

# Muscle-Mania: The Male Body Ideal in Professional Wrestling

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Recent research suggests that men and boys are increasingly experiencing body dissatisfaction and may be at risk for developing other health problems resulting from exposure to idealized media images of the male body. On television, nowhere are men's bodies more prominently on display than in professional wrestling. Qualitative content analyses of 118 episodes of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) programming, focusing on images and commentaries of male wrestling performers' bodies, revealed that televised professional wrestling presents a "hyper-male" body ideal that constructs men's bodies as big, strong, and muscular. The potential impact of exposure to such idealized body images on wrestling's primarily male viewing audience, including possible health consequences, are explored and discussed. Future research examining television portrayals of men's bodies, and the effects that such idealized male body media images may have on men and boys, is recommended.

*Keywords:* male body ideal, media body images, professional wrestling, men's health

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Research pertaining to media depictions of idealized bodies and body image concerns has tended to focus primarily on women. More recently, however, attention has been devoted to men's bodies, with research focusing on men's body concerns and satisfaction, as well as the role of the media in influencing men's attitudes toward their bodies. These studies have mostly paralleled those conducted regarding women, focusing on idealized images in magazines and advertisements, with few investigating television as a popular and influential medium that conveys and essentially reinforces the male body ideal.

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On television, nowhere is the male body more prominently on display than in the widely popular sports-entertainment spectacle of professional wrestling. Not only are men's bodies on display, often blatantly exposed, but also these male bodies are displayed for mostly male viewers, many of whom are adolescents and young adults. Given the focus on men and the nature of the viewing audience found in televised professional wrestling, it is important to examine the messages disseminated and promoted by wrestling programs about the male body and to assess the potential implications of such media messages.

### Literature Review

#### *The Culturally Ideal Male Body*

Current sociocultural standards of male beauty tend to emphasize leanness and muscularity (Botta, 2003; Labre, 2002; Leon, Fulkerson, Perry, Keel, & Klump, 1999; Leone, Sedory, & Gray, 2005; Morris & Katzman, 2003; Pope, Phillips, & Olivardia, 2000; Schooler & Ward, 2006; Stout & Frame, 2002; Yang, Gray, & Pope, 2005). Leon et al. (1999) highlighted the "masculine ideal of lean muscularity" in contemporary North American society that prescribes men to be V-shaped and muscular, with relatively low body fat (p. 194). While cultural standards for women's bodies endorse the "thin ideal," such standards for men's bodies encourage the "muscular ideal" (Leone et al.; Morris & Katzman).

Ricciardelli and McCabe (2001) further contended that the muscular ideal is linked to cultural views of masculinity that prescribe men to be strong and powerful. As Morris and Katzman (2003) pointed out, men's bodies are not only becoming more muscular but also are getting stronger, suggesting that strength is a key factor separating men's bodies from women's bodies. Stout and Frame (2004) have also maintained that the ideal male body is not only lean and muscular but also strong.

Male bodies are expected to be strong, muscular, and lean, but it would appear that they are also expected to be big. McCreary and Sassine (2000) argued that the male standard of bodily attractiveness is big and muscular, while Kinnunen (1999) has contended that large muscular bodies are quintessentially male. In developing a measure of men's attitudes toward their body, Tylka, Bergeron, and Schwartz (2005) found that muscularity, leanness (according to low body fat), and size (in terms of height) are important factors having emerged from the scale items evaluated by three independent samples of college men. Though there is some evidence that large size is considered an important aspect of the ideal male body, this dimension has not been sufficiently explored apart from its relationship to muscularity. Also, the notion of size as a body characteristic has further been complicated by murky definitions and obscure associations, and size may refer variously to weight, height, general bone structure, level of body fat, or some combination of these. What it means to be "big" or "large" has not been thoroughly examined in the context of men's bodies.

*In Pursuit of the Muscular Ideal*

Although body image concerns among women and girls have been well-documented and given extensive attention, it has been recently noted that men and boys are increasingly expressing concerns about body image (Bohne, Keuthen, Wilhem, Deckersback, & Jenike, 2002; Cohane & Pope, 2001; Grogan & Richards, 2002; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004; Olivardia, 2001; Pope et al., 2000). This may be due, in part, to increased sociocultural pressures regarding how men should look (Petrie & Rogers, 2001; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2004; Schooler & Ward, 2006) as well as increased pressures to live up to the cultural ideal (Botta, 2003; Grogan & Richards).

