media, on adolescents' psychosocial development. Franchina and Lo Coco (2018) found that interactive platforms intensify body comparison through continuous peer engagement, reinforcing the “muscular ideal” among boys and increasing body dissatisfaction. However, they emphasized the lack of longitudinal research on long-term psychological effects, particularly among men.

Supporting this, Piatkowski et al. (2020) showed that negative public commentary on muscular male bodies on social media adversely affects self-perception, leading to reduced body esteem and engagement in extreme body-change behaviors.

The media also shapes adolescents' understanding of relationships. Kulkarni et al. (2019) found that both

social and traditional media normalize unhealthy relationship behaviors and promote superficial “relationship goals,” though their findings are limited by a specific urban sample. Similarly, Baldwin-White and Gower (2021) reported that social media influences perceptions of healthy relationships among college students, often normalizing behaviors like digital surveillance. Notably, these effects vary across platforms, indicating a gap in understanding platform-specific influences.

Further, Kuzio (2021) highlighted how media reinforces outdated gender norms around emotional expression in relationships, creating a mismatch between expectations and real experiences. The study identified a lack of primary data examining how these stereotypes influence actual dating behaviors.

New concerns have arisen from the rapid evolution of digital media platforms, such as the acceptance of digital surveillance, the need for public validation, and the promotion of outdated gender roles. Some individuals deliberately distinguish between media portrayals and reality in an effort to maintain contentment despite these limitations, emphasizing the essential function of media literacy.

Method

Research Design

The present study adopted a qualitative research design using an interpretive, exploratory approach to examine how media archetypes influence heterosexual men’s self-image and romantic relationship expectations. This approach facilitated an in-depth understanding of participants’ subjective experiences, acknowledging that perceptions of masculinity and romantic ideals are socially constructed and best understood through individual narratives rather than generalized measures.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling based on predefined inclusion criteria. The sample consisted of seven heterosexual men aged between 18 and 27 years. Recruitment continued until data saturation was achieved, at which point no new themes emerged from the data. Inclusion criteria required participants to be within the specified age range and to have regular exposure to romantic-themed media. Exclusion criteria included individuals with minimal or no exposure to such media.

Measures

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview schedule developed by the researcher based on the review of literature and study objectives. Interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy, and supplementary field notes were taken during the interaction. Verbatim transcripts were prepared for analysis.

Procedure

Participants meeting the inclusion criteria were recruited and contacted for participation. Interviews were conducted via telephone and followed a semi-structured format, allowing flexibility to explore individual perspectives in depth. All interviews were recorded with participant consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The process involved six stages: (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts; (2) generation of initial codes by identifying significant statements; (3) searching for themes by grouping related codes; (4) reviewing and refining themes to ensure coherence and relevance; (5) defining and naming themes along with relevant subthemes; and (6) reporting the findings in relation to the research objectives. Coding was conducted manually and, where applicable, supported by qualitative analysis software.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants after providing detailed information about the study’s purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without any consequences. Confidentiality was strictly maintained by anonymizing data through the use of pseudonyms, and all identifying information was removed from transcripts and reports. Participants were also informed about the limits of confidentiality, particularly in cases involving potential risk or legal obligations.

Results and Discussion

Table 1.

Thematic of Male Perceptions of Media Influence on Self-Image and Romantic Relationship

THEME	DESCRIPTION	
Masculinity and the Physical Ideal	How men view, and feel pressured to conform to the way the media constructs and reinforces the contemporary male.	
Subthemes	Description	Significant Statement Examples
The Muscle Obsession and "Gym-Centric" Identity	Depicts the overwhelming focus on the hyper-muscular archetype displayed in the media, including the pressure to match these archetypes without concern for well-being of self.	"...it focused the physical aspect of a man is that if you do not have muscles you do not have certain this much of biceps, this chest, this triceps then you are not doing enough." p6
Screen Vs. Reality	Most on-screen portrayals of men use filters and extreme methods but present them as normal, creating unrealistic standards that men both desire and recognize as unattainable.	"...let's say for, for example, Hollywood, is that, uh, like, their actors would say they all achieve these body types naturally, but, um, like, most of them are just lying because they never talk about them using substances like steroids or anything to get that body, seeing this some, uh, men would have like stress and all that because they feel like if they don't-- if they're not like this, society wouldn't accept them. And, uh, you know, there'll be a lot of jokes." p2
Pressure to Act Tough	Describing the urge men feel to hide their vulnerable side, in order to maintain a strong front.	" ..think of late we see, I am seeing a lot about men being, you know, for men to be, for men to express their feelings, how they feel, if they feel vulnerable or anything. But I'm not seeing it in real life though. I've seen posts and stuff, but I've not seen, it's very hard to see a man being

