

The Impact of Societal Ideals on Men's Body Image

A Qualitative Study Among Finnish Participants

Smitty Nguyen

Degree Thesis for Bachelor of Beauty and Cosmetics Novia (UAS) - Degree

Beauty and Cosmetics, Beauty Care

Vaasa 2024

DEGREE THESIS

Author: Smitty Nguyen

Degree Programme and place of study: Beauty and Cosmetics, Beauty Care, Vaasa

Supervisor(s): Jaana Ylimartimo-Nybäck & Johanna Nykamb

Title: The Impact of Societal Ideals on Men's Body Image: A Qualitative Study Among Finnish Participants

Date: 17.11.2024 Number of pages: 56 Appendices: 3

Abstract

This study examines the impact of societal ideals and media portrayals in shaping Finnish men's body image and self-esteem through a qualitative approach. Using semi-structured interviews with six Finnish male participants aged 18 to 35, the research explores the relationship between societal pressures, cultural expectations and coping mechanisms related to male body image.

The findings reveal pervasive media portrayals and societal standards as perpetrators of narrow ideals of masculinity, usually characterized by markers such as muscularity, leanness and facial symmetry. Participants reported differing levels of dissatisfaction, repeatedly linked to comparison pressure and the internalization of unrealistic ideals.

The study reveals the role of media as both a source of motivation, as well as an amplifier of insecurities. It details coping strategies employed by participants, including exercise as a way to boost self-esteem, alongside avoidance behaviors to inhibit self-consciousness.

By providing insights into the experiences of Finnish men, the study gives commentary to the broader discourse on male body image, calling for the promotion of diverse representations of masculinity.

Language: English

Key Words: Men's Beauty Standards, Body Image, Self-Esteem, Coping Mechanisms

Table of Contents

1	Introduction.....	1
2	Aim and Problem.....	2
3	Theoretical Framework and Previous Research.....	3
3.1	Historical Evolution of Male Beauty Standards.....	3
3.1.1	Ancient and Classical Ideals.....	3
3.1.2	20th Century to Present.....	3
3.2	Media Influence on Male Beauty Standards.....	4
3.2.1	Traditional Media.....	4
3.2.2	Social Media and Digital Platforms.....	5
3.3	Societal and Cultural Pressures.....	6
3.3.1	Peer and Social Pressures.....	6
3.3.2	Professional and Romantic Expectations.....	7
3.3.3	Cultural and Global Perspectives.....	9
3.4	Psychological Impact and Health Consequences.....	10
3.4.1	Mental Health and Body Dysmorphia.....	11
3.4.2	Coping Mechanisms.....	11
3.5	Body Positivity and Changing Narratives.....	12
3.5.1	Body Positivity Movements.....	13
3.5.2	Media and Advocacy for Diverse Masculinity.....	14
4	Previous Research.....	16
4.1	Summary.....	19
5	Methodology.....	20
5.1	Research Design.....	20
5.2	Semi-Structured Interview.....	20
5.3	Content Analysis.....	21
5.4	Ethical Aspects.....	22
5.5	Practical Implementation.....	22
6	Results.....	24
6.1	Themes Emerging from the Interviews.....	24
6.2	Participants' Perceptions of Body Image, Media Portrayals and Self-Worth.....	24
6.2.1	Perceptions of Body Image and Self-Worth.....	24
6.2.2	The Role of Media and Society in Shaping Male Body Image.....	29
6.3	Participants' Coping Mechanisms.....	31
6.3.1	Coping Mechanisms for Body Image Challenges.....	31
6.3.2	Reflections on Body Image Over Time.....	34
6.4	Result Interpretation.....	38

6.4.1	Participants' Perceptions of Body Image, Media Portrayals and Self-Worth	38
6.4.2	Participants' Coping Mechanisms.....	39
7	Critical Review.....	41
8	Discussion.....	43
9	References.....	45
	Appendix.....	50

1 Introduction

In recent times, societal and media-driven notions of beauty standards have extended their influence beyond female audiences to shape and impact men's perceptions of attractiveness, identity, and self-esteem. While beauty ideals have evolved across historical eras, from classical portrayals of proportional physiques in Greek and Roman art to modern, hyper-muscular imagery, contemporary standards for men have grown increasingly complex and at times, unrealistic (Gültzow et al., 2020; Jess, 2021; Ricciardelli & Williams, 2012). Influenced by traditional media, social media, and cultural expectations, these standards produce a narrow portrayal of masculinity that pushes physical attributes such as muscularity, leanness, and symmetrical features. These kinds of ideals shape male self-perception and have consequences on mental health which often leads to issues of body dissatisfaction, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Pope et al., 2000; Verrastro et al., 2020).

This paper examines the multidimensional set of factors that define male beauty standards in contemporary society, analyzing the roles of media, societal, and psychological influences. My objective is to investigate how these factors shape male body image and self-esteem and to explore the strategies men use to cope with the pressures associated with these standards. Through an in depth review of existing literature and a qualitative study featuring the accounts of six Finnish male participants, this paper contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing male beauty standards and their implications for mental health, while emphasizing the importance of promoting a more inclusive representation of masculinity. It is worth noting that I made use of ChatGPT to help streamline the structure and flow of the paper, particularly in mapping out headings and subheadings (Open AI, 2024).

2 Aim and Problem

The aim of this study is to examine the impact of societal ideals and media portrayals on Finnish men's body image and self-esteem. Specifically, this research investigates how these influences shape individual perceptions of masculinity and explores the coping mechanisms men use to manage body image pressures. By focusing on Finnish participants, this study also hopes to contribute a culturally specific perspective to the discourse on male beauty standards. The findings of this research are expected to benefit several groups. Academics and researchers can gain deeper insights into male body image, an often overlooked area which is rarely discussed in the same depth as female body image. Mental health professionals may use the results to develop targeted interventions for men facing body image challenges. Media and advocacy groups can leverage the study to advocate for more inclusive and diverse representations of masculinity. Most importantly, the study hopes to resonate with men themselves, encouraging awareness, dialogue, and self-acceptance around body image issues.

The study seeks answers to the following questions:

1. How do societal pressures and media portrayals influence men's body image, self-esteem, and perception of attractiveness?
2. What coping mechanisms do men employ to manage the pressures associated with body image?

By exploring these questions, the study aims to expand understanding of the psychological and social effects of male beauty standards, hopefully contributing to more inclusive representations of masculinity.

3 Theoretical Framework and Previous Research

This chapter provides an overview of the theoretical framework and reviews existing research on male beauty standards and body image. It examines the historical evolution of male beauty ideals, the impact of traditional and social media, societal and cultural pressures, and the psychological effects associated with body image concerns. This chapter establishes the foundational concepts and context that guide the analysis of the study's findings.

3.1 Historical Evolution of Male Beauty Standards

3.1.1 Ancient and Classical Ideals

In ancient Greek and Roman cultures, male beauty was linked with the ideals of physical strength, symmetry, and harmony. Greek art celebrated "kalos," a concept of beauty that combined aesthetic appeal with moral virtues (Jess, 2021). Statues of figures like Apollo and Hermes embodied an idealized masculinity characterized by balanced muscularity and proportions, reflecting a societal belief that beauty was rooted in mathematical harmony, often represented by the "golden ratio" (Ricciardelli & Williams, 2012; Rhodes, 2006). The Romans adapted these Greek ideals, highlighting physical strength and virtue but with an increased focus on realism. While Roman images of emperors and military leaders retained idealized traits, they also included individualized features, balancing personal realism with the classical aesthetic (Jess, 2021). This evolution highlighted an appreciation for individual characteristics within broader societal ideals of authority and strength, contributing to lasting perceptions of masculine beauty that still resonate today (Swami et al., 2007).

3.1.2 20th Century to Present

The 20th century saw markant shifts in male beauty standards, largely driven by the rise of mass media and consumer culture. In the early part of the century, ideals of masculinity were linked to athleticism and lean physiques, reflecting a growing emphasis on health and fitness. This shift was boosted by the emergence of sports stars, such as boxers and athletes, who embodied strength and endurance (Ricciardelli & Williams, 2012). By the mid-20th century however, representations of men in media began to shift towards hyper-muscularity, especially in Hollywood films. Actors like Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone became icons of masculinity, promoting the image of the heavily muscular, action-oriented

male hero. This period saw the rise of the "muscle culture," in which muscularity became synonymous with power, dominance, and success (Pope et al., 2000).

In addition to film, the fashion and fitness industries played a crucial role in shaping modern male beauty ideals. Advertisements for men's grooming products and fitness supplements featured lean, muscular male bodies, reinforcing the notion that physical appearance is central to both personal and professional success (Ricciardelli et al., 2012). This shift was pushed further by the start of social media platforms in the early 21st century, where idealized male physiques are continually showcased and compared (Sarwer et al., 2003). In recent decades, ideals have been diversified to include multiple iterations of masculinity beyond traditional muscularity. Studies reveal a growing acceptance of varied male body types, influenced by the body positivity movement, which advocates for a broader definition of attractiveness that includes diverse shapes, sizes, and ethnic backgrounds. Despite this diversification, fitness and a low body-fat physique remain prominent, indicating a blend of classical ideals with contemporary cultural shifts (Jacobsen, 2010; Rhodes, 2006).

3.2 Media Influence on Male Beauty Standards

Media influence plays a central role in defining and reinforcing male beauty standards, shaping contemporary ideals of masculinity and physical appearance. Traditional and digital media platforms have both contributed to creating an idealized vision of male beauty, often emphasizing muscularity, leanness, and attractiveness. These portrayals establish points of reference that influence individual perceptions of self-worth, creating social pressures that can impact physical and mental health. Over time, media has evolved from promoting traditional ideals through magazines and film to distributing digitally enhanced, hyper-realistic images through social media, reinforcing a narrow and often unattainable standard for men (Ricciardelli & Clow, 2010; Weber, 2006).

3.2.1 Traditional Media

Traditional media has played a key role in establishing and perpetuating male beauty standards. In the late 20th century, magazines such as *GQ* and *Sports Illustrated* began to feature lean, muscular, and V-shaped bodies, promoting an image of male beauty tied to physical strength and low body fat (Law & Labre, 2002). This portrayal marked a departure

from the rugged, “everyman” ideal represented by figures like John Wayne in earlier media, and evolving into a hyper-masculine aesthetic embodied by movie actors like Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone. These actors represented the muscular ideal that became a staple of action cinema, influencing the beauty standards young men aspired to achieve (Gough, 2006).

Television also shaped male beauty ideals, especially through makeover shows focused on enhancing masculinity. As Weber (2006) discusses, shows like *Extreme Makeover* and *What Not to Wear* portrayed transformations as necessary for achieving professional and social success, reinforcing the idea that physical appearance is tied to self-worth and societal acceptance. These programs often depicted men’s transformation as necessary for their personal and professional success, subtly reinforcing the notion that achieving the ideal body was essential to self-esteem and social acceptance (Weber, 2006). Traditional media's influence extends into adolescence, as noted by Agliata and Tantleff-Dunn (2004), who explored how young men exposed to muscular ideals in media develop a tendency to internalize these standards. This internalization leads to body dissatisfaction, as they aspire to achieve a physique that is challenging for most to attain naturally. As this muscular ideal became more pervasive in traditional media, it established a cultural guideline for masculinity, creating lasting impacts on body image that persist into the digital age (Agliata & Tantleff-Dunn, 2004).