To be sure, there is some evidence that men and boys are increasingly striving to attain the male muscular ideal. For example, in their book *The Adonis Complex*, Pope, Phillips, and Olivardia (2000) argued that men and boys are increasingly striving to achieve bodies resembling the Greek half-god Adonis—lean, muscular, and strong. Similarly, Cafri and colleagues (2005) discussed the contemporary pursuit of the muscular ideal among males in which developing a lean, muscular figure has become a central focus. Likewise, Harvey and Robinson (2003) contended that there appears to be a drive for men to achieve the ideal male body image, which has led to increased numbers of men and boys expressing the desire to be more muscular (Cohane & Pope, 2001; Grieve, Newton, LaVaun, Miller, & Kerr, 2005; Labre, 2002, 2005; Neumark-Sztainer, Story, Falkner, Beuhring, & Resnik, 1999; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2004; Toro, Gila, Castro, Pombo, & Guete, 2005), and engaging in behaviors to increase weight and muscle mass (Labre, 2005; McCabe, Ricciardelli, & Finemore, 2002; McCreary & Sassine, 2000; Smolak, Murnen, & Thompson, 2005).

Like the drive to be thin imposed upon women, the drive for muscularity among men may have serious health consequences (Botta, 2003; Cafri, Thompson, Ricciardelli, McCabe, Smolak, & Yesalsi, 2005; Cohane & Pope, 2001), possibly leading to body image dissatisfaction (Jones & Crawford, 2005) and body image disorders such as muscle dysmorphia (Harvey & Robinson, 2003; Leit, Gray, & Pope, 2002; Leone et al., 2005; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2004), dysfunctional eating patterns or eating disorders (Raudenbush & Meyer, 2003), harmful weight-control and/or muscle development strategies (Labre, 2002; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2004; Smolak, Levine, & Thompson, 2001), abuse of anabolic steroids (Irving, Wall, Neumark-Sztainer, & Story, 2002; Harvey & Robinson, 2003; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 1999; Pope et al., 2000), and the over-use of nutritional or weight-gaining supplements (Raudenbush & Meyer, 2003; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2004). Although the pursuit of muscularity does not necessarily lead to such health-threatening behaviors, any of these risky health behaviors may develop as a result of pursuing a body type that may be virtually impossible to obtain. In fact, Cohane and Pope concluded that the pursuit of muscularity might be as dangerous for boys and men as the pursuit of thinness is for women and girls.

*The Role of the Media in Constructing the Male Body Ideal*

Most would agree that the media is one of the most pervasive sociocultural forces in constructing body ideals for both women and men. While the media emphasis for women is on thinness (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2004; Labre, 2002; Leit, Pope, & Gray, 2001; Morris & Katzman, 2003; Morrison, Kalin, & Morrison, 2004), media images of the male body tend to emphasize muscularity (Dotson, 1999; Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2004; Harvey & Robinson, 2003; Hatoum & Belle, 2004; Labre, 2005; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004; Morrison et al., 2004; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2004). Schooler and Ward (2006) noted the surge in media portrayals of the muscular male ideal contending that media images of men's bodies have become "increasingly muscular and V-shaped, emphasizing broad shoulders, developed arm and chest muscles, and slim waists" (p. 26). More specifically, the muscular male body ideal has been noted in both men's magazines (Alexander, 2003; Frederick, Fessler, & Haselton, 2005; Law & Labre, 2002) and women's magazines (Leit et al., 2001), television commercials (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2004; Lin, 1998), and print advertisements (Gill, Henwood, & McLean, 2000) as well as popular action figure toys (Baghurst, Hollander, Nardella, & Haff, 2006; Pope, Olivardia, Gruber, & Borowiecki, 1999). Dotson (1999) called attention to the muscular ideal portrayed in various media including art and photography, advertising, television, film, and pornography. Labre (2002) further maintained that the muscular male ideal is evident in entertainment media, such as television and movies, which especially targets adolescent males. Perhaps instructively, Labre pointed out that the WWE franchise of professional wrestling, popular among adolescent males, is populated by extremely muscular performers.

