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Editors: Bart Cammaerts and Nick Anstead



## MAN UP!

A Qualitative Analysis of Representations of the Male Body on  
Instagram and Body Image Among Young Flemish Men

**Femke Konings**



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Instagram and Body Image among Young,  
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## Abstract

*The Body Positivity Movement challenges the aversive effects of 'thin' appearance ideals on women by including more realistic bodies in the media. So far men's body insecurities remain largely undiscussed in academia and popular media. This dissertation fills this void by focussing on men instead of women and on the impact of social media notably Instagram. My central research question is whether Instagram challenges the ideal of the Hegemonic Man (Connell, 1987) and if so whether it results in a more Inclusive Masculine ideal (Anderson, 2009). More specifically: How do idealized and objectified representations of masculinity in Instagram-posts, influence young, white, Flemish men's body dissatisfaction and body modification behaviour? In particular, this study examines whether peripheral forms of masculinity are present on Instagram and how they represent a more realistic, counter-hegemonic discourse, through conducting qualitative semi-structured interviews with white, heterosexual, Flemish male Instagram-users between 18-29 years old. By applying thematic analysis, the results of this study are linked to pre-existing literature on the relationship between media and body image such as the Objectification Theory, Social comparison Theory and the Hegemonic versus Inclusive Masculinity Theory.*

*The main conclusion arising from my research is that despite the openness of the Instagram forum, objectified and idealized bodies on Instagram are still perceived as hegemonic and aspirational exemplars of masculinity. These ideals result in an increase in body dissatisfaction and potentially harmful body modification behaviour. More inclusive forms of masculinity are rejected and are perceived as inferior. Next to Instagram hegemonic ideals, peer pressure was generally felt to have an important impact on body image. These findings do not necessarily contradict recent evidence of more cultural acceptance of homosexuality thanks to social media (Anderson and Morris, 2015) but it suggests that when it comes to body image, social media does not challenge the Hegemonic male ideal. Future research on media representations and body image should therefore also include more diversity in race and sexual orientation in the participants group, to see if they resonate more with the Inclusive Male ideal.*

## INTRODUCTION

There is abundant evidence that idealised, objectified female body in traditional media outlets contribute to aversive outcomes on body image, self-esteem and eating disorders (Anschutz, Engels, Becker & Van Strien, 2009; Noll, 1996). As is the case with appearance ideals of the female body, traditional media has also been found to present unrealistic appearance ideals of the male body (Fouts and Vaughan 2002; Ricciardelli, Clow, and White 2007). The exposure to these idealised and objectified male bodies in mass media outlets has been associated with increased self-objectification (Karsay, Knoll, & Matthes, 2018) and body dissatisfaction among men (Knauss, Paxton, and Alasker 2008; Barlett, Vowels and Saucier, 2008). It also has been found that men are increasingly engaging in dangerous body modification behaviours, such as anabolic steroid use or excessive exercising (Nikkelen, Anschutz, Ha, & Engels, 2012; Olivardia, Pope, Borowiecki, & Cohane, 2004). Although the pursuit for excessive thinness in women is perceived as a psychiatric disorder, extreme muscle building in men is not and even valued or admired (Davis, & Scott-Robertson, 2000).

To this end, the relation between idealizing and objectifying media representations and body image is predominantly under-researched issue among men (Choma, Visser, Pozzebon, Bogaert, Busseri, & Sadava, 2010) and within a social media environment (Andsager, 2014; Light, 2013). One of the key questions in the current academic debate is whether the internet and social networking sites have the potential to incorporate more realistic images of masculinity (Anderson, & Morris, 2015; Andsager, 2014; Caruso and Roberts, 2018) or whether they reinforce the exposure to idealised bodies and, in turn, amplify the aversive outcomes of men's well-being (Duffy, & Hund; Sloan, & Quan-Haase, 2017). Therefore, my dissertation advances the existing literature in two important directions: First, I focus on males rather than females and second, I focus on the role of social media, more specific of Instagram, rather than on traditional media. In particular, this research aims to explore the question of: How do idealizing and objectifying representations of the male body on Instagram influence young men's body image?

My conceptual framework builds on several key theories on (self-)objectification, social comparison, inclusive and hegemonic masculinity, which guide my research. My empirical approach draws on Moradi's (2010) who uses a multi-faceted model of self-objectification. A

simplified version of this model was applied by Vandenbosch and Eggermont (2013). In contrast to these quantitative approaches, I apply a qualitative approach which complements these earlier studies. My own methodology consists of semi-structured qualitative interviews of young, white, heterosexual, Flemish males between 18 and 28 years old, as Instagram's users-base predominantly represents this cohort (Duggan, & Smit, 2014). My research design consists of exposing participants to two sets of stimuli. The first one, includes Instagram posts of 'star athletes', that portray the objectified, ideal male body, whereas the second one shows images *Body positivity accounts*, which present more diverse and inclusive bodies. Subsequently, transcripts were uploaded into the software *NVivo* to detect a list of key words according to which data could be classified into central themes which allowed for deeper analysis (coding). The **results** show that Instagram does not necessarily contribute to including more diverse forms of masculinity. The muscular, mesomorphic male appearance ideal is still very much omni-present amongst participants. Instagram exposure seems to reinforce the acceptance of this hegemonic masculinity and to the rejection of more inclusive masculinities. The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next chapter will outline the theories for the conceptual background of this study. The Methodology chapter offers an overview of the qualitative interviewing method and thematic analysis that is being used in this dissertation. And finally, I present the results in a last chapter, which integrates the findings of the analysis with interpretations and pre-existing theories.

## THEORETICAL CHAPTER

In this chapter I review the relevant theories, which provide the conceptual background for examining how objectified representations in Instagram posts influence body image. I start by discussing the Objectification (Frederickson, & Roberts, 1997) and Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954). Since my research is looking at the impact of social media on body image and body modification of Western men, the chapter continues with reviewing the literature on hegemonic masculinity (Hegemonic Masculinity Theory; Connell, 1987), concerning male appearance ideals and gender norms as seen in Western dominant mass media outlets. In addition, an overview of literature, which elaborates on how these hegemonic ideals influence

body image and body modification behaviour is given. I also discuss how other, more inclusive forms of masculinity that divert from the heterosexual, muscular ideal, are entering the public sphere as a counter-hegemonic discourse of body positivity. The literature that I discuss below will be used to guide the conceptual framework of my research. Finally, I close this chapter with formulating the key objectives and potential contributions.

## **Literature Review**

### *The Internalisation of Appearance ideals, Self-objectification and Social Comparison*

The aversive outcomes on body image of the exposure to sexual objectification for females has been relatively well-studied, but this is much less the case for males (Choma, et al., 2010). Therefore, in this dissertation, we turn our attention to the objectification of men which has initially been overlooked but may be equally important. The Objectification Theory (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997), which is predominantly applied in researching this issue, has as a basic premise that through *sexual objectification* in media outlets, female and male observers are taught to *internalise* cultural ideals of appearance (Aubrey, 2006; Frederickson, & Roberts, 1997).

*Sexual objectification* or *sexualization* refers to the separating of a person's body from his or her as a person, reducing them to the status of an object, which value is based on sexual and physical attractiveness (Aubrey, 2006; Frederickson & Roberts, 1997). By now, a substantial body of research suggest that men are sexually objectified to unrealistic standards in traditional media outlets such as in popular television programmes, magazines, pornographic media, lifestyle magazines and advertisements (Atwood, 2005; Fouts, & Vaughan 2002; Ricciardelli, Clow, & White 2007; Rohlinger, 2002). However, this has not sufficiently been researched in a social media environment (Andsager, 2014; Light, 2013). Therefore, this dissertation contributes to the debate by analysing data on social media exposure of men on the Instagram platform. The Objectification theory (1997) also suggest that exposure to sexually objectifying media can trigger *self-objectification*. This refers to the fact that a person adopts a third-person perspective in evaluating one's own body. In doing so the focus lies predominantly on appearance features, rather than on non-observable attributes or internal states (e.g. feelings, intellect, competence) (Fredrickson et al., 1998, cited in Morry, & Statska, 2001, p.270). However, Moradi and Huang (2008) argue that a key mediating mechanism in

the process of exposure to sexually objectifying media content and self-objectification, is what is referred to as the '*internalisation of appearance ideals*', defined as: "*The extent to which an individual cognitively "buys into" socially defined ideals of attractiveness and engages in behaviours designed to produce an approximation of these ideals.*" (Thompson et al., 1999, as cited in Thompson, & Stice, 2001, p.181). Self-objectification is manifested by *body surveillance*, or "habitual monitoring of the body's outward appearance" (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 180). *Body surveillance* refers to monitoring one's body's outward appearance, in order to comply with the internalized societal beauty ideals (Moradi, 2010; Moradi & Huang, 2008; Morry & Statska, 2001; Vandenbosch, & Eggermont, 2013) and to avoid negative judgements (Aubrey, 2006).