3.2.2 Social Media and Digital Platforms

With the start of social media, the impact of media on male beauty standards has intensified. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok now serve as agents in promoting idealized male bodies. Social media's interactive nature amplifies these beauty standards through likes, comments, and follower counts, which act as social rewards for conforming to these ideals. Research shows that Instagram posts featuring muscular men receive more engagement, creating a feedback loop that reinforces the desire for a lean and muscular physique (Gültzow et al., 2020). This phenomenon is further compounded by digital editing tools, which allow users to alter their appearance, thereby creating a disconnect between real and idealized body images. The concept of “digitized dysmorphia,” is introduced by Verrastro et al. (2020), and highlights the anxiety and feelings of dissatisfaction that arise when individuals compare themselves to digitally manipulated standards on social media. Both male and female

adolescents who regularly use platforms like Instagram are more likely to feel anxious and dissatisfied with their bodies, suggesting that these platforms not only shape beauty standards but also contribute to mental health concerns (Verrastro et al., 2020). For men, exposure to these ideals often results in increased pressure to attain muscularity and leanness, a pursuit that can lead to unhealthy behaviors, including excessive exercise and restrictive dieting (Ricciardelli, 2010; Sylvia et al., 2014).

Video games, another popular digital platform of sorts, has also contributed to these body ideals. Male avatars in video games tend to embody exaggerated muscularity, which can affect male gamers' self-perceptions. Sylvia et al. (2014) found that playing games with highly muscular avatars led to lower body satisfaction among men, indicating that exposure to idealized virtual bodies can reinforce unrealistic standards and negatively impact body image (Sylvia et al., 2014). In addition, studies on the portrayal of masculinity in social media show that the constant self-surveillance encouraged by platforms like Instagram has led to an increased investment in physical appearance among men. Weber (2006) argues the rise of makeover culture has expanded into digital spaces, encouraging men to seek validation through visual self-presentation. This self-presentation aligns closely with hegemonic ideals of masculinity, often emphasizing strength, control, and youthfulness as markers of male attractiveness (Weber, 2006).

3.3 Societal and Cultural Pressures

3.3.1 Peer and Social Pressures

The influence of societal standards and cultural norms on male body image has grown, forwarded by media portrayals, peer expectations, and evolving ideals of masculinity. The prevalence of idealized body types has led many men to internalize these ideals, impacting their self-perception and social interactions. According to Grammas and Schwartz (2009), male body dissatisfaction often arises from the internalization of societal messages that promote perfectionism and specific body ideals. This dissatisfaction is linked to a growing trend among men to compare themselves with media images, leading to behaviours that can compromise mental and physical health, such as excessive exercise, use of supplements, and in some cases, steroid use. McNeill and Firman (2014) observe that modern societal expectations have reshaped hegemonic masculinity, integrating aspects traditionally seen as

feminine, such as concern with appearance. This hints at broader social changes, where hegemonic masculinity is increasingly associated with physical attributes such as muscularity and leanness. As men strive to meet these ideals, they experience more pressure, particularly in social settings where physical appearance is scrutinized. The cultural acceptance of cosmetic and grooming products for men further amplifies these pressures, making appearance a significant component of modern hegemonic masculinity.

Peer influence plays a pivotal role in shaping male body image, especially among younger men. Grammas and Schwartz (2009) highlight that socially prescribed perfectionism where individuals feel that others expect them to meet high standards of appearance significantly predicts body dissatisfaction. Young men often face pressure from friends to attain a certain physique, and this peer influence can foster a strong drive for muscularity and low body fat. This pressure is especially prevalent in settings like gyms, where body comparisons are common. The study underscores how peer-driven standards contribute to men's dissatisfaction with their bodies when they perceive themselves as falling short of these expectations. Additionally, McNeill and Firman (2014) found that young men are not only motivated by media images but also by direct comparisons with friends. Social comparison theory, which posits that individuals evaluate themselves against their peers, is evident in male body image concerns. Younger men often aspire to resemble muscular or leaner peers, seeing them as benchmarks for their own goals. This competitive aspect among friends can enhance motivation for physical changes, yet it can also lead to dissatisfaction when men fail to achieve these idealized images. Therefore, peer influence acts both as a motivator and as a source of pressure, contributing to body dissatisfaction among men in social circles.

3.3.2 Professional and Romantic Expectations

Men face significant societal pressures related to their physical appearance in both professional and romantic contexts. In professional settings, physical attractiveness is often linked to perceptions of competence, confidence, and leadership ability, with taller, more fit men frequently being viewed as more successful and authoritative (Judge & Cable, 2004). This can lead to increased pressure on men to maintain a certain level of fitness and grooming to succeed in the workplace, with muscularity and height often emphasized as traits of professional competence and dominance (Yancey & Emerson, 2016).

Romantic expectations place additional pressures on men, as physical attractiveness is often a crucial factor in romantic selection. Research indicates that women's preferences for male physical traits, such as facial symmetry, chin prominence, and jawline definition, are often linked to evolutionary factors and can fluctuate based on their menstrual cycle. For instance, studies on ovulatory shifts have shown that women tend to prefer more masculine features, such as a pronounced jawline and facial symmetry, during their fertile phase, as these traits are associated with genetic fitness and reproductive potential (Penton-Voak et al., 1999). Men with symmetrical faces and strong jawlines are perceived as more dominant and attractive, particularly for short-term relationships (Rhodes et al., 2000). Height also plays a significant role in romantic expectations, with taller men often perceived as more attractive and dominant in both romantic and social contexts (Yancey & Emerson, 2016). Height preferences have been observed across cultures, though they may be more emphasized in western societies where taller men are associated with protection, strength, and status (Sorokowski et al., 2012). These preferences influence mate selection, as men who are taller and physically fit are more likely to be considered desirable partners, particularly in short-term mating contexts (Penton-Voak et al., 2000).

Facial hair, specifically beards, has also been studied in relation to perceptions of male attractiveness and dominance. Research suggests that men with facial hair are often viewed as more mature, dominant, and physically imposing, which can enhance their attractiveness in certain romantic contexts (Dixson & Brooks, 2013). However, perceptions of beards can vary depending on cultural norms and individual preferences, with some studies showing a preference for clean-shaven faces in contexts where perceived trustworthiness and youthfulness are valued (Dixson et al., 2017).

Facial proportions and symmetry also play a significant role in female mate preferences. Studies suggest that while symmetry is generally associated with attractiveness, certain degrees of asymmetry in male faces may not always be perceived negatively. For instance, some asymmetry may signal uniqueness or genetic variability, which can be attractive to potential mates under specific circumstances (Rhodes et al., 1999). The balance of facial features, including chin height, nose shape, and neck proportions, further influences attractiveness, as these features are often subconsciously linked to perceptions of dominance and health (Rhodes, 2006).

3.3.3 Cultural and Global Perspectives

The influence of cultural and societal norms on male body image is deeply rooted in regional ideals and expectations, often emphasizing specific body shapes, weights, and muscularity as symbols of attractiveness and masculinity. Studies show that these cultural standards vary significantly between western and non-western societies, affecting male body image globally. In western societies, the ideal male physique is usually portrayed as muscular and lean, reinforcing stereotypes of masculinity linked to physical prowess and dominance. This expectation contributes to a widespread phenomenon where western men experience high levels of body dissatisfaction, often aspiring to achieve what has been termed the "Adonis complex" (Yang et al., 2005). The increased visibility of muscular male bodies in western media further intensifies these pressures, leading to a noted rise in body dysmorphia and steroid abuse as men try to align with this cultural ideal (Yang et al., 2005).

In contrast, east asian cultures exhibit differing ideals, often valuing a more balanced or even slender male physique. In Taiwan, male body image issues are less prevalent, attributed to cultural values that do not emphasize muscularity to the same degree as western societies. Taiwanese men generally report less body dissatisfaction, influenced by societal expectations that prioritize non-physical traits over physique in determining masculinity (Yang et al., 2005). Comparisons between western and asian perspectives reveal that the western emphasis on physical form as a marker of masculinity does not universally apply. Monocello and Dressler (2020) discuss that while South Korean and American men both value specific body ideals such as muscularity, they do so for culturally distinct reasons. South Korean men, influenced by the "kkonminam" or "flower boy" ideal, may prioritize aesthetic appeal over the traditionally masculine attributes valued in western cultures, which are more oriented towards functionality (Monocello & Dressler, 2020).

Cross-cultural studies present how body ideals are shaped by socioeconomic factors and cultural settings. Swami et al. (2005, 2007) found that preferences differ not only by culture but also by urbanization; for instance, British urban environments favor lean, muscular physiques, while rural Malaysian environments prefer heavier, robust builds, influenced by local resources and environmental conditions (Swami et al., 2005, 2007). This variation underscores how affluence and urbanization impact body standards, with lean physiques symbolizing self-discipline in individualistic societies, whereas robust builds indicate prosperity in resource-scarce settings. Swami et al. (2007) observed that British women preferred low waist-to-chest ratios, correlating this "inverted triangle" shape with strength, while Greek women favored slimmer, less muscular builds, highlighting variability

even within western Europe. This western focus on strength and dominance places added pressure on men, potentially leading to body dissatisfaction (Swami et al., 2005, 2007).

Global media is accelerating a convergence of male beauty standards across cultures, with western ideals permeating into non-western societies. Abdoli et al. (2024) highlight that exposure to western muscular ideals via social media has led to rising body dissatisfaction among men worldwide, as local body ideals start to mirror western standards (Abdoli et al., 2024). This "cultural convergence" intensifies body image struggles globally, as men feel more compelled to conform to an ideal that may not be aligned with their cultural values (Swami et al., 2007).

3.4 Psychological Impact and Health Consequences

This section explores the potential psychological- and health-related implications of male beauty standards.

The pressure to conform to narrow beauty standards can severely affect men's body image and self-esteem. Increasing exposure to idealized male bodies leads many men to develop negative perceptions of their own appearance. Studies have shown that men who engage in frequent body comparison, especially in contexts such as fitness environments, are more likely to experience body dissatisfaction and lowered self-esteem (Pope et al., 2000).

One of the primary consequences of this body dissatisfaction is the internalization of unrealistic body ideals, which can lead men to adopt extreme behaviours to achieve the desired physique. Excessive exercise, strict dieting and the use of supplements or steroids are common coping mechanisms that men use to try to meet these societal expectations (Ricciardelli et al., 2012). As a result, many men find themselves caught in a cycle of comparison, dissatisfaction and self-criticism, which further tears at their self-esteem. Self-esteem issues related to body image are particularly prevalent in men who perceive their bodies as falling short of the ideal, whether due to insufficient muscularity, weight concerns, or other perceived flaws. This dissatisfaction often translates into psychological distress, including feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, and shame about their appearance (Sarwer et al., 2003).

3.4.1 Mental Health and Body Dysmorphia

In examining the mental health effects of male beauty standards, one of the more significant aspects is the role of body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) and muscle dysmorphia (MD), a subtype of BDD particularly prevalent among men focused on muscularity. BDD, as discussed by Phillipou and Castle (2015), is a psychiatric disorder characterized by obsessive concerns over perceived physical flaws, which for men often shows through in muscle dysmorphia or a fixation on achieving a muscular physique (Halbeisen et al., 2024; Phillipou & Castle, 2015). Muscle dysmorphia is specifically common among men due to societal expectations around masculinity and physical strength. Pope et al. (1997) introduced muscle dysmorphia as a disorder that is distinct from classic BDD, primarily involving a compulsive drive for muscularity, even when individuals are already physically fit or muscular. This disorder often leads to extreme behavioral patterns, such as excessive weightlifting, restrictive dieting, and in some cases, substance abuse, including anabolic steroids (Pope et al., 1997; Pope et al., 2005). The psychological strain from constantly striving for an idealized physique can significantly impair mental health, manifesting itself in low self-esteem, social withdrawal, and even suicidal ideation in severe cases (Strother et al., 2012).