While it is acknowledged that the mass media appears to construct, perpetuate, and reinforce the muscular ideal, most media analyses of men's bodies focus on magazine images. Few investigations of television portrayals of male bodies have been carried out beyond commercial analyses (e.g., Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2004; Lin, 1998). Of notable exception, a study conducted by Fouts and Vaughan (2002) examined men's and women's body weight in television situation comedies. Fouts and Vaughan subsequently found that heavy-set male characters were under-represented in TV sit-coms suggesting a cultural preference for the lean ideal. However, other characteristics of the male body ideal (e.g., muscularity, strength) were not examined in the study. Except for these notably few studies, it would appear that extensive content analyses of television programs concerning men's bodies are, as Labre (2002) noted, woefully lacking. Moreover, media analyses of men's bodies has generally focused on muscularity, while body size and strength have typically been neglected even though such characteristics appear to be essential features of the male body ideal.

A growing body of literature suggests that exposure to idealized media images of the male body can affect, not only the way men and boys view their bodies (Botta, 2003; Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2004; Hatoum & Bell, 2004; Leit et al., 2002), but also overall body satisfaction (Agliata & Tantleff-Dunn, 2004; Barlett, Harris, Smith, & Bonds-Raacke, 2005; Duggan & McCreary, 2004; Lorenzen, Grieve, & Thomas, 2004;

Morry & Staska, 2001; Strong, 2005) as well as contribute to a depressed mood (Agliata & Tantleff-Dunn, 2004) and eating disturbances (Botta, 2003; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Morry & Staska, 2001). Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that men and boys may internalize media images of the ideal male body in much the same way as women and girls internalize the "thin ideal" promoted in various media. For example, analyzing the relationships among media exposure, self-objectification, and body shape dissatisfaction in male and female university students, Morry and Staska (2001) found that women who read beauty magazines that promoted the thin ideal and men who read fitness magazines that promoted the muscular ideal tended to internalize these societal body ideals. Similarly, as revealed through interviews with both readers and non-readers of fitness magazines, Labre (2005) found that college men might be internalizing the lean and muscular male body ideal featured in men's fitness magazines and other media.

Internalization of media body ideals may contribute to the pursuit of muscularity among boys and men (Botta, 2003; McCray, 2005; Morrison, Morrison, & Hopkins, 2003). Investigating men's drive for muscularity, Morrison et al. (2003) found that men's exposure to idealized media images of the male body, and their self-reported comparison to universalistic targets, correlated positively with the intensity of their drive for muscularity. Similarly, McCray (2005) found, in examining the effects of exposure to images of the male muscular ideal on body image and muscularity concerns in men that men responded to images of competitive bodybuilders with increased drive for muscularity. Botta (2003) also concluded that adolescent boys exposed to health/fitness magazines were more likely to express wanting to be more muscular and to engage in activities (e.g., taking supplements or pills) that showed their commitment to becoming more muscular.

Though there appears to be strong evidence for the influence of media exposure to the idealized body images of men and boys, some studies do not support this relationship, or they suggest that the relationship is weak at best. Humphreys and Paxton (2004) found, for example, that the adolescent boys in their study were not negatively affected by exposure to idealized male body images, though they pointed out that reaction to exposure was dependent on individual attributes. Likewise, in testing the effects of exposure to magazines and television programs containing idealistic body imagery on male and female adolescents' body-image evaluation and body-image investment, Morrison et al. (2004) found that support for this relationship was stronger for the adolescent girls than for the adolescent boys. Similarly, Hargreaves and Tiggemann (2004) concluded that the impact of exposure to images of idealized beauty in television commercials was much stronger for the adolescent girls in their study than the adolescent boys, though they conceded that some boys may also have been affected. Given these results, it is important to keep in mind possible gender differences when considering the potential impact of idealized male body media images.

*Men's Bodies on Display in the WWE*

While there have been various commentaries concerning the bodies of women in professional wrestling (for example, see Parents' Television Council, 2001; Plagens, 1999; and Reuter, 2000 for critiques of women as "big-breasted" and "scantily-clad"), men's bodies have surprisingly received little attention despite the fact that professional wrestling is an entertainment venue in which the male body seems to take center stage. As a male-dominated sports-entertainment enterprise, professional wrestling, in the form of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), primarily showcases male performers, and men's bodies are routinely on display. As well, it could be argued that professional wrestling provides a cultural space for the performance of gender (Butler, 1990) in which both masculinity and femininity are played out through the images and actions of the various wrestling performers.