The Social Comparison Theory, already propagated by Festinger in the early fifties, also deals with the relationship between exposure to media and aversive outcomes on the observer's well-being. Central to this theory is that people have an internal drive to constantly compare themselves with others, in order to build their own identity and characteristics (Festinger, 1954, in Nikkelen, Anschutz, Ha, & Engels, 2012, p. 309). The process of social comparison thus stems from the drive for self-evaluation.

*Upward social comparison* refers to a comparison with someone who is perceived as superior. When observers of idealized images compare their own bodies as 'objects' to these appearance ideals, they may perceive their own body as inferior. In turn, this can result in an increase in appearance anxiety or body shame (Barlett, et al., 2008; Frederickson & Roberts, 1997; Lorenzen, Grieve, & Thomas, 2004; Nikkelen et al., 2012).

Experiencing such incongruity between one's own body and the mediated ideal occurs, this can, in turn, result in behavioural processes in order to comply to the cultural standards of appearance (Joshi et al., 2004). Finally, the Social Comparison Theory also states that the process can work in the opposite direction: *downward social comparison*. This refers to comparing oneself to someone who is perceived as inferior. When this occurs, the person making the comparison places oneself higher up on the appearance ladder (Festinger, 1954).

In my research I seek to study the impact of social media on body image and body modification of Flemish men. Next to the two theories discussed above i.e. the Social Comparison Theory and the more recent Objectification Theory, I also turn to the theory of Connell (1987) on



Hegemonic Masculinity. This theory offers an understanding of how certain representations of masculinity are perceived as 'hegemonic' in Western societies and are therefore predominantly represented in media outlets. This theory is contrasted by Anderson's (2009) Inclusive Masculinity Theory who argues how more inclusive forms of masculinity can challenge the hegemonic norm as counter-hegemonic discourse, such as the body positivity movement illustrates. The specific focus on Western societies in these theories is useful for my own conceptual framework designed to guide my empirical work in subsequent chapters. Therefore, Connell's and Anderson's theories will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

### *Hegemonic and Inclusive representations of Masculinity*

Connell's (1987) Hegemonic Masculinity Theory refers to the social process in which a particular type of masculinity is culturally awarded above others. 'Hegemonic masculinity' works through the production and depiction of authoritative and aspirational exemplars of masculinity. Although, this is often not what men in society live up to, it is what large numbers of men are motivated to support and aspire (Connell, & Messerschmidt, 2005). Currently, the embodiment of this muscular Western hegemonic ideal depicted in the media, often contains a level muscularity, which is impossible to achieve for most men by healthy means (Leit, Pope, & Gray, 2001). Even today, the prevailing norm on the Western male body seems to have the following traits (Waller-Loland, 1998; Davis, Dionne, & Lazarus, 1996; Freedman, 1984; McCreary & Sasse, 2000; McKinley, 1998; Pope, Olivardia, Gruber, & Borowiecki, 1999 as cited in Morry, & Staska, 2001, p. 279):

- *tall*
- *muscular*
- *well-developed upper body, muscles on the arms, chest, shoulders*
- *a flat stomach and narrow hips (the so-called V-shape)*

However, extreme muscularity (i.e. body builders) is not widely accepted and often rejected as 'unnatural' or 'narcissistic' (Grogan, 2010). The Hegemonic Man is not only expected to be physically attractive but also has to have these traits:

- *self-assured,*
- *rational,*
- *mentally strong,*
- *heterosexual*
- *not express emotional concerns related to one's personal situation, such as body dissatisfaction (Connell, 1987; Connell, & Messerschmidt, 2005).*

Brannon (1985, cited in Kilmartin, 2000, p.7) summarizes this in four major traits that characterize the traditional, Western 'hegemonic' view on masculinity:

- *status and achievement,*
- *anti-femininity,*
- *inexpressiveness and independence,*
- *adventurousness and aggressiveness.*

Representations of hegemonic men in the media often include these traits. For instance, star athletes or other men with high societal status are often portrayed in a way that lies far from the average man (Leit, Pope, & Gray, 2001; Pope, Olivardia, Gruber, & Borowiecki, 1999). An interesting research question is whether this discrepancy between the hegemonic appearance ideals and the real-life average male body size, is dwindling or increasing over time. Some studies like Morris and Anderson (2015) find an increased acceptance and tolerance for homosexuality coinciding with increased use of social media. But when it comes to body images, existing evidence seems to point in the direction that the discrepancy between the hegemonic appearance ideal and the real-life average body size is even increasing (Spitzer, Henderson, & Zivian, 1999).

Overall, the empirical literature suggests that men, like their female counterparts, suffer from body image issues and have the desire to live up to the idealized men in the media. This desire can be so strong that it results in body behavioural consequences involving excessive exercising (Barlett, et al., 2008), the use of unhealthy food supplements, beauty products or risky forms of surgery (Olivardia, Pope, Borowiecki, & Cohane, 2004; Vandembosch, & Eggermont, 2013). But it can go beyond that, as some men have been found to engage in extreme muscle-gaining behaviour such as anabolic steroid use, which is harmful for their physical and mental health (Nikkelen, et al., 2012). However, while the psychological profiles of men engaging in extreme muscle building have been found to be similar to women with anorexia nervosa, the former is not perceived by society as a psychiatric disorder (Davis, & Scott-Robertson, 2000).

This conceptualization of awarded forms of masculinity, automatically implies the subordination of men who do not comply to these hegemonic ideals. Ricciardelli et al. (2010) argue that to obtain hegemonic power, men are required to maintain and sustain certain features and characteristics as aforementioned. A vast body of research supports that hegemonic masculinity in Western societies, subordinates women and homosexual forms of masculinity. Homosexuals are found to be subordinated because they are often associated with femininity (Connell, 1987, Connell, 1995; Ghail, 1994 Kimmel, 1994;). Earlier research conducted with heterosexual young men, has confirmed that Hegemonic masculinity which coincides with an anti-feminine and anti-gay view of masculinity, was part of youth cultures (Connell, 1995). Men behaving in a feminine way can therefore be confronted with social disapproval (Connell, 1987; Connell, & Messerschmidt, 2005; Donaldson, 1993; Kilmartin, 2000)

Anderson (2009) however, in his Inclusive Masculine Theory predicts that as cultural homophobia decreases under influence of the social media, hegemonic masculinity will also come under pressure as the dominant appearance and ideal. Instead we may shift more in the direction of 'inclusive masculinity' where other masculine types and traits can be part of the ideal.

Empirically, several authors report a social trend of decreasing homophobia among heterosexual young men in recent times (Adams, 2011; Anderson, 2014; Clements and Field,

2014; Kozlowski, 2010; Morris, & Anderson, 2015). It is being argued that this is under the influence of internet technologies and social media (Anderson, 2012; McNair, 2013) which results in new forms of masculinity that are entering the online public sphere as a counter-hegemonic discourse such as the *Body Positivity Movement for men* (Caruso, & Roberts, 2018).

The question currently raised in the academic debate is whether the internet and social networking sites also result in embracing more inclusive forms of masculinity. Can social media challenge other aspects of the 'hegemonic masculine' type, such as idealized physical features and muscularity? Or instead, are the hegemonic, muscular, anti-emotional masculine ideals being reinforced through social media platforms (e.g. Duffy, & Hund, 2015; Sloan, & Quan-Haase, 2017)?

In the following section I elaborate on how my own research aims to contribute to this current academic debate. I outline how the different existing theories are used to guide my research questions and research design.

### **Conceptual Framework and Research Questions**

Earlier literature has mainly focused on the relationship between traditional media and the self-image of young women. In this dissertation, I divert from this in two directions. First, I focus on a much smaller and sparser literature tackling the relationship between idealized media representation and the self-image of young men. Second, instead of examining traditional media, I look at social media. Most of the existing empirical studies find that men are sexually objectified in traditional media outlets. The key research questions of this dissertation are the following: *How do social media influence the representation of masculinity? Do social media result in more diverse representations of masculinity than the hegemonic masculinity type which is the main and dominant type in traditional media outlets? How do social media influence body (dis)satisfaction and body modification behaviour in young male users?*

To this end I collect qualitative data based on group interviews and individual in-depth interviews with a sample of Flemish young men which were carried out in the course of the Spring and Summer of 2020. The social medium I turn my attention to is Instagram. This network platform has three features which make it particularly interesting to research: First, Instagram predominantly runs on user-generated content, and offers its users the opportunity

to manage their online self-presentation (Fox, & Rooney, 2015). Second, Instagram has the option to modify the content that you put online through filters and photo-shopping of images. This may contribute even more to the depiction of idealized bodies and 'perfect' lifestyles (Duffy, & Hund, 2015). Having the perfect body seems effortless after photo-shopping and the app Instagram makes it is easy to improve your 'mediocre' appearance (Sloan, & Quan-Haase,2017). Third, Instagram and its many users offers the potential to depict more diverse representations of male bodies and to break down the hegemonic masculine dominant representation (Andsager, 2014; Caruso and Roberts, 2018).