Studies by Strother et al. (2012) and Nieuwoudt et al. (2015) highlight the unique challenges faced by men with body image disorders. These disorders are not only underdiagnosed but also frequently misunderstood, as clinical tools were historically developed around female presentations of body dysmorphia. Men often hesitate to seek treatment due to stigma, leading to prolonged suffering and potentially severe coexisting conditions, including anxiety, depression, and substance abuse (Nieuwoudt et al., 2015; Strother et al., 2012). Research also indicates that body dysmorphia among men correlates strongly with societal pressures, such as media portrayals of the ideal male body. For example, unrealistic representations of male muscularity in media and sports increase the discrepancy between body image and the societal ideal, triggering feelings of inadequacy and mental health issues. Phillips et al. (2006) found that men with BDD often show heightened distress related to their body image, which interferes with their social and occupational functioning and can lead to isolation and significant emotional distress (Phillips et al., 2006).

3.4.2 Coping Mechanisms

Men face complex societal pressures regarding body image, which often lead to various coping strategies to manage appearance related stress. Coping mechanisms for body image

issues are generally divided into three categories: avoidance, appearance fixing, and positive rational acceptance, as presented by Cash et al. (2005). These strategies reveal different approaches men use to alleviate body dissatisfaction, with some responses proving more beneficial to mental health than others (Cash et al., 2005).

Avoidance is a common strategy where men attempt to escape situations that could bring their perceived flaws to the forefront. Tod and Edwards (2015) found that men dealing with muscle dysmorphia, a form of body dysmorphic disorder focused on muscularity, often avoid activities that expose their bodies, such as communal showering, to prevent judgment or comparison with others (Tod & Edwards, 2015). Similarly, Thomas et al. (2010) observed that obese adults frequently avoided social situations due to stigma and self-consciousness about their appearance, which further isolates them and reduces social support (Thomas et al., 2010).

Appearance Fixing involves trying to modify one's appearance, either through clothing choices, grooming, or even physical alterations. Avci and Akliman (2018) brought up that male adolescents commonly engage in appearance fixing to conform to idealized masculine body shapes, such as a muscular V-shaped torso, which is heavily promoted in Western media (Avci & Akliman, 2018). For many men, this strategy includes rigorous gym routines and in extreme cases, the use of performance-enhancing substances to achieve a more muscular physique. Tod et al. (2015) noted that these behaviors are typically driven by deep-seated dissatisfaction with their bodies, reinforcing the cycle of a negative body image (Tod et al., 2015).

Positive Rational Acceptance is an adaptive strategy promoting mental well-being. This approach encourages men to reframe negative body image perceptions, encouraging acceptance and self-care practices. Matera et al. (2024) found that men who practiced positive rational acceptance experienced improved psychological well-being, as they focused more on self-acceptance rather than striving to meet unattainable ideals (Matera et al., 2024). This coping strategy also fosters a shift towards valuing body functionality over appearance, an approach shown to correlate with increased life satisfaction and self-esteem in Bennett et al.'s study on older men (Bennett et al., 2020).

3.5 Body Positivity and Changing Narratives

This section reviews media efforts to promote a more diverse concept of masculinity, as well as the subsequent body positivity movements on social media platforms.

In recent years, body positivity and evolving societal narratives have started to reshape rigid beauty standards traditionally associated with masculinity. Historically, masculinity has often been defined by a narrow ideal: muscularity, leanness, and a stoic, unyielding demeanour. However, as awareness of the impact of these standards on mental health grows, movements promoting body positivity and diverse representations of masculinity have gained momentum (Frederick & Essayli, 2016). These movements challenge conventional ideals, emphasizing self-acceptance, inclusivity, and the celebration of diverse body types and gender expressions. Body positivity campaigns and social media have played significant roles in expanding perceptions of hegemonic masculinity by allowing men of all backgrounds and body types to reclaim their narratives. Gelsinger (2021) notes that platforms like Instagram have cultivated spaces for self-expression, where users share unfiltered and diverse representations, although mainstream media sometimes still prioritizes conventionally attractive images even within these movements (Gelsinger, 2021). Media platforms have become battlegrounds where traditional depictions of masculinity are simultaneously upheld and undone, with advocacy groups and influencers actively working to present a broader spectrum of male identities (Chen & Kanai, 2022).

3.5.1 Body Positivity Movements

The body positivity movement has emerged as a critical answer to restrictive beauty standards, promoting acceptance of diverse body types and challenging hegemonic ideals. Initially rooted in the fat acceptance and feminist movements of the 1960s, body positivity has evolved to advocate for inclusivity and self-acceptance. Gelsinger (2021) examines how the movement surfaced on Instagram in 2012 to counteract unrealistic beauty portrayals, particularly by empowering users to share unfiltered and diverse body images. However, popular posts tagged with #bodypositive or #bodypositivity often still prioritize conventionally attractive and thin figures, thereby straying from the movement's original inclusive intentions (Gelsinger, 2021).

Social media platforms like Instagram serve as significant spaces for promoting body positivity, but they also showcase tensions within the movement. Cohen et al. (2019) observed that while body positive imagery on Instagram includes a broader spectrum of body sizes, it tends to gravitate towards appearance-focused content. This emphasis risks reinforcing societal preoccupations with physical appearance, which might undermine the movement's goal of fostering self-acceptance beyond aesthetics (Cohen et al., 2019). Critiques of body positivity argue that mainstream media and wellness industries have co-

opted the movement, reducing its focus on social justice and inclusivity. Griffin et al. (2022) highlight how commercialized forms of body positivity on social media tend to prioritize lean, white, able-bodied individuals, marginalizing non-normative body types. This commodification shifts body positivity away from its origins in black and fat activism, making it accessible primarily to bodies that already hold cultural high ground in appearance-focused settings (Griffin et al., 2022).

On platforms like Tumblr, men's body positivity spaces have emerged, as Caruso and Roberts (2018) found in their case study on "*Body Positivity for Guys*." These spaces often counter traditional, hegemonic masculinity by celebrating diverse male body types, fostering supportive communities where men can discuss their experiences without the usual pressures of masculine hierarchy. Such platforms demonstrate how body positivity movements for men can work to dismantle rigid norms and promote a more inclusive range of masculinities (Caruso & Roberts, 2018). Despite its challenges, the body positivity movement holds potential to promote self-acceptance and challenge narrow body ideals. Tager et al. (2006) note the psychological benefits of body positivity by linking positive self-perceptions with well-being among men. This connection demonstrates the movement's power to encourage mental health improvements through acceptance of diverse body forms and broader definitions of masculinity (Tager et al., 2006).

3.5.2 Media and Advocacy for Diverse Masculinity

Media and advocacy have played pivotal roles in reshaping societal perceptions of masculinity by promoting diverse body types and challenging rigid gender norms. The media's influence on body image is substantial, especially regarding the portrayal of male ideals. Frederick and Essayli (2016) found that men, especially those within LGBTQ+ communities, are highly susceptible to body dissatisfaction due to media-promoted standards of leanness and muscularity. Gay men report greater body dissatisfaction, feeling pressured to conform to an ideal physique that is lean and muscular, reflecting sociocultural standards deeply rooted in media depictions (Frederick & Essayli, 2016). Social platforms have increasingly become spaces for LGBTQ+ and minority advocates to uphold inclusive representations of masculinity. Chen and Kanai (2022), for example, examine how gay male influencers on Instagram, such as James Charles and Bretman Rock, use their platforms to subvert traditional gender norms. These influencers often engage in a performance of femininity within the beauty industry, creating a space that merges queer identity with

traditionally feminine aesthetics, challenging heteronormative masculinity (Chen & Kanai, 2022).

However, the media's focus on certain body types even within these diverse representations often perpetuates other stereotypes, particularly the idealization of certain racial and ethnic characteristics. Ricciardelli et al. (2007) discuss how white ideals remain dominant in media portrayals, marginalizing non-white body types and enforcing narrow paradigms for masculine attractiveness. This lack of inclusivity reveals a gap in advocacy efforts, as representations in media often fail to fully capture ethnic diversity among men, and thus limiting the movement's effectiveness in creating a truly inclusive narrative (Ricciardelli et al., 2007). Media's emphasis on hegemonic masculinity has also prompted responses from both activists and scholars. For example, Jones (2015) argues that queer theory can provide frameworks to dismantle mainstream representations of masculinity, advocating for body diversity by placing focus on intersectional identities. Through storytelling and social media presence, queer advocates help reshape cultural narratives around masculinity, encouraging more inclusive and realistic body images (Jones, 2015).

4 Previous Research

This section expands on the theoretical framework by presenting previous research that explores the societal, psychological, and media-driven factors influencing body image. These studies were searched for on Google Scholar using key words such as “Male Beauty Standards” and “Male Body Image.” Each paragraph provides an overview of a distinct study, detailing its methodology and synthesizing the key findings in a consistent and structured format.

In Ricciardelli et al.’s (2010) study, content from eight men’s lifestyle magazines was analyzed to explore how masculinities are portrayed. The study focused on representations of the male body, grooming, and fashion within the context of hegemonic masculinity. The results showed that while different magazines showcased varying forms of masculinity, they consistently pushed muscularity and physical appearance as markers of success and desirability. Further findings revealed that these magazines encouraged readers to engage in bodywork and adopt consumerist behaviors to enhance their appearance. The study highlighted how such portrayals reinforce societal pressures on men to adhere to narrow body ideals. It concluded that these messages perpetuate unrealistic standards, influencing male readers' perceptions of masculinity and self-worth.

In Grammas and Schwartz’s (2009) study, 202 male college students from various ethnic backgrounds participated in a survey. The study investigated predictors of male body dissatisfaction, focusing on societal influences and the role of perfectionism. The results showed that internalizing societal messages about ideal male bodies and socially prescribed perfectionism were markable predictors of dissatisfaction with muscularity and body fat. The findings also revealed that these factors did not predict dissatisfaction with height, indicating that societal pressures are more pronounced for certain aspects of male appearance. The study concluded that perfectionism and societal expectations interact to shape body image concerns and emphasized the psychological impact of striving for unattainable body ideals.

In Cash et al.’s (2005) study, the Body Image Coping Strategies Inventory (BICSI) was developed to assess how individuals manage body image-related stress. The study involved 603 college students who completed the BICSI and additional psychosocial assessments. The results identified three coping strategies: avoidance, appearance fixing, and positive rational acceptance. Avoidance and appearance fixing were associated with greater body dissatisfaction and dysfunctional behaviors, while positive rational acceptance was correlated to better psychological outcomes. The study also revealed gender differences,

with women using all coping strategies more frequently than men. The study concluded that coping strategies notably influence body image quality of life and emphasized the importance of understanding these mechanisms for more targeted interventions.

Expanding on the previous study, Matera et al. (2024) examined the relationship between positive body image and psychological wellbeing, focusing on the “mediating role of body image coping strategies.” The study surveyed 749 Italian adults, assessing body appreciation, functionality, compassion, and three coping strategies: avoidance, appearance fixing, and positive rational acceptance. Results showed that positive body image was associated with lower avoidance and appearance fixing, but higher positive rational acceptance. These coping strategies mediated the link between body image and wellbeing, with positive rational acceptance showing the strongest association. The study highlighted gender differences, noting that avoidance had a more pronounced negative impact on men’s self-acceptance. It concluded that fostering positive body image and adaptive coping strategies could enhance overall psychological wellbeing.

In Pope et al.’s (1997) study, muscle dysmorphia was identified as a subset of body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), characterized by a pathological concentration on muscularity. The study involved male bodybuilders and gym-goers, with 10% reporting severe distress about perceived insufficient muscularity despite being physically large. Symptoms included excessive weightlifting, steroid abuse, and avoiding public exposure. The findings bring forth the social and occupational impairments caused by muscle dysmorphia and proposed diagnostic criteria to aid with future research. The study concluded that muscle dysmorphia is underrecognized and discussed the need for clinical awareness of this condition.