		vulnerable, from before this was not there so..."p3
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THEME	DESCRIPTION	
Breaking the "Perfect Couple" Script.	Being influenced by the depictions of romance in media, and moving out of the stereotypical representations of romantic relationships that are portrayed in media	
Subthemes	Description	Significant Statement Examples
Screen-Based Expectations	The depictions in the media created unrealistic expectations, creating disappointment in reality.	"I think that movies and the entertainment media, they generally set some standards for men. Um, let's say about 50 to 60 percent. But when we look into it, uh, when it comes into real life, um, people tend to, uh, try and mirror those things. And when they try to mirror those things and it doesn't happen, uh, it's generally a bad thing. It's generally like it ends up with disappointment and a lot of things. So generally that's what I feel about it."p3.
Modeling Performative Expression	Media acts as a script for expression of romantic behaviours, this is adopted by men in reality to express affection.	"So the expression of it is like, do like nice dialogues or like poems and all the, all the songs and everything... So definitely I have that better in terms of expressing, um, of my, of my love and affection."p1
Emerging Norms of Vulnerability and Consent.	The importance of consent and men being vulnerable are new concepts being popularised in the media, that seem to be beneficial for the male population, making it easier to express themselves.	"Now, I see it changing a little bit where the more vulnerable side of men has come out. And the characters that are being written are also more communicative, more logical. ."p1

THEME 1: Masculinity and the Physical Ideal:

The media portrayals of men, in most forms of media, are largely to do with their physicality and the stereotypic masculine attributes the character comprises. This involves the body-image mainly, this is with regard to the highly popularized content that is most accessible to a majority. However, even the features like emotional-self and “masculine” features like - being tough are extended to the male audience, with the expectation to fulfil that stereotypic role. The men felt that they were being confined to these standards, and they built expectations for self by being an audience to these portrayals.

Subtheme 1.1: The Muscle Obsession and “Gym-Centric” Identity. There was an evident fixation on the importance of having a well-built body and how that is one of the most prominently displayed attributes of an attractive male in the media. The participants mentioned that they were also convinced to build that body due to the media displays, and continue to see their peers having the same mindset. A participant revealed that “.. I'd wanna diet for, like, four months, and that too it was very unhealthy”p6

Subtheme 1.2: Screen Vs. Reality. The participants are well aware of these fake-realities of media but despite that, fantasize about acquiring these standards because it is popularised, thus creating a conflict within themselves, one participant shared that “ you'll see a picture of someone with a well-shaped, body, uh, really muscular, but in reality, he may not look like that..”p3

Subtheme 1.3: Pressure to Act Tough. Feeling the need to keep the “softer” feelings and interests under cover was widely seen. They felt that they should always be strong and never show their inner vulnerability. “..it's very hard to see a man being vulnerable.”p3

THEME 2: Breaking the “Perfect Couple” Script:

Media depictions create a script that the audience feel they need to follow to be seen as an attractive and capable person. Moving away from the performative, idealized construct of romance that is often presented on social media or in traditional forms of storytelling, men feel that although the script may exist, it is not a reality and cannot be either.

Subtheme 2.1 Real Dating vs. The Movies. Participants talked about an initial mirroring of South Indian or Hollywood movie tropes, such as "love at first sight" or "violence equating to love," which led to disappointment when it was adapted to the real world.

Subtheme 2.2 Modeling Performative Expression. The media acts like a script for expressing affection, with men adopting behaviors like gift-giving, nice dialogues, or specific date ideas learned from movies. Even though they model these expressions, they tend to rely on personal principles for deeper issues like conflict resolution.

Subtheme 2.3 Emerging Norms of Vulnerability and Consent. There is a noted shift toward "men written by women" tropes in modern media, which portrays men as more communicative, logical, and aware of consent. Participants appreciate this vulnerable side as a positive departure from traditional toxic portrayals.