For the *conceptual framework* that guides my empirical research design, I rely on the conceptual framework of 'Hegemonic Masculinity', as introduced by Connell (1987) and the Inclusive Masculinity Theory of Anderson's (2009). Whereas Connell (1987)'s theory deals with the relationship between traditional media and the dominant hegemonic masculine culture (e.g. star athletes), Anderson (2009) analyzes the relationship between social media and more inclusive forms of masculinity that divert from the heterosexual hegemonic ideal. In contrasting these two theories I define the following key research questions: *How do idealized and objectified representations of masculinity in Instagram- posts, influence young, white, Flemish men's body dissatisfaction and body modification behaviour? And Does Instagram challenges the ideal of the Hegemonic Man (Connell, 1987) and results in a more Inclusive Masculine ideal (Anderson, 2009)?*

There are very few studies that focus on Instagram-users, and those that do merely focus on what takes place on the screens (Sloan, & Quan-Haase, 2017). In this dissertation I go beyond that by also focussing on the interactions between peers. In the qualitative interview data that I collect, I specifically examine peer discussion of the Instagram content.

In my research design I also rely on the Objectification (Frederickson, & Roberts, 1997) and Social Comparison (Festinger, 1954) theories which are used to understand the underlying mechanisms of how representations of masculinity on Instagram can influence well-being in Flemish, young, male Instagram-users. In order to operationalize my research design I heavily rely on other influential models in the recent literature like the multifaceted model proposed by Moradi (2010) of self-objectification. In particular, I adopt the simplified quantitative structural equation model of this model as developed by Vandenbosch and Eggermont (2013)

(Appendix 1). That study pursues a quantitative analysis using a structural equation model to study the sexualization of adolescent boys in prime-time television. They investigate how exposure to (sexually) objectifying media impact the internalisation of appearance ideals and whether this results in increased levels of self-objectification and body surveillance. Their findings suggest that the multidimensional model of self-objectification (Moradi 2010) is an empirically valuable explanatory model for boys' body image. While their approach is more quantitative, it offers building blocks for my more qualitative conceptual framework on the relationship between objectified and idealized representations of masculinity and young men's body image.

In Appendix 2, I construct a schematic Figure to visualize the relations and predictions. In words, the model works as follows: *it shows how exposure to objectifying media images (1) can have an indirect influence on self-objectification (3) through the internalization of appearance ideals (2). In turn, the internalization of appearance ideals (2) is predicted to result in upward social comparisons (4) of one's own body (3) to the ideals through the process of body surveillance (5). A person is predicted to monitor his body (3) in comparison (4) to societal beauty ideals (2). If a discrepancy between one's own body and the internalized idealized bodies is observed, this is predicted to result in body dissatisfaction (6) and eventually in body modification behaviour (7) in order to comply to the internalised ideal.*

In the following paragraph I discuss why the research pursued in this dissertation is innovative and I also elaborate on its specific objectives.

### **Research Objectives**

I focus on males which hitherto are much less studied than females. A possible explanation for the lack of research on men and for a smaller stock of knowledge on men and their body image, is that dissatisfaction of males with their bodies was until recently considered to be a social taboo. Women are encouraged by the media to be concerned about their bodies. On the contrary, men are often raised with the idea that talking about how they feel about their body may be a sign of 'mentally weakness' or a 'taboo' (Donaldson, 1993). Consequently, the social barrier to talk about body dissatisfaction is, arguably, higher for men than for women (Vandenbosch, & Eggermont, 2013).

The lack of data on men offers opportunities for novel research in this area. The male relationship between exposure to idealized bodies and their body image and well-being is equally important. Moreover, research suggests that young, Western, men are increasingly engaging in (dangerous) body modification behaviour such as excessive exercising or the use of performance enhancing substances to comply to the muscular ideal (e.g. Barlett et al., 2008; Davis, & Scott-Robertson, 2000).

In this dissertation I pursue three objectives which result in testable hypotheses. The first objective is to understand whether the conceptualization of masculinity is shifting in a changing media environment and how in turn this may influence body image. Social media and the Internet in general, are under-represented in research on masculinities and appearance ideals (Light, 2013). The ongoing discussion within the academic field is thus whether social media has brought more positive and diverse messages around body image compared to more traditional media (Anderson, & McCormack, 2018). The second objective of this dissertation is to understand how masculine Instagram posts are discussed in group and how group dynamics affects the expression of insecurities about body image. Currently several studies exist that study Instagram-users. However, most Instagram-research limits itself to what takes place on the screens, rather than the interactions amongst men when they discuss Instagram posts (Sloan, & Quan-Haase, 2017). In my dissertation, I explicitly take on board this group dynamics aspect and contrast it to the information obtained in the individual follow-up in depth interviews.

The third objective of my dissertation is to offer a complementary qualitative approach to this topic since the existing literature research on (male's) (sexual) objectification is predominantly quantitative (Moradi, & Huang, 2008). By pursuing semi-structured interviews, it is often easier to research aspects which involve a social taboo. In this case it is less acceptable for men to talk about their body image as it is perceived as 'taboo' in the hegemonic conceptualizations of masculinity (Donaldson, 1993; Vandenbosch, & Eggermont, 2013). Hence, quantitative questionnaires may not fully capture the complexity of the underlying cognitive processes in men (Vandenbosch, & Eggermont, 2013). 'Masculinity' is a social construct, with a meaning that fluctuates over time and contexts (Connell, 1987; Killmartin, 2000). Therefore, instead of a quantitative approach, in this dissertation I pursue a qualitative, constructionist approach

which allows me as interviewer to create an open and safe environment to discuss taboo issues such as male body dissatisfaction with the interview participants (Warren, 2002).

## METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I elaborate on the methodology and research design of this study. I discuss the rationale of the research strategy and the research design, along with the sampling strategy. This is followed by an outline of the particular research tools used in this dissertation. Finally, this chapter closes with a reflection on ethical considerations as well as my positioning as researcher in the project and how this could have influenced the operationalisation of the research question.

### **Research Strategy**

#### *Qualitative Interviewing*

This dissertation seeks to offer a qualitative understanding of the underlying cognitive processes of the effect of objectified images in social media on body dissatisfaction, which has been found in previous quantitative studies (e.g. Vandebosch, & Eggermont, 2013). It follows a qualitative, constructionist approach consisting of semi-structured interviews to capture young men's concrete meaning-making processes. The semi-structured interviewing approach allows for flexibility in following participant's leads in the conversations and adapting questions to them. However, the structure and content in the interviews was kept relatively uniform through a topic guide based on the existing literature and which ensured that key themes were all being discussed (Appendix 3) (Berger, 1998). Hence, I start with some assumptions in mind, based on existing theories about what she will find in the data, but the 'story' unfolds when interviewees and researcher explore an issue together (Charmaz, & Belgrave, 2012).

During the interviewing process, as a researcher I prioritize to the voice of the interviewees. At regular time points throughout the interviews, I ask the participants whether my interpretation of their experiences is correct. This enables to check whether I have understood their messages correctly (Ezzy, 2002). Below I describe an extract of an interview with focus group 3 to illustrate this:



Ron: The men shown on Instagram made it. They probably have a beautiful girl, every car they want...they are the best of the best in their profession...they are just very successful.

Researcher: You just mentioned that successful men are associated with being surrounded by beautiful women, is it correct that a woman can be seen as a status symbol for men?

Ron: yes.

Dan: That is definitely the case with athletes.

Eddie: Most athletes have a good-looking girlfriend. I personally have never seen a top athlete with a chubby lady...so yeah...a woman can enhance a man's status.

Ron: Agreed!

Before collecting the final sample of interviewees, I conducted a pilot study to evaluate the methodology for this larger research project. The pilot suggested that focus groups are useful to examine how perceptions of masculinities are constructed and negotiated in a peer-environment. However, it also revealed that individual interviews are more prone to motivate respondents to talk about their covert attitudes, insecurities and feelings regarding representations of masculinities and their own body image, something they are less likely to do in group interviews. A possible explanation for this could be that power dynamics and cultural norms may be at stake in these peer environments that make the members of a group discussion comply to the hegemonic cultural standard (Beitin, 2012; Donaldson, 1993; Kilmartin, 2000). Therefore, in the final research set up, I complement the focus group interviews with individual follow-up interviews. The main reason for conducting one-to-one interviews as well, is thus, that they offer the possibility to pose probing questions, in order to examine deeper lying sentiments within participants, which may remain unsaid in group discussions.

After conducting an interview, the recordings are translated to English into Transcripts, using denaturalized transcription, as this emphasised constructed meanings over exact semiotic language use (Oliver, Serovich, & Mason, 2005).