In Sylvia et al.’s (2014) study, male college students were randomly assigned to play a video game for 45 minutes, using either hyper-muscular avatars or more average body-type avatars. The study aimed to examine the impact of avatar appearance on male body satisfaction and muscularity concerns. The results showed that participants who used hyper-muscular avatars reported significantly lower body satisfaction compared to those who used average avatars. The study also indicated that the exposure to these exaggerated body ideals increased concerns about muscularity, reflecting internalized pressures to achieve such physiques. The study concluded that interactive media like video games reinforce unrealistic body standards and highlighted the potential psychological consequences of repeated exposure, such as increased body dissatisfaction and unhealthy behaviors.

In Cohen et al.'s (2019) study, 640 Instagram posts from popular body positivity accounts were analyzed. Participants examined content related to physical appearance and the messages conveyed in the posts. The results showed that body positivity accounts typically depicted a wide range of body types and appearances, with many promoting themes of self-acceptance and body appreciation. However, some posts were still appearance-focused and aligned with societal beauty ideals. Results further indicated that most posts adhered to theoretical definitions of positive body image, encouraging the rejection of narrow beauty standards. The study also highlighted that these accounts have the potential to shift societal norms by providing alternative representations of beauty and encouraging critical thinking about traditional ideals.

In Tager et al.'s (2006) study, 101 male college students participated in a survey examining the relationships between body image, adherence to masculine norms, and psychological well-being. The results showed that positive evaluations of physical appearance significantly predicted higher levels of self-acceptance and environmental mastery. Further findings revealed that men who perceived themselves as overweight reported lower self-acceptance compared to those who considered themselves underweight. The study also found that adherence to traditional masculine norms, such as dominance, was associated with body image concerns. It concluded that body dissatisfaction has become a significant factor affecting young men's mental health, underscoring the need to address societal expectations and their psychological impact.

In Verrastro et al.'s (2020) study, 621 adolescents aged 13 to 21 were surveyed to investigate the relationship between Instagram use, internalization of beauty standards, and body image-related anxiety. The results showed that adolescents who frequently edited and uploaded their photos to Instagram were more likely to internalize unrealistic beauty ideals and experience heightened body dissatisfaction. Findings also indicated that this pressure to conform to digitally curated standards affected both male and female participants, defying the notion that body image concerns primarily affect young women. The study concluded that Instagram's focus on likes and followers cultivates comparison and anxiety, emphasizing the need for interventions to promote media literacy and resistance against social media's harmful influences.

4.1 Summary

The theoretical framework and review of previous research highlight the complex and evolving nature of male beauty standards, shaped by a multitude of historical, cultural, and media-driven influences. From ancient ideals rooted in symmetry and strength (Ricciardelli & Williams, 2012; Rhodes, 2006) to modern portrayals of hyper-muscularity and leanness (Pope et al., 2000), the construction of male beauty has continuously reflected societal values and shifting definitions of masculinity. The impact of traditional media and the intensification of these standards through social media platforms (Gültzow et al., 2020; Verrastro et al., 2020) underscore how external pressures reinforce narrow images of male attractiveness, often leading to body dissatisfaction and related mental health issues among men (Ricciardelli & Clow, 2010; Weber, 2006).

Societal expectations, whether through peer influence, professional environments, or romantic preferences (Grammas & Schwartz, 2009; Judge & Cable, 2004; Penton-Voak et al., 1999), further amplify the pressures faced by men to conform to these ideals. Cross-cultural perspectives reveal that while beauty standards may vary globally, the pervasive influence of western media has led to a convergence in male body ideals, complicating men's perceptions of themselves in different cultural contexts (Swami et al., 2005, 2007; Monocello & Dressler, 2020). Psychological implications, including the prevalence of body dysmorphia and related mental health challenges, underscore the need for further investigation into the coping mechanisms men employ to navigate these pressures (Phillips et al., 2006; Nieuwoudt et al., 2015). This foundational review reveals gaps in current research, particularly regarding the long-term psychological effects of male beauty standards and the role of emerging social movements, such as body positivity, in redefining masculinity (Frederick & Essayli, 2016; Gelsinger, 2021).

5 Methodology

This chapter introduces the methodology employed in this study, with a focus on the qualitative approach and thematic analysis used to explore the experiences and perspectives of men regarding body image. It presents the research design, data collection methods and analytical process, ensuring integrity and accuracy in addressing the research objectives. The chapter concludes by detailing the practical implementation of the study.

5.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design, grounded in an interpretative approach to explore the complex experiences of Finnish men, aged 18-35 regarding body image and societal expectations. A qualitative design was chosen as it allows for in-depth understanding of individual perspectives and enables the exploration of nuanced meanings within the participants' narratives.

Qualitative research is ideal for studies aiming to interpret personal and social phenomena from participants' viewpoints (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This approach rejects the notion of an objective "truth," instead acknowledging multiple realities as shaped by individual experiences and sociocultural contexts. The use of interviews as the primary method aligns with the aims of qualitative inquiry, allowing participants to express their views in a conversational format that allows for detailed and contextualized insights.

5.2 Semi-Structured Interview

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary data collection method for this study because they provide a balance between structure and flexibility. This approach combines a framework of pre-defined questions with the adaptability to look out for emerging themes during the interview process, making it especially suited to exploring complex phenomena in depth (Gill et al., 2008; Kallio et al., 2016; Bryman, 2016). The semi-structured format allows for consistency across interviews while allowing participants the freedom to elaborate on their detailed experiences. This flexibility is valuable in qualitative research as it enables the collection of rich and detailed data that captures both anticipated and unexpected insights. As noted by Gill et al. (2008), this method is especially effective in addressing sensitive topics and understanding individual beliefs, motivations, and experiences, offering a level of depth that more rigid interview styles cannot achieve. Kallio et al. (2016)

emphasize that semi-structured interviews are a rigorous and versatile tool, widely applicable in qualitative research for their ability to balance structure and spontaneity. Bryman (2016) similarly notes that these interviews are particularly useful when the goal is to uncover nuanced perspectives and explore how participants interpret their experiences.

5.3 Content Analysis

The data collected from interviews was analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), complemented by principles of qualitative content analysis from Elo and Kyngäs (2008). Thematic analysis, as developed by Braun and Clarke (2006), provides a flexible yet systematic framework for identifying, analyzing, and presenting themes in qualitative data. The process began with an inductive approach, where codes and themes were derived directly from the data rather than predefined categories. This approach is particularly valuable for exploratory research, and it allows themes to emerge more naturally from participants' descriptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase process:

1. Familiarization with the data by reading and rereading transcripts.
2. Generating initial codes by identifying significant excerpts related to the research questions.
3. Searching for themes by grouping related codes into overarching categories.
4. Reviewing themes to ensure they accurately reflect the data set.
5. Defining and naming themes by clarifying their scope and relevance.
6. Producing the report by organizing themes into a coherent narrative that addresses the study's aims.

In addition, concepts from Elo and Kyngäs's content analysis framework (2008) guided the analytical process to ensure systematic organization of themes. This framework emphasizes preparation, organization, and reporting phases to maintain analytic rigor and achieve a proper understanding of data. Through this process, concealed meanings underlying participants' descriptions of body image were identified, allowing for a nuanced interpretation of how societal ideals impact self-perception. The analysis process was reflexive and iterative, continually reflecting on how the researcher's interpretations might

shape or affect the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Reflexivity was integrated throughout, acknowledging that the researcher's perspective inevitably influences data interpretation.

5.4 Ethical Aspects

Prior to participation, all respondents were fully informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and the intended use of their responses for academic research. A quick informed consent (see appendix 1) process was conducted, ensuring that participants understood that their responses would be analyzed and used exclusively for the purposes outlined in this study. Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions and clarify any concerns before agreeing to participate, and their consent was obtained. This process aligns with ethical standards to safeguard participants' autonomy and ensure voluntary participation (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

To protect participants' identities and maintain confidentiality, all responses were anonymized. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym, and any identifying information was either omitted or altered to prevent recognition. This approach ensures that participants' identities remain private, respecting their right to anonymity as initially agreed upon. Anonymizing data not only upholds ethical standards but also encourages open and honest responses by creating a safe environment for participants to share personal insights without fear of being identified.

5.5 Practical Implementation

This section outlines the steps I undertook to conduct the research, from participant recruitment to data analysis.

To begin, I recruited participants through street recruiting, as well as through social media. The criteria to be selected for the study were that the participants were adult males, aged 18 to 35. They were provided with detailed informed consent (see appendix 1) about the study, including its purpose, the voluntary nature of their involvement, and their rights to withdraw at any point. Informed consent was obtained to ensure transparency and respect for participants' autonomy. The data collection relied on a structured interview. I used an interview guide (see appendix 2 & 3) to gather data on specific themes. The data collection process was streamlined and efficient, through recorded interviews which were then

transcribed and translated, which facilitated ease of access and ensured integrity for the study.

The interviews were conducted in settings chosen by the participants to promote comfort and openness, facilitating genuine responses. Questions were designed to be open-ended to encourage exploration and were based on initial thematic considerations derived from literature on body image and social influences. In addition to the general setup of the interviews, it is worth noting that most interviews were conducted in Swedish, as it was the preferred language of the participants, facilitating a comfortable and natural conversation flow. This choice also ensured that participants could express themselves fully without language barriers. The exception was one interview conducted in English, as per the participant's preference. All interviews were transcribed verbatim in their original language to maintain the integrity of participants' responses and preserve subtle linguistic nuances that contribute to the depth of analysis.

The analysis phase was equally rigorous. I coded the responses to identify recurring themes and patterns using thematic analysis, to allow for a thorough understanding of the underlying trends and insights relevant to the research questions. Responses were coded and sorted into five overarching themes which I then integrated into the paper, sorting the responses according to the themes and the structure of the interview. After synthesizing the emerging themes in the interviews, I then presented my analysis in tandem with the results. I formatted the analysis in a way that would help with ease of reading and understanding the subsequent subthemes in relation to their overarching themes by developing a marking system.

6 Results

This chapter presents the findings of the qualitative interview. It explores participants' perceptions of body image, their experiences with societal ideals, and the coping strategies they employ to navigate these pressures. Through a thematic analysis, key themes emerge, providing account on the challenges and resilience of men in navigating body image in a socially constructed framework.

6.1 Themes Emerging from the Interviews

Overarching themes such as **Comparison Pressure (1)**, **Unrealistic Ideals (2)**, **Self-Esteem Impacts (3)**, **Coping Mechanisms (4)**, **Shifting Priorities (5)**, and **Calls for Societal Change (6)** emerge throughout the analysis and are highlighted within the text in **bold**. Subsequent subthemes are presented in *bold italic*, as well as numbered to show correspondence to their overarching theme.

6.2 Participants' Perceptions of Body Image, Media Portrayals and Self-Worth

The first research question for this paper is “*How do societal pressures and media portrayals influence men's body image, self-esteem, and perception of attractiveness?*” This section of the results is further divided into two subheadings, “Perceptions of Body Image and Self-Worth,” and “The Role of Media and Society in Shaping Male Body Image.” Through these perspectives, this section seeks to answer the first research question.

6.2.1 Perceptions of Body Image and Self-Worth

Some participants described feelings of dissatisfaction with their body image, reflecting the theme of **comparison pressure**. Adam linked these struggles to societal standards and the pervasive influence of social media. Idealized physiques portrayed on platforms like Instagram were highlighted as a significant source of inadequacy, even if he recognized that such images are often edited and **unrealistic**.

Interviewer: Can you describe how you feel about your body and appearance?

Adam: I would say it's kind of like, not so good sometimes. Like, some days are better, but some days not. I know I am not, like, in bad shape, but I am also

not [...] “muscular” or lean [...]. When I see pictures, like Instagram [...] it’s sometimes hard to not compare.