Interpretation of Findings

The present study examined how media depictions of body image, emotional expression, and relationship scripts shape young men’s masculine identity and romantic expectations. Extending prior literature that has largely focused on women, the findings highlight the male experience as a complex negotiation of stereotypical masculine ideals. Two overarching themes—*Breaking the “Perfect Couple” Script* and

Masculinity and the Physical Ideal—illustrate the interplay between media consumption, social comparison, and identity formation.

Findings indicate that body image concerns among men extend beyond surface-level dissatisfaction, reflecting deeper conflicts between personal identity and media-driven ideals. Participants emphasized physical appearance, particularly muscularity, as central to masculine competence, alongside emotional restraint. Failure to approximate these ideals was associated with reduced self-worth and perceived inadequacy. This aligns with *Social Comparison Theory*, wherein discrepancies between lived reality and idealized media representations generate psychological distress. Despite recognizing these portrayals as unrealistic, participants remained emotionally invested, reflecting a state of cognitive dissonance and liminality between authenticity and unattainable standards.

A key contribution of this study is the concept of identity bifurcation, wherein men perceive the “muscular ideal” as separate from their authentic selves, yet feel compelled to pursue it to achieve social acceptance. This division intensifies efforts toward extreme body regulation practices, often accompanied by internalized anxiety and suppression of vulnerability. Masculinity thus emerges as a performative construct, where maintaining a “tough” exterior outweighs acknowledgment of emotional strain.

Media also functioned as a script for romantic behavior, shaping expectations of affection and partnership. Participants reported internalizing cinematic tropes—from idealized “love at first sight” narratives to problematic depictions equating possessiveness or aggression with love. Inability to replicate these scripts in real-life relationships led to disillusionment and perceived relational inadequacy. However, participants demonstrated reflexivity by selectively adopting and critically evaluating these norms, particularly in areas such as communication and conflict resolution.

Notably, the findings reveal a transitional shift in masculine norms. Participants described navigating between traditional roles emphasizing stoicism and provision, and emerging expectations centered on emotional openness and consent. While vulnerability was increasingly recognized as valuable, it remained constrained by internalized norms that stigmatize emotional expression. This resulted in what may be conceptualized as dual emotional labor: the labor of suppression (concealing vulnerability) and the labor of performance (enacting idealized romantic behaviors).

Overall, the study underscores the powerful role of media in shaping male identity and relational expectations, while also highlighting men’s active negotiation and partial resistance to these influences. The findings point to the need for greater attention to male-specific experiences of body image and emotional expression, as well as the evolving nature of masculinity in contemporary media contexts

Summary and Conclusion

This study examined how media archetypes shape young men’s body image and romantic expectations. Findings indicate that men increasingly view the body as a regulated “project,” engaging in strict exercise and dieting to meet gym-centric ideals associated with masculine competence. Participants reported identity bifurcation, experiencing a gap between their real selves and idealized media representations, leading to persistent inadequacy and self-doubt.

In romantic contexts, men described attempting to replicate “perfect couple” scripts derived from media. When real-life relationships failed to align with these portrayals, participants reported relational dissatisfaction and self-blame. The findings highlight two forms of emotional labor: performance (enacting ideal partner roles) and suppression (concealing vulnerability). Although emerging media

narratives promoting vulnerability and consent were viewed positively, traditional masculine norms continued to constrain emotional expression.

Overall, the study underscores the role of media in transforming the male body into a symbol of social value while shaping unrealistic relational expectations. Despite growing awareness of the artificial nature of media portrayals, participants remained emotionally influenced by them, reflecting ongoing cognitive dissonance. However, the gradual acceptance of vulnerability signals a shift toward more flexible and adaptive forms of masculinity.

Clinically, these findings suggest the importance of addressing media-driven distortions through interventions such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), enabling individuals to challenge unrealistic standards and develop healthier self-concepts. From a socio-cultural perspective, media literacy programs must move beyond simply identifying media as unrealistic to addressing individuals' emotional attachment to these ideals. For media practitioners, there is a need to promote diverse and realistic portrayals of masculinity that emphasize authenticity, emotional expression, and consent.

The study is limited by its small sample size, cross-sectional design, and reliance on self-report data, which may be influenced by social desirability. Future research should include larger, more diverse samples and longitudinal designs to better understand the evolution of masculine identity. Experimental and mixed-methods approaches are recommended to clarify causal relationships and develop interventions that reduce self-blame and rigid masculine norms.

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