WWE programming, which includes cable and network television shows as well as monthly pay-per-view events, is widely popular, in North America as well as internationally, with a live and televised audience consisting primarily of young males (Ashley, Dollar, Wigley, Gillentine, & Daughtrey, 2000; Bernthal & Medway, 2005; Lemish, 1998; Maguire, 2005). It can be reasonably argued, then, that the WWE is part of a cultural environment that conveys images of men's bodies and, thus, may contribute to media constructions of the male body ideal potentially influencing the conceptions of those exposed to these idealized images.

Given that there have been few recent or extensive investigations of television program content regarding men's bodies, the current study aimed to expand the existing research literature by examining the popular WWE television programming in which the male body is prominently on display for a predominately-male viewing audience. In addition, the examination of men's bodies in professional wrestling programs sought to go beyond a focus on muscularity by including attention to other body characteristics thought to be important such as size and strength.

Two broad research questions essentially informed the study: (1) how is the male body constructed in professional wrestling, and (2) what messages do WWE programs send to viewers about the male body? We believe answers to these questions will provide a better understanding of the role of the media in constructing male body image ideals as well as provide an avenue for discussing the potential implications of such popular culture media exposure to idealized images with respect to men's body image and health.

### Method

Data for the current study were collected as part of a larger, more encompassing, study that examined the way in which masculinity is constructed in professional wrestling (see Soulliere, 2005). Qualitative content analyses of 118 episodes of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) programming (52 episodes of *RAW*, 54 episodes of *Smackdown*, and 12 monthly pay-per-view events), recorded between August 16, 2001

and August 22, 2002, were conducted. Detailed transcripts were developed from the videotaped episodes in order to capture important verbal content, while important visual content was accounted for through detailed notes.

Specifically, the transcripts and notes first were analyzed and all data pertaining to male performers' bodies (with particular attention to size, muscularity, and strength) were selected for further thematic coding. This initial coding process of the data corresponds to Strauss's (1987) qualitative analysis technique of open coding. The data pertaining to men's bodies were then analyzed for patterns, or themes, corresponding to Strauss's techniques of axial and selective coding. Thus, themes were developed as a process of emergent rather than a priori coding (Stemler, 2001) with constant data comparisons (Strauss) serving as a validity and reliability check in the thematic coding process. In addition, visual assessments were made of the male performers' bodies in terms of size, degree of muscularity, and displays of strength. To aid this particular assessment, both height and weight (which are announced at the beginning of every match) were recorded for each male performer.

The themes and patterns that emerged with respect to the bodies of male performers provide an understanding of the way in which the male body is constructed in professional wrestling offering insight into the messages imparted by WWE programs about men's bodies and the male body ideal.

## Results

Analyses revealed that, for the most part, the WWE programs presented the cultural ideal of the male body as big, muscular, and strong. The male body was effectively constructed through visual displays as well as through the announcers' commentaries. To be sure, the messages about men's bodies in professional wrestling emphasized large size, lean muscularity, and strength, which were presented as inter-connected features of the ideal male body. Additionally, such body characteristics were frequently construed as advantageous to, and desirable in, men and were subsequently constructed as key defining features of what a "real" man should look like and aspire to be.

### *The Advantages of Large Size*

Large body size, particularly in terms of height and weight, was constructed as the ideal for men in the WWE programs analyzed. Most of the male wrestling performers were over six-feet tall and weighed in the average range of 240 to 280 pounds. In addition, the announcers frequently referred to male performers' body size during the play-by-play commentary, especially those of large size. For example:

Albert's about six-eight, 350 some odd pounds.... (*Smackdown*, 09-13-01)  
 ...Test, who is six-feet-seven, about 280 pounds.... (*RAW*, 09-17-01)  
 Kevin Nash, the seven-footer, the 300 pounder.... (*RAW*, 03-04-02)

In fact, one male wrestling performer's height and weight were continuously referred to by the commentators. The Big Show, who was described as being seven-foot-two and weighing 500 pounds, was variously called a "monster" (*Smackdown*, 09-20-01), "tree-like" (*Smackdown*, 09-13-01), "behemoth" (*Smackdown*, 01-17-02), "King Kong" (*Smackdown*, 09-04-01), and was given the distinct title of being the "biggest man in the history of sports entertainment" (*Unforgiven*).

Large body size was also presented as advantageous and desirable for men. The announcers often pointed out the advantages of a larger size and the disadvantages of a smaller size concerning male wrestlers' performance. For example, announcer Jim Ross (JR) remarked that Kane's size helps him make it to the ropes after being locked into a submission move stating, "He's seven-feet tall, he's got a long reach" (*Wrestlemania*). Likewise, JR points out Edge's size advantage with, "Edge, at six-three, able to get to the corner" (*Summerslam*).