Interviewer: When you say “hard not to compare”, can you explain more? Is it the comparison itself, or how often you’re seeing these images?

Adam: ... maybe both, [...] I see those pictures every day almost. And even if I know they are [...] edited or fake, it’s like I still think, “Why not me?” And I follow some fitness accounts because I like to see exercise ideas, but end up feeling... how you say... not enough.

The theme of *internalized societal ideals (1)* emerged as Aaron expressed a desire to align more closely with perceived standards of muscularity and fitness. Although these ideals were not always at the forefront of his daily thoughts, Aaron noted that social media subtly reinforced the need for physical improvement, perpetuating a sense of *pressure to conform to societal expectations (1)*.

Aaron: ... well, how do I say... I am kind of in the middle, you know? I don’t feel particularly content, but I don’t think about it every day, either. But you would still want to look more “fit”, if I put it like that.

Interviewer: When you say “more fit”, is there anything in particular you’re thinking of, or just a general feeling?

Aaron: Well, it’s more specific [...] I am pretty skinny and it feels like I should bulk up a little. You know, wider shoulders and a little more muscles. I see pictures on social media, and you *do* think that, why do I not look like that?

Some participants conveyed a generally positive view of their body image, though their perspectives varied in focus. Andrew expressed feeling “pretty comfortable” with his appearance, emphasizing that his motivation to stay in shape stems from a desire to feel good rather than conform to societal standards, reflecting the theme of *prioritizing health over societal validation (5)*. Anton described being “pretty content” with his body, crediting a consistent workout routine that aligns with media ideals of fitness and muscularity, illustrating a theme of *conditional contentment (1)*. While both accounts reflect a level of satisfaction, they also reveal an implicit awareness of *societal expectations (1)*, suggesting that even those who feel positive about their appearance remain influenced by *external pressures (1)*.

Andrew: ... I feel, how do I say... pretty comfortable with how I look. Like, I’m not obsessed with having a “perfect” body [...] but I try to keep myself in

shape. It feels like more important for me to feel good than to look a particular way.

Anton: ... I'm pretty content, [...] I work out quite often, and can say that I fit into that "ideal" that you see in media. People tend to think I have good self-esteem, and yes, in a way that's true.

Some participants expressed deeper struggles with body image, often feeling inadequate due to societal expectations. Alex shared that he has always struggled with being slightly overweight, feeling that he doesn't fit into the mold of how one is "supposed" to look, reflecting the theme of *dissatisfaction tied to societal standards (3)*. This dissatisfaction impacts his daily life, contributing to *self-consciousness (3)* in public and *frequent comparisons (1)* with others who appear more fit.

Alex: ...well, I don't really like how I look, if I'm honest. I have always been a little overweight, and it's something I've struggled with ever since I can remember. I feel that I don't really fit in how you're "supposed" to look...

Interviewer: How does that affect your daily life?

Alex: Well it's like... It's in the back of the head all the time [...] I feel self-conscious mostly the whole day, like when I go out in the streets or to work. I see other guys who are more fit, and then I think, "why can't I look like that?" It makes you feel [...] inadequate.

Adrian described himself as feeling "average" and noted that this perception of being neither overweight nor exceptionally fit contributes to a sense of *invisibility in social contexts (3)*. He admitted to feeling particularly *self-conscious (3)* in social situations, especially among unfamiliar people, where concerns about being judged heighten his insecurity.

Adrian: ... I have never really been content with how I look, to be honest. I have always felt a little... well, average, [...] I mean, I'm not exactly overweight or so, but I don't stick out either.

Interviewer: Does that affect your daily life, or mostly in specific situations?

Adrian: Yes, it *does* affect me mostly when I am around a lot of people. Particularly when it's people I don't know that well. I become very self-conscious about my appearance then, and get the feeling that others maybe judge me, even if I know that might not be the case.

These responses underscore the *emotional toll of internalized societal ideals (3)*, illustrating how they lead to heightened self-awareness, feelings of inadequacy, and challenges in navigating public and social spaces.

When asked to describe the ideal male body image according to societal standards, participants identified a *consistent societal ideal (2)* characterized by tall stature, muscularity, and low body fat. Adam described the ideal as “tall and very muscular,” highlighting features such as a wide chest, broad shoulders, large arms, and six-pack abs. Andrew echoed this sentiment, emphasizing that broad shoulders are part of the “usual” standard frequently portrayed in media. Anton and Aaron noted that while muscularity is key, it should not appear excessively large, favoring a “*fit but lean*” *ideal (2)* commonly featured in advertisements and movies.

Interviewer: How would you describe the ideal male body image, according to society?

Adam: ... it is, like, tall and very muscular. You know, with big arms, chest and six-pack abs.

Andrew: ... the body, yes, it's like usual — wide chest, big arms n wide shoulders, and of course like sixpack. ...

Anton: ... I would say you have to be tall, muscular, but not too “big,” [...] That “fit but lean”-appearance that you see in ads and movies all the time.

Aaron: ... he should be tall, wide on the shoulders, and have like abs, you know. Muscles, but still not too big either, just so he looks good and strong. [...] fat percentage should be very low. I’m thinking that you see this the most on social media and movies.

Participants also highlighted the theme of social media as a source of *amplified pressure (1)*. Aaron specifically pointed out that these ideals are most visible on platforms like Instagram, where a proportionate physique with low body fat is heavily emphasized. He explained that younger men in particular, feel pressured to conform to this image, viewing it as essential for gaining popularity and success.

Interviewer: Do you think that most men feel a pressure to achieve this kind of body?

Aaron: Yes, I think so. Especially younger guys who constantly see it on the net, they think that that's what you should look like to be popular or successful.

Some participants emphasized that the ideal male image expands beyond body composition and includes facial characteristics and grooming as well. For example, Adrian described defined cheekbones, full eyebrows, and a well-groomed beard as markers of masculine attractiveness. Hairstyles, particularly thick and "perfectly tousled" hair, were also noted as important elements in aligning with *societal expectations (2)*.

Adrian: I think that the ideal manly image is more than just muscles. It's also about having the right style and, like, right facial features. Like cheekbones, full eyebrows, and [...] a well-kept beard. And the hair it should preferably be thick and styled, like a little "perfectly tousled."

Interviewer: Do you think society is becoming more or less strict regarding these ideals today?

Adrian: I don't know... maybe both. It feels like there's more pressure today, with social media where everyone tries to show their best self. But at the same time people are starting to talk more about breaking these norms, so maybe it goes in the right direction.

Andrew added to this sentiment, emphasizing that societal ideals also include facial symmetry and grooming standards, such as a strong jawline, straight nose, and neatly groomed facial hair. A moderate amount of facial hair, combined with a polished appearance, was noted as completing the *ideal masculine image (2)*.

Andrew: ... it's not just the body, I think. Like, society idealizes also how the face should look. Like, it should be good jawline, straight nose, and not too much beard, but still a little. ...

When asked whether these ideals are attainable, participants overwhelmingly described them as *unrealistic and exclusionary (2)* for most people. Anton noted that achieving these standards often requires significant sacrifices, making them feasible only for individuals like models, whose careers depend on maintaining such appearances. Adam expanded on this, iterating that even with regular exercise, it is *nearly impossible (2)* for the average person to fully embody these ideals. Andrew pointed to the *broader nature of societal expectations (2)*, noting that these ideals go beyond physical fitness to include facial features, grooming,

and personal style. He noted that meeting these expectations involves adopting an entire lifestyle, which few people can realistically sustain.

Interviewer: Do you feel this image is realistic or achievable for most people?

Anton: No, well, it *is* very hard for most people. If you don't work as a model or something, then you have to sacrifice a lot to be able to look like that. It feels like a standard that is very unrealistic for regular people.

Adam: ... maybe if you are a bodybuilder or model, but for normal people, it's very hard. Even if you work out, you cannot always look like that.

Andrew: ... absolutely. It feels like you have to match the whole picture [...] not just train the body, but also fix the face, your style. It becomes like a whole lifestyle, and it's hard for most people to keep up with all that.

These accounts reveal the *disconnect between societal ideals and everyday realities (2)*, emphasizing the pressures placed on men to conform to unattainable standards and the *emotional burden (3)* of striving for perfection.

6.2.2 The Role of Media and Society in Shaping Male Body Image

Regarding the role of media and society in influencing body image, participants consistently emphasized the pervasive *pressure to conform to idealized male standards (1)*. Adam explained that the societal expectations of being tall, strong, and lean are omnipresent, making it difficult to avoid comparisons with others. This **comparison pressure** was particularly pronounced in contexts like dating apps, where appearance often feels like a defining factor. Another participant echoed this, describing the *inescapable portrayal of muscular, well-trained men (2)* in media, which causes *frustration (3)* and a sense of not being "good enough." Others admitted to occasional feelings of inadequacy and even failure when unable to meet these ideals. Collectively, their accounts demonstrate how deeply entrenched and *emotionally taxing (3)* these standards are for many men.

Interviewer: Do you think media and societal standards have impacted your self-esteem or body image?

Adam: Yes, very much. Society has this [...] ideal man. [...] Tall, strong, and low body fat. It's everywhere, so it's hard not to think about it. I see friends, and

they maybe look more like this ideal, so then I feel that... well, I don't look like that... Even on dating apps or something, you feel that you have to look certain way.

Aaron: Yes, absolutely. It's unavoidable. Everywhere you see the same types of men, strong and well-trained. [...] it makes you start to think, that I'm not good enough as I am. It's frustrating.

Adrian: ... indeed. [...] it *does* affect you [...] you feel almost inadequate sometimes.

Alex: ... it feels like I'm not really enough. It's hard to not feel like a "failure," just because you don't look like that.

Other participants reflected on *navigating societal pressures (4)* by adopting personal strategies. Andrew noted that while he occasionally feels the pressure to conform, he focuses on personal health and what feels right for him rather than striving to fit into an idealized mold. Although he admitted to occasional comparisons, particularly at the gym, he emphasized the importance of *self-acceptance (4)* to counterbalance societal expectations.

Andrew: Yes, well, it probably [...] affects a little. I mean, you see those pictures everywhere. And sometimes, like, you think that "Should I maybe work harder on my appearance?" But I try to focus more on my own health than to try to fit in some sort of mold...

Interviewer: ... but do you ever feel like social media or society gives you a feeling of pressure to change yourself anyways?

Andrew: ... sometimes it *does* probably do that. I'm not *immune* to that. Sometimes you see others at the gym who are really well-trained, then you think [...] "should I look like that as well?" But, like, I remind myself that this is what works for me. So, I try to hold myself to that.

Anton added that even those who feel content with their appearance often experience amplified pressure due to *social media's demand for consistency (2)*. He described an "unwritten rule" that requires individuals to always maintain a polished and fit appearance, noting that missing gym sessions or looking less polished can lead to concerns about being judged. This highlights how societal expectations not only create a desire to meet specific ideals but also encourage an ongoing and often *exhausting (3)* need to uphold them.

Anton: ... It *does* have a big effect, [...] even if I feel content, there's always a pressure to like maintain this look. Especially on social media, where everyone sees you all the time, [...] it can feel like you can never let go ...

Interviewer: ... so it feels like a pressure to maintain your appearance? Can you elaborate on that?

Anton: ... it's like an unwritten rule. If I miss the gym a few days or if I'm not as well-trained, then it's like that I worry that people will notice. [...] You get stuck in that mindset to always look on top because people expect it.

6.3 Participants' Coping Mechanisms

The second research question of this paper is “*What coping mechanisms do men employ to manage the pressures associated with body image?*” This section is further divided into two subheadings, “Coping Mechanisms for Body Image Challenges” and “Reflections on Body Image Over Time.” Through these perspectives, this sections seeks to answer the second research question.