### *Analytical Strategy*

The data from the interviews are then inductively as well as deductively thematically analysed using the qualitative data analysis software *Nvivo*. In a first step, we inserted into NVivo, the *pre-theory-driven codes*, consisting of:

- Self-objectification,
- Social Comparison,
- Cultural norms,
- Perceptions of hegemonic masculinity and Inclusive masculinity,
- Body surveillance,
- Body modification behaviour,
- Body dissatisfaction,

And they were applied on the transcripts (i.e. deduction). In a second step, the transcripts were analysed with an inductive approach to find the codes that emerge from the *data*. A code is a label that captures what is interesting in the data (Clarke, & Braun, 2006). Next, codes which have associations between them, are clustered in themes. From this we were able to define six general themes:

- Acceptance of Hegemonic Masculinity,
- Rejection of Inclusive Masculinity,
- The Internalisation of Appearance ideals,
- The Internalisation of Behavioural Norms,
- Self-Objectification and
- Social Comparison.

A detailed overview of all the themes, codes, code definitions and examples are given in a coding frame. This coding frame was used to find relationships between the raw data extracts and the pre-existing theory.

## Research Design

### *Sampling*

In order to examine perceptions of diverse representations of masculinity on the social media platform, Instagram, I utilize a purposeful, theoretical sampling strategy. The selection of participants is based on a clear rationale, which relates to the research questions (Ezzy, 2002) and are based on theoretical criteria:

The first criterium is the respondents' age. Instagram-users are predominantly situated between 18 and 29 years old (Duggan, & Smit, 2014). It is expected that this cohort will experience the most exposure to (idealized) representations of masculinities, as they spend most time in the visual, image-based environment of Instagram (Laestadius, 2016).

The second cluster of criteria consists of ethnicity, class and sexuality. It is argued that white, middleclass, heterosexual men are often rewarded with prestige and influence in a patriarchal context. However, it is also argued that these men often do not recognize their privileged societal position over other, less privileged non-white, non-middleclass, non-heterosexual men (Kilmartin, 2000, p. 17). Privilege, thus, does not extend equally to all races and classes, as people of colour, LGBTQ+, or low socioeconomic status are still underrepresented in Western media (Poynting, Noble, & Tabar, 2003; Schmidt, 2015; Vorsino, 2015). In sum, participants traits are:

- white ethnicity,
- heterosexual men
- middleclass socioeconomic status,
- aged between 18 and 29
- living in North of Belgium
- speaking Dutch
- frequent Instagram users
- belonging to the social network of interviewer

were selected for this study. The homogeneity among them, may highlight patterns in the data more clearly (Warren, 2002).

In total five focus group, each consisting of three participants and five individual follow-up interviews with one member of each focus group (N= 20) were conducted. All 15 participants are Flemish and stem from a region in the North of Belgium. The average age of participants is 23.2 years old. Nine respondents have a degree in higher education (i.e. university), and six of them have a qualification:

- 15 persons in total
- 9 with a University degree
- 6 with a high school degree
- 5 focus groups with each 3 members for group interviews
- 5 follow-up interviews with 1 member per focus group
- Digital Zoom interviews and live interviews

The following table offers an overview of demographics of each participant, however names are replaced by pseudonyms to guarantee anonymity.

Pseudonym	Age	Highest degree	Focus group
Joseph	26	University (MSc)	1
Ryan	23	University (MSc)	1
Mark	21	University (BSc)	1
Jamie	26	High School	2
Robert	26	University (MSc)	2
Calvin	23	University (MSc)	2
Ron	26	University (BSc)	3
Dan	25	University (BSc)	3
Eddie	28	University (BSc)	3
Hal	22	High School	4
Caspar	22	High School	4
Charles	22	High School	4
Sean	21	High School	5
Tom	18	High School	5
Toby	21	University (BSc)	5

Figure 1: Demographics respondents

The aim of my sampling strategy is to achieve the point of theoretical saturation. This refers to the point at which no new information or themes are found in the data (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). In this study I adhere to theoretical sampling and the data gathering process ends when there is considered to be enough information to analyse for the particular purpose of the study.

Due to the current worldwide health crisis of COVID-19, it was not possible to encounter all the respondents face-to-face. For this reason, interviews were conducted through the online video-conference platform *Zoom*. This made the engagement in the study as low- effort and low-risk as possible, while obtaining optimal access to respondents. Moreover, this interviewing strategy offers the option to record the interviews, which was useful for transcription and analysing purposes, as this limits memory-errors (Berger, 1998).

#### *Design of research tools*

Within the focus group, all the group members discuss the two sets of stimuli they are exposed to. The first stimulus is a corpus of posts representing 'hegemonic' forms of masculinities which are objectifying the male body. The men depicted on the images were among the top ten most followed male Instagram users with a predominantly male following-base. Most selected men are sports athletes and football players and have typical traits of the hegemonic man (Chen, 2020).

Images are selected from the Instagram-accounts of Cristiano Ronaldo (@cristiano) with 211.9 million followers (76% male) Neymar (@neymarjr) with 136.9 million (79% male), Dwayne Johnson (@therock) with 178 million followers (61% male), Paulo Dybala (@paulodybala) with 37.6 million followers (65% male) and Kylian Mbappé (@k.mbappe) with 40.1 million followers (71% male). The specific posts themselves are chosen, based on traits that are theorized as hegemonic: *muscularity* (e.g. Leit, Pope, & Gray, 2001), *dominance*, *anti-femininity*, *status and achievement*, *inexpressiveness and independence*, *adventurousness and aggressiveness* (Brannon, 1985, cited in Kilmartin, 2000, p.7).

The second stimulus consists out of more inclusive representations of masculinity. The images are derived from *body positivity accounts*. Specific posts are selected, based on characteristics of

Anderson's Inclusive Masculinity Theory (2009): *emotionality, femininity, ecto-/endomorphnic body types*.

Images were selected from Zach Miko (@zachmiko) with 87.4k followers, Stevie Blaine (@bopo.boy) with 18.8k followers, @theeverymanproject with 18.7k followers, Jules Von Hep (@julesvonhep) with 40.9k followers and Marquis Neal (@marquimode) with 13.1k followers.

## **Ethics and Reflexivity**

### *Ethics*

Before starting the data gathering process, I filled out the 'The LSE Research Ethics Checklist' to identify potential ethical issues, which was approved by my supervisor. Before partaking in the interviews, all respondents were required to sign a compulsory informed consent. This form informs respondents that their data is merely used for academic purposes (i.e. confidentiality) and is treated anonymously, that respondents are voluntarily participating and have the option to withdraw at any point. Respondents have to be 18 years old or over and the research possibly touches upon sensitive topics.

The posts in both corpuses were selected from the Instagram-accounts of the men that are presented. Although all these accounts are public profiles, consent was not explicitly granted from the owners of the images. Nevertheless, the SAGE Handbook of Social Media Research Methods (Sloan, & Quan-Haase, 2017) mentions that researchers are allowed to manually extract data from the public Instagram user-interface. This means that the found data (i.e. posts) can be captured with a simple screenshot. However, Instagram's terms of use do prohibit scraping content through automated means and including deleted, posts that were made private (Laestadius, 2016). In particular, this study uses images extracted from Instagram-accounts of adult, (micro-) celebrities. Informed by previous research that views blog data as publicly accessible (Caruso, & Roberts, 2018), these posts are considered as an open source of data. However, to ensure the protection of copyrights, all the account-names are referred to.

### *Reflexivity*

My socio-demographic background is similar to the one of the participants. I have the Belgian nationality, white ethnicity, speak Flemish and I am middleclass and heterosexual. Although, participants were selected based on theoretical criteria, it could be argued that my demographics influenced the data gathering process, as I have more men in my social network with similar characteristics to mine.

As I am a woman, all the participants are of the opposite sex. Hence, it could be argued that during the interviews, there might have been some gender dynamics at stake. Connell (1987) argues that the 'hegemonic masculinity' includes subordination of women. It could be that respondents who identify more with hegemonic forms of masculinity, pose certain 'alpha' behaviour to affirm their perceived, superior, hierarchical status over the female researcher. This could potentially bias their responses.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This chapter reports and discusses the main findings from the interviews conducted in this study. In the collection of the data I was guided by the theoretical framework introduced in the theoretical chapter. In this chapter I formulate answers to the research question of how diverse representations of masculinity on the social media platform Instagram influence body image in young, Flemish, men. To this end, the results are organised using the schematic figure presented in Appendix 2. It is based on the model of Vandebosch and Eggermont (2013) (Appendix 1) and the extended version of Moradi (2010). The first section of this chapter discusses how respondents perceive idealized, objectified representations of masculinity versus more inclusive ones in Instagram posts as well as how these are negotiated within a group of peers. The second section analyses how the social media platform Instagram enacts the role of socialising agency in teaching young men on how they are ought to look and behave. Moreover, it shows the extent to which respondents hold the desire to achieve the cultural appearance ideals (i.e. muscularity) as well as to conform to the masculine cultural, behavioural expectations (i.e. confidence). This chapter concludes with an integrated overview of how the internalisation of appearance norms through idealized media portrayals, may result in comparing one's own body as an object with other mediated representations as well

as with one's peer-environment. While drawing on the Objectification (Frederickson, & Roberts, 1997) and Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), it also illustrates how these processes may result in body dissatisfaction and body modification behaviour.

### **Exposure to sexually objectifying media: Negotiating perceptions of representations of masculinities on Instagram**

The theoretical framework of Vandenberg and Eggermont's (2013) (Appendix 1) predicts that the exposure to sexually objectifying prime-time television (i.e. focus on bodily features) is indirectly associated to self-objectification through the process of internalisation of appearance ideals. Self-objectification, in turn is predicted to be positively related to body surveillance. However, this study predicts that self-objectification results in upward social comparisons of the own body to the internalized appearance ideals, through the process of body surveillance. In turn, observing a discrepancy between one's own body and the ideals, can result in body dissatisfaction and eventually in body modification behaviour.

This first section of the results offers an overview of how the Flemish, young, male men in this study perceived exposure to (sexually) objectifying, hegemonic versus non-(sexually) objectifying, more inclusive representations of masculinity on the social media platform Instagram. The findings suggest that respondents which are frequent users of Instagram, *predominantly encountered images belonging to the 'hegemonic' corpus* (i.e. the objectified 'ideal' male body) and hardly were exposed to other non-conforming bodies as in the 'inclusive' corpus, on Instagram. This indicates, that social networking site Instagram does not necessarily contribute to including more diverse forms of masculinity. In general, during immediate exposure to idealized representations of masculinity in this study, respondents associated them with affirmative sentiments whereas *more inclusive representations were rejected* and perceived as unaspiring. This suggests that the respondents predominantly accepted the objectified, Western, male appearance ideal as hegemonic.

#### *Acceptance of Hegemonic Masculinity*

Results of the study show that respondents were inclined to attribute positive connotations to the men represented in the hegemonic corpus. Moreover, they were perceived to pose 'alpha behaviour' (i.e. dominant behaviour) and to promote a healthy lifestyle. Moreover, they were



associated with being confident, muscular and successful. When asked to define successful, participants referred to achievements such as wealth, power and 'having' a beautiful woman. For example, participant Ron said:

They made it, they have nice cars, a good-looking girlfriend...A successful man is someone who can provide a luxurious lifestyle, who is wealthy and has a beautiful wife (Ron, FG3)

Although, existing literature indicates that these Western appearance ideals for men, are hardly achievable without excessive exercising and thus present an unrealistic standard (Pope et al., 1999; Spitzer, Henderson, & Zivian, 1999), some respondents did find that the muscular, mesomorphic, tall bodies looked attainable and realistic or as one respondent formulates it: 'I think these images are normal...I would find it normal when Charles would post a picture like this for example' (Caspar, FG4). However, the majority of respondents did acknowledge that looking like these ideals is unrealistic for an 'average' man and could only be achieved through working hard. As participant Eddie described:

These are all athletes, they all have guidance to achieve a body like that... I don't think this is representative for the 'normal' man... I mean it is possible to look like this, but you will need to put a lot of time and effort into it... (FG3)

Overall, results indicate that participants had admiration for the men depicted in idealized Instagram-posts. For instance, Hal said: Everyone wants to be like these men and achieve what they have achieved (FG4). R: you want to know how you can live a perfect life and when you find someone who embodies that, then that is useful for getting things done. This finding, arguably, affirms the authoritative status of the tall, muscular and mesomorphic body as an 'hegemonic' and aspirational exemplar of masculinity (Connell, & Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculine ideals are always constructed in relation to subordinated masculinities (Connell, 1987). As most respondents reported that only a few, could live up to these socially rewarded ideals, it seems that they perceived the 'star athletes', represented in the hegemonic corpus, as the embodiment of the most honoured way of being a man (Connell, & Messerschmidt, 2005), who contribute to the betterment of society:

we always talk about how these images influence us negatively, but at the same time has the child obesity rate never been so high...maybe we need more of these images to promote a healthy lifestyle (Joseph, FG1)

Therefore, it could be argued, that participants did not necessarily perceive these idealized representations on the social media platform Instagram, as potentially harmful or felt the need to challenge them with more realistic representations of masculinity.

### *Rejection of Inclusive Masculinity*

In contrast to the affirmative and admiring sentiments, associated with the 'hegemonic' masculinity corpus by the respondents, representations of more inclusive forms of masculinity, which diverted from the Western appearance ideal, were generally rejected as unambitious and to promote an unhealthy lifestyle. As participant Charles stated:

I don't get why we want to move away from discipline and hard work...it's something to look up to...I don't think that it's a good thing to comfort these men with 'oh your body is okay, you don't have to go to the gym or whatever', maybe it's better that these men think: 'perhaps I should work on myself', instead of us looking at these losers who do nothing and then think that they are okay (FG 4)

It was interesting that participants from focus groups three and five found these images more realistic than the hegemonic ones, as they looked 'average'. For example, participants Ron and Tom reported:

Uhm...yeah these are men you would rather see in everyday life...just average bodies, most people in our friend group look like that (Ron, FG3)

I think 80% of adult men, look like this and maybe 20% like the first ones (Tom, FG5)

Respondents in these respective focus groups, predominantly identified themselves more with representations in the inclusive corpus. However, these more 'average' forms of masculinity were generally perceived as unaspiring by all respondents. For instance, participant Joseph said: 'It's not a goal to look like this at all...I feel a bit uncomfortable looking at them (FG1). In focus groups one, two and four, respondents associated the more inclusive Instagram-posts predominantly with femininity or/and being 'homosexual'. Anderson's Inclusive Masculinity Theory (2009) theorizes that men are likely to reject inclusive forms of masculinity that divert from the hegemonic norm, as 'gay' or 'feminine', when they are anxious of being perceived as homosexual or want to bolster their masculinity through the approximation of requisites of hegemonic masculinity. For example, participants Jamie and Caspar:

Yeah personally I feel like they are extremely feminine...they all are in lady-like poses and...yeah...they are very proud of the way they look (Jamie, FG2)

This is not the image of masculinity. The first pictures were purely the representation of masculinity and this totally is not. They can post as much body positivity as they want, it is never going to replace the definition of masculinity...they look very gay as well (Caspar, FG4).

This suggests, that especially within these focus groups interviewees wanted to approximate the admired hegemonic status through distancing themselves from the subordinated one (Boswell, & Spade 1996; Anderson, 2009)

A rather unexpected finding is that one respondent in focus group 3 perceived the men in the more inclusive images as confident. He linked posting pictures like this with not caring about what others think: I think they are courageous...a lot of men would not want to be in pictures like these...they look confident (Eddie, FG3). In general, confidence was associated with depictions of 'hegemonic' masculinity. Therefore, it was perceived as an aspirational masculine trait, which is socially awarded (Connell, 1987; Connell, & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Although the men depicted in the Instagram-posts of the Body Positive Movement (BPM) did not physically embody the muscular, tall, mesomorphic appearance ideal, this respondent did accept and admired some aspects of their counter-hegemonic representations to some extent. In doing so, he negotiates dominant meanings of hegemonic masculinity with the other respondents who were predominantly rejecting the inclusive masculinity representations (Siibak, 2010).

These findings support the argument made in the previous section on 'acceptance of hegemonic masculinity' that men are motivated to support and aspire unattainable appearance ideals that only a minority of men enact as 'hegemonic' exemplars of masculinity (Connell, 1987; Connell, & Messerschmidt, 2005). Moreover, it seemed that respondents in this study wanted to distance themselves from these more inclusive representations, as they arguably perceived them as subordinate to this aspirational hegemonic ideal (Connell, 1987). Inclusive masculinity includes expressions of emotionality, femininity and ecto-/endomorph body types (Anderson, 2009). Hence, they embody the antithesis of the requisites of 'hegemonic' masculinity. The majority of respondents in the focus groups during the group interviews identified themselves the most with the men depicted in the idealized

representations (focus group one, two, and four). However, at that point as a researcher, I could not exclude the possibility that participants did not want to openly express appreciation for the more inclusive forms of masculinity in the group, out of the fear of being associated with them (Anderson, 2008; 2009). Although, there is some indication that 'hegemonic masculinity' is not a fixed entity and that certain aspects of more inclusive, marginalised forms of masculinity can be accepted and incorporated in the concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, & Messerschmidt, 2005; Moradi, 2010).

In sum, respondents reported to mostly encounter objectifying, sexualizing hegemonic images on the social media platform Instagram. The model of Vandenbosch and Eggermont (2013) predicts that these dominant representations learn young men what society perceives as 'the ideal appearance'. Respondents therefore are likely to have internalised these cultural appearance standards as well as the desire to achieve them (Thompson and Stice 2001). The results suggest that this is the case, as representations of idealized bodies of star athletes, were perceived as 'hegemonic' by the respondents. They were mainly associated with affirmative, admiring sentiments, whereas more inclusive representations of masculinity were rejected as 'effeminate', 'gay' and perceived as unaspiring. Moreover, this arguably indicates that challenging hegemonic ideals with counter-discourses as the body positivity movement were not resonating among respondents.