6.3.1 Coping Mechanisms for Body Image Challenges

When asked about the **coping mechanisms** they employ to address dissatisfaction with their body image, many participants described turning to ***exercise (4)*** as a primary strategy. Adam shared that going to the gym and pushing himself during workouts helps him manage negative feelings about his body. Andrew explained that on difficult days, he channels his energy into ***running (4)*** to maintain balance and keep negative thoughts at bay.

Interviewer: When you feel dissatisfied with your appearance, what do you do to cope with those feelings?

Adam: ... I think exercise is big one for me. Like, if I feel bad, I go to gym and push myself there ...

Andrew: ... of course, *everyone* has their days, [...] If I'm having that kind of day, then I'll try to do something productive of it, like going out and running [...] It's not like I'm trying to ignore the feeling, but I don't want to let it take over *either* ...

Aaron highlighted the dual role of exercise as both *motivation (5)* and *pressure (1)*, explaining that while consistent training and gradual progress improve his mood and confidence, the gym also keeps *societal ideals (2)* “in the back of his head.”

Aaron: Yes, I *do* try. Started going to gym consistently [...] and it *does* help. Feels a little better when I train and see little improvements, but sometimes it still feels like it's not enough.

Interviewer: It sounds like the gym helps, but creates a little pressure as well? Is that more positive or negative do you think?

Aaron: ... it's mostly positive. The gym gives confidence, and the mood is better in general. But I'm not going to lie, it also keeps that “ideal” in the back of the head, so sometimes it *does* feel burdensome.

Anton reflected on the influence of *societal expectations (2)*, explaining that his initial motivation for training was health-focused but has since been shaped by the *pressure (1)* to meet *aesthetic standards (2)*. This pressure, he admitted, affects his social life, particularly at events where pictures are taken, as he feels compelled to look “*perfect (2)*.” Despite projecting confidence, Anton revealed that maintaining this image creates a sense of *self-consciousness and insecurity (3)*, exposing the hidden vulnerabilities of conforming to societal ideals.

Anton: I try to remind myself of why I began training in the first place, that it actually was about health and to feel good. [...] But I'm gonna be honest, it's hard to block out the pressure, especially on social media, where it feels like everyone inspects every little thing.

Interviewer: Do you think this pressure ever affects your social life or self-esteem?

Anton: Yes, sometimes. If I'm going to some party or someplace where there will be a bunch of pictures, it feels like you have to look “perfect.” [...] It can make you a little insecure, actually, and it sounds maybe weird because people think I wouldn't feel that way. But when you are known for looking a certain way, [...] you *do* become extra conscious, maybe even insecure in some way.

Alex described using *avoidance behaviors (4)* to cope with body image dissatisfaction, such as attempting diets and exercise but struggling to sustain motivation during low periods. He explained that he often avoids mirrors and opts for loose clothing to conceal his body, reflecting a strategy of avoiding rather than confronting his *underlying insecurities (3)*.

Alex: ... I *do* try sometimes. I've tried diet and training, but it's hard to keep up motivation when you already feel down. [...] Sometimes I avoid mirrors, or I'll dress myself in big clothes to hide myself a little ...

Adrian emphasized the importance of *focusing on controllable factors (5)* to manage feelings of inadequacy. He highlighted how dressing well and maintaining a fresh appearance serve as a "*shield (4)*," particularly in social situations, to reduce insecurities even if they cannot be entirely eliminated. Adrian also noted that taking *breaks from social media (4)* helps him distance himself from **unrealistic standards**, which otherwise exacerbate negative self-perception.

Adrian: ... well I try to focus on things I can control. Like dressing myself nicely and make sure that I keep myself fresh, [...] Even if it sounds a little shallow, it actually feels better when you look good in what you're wearing. And sometimes I take a break from social media as well, when it becomes too much.

Interviewer: You mentioned clothes — do you think it helps you to feel more secure when you're among others?

Adrian: Yes, [...] If I've got something on that I feel comfortable in, then I become less insecure, particularly in social situations. It feels like a little "shield," [...] It doesn't take away everything, but it absolutely helps.

The theme of *social withdrawal due to body image concerns (4)* emerged strongly, with several participants describing the ways these *insecurities (3)* affect their daily lives. Adam admitted to *skipping events (4)* like parties when dissatisfied with his body, finding it easier to avoid discomfort altogether. Aaron mentioned *avoiding specific environments (4)*, such as beaches or crowded places, to escape **comparison pressure** that intensifies *feelings of inadequacy (3)*. Adrian echoed this pattern, explaining that on particularly bad days, he avoids gatherings altogether, fearing judgment or unfavorable **comparisons**. These behaviors reveal how deeply body image struggles can influence not only individual **self-esteem** but also social engagement and quality of life.

Interviewer: Do you ever avoid social situations because of your body image concerns?

Adam: Yes, like if I am not feeling good with my body, I skip some parties or events. Like, “why to go if I feel bad?” [...] I know it’s not maybe healthy, but it’s easier to stay home sometimes.

Aaron: ... If I’m not content with myself that day, then maybe I’ll skip [...] places where there are a bunch of people. Like beaches or parties, so I don’t have to feel like that “skinny guy” among others. [...] Not so fun when you walk around and compare yourself constantly.

Adrian: Yes, actually. If I’m having a really “bad day,” it happens that I decline certain things. Like parties or other larger crowds. I don’t want to put myself in situations where I feel bad compared to others. [...] It maybe isn’t always the best, but sometimes it’s just easier that way.

By contrast, Andrew described a more *resilient approach (5)*, stating that he rarely avoids social situations due to appearance-related concerns. When he does skip an event, it is typically for practical reasons, such as being tired or busy, rather than stemming from dissatisfaction with his appearance.

Andrew: No, actually not. If I have a day when I don’t feel too content [...] maybe I skip a thing here and there, but it’s seldom. I still thrive with myself mostly, and if I don’t go to something it’s most often because I’m tired or busy, not because of how I look ...

This perspective reflects the theme of *resilience in managing societal pressures (4)*, illustrating an alternative narrative to the avoidance behaviors exhibited by other participants.

6.3.2 Reflections on Body Image Over Time

When reflecting on how their views on body image and appearance have evolved, several participants described becoming more *self-critical over time (5)*, largely due to increased exposure to social media. Many shared that they paid little attention to their appearance during their youth but became more conscious of perceived flaws as they aged. Adam remarked that seeing idealized images online heightened his awareness of imperfections, while Aaron characterized this change as a general increase in self-consciousness influenced by media exposure. Adding to the discourse, Adrian expressed efforts to move toward *self-acceptance (4)*, despite his challenges with becoming more self-critical over time.

Interviewer: How have your views on body image and appearance changed over time?

Adam: Yes, I think so. When I was younger, I did not think about it. But now, with all the social media [...] I became more aware. But I try to remember that everyone has own struggles, and it helps, little bit.

Aaron: Yes, it *has*. In the past I didn't care so much, but now when you see more pictures and such, you *do* become more conscious ...

Adrian: ... I actually didn't think that much about it at all, but now it's like everywhere [...] I have become more conscious of "flaws" that I didn't even think about before. But I try to work on accepting myself more.

Alex: ... it *has* gotten worse. I didn't care that much, but now when you see [...] pictures on the internet, you become more aware of things you maybe didn't even think about ...

Others shared similar experiences but framed them within the broader context of **shifting priorities**. Andrew explained that his focus has moved away from striving to look "cool" and toward engaging in activities and habits that make him feel well, reflecting a *sense of liberation from societal expectations (5)*. Similarly, Anton described how his initial motivation for training was to achieve the "perfect" body but noted that over time, his focus has shifted to *health and well-being (5)*, even though appearance remains a consideration. These reflections highlight the tension between societal pressures and *personal growth (5)*, as participants strive to reconcile external expectations with their evolving internal values.

Andrew: ... absolutely. When I was younger, I cared more about looking "cool" [...] but now I'm more focused on feeling well and doing things I like. I don't stress as much over fitting in, and it feels freeing [...]

Anton: Yes, it has. When I first started training it was mostly for the appearance's sake, to get that "perfect" body. But with time I've started to realize that it actually is more about feeling good. *Sure I do* still care about how I look, but health and wellbeing feels more important now ...

Participants also offered a range of advice for individuals struggling with body image concerns, emphasizing *self-acceptance (4)* and *health over appearance (5)*. Anton suggested prioritizing strength and health instead of striving for an unattainable "perfect" look, which was described as both restrictive and unsustainable. Adam stressed the importance of *self-compassion (4)*, advocating for *health-focused goals (5)* and reducing exposure to social media, which often exacerbates unrealistic comparisons.

Interviewer: What advice would you give to someone struggling with similar body image concerns?

Anton: Well, I would say to try to focus on feeling strong and healthy instead of just looking good. The "perfect" appearance is just *so very* tight and hard to hold on to [...] It's much more rewarding to view training as something to feel good, not just to look good.

Adam: ... try not to be so hard on yourself. [...] it's difficult, but if you focus on health, it's better. And maybe spend less time on social media ...

Others highlighted the importance of *normalizing body image struggles (6)* and finding small aspects of oneself to appreciate as a step toward *self-acceptance (4)*. One participant encouraged *focusing on progress (5)* rather than perfection, reminding others that many online images are edited and do not represent reality. Practical suggestions included dressing in ways that feel comfortable, taking breaks from social media, and remaining mindful that much of what is portrayed online is exaggerated. These recommendations demonstrate a *balanced and compassionate approach (5)* to navigating body image challenges.

Alex: ... think about that you're not alone in feeling like this. You feel easily like you're the only one that has it tough, but I know that others also feel the same. Maybe find small things that you like about yourself. I haven't quite gotten there myself yet, but I think that it can help.

Aaron: ... focus on progress and not on perfection. Even small improvements *are* good and feel better than nothing. [...] remind yourself that pictures on the internet most often are edited. You shouldn't compare yourself with things that aren't even real.

Adrian: ... focus on things that get you to feel better in the moment, like to dress in a way that feels good, or to take breaks from social media sometimes.

And to remember that a lot of what we see online is edited or exaggerated. To compare yourself with that is unfair to yourself.

These responses advocate for a compassionate and balanced approach to body image, emphasizing the importance of both *mental and physical well-being (5)* as key to overcoming societal pressures.

Participants highlighted two primary areas where society could better support men facing body image challenges: *diversified representation in media (6)* and *open dialogue about male insecurities (6)*. Several respondents emphasized the need to *expand media portrayals (6)* to include a broader range of male body types and appearances. They noted that current media predominantly features well-trained physiques, leaving many men unable to see themselves reflected. By showcasing more varied representations in movies, advertisements, and on social media, society could *reduce the pressure to conform (6)* to a singular ideal and *normalize the beauty of diversity (6)*.

Interviewer: What do you think society could do to better support men facing body image pressures?

Anton: I think media has a big role here. They could start showing more types of men, both bodies and faces, so that you see that there's beauty in variation.
...

Aaron: Well, I'm thinking that you could start showing more types of bodies and people in media. Right now it's like only the well-trained dudes who are visible, and it would be better if more [people] could recognise themselves [in media] ...

Adrian: ... start by changing how men are portrayed in movies, commercials, and on social media. If there was more variation [...] I think many would feel less pressure ...

The theme of *fostering open conversations (6)* about body image emerged strongly. Respondents suggested introducing discussions in schools to teach boys that it is acceptable to look different, creating safe spaces where men can talk openly about their insecurities without judgment, and tackling the stigma surrounding men's mental health. Participants emphasized that *normalizing these conversations (6)* is crucial, as many men feel pressured to hide their struggles, which only worsens the problem.

Adrian: ... And then there should be more education about this in the school already, so that young guys learn that it is okay to look different.

Aaron: ... talk more about how men also have these problems. It feels like it's not taken seriously sometimes.

Alex: ... maybe create more forums or places where men can talk about this, without feeling judged. It feels like many men keep everything to themselves, and it doesn't get better then.