### **Young men's pursuit for muscularity and confidence: the internalisation of appearance ideals and behavioural norms**

This section will elaborate on how respondents internalised appearance as well as behavioural norms through the exposure to objectified, idealized representations on the social media platform Instagram. 'internalisation of appearance ideals' is predicted to mediate the effect of exposure to these ideals on self-objectification. The latter will be discussed later on.

#### *Instagram as socialising agency*

It has been theorized that traditional media is an important factor in gender socialization (Barlett et al., 2008) and the internalisation of appearance ideals (Andsager, 2014; Vandenbosch, & Eggermont, 2013). The former refers to how exclusive social (behavioural) expectations for men and women are taught through agencies of socialisation (e.g. the media,

peers, family) (Connell, 1987). Internalisation of appearance ideals refers to the extent to which one personally wants to achieve the culturally defined ideals of attractiveness and attaches importance to them (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999).

The results of this study indicate that respondents were predominantly exposed to hegemonic forms of masculinity on the social media platform Instagram. Respondents mostly perceived an absence of more inclusive forms, as most of them reported to hardly see any representations of men who divert from the heterosexual, muscular hegemonic ideal. For instance, participant Hal said:

I mostly see muscular guys, who look good... I hardly ever see more diverse forms of masculinity (Hal, FG4, follow up)

The 'hegemonic' ideals on Instagram were predominantly perceived as aspirational examples of masculinity. The interface of the social media platform Instagram, arguably, explicitly portrays social awards for these exemplars through 'likes'. Therefore, it can be argued that respondents have to some extent learned and internalised the dominant societal expectations regarding behaviour and appearance for men and women through observing the affirmations certain representations of masculinity retrieved on Instagram (Barlett et al., 2008). Consequently, like traditional media, social media, arguably, is an agency of socialisation (Connell, 1987, p.49) that contributes to teaching consumers gender and appearance norms. The following paragraphs elaborate on how respondents mainly internalised confidence and having a moderately muscular body as respective appearance and behavioural norms.

#### *Internalisation of masculine behavioural norms: confident self-presentation*

Media portrayals are not merely an important factor in the internalisation of appearance ideals, but also in learning men and women behavioural expectations (Barlett et al., 2008). Previous literature indicates that dominant norms on how to behave in Western societies include being self-assured, mentally strong and to not express emotional concerns related to one's personal feelings (Donaldson, 1993; Connell, 1987; Connell, & Messerschmidt, 2005; Vandenbosch, & Eggermont, 2013). For this reason, respondents were asked whether they felt comfortable discussing their own body with friends. It was found that respondents did feel secure talking about their achievements with their peers like: 'We constantly talk about

nutrition and how much we can bench (Joseph, FG1)'. This indicates how there always exists competition for the hegemonic status among men in a group (Anderson 2005; Connell 1995).

On the contrary, most focus groups reported that it was a taboo to talk about one's insecurities with their male counterparts, as they reported that opening up about one's feelings might come across as mentally weak (Donaldson, 1993):

Everyone has their own insecurities, but I think it is still taboo to talk about it. Men see it as a weakness (Hal, FG4)

It is definitely taboo to talk about my insecurities. This is the first time I'm even talking about this topic with two other guys in a room (Jamie, FG2)

Participant Calvin reported that it is socially sanctioned within his group of peers to talk about one's insecurities: you often get an 'act normal' response, when you try to discuss stuff like that" (FG2). Moreover, the study of Ricciardelli et al., (2010) indicates that the 'playboy' dimension (i.e. being surrounded by beautiful women) is also part of the 'hegemonic' standards of masculinity. As mentioned earlier, women were indeed perceived as a status symbol for men by the respondents. Since participants generally aspired and desired the hegemonic status, it is assumable that wanted to be attractive for the opposite sex: "I often think about how women perceive me... you want to be attractive for the opposite sex..." (Calvin, FG2, follow up). When respondents were asked what they perceived, women find attractive in a man, confidence was reported as a crucial feature. As participants Hal and Joseph reported: Confidence is one of the most important things, I think it is important that you can stand up for a woman, can protect her (Hal, FG4):

I think when a man has a good career, status, is powerful and confident, his appearance is less important for women (Joseph, FG1)

These findings arguably affirm that respondents internalised to behave confident and to not express feelings of body dissatisfaction in order to comply to the hegemonic norms of masculinity.

In sum, the findings suggest that respondents did not want to show their insecurities within a group of peers, as they perceived it as the opposite of confident, mentally weak and not attractive for the opposite sex.

### *Internalisation of male appearance ideals: moderately muscular body*

To examine whether the respondents indeed had internalised hegemonic appearance norms, they were asked to describe what the ideal male body looked like. Participants defined it as athletic, with well-developed muscles, but slender. However, extreme muscularity (i.e. body building) was rejected as 'exaggerated', 'obsessive' and 'unnatural' (Grogan, 2010). Moreover, overweight or 'fat' bodies, were thought of as 'unhealthy' and 'suboptimal'. For example, participants Joseph and Dan reported:

I would refer to the statues of the old Greek. Not extremely muscular, just a bit all-round developed muscles and endurance (Joseph, FG1)

..., a friend of us, he weighs 135 kg, that's not ideal (Dan, FG3)

Respondents' associations with the ideal male body were similar to the perceptions and sentiments they reported with exposure to the hegemonic corpus, as described above.

This suggests that respondents have, internalised the hegemonic, muscular, tall, mesomorphic body as personal, aspirational appearance ideal (Thompson, & Stice 2001). The next section on self-objectification and social comparison, will elaborate on how respondents compared their own bodies with these internalised appearance ideals. This study predominantly focuses on how the internalisation of appearance ideals influences self-objectification, body surveillance, body dissatisfaction and body modification behaviour. However, internalisation of behavioural norms was also considered to examine how group dynamics may inhibit or reinforce respondents' answers.

### **Self-objectification and social comparison**

#### *Objectification Theory (Frederickson, & Roberts, 1997): Self-Objectification*

Another interesting finding in this study revolves around the Objectification theory (Frederickson, & Roberts, 1997). It has been found that respondents adopted a self-objectifying gaze towards their own body. They describe it as an object and are much focused on outward features, rather than capabilities or internal states. Furthermore, some reported that they often think about their body's outward appearance and how it is perceived by others, as the following quotes illustrate:

My body...12.5% fat, I weigh 69 kgs, I'm averagely built...by nature I have broad shoulders, so I'm between average and athletic (Ryan, FG1, follow up)

My body is tall and muscular, not too muscular, but tall and muscular yeah...I often think about the way that I look...when I pass by a car, I would stop to check my reflection and see whether my hair looks good (Toby, FG5, follow up)

Moreover, respondents generally attributed importance to staying in shape or maintaining a fit appearance. This, in turn, points back to the internalisation of the hegemonic, Western appearance ideal, as they hold the desire to comply to the muscular, athletic appearance norm (Thompson et al., 1999; Thompson, & Stice, 2001)

My appearance is important to me, I want to look good. It is important to me to be in shape and look presentable...I often think about the way I look, I check myself out when I walk past a mirror...I look at my hair, my face, my body. (Hal, FG4, follow up)

The above quotes are illustrations of how these internalised mediated appearance ideals are applied to one's body, which results in looking at one's own body from an outsider perspective (i.e. self-objectification), which, in turn, results in '**body surveillance**', as respondents were monitoring their appearance/bodies as objects to conform with societal beauty ideals (Moradi, 2010; Moradi & Huang, 2008; Morry & Statska, 2001). Hence, the findings of this study affirm the model predicted by Vandebosch and Eggermont (2013) that exposure to objectified media images results in self-objectification, through the process of internalisation of appearance ideals.

I will next turn to the Social Comparison Theory, to offer a possible explanation of how this process can result in body dissatisfaction and body modification behaviour, as is predicted in the model developed by Moradi (2010).

#### *Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954)*

##### Social comparison with internalised mediated ideals

As discussed in chapter 2, Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) predicts that humans have the internal drive to compare themselves to others in order to evaluate their own characteristics that have personal or social importance. As argued earlier, results suggest that respondents predominantly encounter hegemonic representations of masculinity and have



internalised these as aspirational appearance ideals they desire to achieve. Moreover, it was also reported that they monitor their own bodies (i.e. body surveillance) from an outsider perspective (i.e. self-objectification) to conform with these internalised 'superior' bodies. Hence, it is predicted that during this process, consumers of idealized Instagram-posts, will compare their own bodily features as parts of an object to the ones they have internalised from these posts (i.e. self-objectification) (Vandenbosch, & Eggermont, 2013). This process is referred to as upward social comparison as one compares his own body with one that is perceived as superior looking (Festinger, 1954).