Anton: ... we should talk more about men's mental health connected to these problems. It *is* still a bit taboo, but it should become as normal as talking about other types of pressure.

Andrew: ... it should be okay to say that you're struggling with your body image. It feels like it's something many conceal.

These suggestions collectively reflect a **call for societal change**, advocating for inclusivity and open communication as *strategies to alleviate the pressures (6)* men face regarding body image and self-esteem.

6.4 Result Interpretation

The result interpretation is presented under two subheadings, with each one addressing each research question.

6.4.1 Participants' Perceptions of Body Image, Media Portrayals and Self-Worth

The first research question "*How do societal pressures and media portrayals influence men's body image, self-esteem, and perception of attractiveness?*" explored how societal ideals influence men's perceptions of their own bodies. Participants consistently pointed out feelings of pressure to conform to societal standards, especially ideals of muscularity and leanness, which they identified as symbols of success and attractiveness. These findings align with Ricciardelli et al. (2010), who highlight the role that media plays in perpetuating narrow and unattainable male beauty standards. Participants in this study mentioned social media platforms like Instagram as key sources of comparison and dissatisfaction, reinforcing

findings that such platforms amplify body image concerns (Verrastro et al., 2020). Societal perfectionism was another recurring topic in the study. Participants detailed how societal expectations have shaped their self-perceptions, often associating physical appearance with competence and worth especially in professional or social contexts. These narratives are consistent with research that identifies perfectionism as a markant contributor to body dissatisfaction (Grammas & Schwartz, 2009). The participants' experiences varied in terms of how deeply these pressures were internalized. While some described frustration and anxiety over their inability to live up to societal ideals, others expressed a more balanced perspective, resisting the norms and prioritizing their own definition of self-worth. These patterns reflect the psychological impacts of unattainable body standards, including conditions like muscle dysmorphia, as identified in previous studies (Pope et al., 1997). The findings of this study illustrate the markant influence of societal ideals on men's perceptions of their bodies. These pressures are amplified by media and cultural norms, and shape not only how men see themselves but also how they navigate their physical appearance in daily life.

6.4.2 Participants' Coping Mechanisms

The second research question "*What coping mechanisms do men employ to manage the pressures associated with body image?*" examined how men cope with the pressures of societal ideals regarding body image. Participants described a range of strategies, from behaviors aimed at adhering to social standards to behaviors pushing for self-acceptance. Exercise came up as a dominant coping mechanism, viewed as a way to meet societal expectations of fitness and muscularity. While some participants found this empowering, others detailed it as an obligation that adds pressure. This aligns with previous studies that detail appearance-fixing behaviors as a common response to body dissatisfaction (Cash et al., 2005). Avoidance behaviors were also observed, including strategies such as wearing loose clothing or avoiding social situations to mask perceived flaws. These behaviors offered short-term relief but tended to reinforce negative body perceptions. Participants who engaged in these coping strategies described feeling constrained by societal expectations, highlighting a broader emotional toll of body image concerns. Contrastingly, some participants adopted more adaptive and balanced coping mechanisms, such as focusing on health rather than aesthetics or rejecting societal ideals altogether. These individuals described a shift toward prioritizing personal well-being over external validation, which resonates with Matera et al.'s (2024) findings on the mental benefits of positive rational acceptance. This approach allowed participants to reevaluate their relationship with their

bodies in ways that were less reliant on societal approval. Social media also played a dual role in participants' coping strategies. While some detailed platforms as resources to find supportive communities, others found that constant exposure to idealized images added their dissatisfaction. This dual edged impact is consistent with prior research highlighting the complex role of social media in body image experiences (Verrastro et al., 2020). Finally, participants emphasized the role of supportive relationships in navigating societal pressures. Open conversations which encouraged authenticity and self-acceptance were critical in fostering resilience. This links to research attributing social connections to greater psychological wellbeing, particularly in inhibiting the effects of traditional masculine norms (Tager et al., 2006). To conclude, the findings in this study showcase a spectrum of coping mechanisms that men use to navigate societal ideals. While adaptive strategies such as self-acceptance and health-focused behaviors offer pathways to resilience, others, like avoidance and excessive exercise, perpetuate cycles of dissatisfaction. These results address the importance of fostering supportive environments and promoting adaptive coping mechanisms to help men navigate the pressures of societal body ideals.

7 Critical Review

This chapter provides a comprehensive critical overview of the study, It aims to assess the research comprehensively, identifying strengths and limitations, as well as areas for improvement.

Aim and Problem

The Aim and Problem chapter clearly articulates the purpose of the study and outlines its research questions. The focus on the impact of societal ideals and media portrayals on Finnish men's body image provides a solid foundation for the research. Additionally, the chapter identifies the relevance of the study by connecting it to broader societal and psychological discourses. It could, however, go further in critically engaging with the potential implications of the findings, particularly for diverse audiences such as policymakers or advocacy groups.

Theoretical Framework and Previous Research

This chapter offers a comprehensive review of literature, effectively contextualizing the study within historical, cultural, and psychological frameworks. It provides a valuable exploration of the evolution of male beauty standards and the influence of media and societal pressures. The cross-cultural analysis is particularly insightful, as it presents the variability of beauty standards globally. However, the chapter leans toward being more descriptive in some sections, particularly when summarizing previous research. A more critical engagement with these studies, such as analyzing methodological strengths and weaknesses, would better justify the study's scope and approach. The link between the theoretical framework and the study's research questions could also be more explicitly articulated.

Methodology

The Methodology chapter successfully outlines the study's qualitative design, justifying the use of semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis. This approach aligns well with the research aim of understanding nuanced, personal experiences. The inclusion of ethical considerations and practical implementation demonstrates thorough planning and tact. However, the chapter could provide a more critical reflection on potential biases or

challenges during data collection. For example, the decision to conduct most interviews in Swedish to accommodate participants' preferences is commendable, but the potential for linguistic nuances to affect the analysis could be explored further. The sample size, though sufficient for a qualitative study of this scope, is small and homogenous, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Recruiting participants through social media may also have introduced bias, as those who engage with digital platforms are more likely to be influenced by the very pressures under investigation. This kind of selection bias could skew the results and narrow the scope of the study's applicability. Detailing these potential biases and challenges more in depth could have benefitted the chapter.

Results

The Results chapter is well-structured, presenting clear themes that emerged from the interviews. The integration of participant quotes adds authenticity and depth to the findings, illustrating the personal impact of societal ideals on body image. Themes such as comparison pressure, unrealistic ideals, and coping mechanisms are analyzed in detail, providing valuable insights into the participants' experiences. However, the chapter could be more critical in its interpretation. For instance, while the emphasis on exercise as a coping mechanism is explored, the potential risks, such as reinforcing body dissatisfaction or over-reliance on physical appearance, are not fully addressed. Additionally, there is room to discuss how broader systemic factors such as economic or cultural influences, contribute to the perpetuation of these societal pressures.

To finish, this study is a decently constructed study that forwards the conversation on male body image. Its strengths in thematic depth and integration with existing research are commendable. Addressing some of its methodological and analytical pitfalls would enhance its contribution and help provide a more comprehensive understanding of such a complex issue.

8 Discussion

This chapter presents an overarching discussion of the thesis, reflecting on its aim, contributions, and broader implications. It examines who can benefit from the study, offers development proposals for improving the thesis, and suggests directions for future research within this topic area.

This study set out to explore how societal ideals and media portrayals influence Finnish men's body image, self-esteem, and perceptions of masculinity, as well as the strategies they employ to cope with these pressures. By focusing on Finnish men aged 18 to 35, my research provided an in-depth understanding of the nuanced ways in which cultural and media-driven expectations shape body image. The findings highlighted the significant mental impact of these ideals, including comparison pressures and the mixed effects of coping mechanisms such as exercise. The study ultimately underscored the importance of encouraging a more inclusive understanding of masculinity that challenges traditional notions that are often tied to physical dominance, muscularity, and leanness.

The findings from this study have relevance for multiple stakeholders as well. Mental health practitioners, such as psychologists and counselors, can draw from these findings to develop targeted interventions that address body image issues among men, helping them build healthier self-esteem and coping mechanisms. Media professionals and advocacy groups can also benefit by using this research to push for more diverse and inclusive representations of masculinity, which could alleviate some of the pressures men face. Educators and researchers can also use this study as a foundation for cultivating critical discussions about the influence of societal expectations on body image, particularly among young people in educational settings. Perhaps most importantly, the research provides value to men themselves by bringing visibility to an often-overlooked issue and encouraging dialogue about the pressures they experience. This visibility can promote self-acceptance and resilience within male communities.

While my study contributes meaningful insights, there are opportunities to enhance its scope and impact. One potential improvement would be to broaden the demographic range of participants. Including men from a wider age range, different cultural backgrounds within Finland, or varying socioeconomic groups could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how body image issues evolve across different contexts. Another development opportunity lies in complementing the qualitative approach with quantitative

methods. For example, surveys or validated body image scales could offer broader generalizability and measurable trends to enrich the analysis.

The findings of this research also open up exciting opportunities for future exploration. One promising area for further study is the intersectionality of body image concerns. Future research could examine how factors such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or sexual orientation interact with societal ideals to create unique challenges for different groups of men. This would allow for more tailored interventions and support systems. Another area for exploration could be a longitudinal study that investigates the long-term psychological effects of body image pressures and coping mechanisms. Tracking participants over time would provide valuable insights into how these issues develop and whether specific strategies, such as exercise or body positivity movements, prove effective in promoting mental well-being.

To conclude, my study has shed light on how societal and media-driven ideals impact Finnish men's perceptions of their bodies and masculinity. By emphasizing the emotional and psychological toll of these expectations, the research contributes to ongoing efforts to promote healthier and more inclusive narratives of masculinity. While it has provided a meaningful foundation, the study also highlights areas for further exploration, ensuring that future research continues to address gaps and build on these findings to create positive change.

9 References

- Abdoli, M., Scotto Rosato, M., Desousa, A., & Cotrufo, P. (2024). Cultural differences in body image: A systematic review. *Social Sciences*, 13(6), 305.
- Agliata, D., & Tantleff-Dunn, S. (2004). The impact of media exposure on males' body image. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 23(1), 7-22.
- Avci, M., & Akliman, C. K. (2018). Gender differences in perception of body, expressions of body image and body image coping strategies among Turkish adolescents. *International Journal of Curriculum and Instruction*, 10(2), 30-44.
- Bennett, E. V., Hurd, L. C., Pritchard, E. M., Colton, T., & Crocker, P. R. (2020). An examination of older men's body image: How men 65 years and older perceive, experience, and cope with their aging bodies. *Body Image*, 34, 27-37.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. Sage.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), 589-597.
- Bryman, A. (2016). *Social research methods*. Oxford university press.
- Caruso, A., & Roberts, S. (2018). Exploring constructions of masculinity on a men's body-positivity blog. *Journal of Sociology*, 54(4), 627-646.
- Cash, T. F., Santos, M. T., & Williams, E. F. (2005). Coping with body-image threats and challenges: Validation of the body image coping strategies inventory. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 58(2), 190-199.
- Chen, S. X., & Kanai, A. (2022). Authenticity, uniqueness and talent: Gay male beauty influencers in post-queer, postfeminist Instagram beauty culture. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 25(1), 97-116.
- Cohen, R., Irwin, L., Newton-John, T., & Slater, A. (2019). #Bodypositivity: A content analysis of body positive accounts on Instagram. *Body Image*, 29, 47-57.
- Dixson, B. J., & Brooks, R. C. (2013). The role of facial hair in women's perceptions of men's attractiveness, health, masculinity, and parenting abilities. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 34(3), 236-241.
- Dixson, B. J., Lee, A. J., Sherlock, J. M., & Talamas, S. N. (2017). Beneath the beard: Do facial morphometrics influence the strength of judgments of men's beardedness? *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 38(2), 164-174.

- Elo, S., & Kyngäs, H. (2008). The qualitative content analysis process. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 62(1), 107–115.
- Frederick, D. A., & Essayli, J. H. (2016). Male body image: The roles of sexual orientation and body mass index across five national US studies. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, 17(4), 336.
- Gelsing, A. S. (2021). A critical analysis of the body positive movement on Instagram: How does it really impact body image? *Spectra Undergraduate Research Journal*, 1(1), 4.
- Gill, P., Stewart, K., Treasure, E., & Chadwick, B. (2008). Methods of data collection in qualitative research: interviews and focus groups. *British dental journal*, 204(6), 291-295.
- Gough, B. (2006). Try to be healthy, but don't forgo your masculinity: Deconstructing men's health discourse in the media. *Social Science & Medicine*, 63(9), 2476–2488.
- Grammas, D. L., & Schwartz, J. P. (2009). Internalization of messages from society and perfectionism as predictors of male body image. *Body Image*, 6(1), 31–36.
- Griffin, M., Bailey, K. A., & Lopez, K. J. (2022). #BodyPositive? A critical exploration of the body positive movement within physical cultures taking an intersectionality approach. *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*, 4, 908580.
- Gültzow, T., Guidry, J. P., Schneider, F., & Hoving, C. (2020). Male body image portrayals on Instagram. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 23(5), 281–289.
- Halbeisen, G., Laskowski, N., Brandt, G., Waschescio, U., & Paslakis, G. (2024). Eating disorders in men: An underestimated problem, an unseen need. *Deutsches Ärzteblatt International*, 121(3), 86.
- Jacobsen, T. (2010). Beauty and the brain: Culture, history, and individual differences in aesthetic appreciation. *Journal of Anatomy*, 216(2), 184–191.
- Jess, M. (2021). *On beauty: Ancient perceptions of beauty from classical Greece to Imperial Rome*.
- Jones Jr, R. G. (2015). Queering the body politic: Intersectional reflexivity in the body narratives of queer men. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 21(9), 766–775.
- Judge, T. A., & Cable, D. M. (2004). The effect of physical height on workplace success and income: Preliminary test of a theoretical model. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 89(3), 428.
- Kallio, H., Pietilä, A. M., Johnson, M., & Kangasniemi, M. (2016). Systematic methodological review: developing a framework for a qualitative semi-structured interview guide. *Journal of advanced nursing*, 72(12), 2954-2965.
- Law, C., & Labre, M. P. (2002). Cultural standards of attractiveness: A thirty-year look at changes in male images in magazines. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 79(3), 697–711.

Matera, C., Casati, C., Paradisi, M., Di Gesto, C., & Nerini, A. (2024). Positive body image and psychological well-being among women and men: The mediating role of body image coping strategies. *Behavioral Sciences*, 14(5), 378.

McNeill, L. S., & Firman, J. L. (2014). Ideal body image: A male perspective on self. *Australasian Marketing Journal*, 22(2), 136-143.

Monocello, L. T., & Dressler, W. W. (2020). Flower boys and muscled men: Comparing South Korean and American male body ideals using cultural domain analysis. *Anthropology & Medicine*, 27(2), 176-191.

Nieuwoudt, J. E., Zhou, S., Coutts, R. A., & Booker, R. (2015). Symptoms of muscle dysmorphia, body dysmorphic disorder, and eating disorders in a nonclinical population of adult male weightlifters in Australia. *The Journal of Strength & Conditioning Research*, 29(5), 1406-1414.

OpenAI. (2024). ChatGPT (Jan 25 version) [Large language model].
<https://chat.openai.com/chat>

Penton-Voak, I. S., & Perrett, D. I. (2000). Female preference for male faces changes cyclically: Further evidence. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 21(1), 39-48.

Penton-Voak, I. S., Perrett, D. I., Castles, D. L., Kobayashi, T., Burt, D. M., Murray, L. K., & Minamisawa, R. (1999). Menstrual cycle alters face preference. *Nature*, 399(6738), 741-742.

Phillipou, A., & Castle, D. (2015). Body dysmorphic disorder in men. *Australian Family Physician*, 44(11), 798-801.

Phillips, K. A., Menard, W., & Fay, C. (2006). Gender similarities and differences in 200 individuals with body dysmorphic disorder. *Comprehensive psychiatry*, 47(2), 77-87.

Pope, C. G., Pope, H. G., Menard, W., Fay, C., Olivardia, R., & Phillips, K. A. (2005). Clinical features of muscle dysmorphia among males with body dysmorphic disorder. *Body Image*, 2(4), 395-400.

Pope, H., Phillips, K. A., & Olivardia, R. (2000). *The Adonis complex: The secret crisis of male body obsession*. Simon and Schuster.

Pope Jr, H. G., Gruber, A. J., Choi, P., Olivardia, R., & Phillips, K. A. (1997). Muscle dysmorphia: An underrecognized form of body dysmorphic disorder. *Psychosomatics*, 38(6), 548-557.

Rhodes, G. (2006). The evolutionary psychology of facial beauty. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 57(1), 199-226.

Rhodes, G., Hickford, C., & Jeffery, L. (2000). Sex-typicality and attractiveness: Are supermale and superfemale faces super-attractive? *British Journal of Psychology*, 91(1), 125-140.

- Rhodes, G., Sumich, A., & Byatt, G. (1999). Are average facial configurations attractive only because of their symmetry? *Psychological Science*, 10(1), 52–58.
- Ricciardelli, L. A., & Williams, R. J. (2012). Beauty over the centuries—Male. *Encyclopedia of Body Image and Human Appearance*, 1, 50–57.
- Ricciardelli, R., Clow, K. A., & White, P. (2010). Investigating hegemonic masculinity: Portrayals of masculinity in men's lifestyle magazines. *Sex Roles*, 63, 64–78.
- Ricciardelli, L. A., McCabe, M. P., Williams, R. J., & Thompson, J. K. (2007). The role of ethnicity and culture in body image and disordered eating among males. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 27(5), 582–606.
- Sarwer, D. B., Grossbart, T. A., & Didie, E. R. (2003, June). Beauty and society. In *Seminars in Cutaneous Medicine and Surgery* (Vol. 22, No. 2, pp. 79–92).
- Sorokowski, P., & Butovskaya, M. L. (2012). Height preferences in humans may not be universal: Evidence from the Datoga people of Tanzania. *Body Image*, 9(4), 510–516.
- Strother, E., Lemberg, R., Stanford, S. C., & Turberville, D. (2012). Eating disorders in men: Underdiagnosed, undertreated, and misunderstood. *Eating Disorders*, 20(5), 346–355.
- Swami, V., Smith, J., Tsiokris, A., Georgiades, C., Sangareau, Y., Tovée, M. J., & Furnham, A. (2007). Male physical attractiveness in Britain and Greece: A cross-cultural study. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 147(1), 15–26.
- Swami, V., & Tovée, M. J. (2005). Male physical attractiveness in Britain and Malaysia: A cross-cultural study. *Body Image*, 2(4), 383–393.
- Sylvia, Z., King, T. K., & Morse, B. J. (2014). Virtual ideals: The effect of video game play on male body image. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 37, 183–188.
- Tager, D., Good, G. E., & Morrison, J. B. (2006). Our bodies, ourselves revisited: Male body image and psychological well-being. *International Journal of Men's Health*, 5(3).
- Thomas, S., Karunaratne, A., Lewis, S., Castle, D., Knoesen, N., Honigman, R., ... & Komesaroff, P. (2010). 'Just bloody fat!': A qualitative study of body image, self-esteem and coping in obese adults. *International Journal of Mental Health Promotion*, 12(1), 39–49.
- Tod, D., & Edwards, C. (2015). Relationships among muscle dysmorphia characteristics, body image quality of life, and coping in males. *Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport*, 18(5), 585–589.
- Verrastro, V., Liga, F., Cuzzocrea, F., & Gugliandolo, M. C. (2020). Fear the Instagram: Beauty stereotypes, body image and Instagram use in a sample of male and female adolescents. *QWERTY-Interdisciplinary Journal of Technology, Culture and Education*, 15(1), 31–49.

- Weber, B. R. (2006). What makes the man? Television makeovers, made-over masculinity, and male body image. *International Journal of Men's Health*, 5(3).
- Yang, C. F. J., Gray, P., & Pope Jr, H. G. (2005). Male body image in Taiwan versus the West: Yanggang Zhiqi meets the Adonis complex. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 162(2), 263-269.
- Yancey, G., & Emerson, M. O. (2016). Does height matter? An examination of height preferences in romantic coupling. *Journal of Family Issues*, 37(1), 53-73.

Appendix

Appendix 1. Informed consent guide

This study aims to explore the impact of societal ideals and media portrayals on men's body image and self-esteem. Your participation will help contribute to a better understanding of these topics and the challenges associated with them.

During this session, I will ask you several questions about your experiences and perspectives regarding body image and societal expectations. Our conversation will be audio-recorded to ensure accuracy, but please know that your responses will be kept anonymous.

Your privacy is very important. Your name and any identifying information will not be associated with your responses in any way. All data collected will be used solely for academic purposes and will be presented in a way that ensures confidentiality. Your documents and information will not be shared and will be processed privately by only me.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to skip any question or stop the interview at any time, without giving a reason or facing any consequences. If you have any questions or concerns at any point, please feel free to ask.

Do you have any questions about the study, your role, or how your responses will be used?

If you are comfortable with everything that has been outlined and consent to participate in this study, please confirm your agreement by saying, "Yes, I consent."

Appendix 2. Interview guide (English)

Can you describe how you feel about your body and appearance?

How would you describe the ideal male body image, according to society?

Have these societal ideals influenced the way you view yourself?

How often do you encounter images or messages in the media about male body ideals?

Can you recall a specific moment or experience where you felt influenced by these ideals?

Do you think media and societal standards have impacted your self-esteem or body image?

Do you ever avoid social situations because of your body image concerns?

When you feel dissatisfied with your appearance, what steps do you take to feel better?

Are there any particular routines or habits that you've developed to cope with body image concerns?

Do you feel these coping mechanisms are helpful or effective?

How have your views on body image and appearance changed over time?

What advice would you give to someone struggling with similar body image concerns?

What do you think society could do to better support men facing body image pressures?

*Can you tell me more about that experience?

*How did that make you feel?

*Why do you think that is important to you?

Appendix 3. Interview Guide (Swedish)

Kan du beskriva hur du känner kring din kropps bild och ditt utseende?

Hur skulle du beskriva den ideala manliga kropps bilden enligt samhället?

Har dessa samhällsideal påverkat hur du ser på dig själv?

Hur ofta stöter du på bilder eller budskap i media om manliga kropps ideal?

Kan du minnas ett specifikt ögonblick eller en upplevelse där du kände dig påverkad av dessa ideal?

Tror du att media och samhällsnormer har påverkat din självkänsla eller kropps uppfattning?

Undviker du någonsin sociala situationer på grund av oro över din kropps uppfattning?

När du känner dig missnöjd med ditt utseende, vad gör du för att må bättre?

Finns det några specifika rutiner eller vanor som du har utvecklat för att hantera oro över din kropps uppfattning?

Tycker du att dessa hanteringsmekanismer är hjälpsamma?

Hur har dina synpunkter kring kropps uppfattning och utseende förändrats över tid?

Vilket råd skulle du ge till någon som kämpar med liknande bekymmer kring sin kropps uppfattning?

Vad tycker du att samhället kan göra för att bättre stötta män som känner press kring sin kropps uppfattning?

Kan du berätta mer om den upplevelsen?

Hur fick det dig att känna?

Varför tror du att det är viktigt för dig?