Pre-existing literature has argued that observing a discrepancy between the way one's own body looks versus the (internalized) idealized body, may result in body dissatisfaction (Festinger, 1954; Karazsia and Crowther, 2010). It has been theorized that in order to decrease body dissatisfaction people may engage in body modification behaviour (Nikkelen et al., 2012; Vandenbosch, & Eggermont, 2013). Results suggest that respondents engaged in actions that modified their bodies, to comply to their internalised appearance ideals. For instance, interviewees indicated that they engaged in sports (e.g. lifting weights, running) and watched their diet to stay 'in shape'. In the following quote, Ron clearly expresses the link between him feeling insecure or dissatisfied with his body and engaging in sports to get rid of his 'belly' and, thus conform more to the muscular ideal:

I go running, play football and golf to stay fit...sometimes I think about my belly and then I think 'hmm maybe I should go running' (FG3, follow up)

Although, the results of this study indicate that mediated representations of hegemonic ideals may affect body dissatisfaction and body modification behaviour within the respondents through the processes of internalisation of mediated ideals and upward social comparison, only one respondent explicitly stated to see them as a motivation to enhance their own appearance (Joshi et al., 2004; Nikkelen et al., 2012):

I would like to look like these men on Instagram...I compare myself sometimes to the ideals that I encounter on Instagram. I sometimes tried to work towards looking like them (Ryan, FG1, follow-up)

On the contrary, most respondents generally self-reported to not being influenced by mediated idealized representations of masculinity. Instead they reported to compare themselves

predominantly to their direct, offline, peer-environment. It seemed that when they perceived their own body as inferior to others in their daily interactions, the effects on body dissatisfaction were stronger. As participant Joseph shared in this anecdote:

I must say that online images affect me less than my offline environment. Especially my work-environment has influenced me. A year ago, I was working for an insurance-company. Everyone there was overweight. When I switched to the company I'm working for at the moment, in venture capital and tech, everyone was fit. I felt like the ugly, fat one. This was a trigger for me to start exercising so that I would fit in more (FG1)

Some of the participants experienced peer-pressure to comply to the hegemonic ideals in more explicit ways, as peers commented on their appearance. As Sean commented:

Because I am the tallest, the heaviest, but also the strongest, of my friend group, they sometimes make comments like: 'when are you going to lose some weight?' or 'shouldn't you eat healthier?' (FG5)

Calvin reported that that his peers were body shaming because of his weight gain:

Last year, I had gained some weight during the holidays. After, I went on a skiing trip with friend. They all made comments about it...these body shaming moments triggered me (FG2)

Whether others, admitted engaging themselves in applying appearance norms to their friends' physique:

If Ron suddenly would weigh 100 kgs, I would tell him to do something about it (Dan, FG3)

It could happen that we would tell one of our friends: 'hey fat ass, you need to start going to the gym' (Charles, FG4)

It thus seems that the participants engaged in policing and promoting gender behaviours of each other.

Moreover, some respondents also engaged in downward social comparisons with men they perceived as 'insecure'. They perceived them as more vulnerable to being affected by these mediated hegemonic ideals. For instance, Eddie stated:

I think these representations of the perfect body have an influence on some men, but not on me...I think it makes some men insecure (FG3)

A possible explanation for this finding may be related to the internalisation of the hegemonic masculine behavioural norm of not expressing concerns related to one's personal struggles such as body dissatisfaction as explained earlier in the section on 'internalisation of masculine behavioural norms: confident self-presentation' (Connell, 1987; Connell, & Messerschmidt, 2005; Donaldson, 1993).

Surprisingly, in the follow up interviews, respondents did report insecurities on their bodily features they were not satisfied with. Arguably, they were less inhibited by group dynamics, as Ryan reported:

I think it's harder to talk about this topic in a group of peers. I found it more difficult to open up about certain things (FG1, follow up)

Most reported insecurities were related to the hegemonic, muscular, tall, mesomorphic appearance ideal, as respondents reported that they felt too fat, too skinny or too short. For instance, Hal reported:

Sometimes when I see someone who is tall, I think 'that's a better height than mine (FG4, follow up)

In contrast to what they self-reported, it could be argued that these insecurities arose, because they were comparing their bodies upward with internalized, mediated, hegemonic appearance ideals.

In essence, the findings affirm that dominant representations on Instagram reproduce the objectified, unrealistic ideal of appearance, enacted by men with high societal status. It is not merely the high visibility of the muscular, mesomorphic, tall body in Instagram posts, but also their confident attitude and perceived success that were perceived as aspirational (i.e. hegemonic) by young, Flemish men. Although, Instagram- users' individual perceptions of inclusive masculinity seemed to be dependent on the bodies, they mostly identified with, all of them did not find them desirable.

Interestingly, respondents who identified more with the hegemonic representations, distanced themselves explicitly from more inclusive forms of masculinity, by labelling them 'gay' and 'feminine', in order to secure their own perceived superior status (Anderson, 2009). Moreover, results suggest that idealized bodies on Instagram influenced young, Flemish, men's body

dissatisfaction and body modification behaviour. However, men self-reported that not the idealized Instagram- posts, but their immediate peer environment was the greatest influence on their perception of themselves. Overall, it seems that the Instagram does not bolster the incorporations of marginalised masculinities into the gender hierarchy (Anderson, 2012; McNair, 2013), but rather reinforces the exposure to objectified hegemonic masculine representations (Duffy, & Hund, 2015; Sloan, & Quan-Haase,2017), as well as the aversive outcomes on young, Flemish, men's body image.

### **Limitations and recommendations for future research**

A number of limitations should be considered for the findings in this study. First, the first corpus that was utilised as stimulus in this study, consisted of famous sports men, who frequently appear in Western popular culture. However, the second corpus, consisted out of men who were not known by the general public. Therefore, it could be argued that respondents were biased in their perceptions of these representations. Consequently, it is advised that future research utilizes both stimuli with unknown men, in order to minimize priming-effects and maintain focus on bodily differences between the two corpuses.

Second, group dynamics may have caused the convergence of meanings in the focus groups, as respondents have a priori relationships with each other. This may have created certain hierarchies or norms on what could (not) be said (Beitin, 2012). Therefore, ideally individual follow-ups interviews would have been conducted with each participant to examine whether their answers differed in both contexts. Unfortunately, only five respondents in this study wanted to participate in individual follow-up interviews. A potential reason could be that they felt more inhibition to engage in an individual interview on their personal feelings with a female interviewer. In future research, it would be desirable to conduct follow-up interviews with each participant to identify group dynamics in more detail.

A third limitation in my research is that it was conducted with heterosexual, white, men, who are considered to already lean more towards hegemonic ideals than non- heterosexual, non-white, non-western men (Kilmartin, 2000). These other, marginalised groups, should also be considered in research on media representations and body image. It could be argued that they

may identify more, with inclusive forms of masculinity, as they feel even more excluded from the hegemonic norm.

## CONCLUSION

This dissertation contributes to an ongoing academic debate about the role of the media on body image. The research in this dissertation takes a novel turn by focussing solely on men rather than women and by exploring the role of social media. Key research questions are *whether Instagram challenges the ideal of the Hegemonic Man (Connell, 1987) and results in a more Inclusive Masculine ideal (Anderson, 2009)? And more specific: How do idealized and objectified representations of masculinity in Instagram-posts, influence young, white, Flemish men's body dissatisfaction and body modification behaviour?*

The qualitative interviewing method takes advantage of the fact that by creating an open stimulating context, one can understand the underlying cognitive processes in men's perceptions of objectifying images and their respective influences on body image. The predictive model (Appendix 2) seems applicable in predicting these underlying processes. In turn, an interpretation of the results of this study has indicated empirical support for the hypothesised model in this study (Vandenbosch, & Eggermont, 2013) (Appendix 1) and by extension offers a qualitative understanding for Moradi's model (2010) of self-objectification. The key findings can be summarized as follows.

First, participants argue that they are more exposed to the hegemonic male type on Instagram with idealized bodies and muscular looks than more inclusive types of masculinity with feminine traits. The objectified and idealized bodies on Instagram are perceived as hegemonic and aspirational exemplars of masculinity. Second, similar to the results coming out of the traditional media literature, I find that exposure to these hegemonic ideals in Instagram posts, also increases body dissatisfaction and body modification behaviour. Men were found to be susceptible to wanting to alter their physical appearance, when they engage with idealised images of the male body on Instagram. Third, young men adopt a self-objectifying gaze in evaluating their bodies, when comparing them to these ideals of appearance on Instagram. Fourth, more inclusive forms of masculinity are rejected as 'gay' or 'feminine' and are

perceived as inferior. Fifth, peer pressure is important and perceived to affect body dissatisfaction more than Instagram. Peer pressure also plays another role: emotional insecurities are typically not shared in the group but do exist as evidenced by the individual in-depth interviews. These findings seem to confirm the model by Moradi (2010) in its predictions of the underlying processes. As such, my results offer a qualitative understanding for Moradi's model (2010) of self-objectification.

The results from my research are important since they put into perspective the results recently reported by Anderson and Morris (2015) who find that cultural acceptance of homosexuality had widened. This greater cultural acceptance was ascribed to the social media which enhance openness and where more diverse types of masculinity enter the public sphere. However, my results seem to indicate that a social media platform like Instagram has *not* altered the dominance of the Hegemonic masculine type as described by Connell (1987). Similar to mass media outlets, idealized representations on Instagram predominantly have a negative influence on young, Flemish, men's body image. The reinforced exposure to the objectified muscular and confident looking men on Instagram increases body dissatisfaction.

Furthermore, the findings support the applicability of the Objectification Theory (Frederickson, & Roberts 1997) and Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) in research on body image among men. Men in this study had adopted a self-objectifying gaze towards themselves, predominantly focused on their body's outward features and attaching importance to staying in shape. Although, insecurities which were reported in the individual interviews were about discrepancies between their own bodily features and hegemonic internalised ideals, Flemish men did not admit to comparing themselves to these mediated, idealised posts, during conversations with their male counterparts. It does seem that opening up about being dissatisfied with one's body is still stigmatized among young Flemish men.

Representations of masculinity on Instagram are embedded in a crucial site of hegemonic power structures. Findings suggest that within peer-groups, perceptions converge towards accepting, admiring and wanting to identify with hegemonic ideals of appearance for men, which are mostly embodied by celebrities with large amounts of followers. On the contrary, men pose rejecting attitudes towards more open, inclusive and realistic forms of masculinity that are currently trying to challenge these unattainable ideals through the *body positivity*

*movement*. However, this study has not found that inclusive representations of masculinity were beneficial for reducing the influence of idealised bodies in Instagram posts on body dissatisfaction and body modification behaviours. As 'softer' forms of masculinity are not perceived as aspirational it could be argued that men do not want to be in this 'inferior' position in the hierarchy of masculinities. Therefore, it is concluded that the body positivity movement is not resonating among white, heterosexual, Flemish, young, men.

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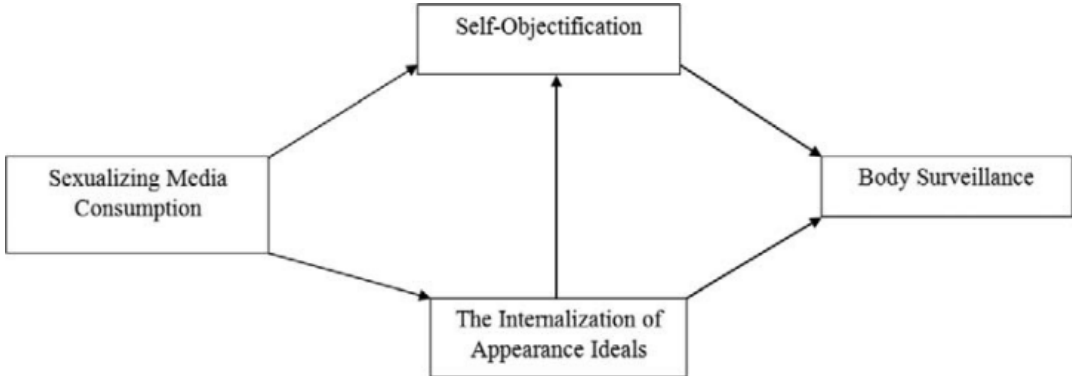
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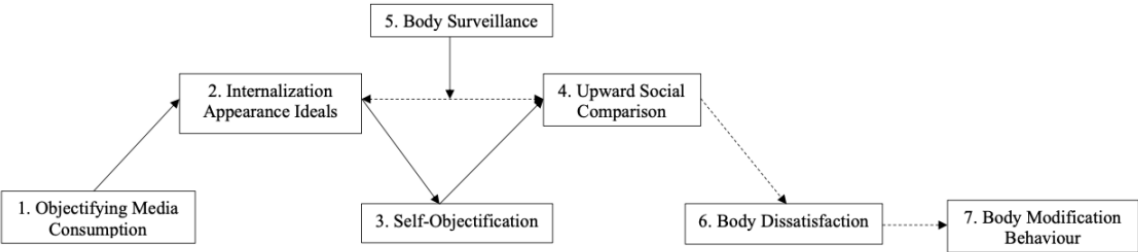
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Appendices

Appendix 1: Model Vandenberg & Eggermont (2013)



Appendix 2: Predictive model created for this study



## Appendix 3: Focus group topic guide

### *Opening*

Good afternoon, thank you for agreeing to take part in this group discussion. My name is (*name researcher*) and I am conducting this focus group on behalf of the London School of Economics and Political Science. The focus group is part of a study that looks at the representation of ‘masculinity’ on social media platforms and how this influences body image, body modification behaviour in young Western men.

I hope everyone is eager to participate, your contributions are very important for the successful completion of this study.

There are no right or wrong answers to the questions in this interview and you are never obliged to answer.

Throughout this research project, confidentiality and anonymity is guaranteed and you have the right to withdraw at any point.

(Introduction of all the individuals around the table)

Let’s start with a general question.

### ***Self-Introduction***

1. How is everyone doing today?
2. Is everyone a user of Instagram?  
- What do you like about using Instagram?

### ***General Attitudes/Ideas about masculinity***

1. What comes to mind, which words, expressions, ideas when you hear ‘masculinity’ ? (Find out what active perceptions of masculinity are)
2. Can you describe the ideal male body?
3. Do you notice a certain type of masculinity on Instagram that is put forward as an ideal? (listen: social/gender roles?)
4. What do you think partners desire/ find attractive in a man? (gender roles)

### ***Stimulus 1: corpus hegemonic masculinity***

Characteristics posts

1. What do you see on these posts?

(Listen: do they describe hegemonic masculinity: strong, independent, professional, powerful etc., do they accept it or reject it)

2. Do you encounter these types of posts frequently on Instagram?

(Listen: presence of hegemonic masculinity in contemporary online youth culture)

3. Do you follow any of these people on Instagram?

- If so, why?

- What kind of accounts would you say, you follow mostly on Instagram?

Hegemonic Representations of masculinity

4. Can you describe the ideal male body?

5. Do you think these posts represent realistic conceptions of masculinity?

- Do you think these men are successful? Why?

6. Do you think that these representations of masculinity on Instagram have shaped people's expectations of men in daily life?

- In what way?

7. Do you think that the representations of masculinity on Instagram have shaped men's own expectations of themselves?

- In what way?

8. Is there any post in particular that you find interesting, repulsing, attractive?

Interaction respondents with posts

9. Do you have posts like this on your own Instagram profile? (Listen: do they percept themselves as embodying hegemonic masculinity)

- If so, how are others reacting to this?

- Do any of your friends have Instagram posts like this?

- What would you react if they posted something like this?

(Listen: acceptance/ reinforcing or rejecting/ social sanctioning)

- Among your friends/ networks, do you feel a certain pressure to behave in a certain way? (Listen: are there certain 'manly' behaviours that are accepted/rejected by peers? )

10. How do you feel when you see these posts (in general + about yourself)? (Listen: body image, social comparison theory)

- Do you ever look at Instagram posts and wish you could look like these men?

o Bodily / professional (success) qualities

o Can you think of moments where you were inspired by posts like this to change something about yourself? (Working out, buying clothes, etc.) (Listen: body modification behaviour)

- Have you ever gone on a diet?

- Why?

- Cut out alcohol? Cut out meals? Cut out take-away?

-Have you ever considered cosmetic surgery? (rhinoplasty, breast augmentation, liposuction on the waist)

- Have you ever engaged in sport specifically to improve body image?

- What kind of exercise? (weight training, bodybuilding?)

- Do you compare yourself to these men? (listen: body image; social comparison theory)

o Do your feelings about your body affect your self-esteem?

- Are you happy with your own body?

o How do you feel about talking about your feelings/insecurities to your friends/peers? (Listen: taboo among men to talk about feelings such as body image)

### ***Stimulus 2: corpus Inclusive masculinities***

Characteristics posts:



1. What do you see on these posts?

(Listen: do they describe inclusive masculinities)

2. In what way do you think these posts differ from the post I showed you earlier?

3. Do you encounter these posts more or less frequently on Instagram than the posts I showed you earlier?

Inclusive Representations of Masculinity

4. Do you think these posts represent realistic forms of masculinity?

- Would you identify more with these representations or with the previous ones? (Listen: do they compare them to these more inclusive forms of masculinity, body image, self-objectification: do they want to meet the hegemonic masculinity ideal?)

- Do you think these men are happy/happier than the ones in the previous posts?

o Why?

Interaction of respondents with posts

5. How do you feel when you see these posts (in general/about yourself)?

- Do you aspire these men?

o Why?

- Body? Professionalism?

- Do you want to be like them?

o Why?

- Can you think of people in your networks who are like the

*Closing*

- Do you think that these posts (second corpus) can help in expanding the dominant meanings of what it means to be 'man' as shown in the first corpus?

How do you feel about these more alternative definitions of

'masculinity' ?

*Debriefing*

That was all, is there anything you would like to add, clarify? Anything that you think is important but you did not get the chance to say?

Thank you for your time and your contributions during this interview.

If you have any questions, you can always contact me by email

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