Large size, especially body weight, also contributed to physical dominance and strength by male performers. For example, Michael Cole comments with respect to Albert (*Smackdown*, 08-16-01), "The 350-pound Albert driving his shoulder into the Light Heavyweight Champion, Tajiri...Can you imagine the impact? What it must feel like with 350 pounds slamming into your body?" Here, Cole reinforces that Albert is able to physically dominate his opponent, Tajiri, because of his body size. During the match, viewers are constantly reminded that Albert is 350 pounds. The announcers also pointed out the strength factor of large men as well as highlighted size of opponents to emphasize their strength. For example, JR emphasizes the strength of Kane (*RAW*, 09-17-01) when he says, "Bubba Ray, about 325 himself, and look at the power of Kane, walking right out of the corner with a man well over 300 pounds and power-bombing him!"

Consequently, the announcers clearly emphasized the disadvantages of small body size. For instance, JR remarks that Spike Dudley, at 150 pounds, "does not have the kind of body weight to shock-absorb that kind of impact" (*Summerslam*) suggesting that Spike's small size is definitely a disadvantage. Similarly, JR points out how Scotty 2 Hotty's small size could be a disadvantage: "Scotty, being the smallest man physically in this match, certainly getting isolated" (*Vengeance*). Here, JR suggests that being small in body size leads to being dominated by larger opponents.

The above findings suggest that men are supposed to be big and tall, especially those who perform in the WWE. By routinely highlighting the weight and height of the male wrestlers, the announcers suggested that 'being big' was akin to "being male." Furthermore, by pointing out the advantages of large size and the disadvantages of small size with respect to male wrestlers' performances, the announcers further reinforced that large body size is desirable for men.

### *Muscles Make the Man*

A cursory visual assessment of the male performers on the active WWE roster during the data collection period revealed the lean muscular ideal to be the male body standard. In fact, it could even be argued that emphasis was placed on a "hyper-mus-



cular” look. Many of the male wrestling performers were heavily muscled with some resembling competitive bodybuilders in shape and musculature (e.g., Triple H, Scott Steiner, and Batista).

The announcers contributed to the construction of lean muscularity as part of the male body ideal by calling attention to the muscles of male performers and emphasizing their physical condition. For example, announcer Tazz comments, “Test is all muscle” (*Smackdown*, 08-23-01), and commentator King remarks about Billy and Chuck: “Look at their physiques, their muscles...” (*RAW*, 12-17-01). In both cases, muscularity is emphasized. Likewise, King and JR comment on Vince McMahon’s physical condition on an episode of *RAW* (12-03-01):

King: Look at those traps!

JR: [He] probably has 8 or 9 percent body fat. That’s impressive.

As well, Michael Cole expresses appreciatively about Batista: “What a physical specimen is Deacon Batista!” (*Smackdown*, 06-27-02), while King comments about Stephen Richards: “Richards is probably in the best shape of his life. Look at him! He’s pumped, he’s cut” (*RAW*, 07-08-02).

Clearly, male wrestling performers are expected to have lean, well-conditioned, muscular bodies. Indeed, the emphasis on lean muscularity for men was exemplified in a more recent *RAW* episode (01-06-03) in which two male performers, Triple H and Scott Steiner, competed in a non-physical contest concerning who had the biggest muscles. In a ring “pose-down,” the men flexed and were then judged in order to determine who had the better more muscular body.

### *Strength as Masculine*

The male body in professional wrestling was invariably constructed as strong and powerful. To be sure, the strength of male performers was routinely highlighted by announcers during the play-by-play commentary. For example, “Albert’s a big, strong, tough kid” (*Smackdown*, 08-30-01), “Look at the power, the brute strength of Rhino” (*RAW*, 09-24-01), and “Look at the power of Lesnar, that scary upper-body strength” (*Backlash*). Displays of physical strength by male performers also served to emphasize men’s bodies as powerful and strong. For example, Rhino lifts Jericho overhead, gives his body a twirl, and then drops him to the canvass at *Summerslam*; Bradshaw catches D-Von Dudley in his arms at the top rope and drops him backward on an episode of *RAW* (08-20-01); and Big Show presses William Regal overhead and tosses him into the ring over the ropes (*RAW*, 02-25-02). Mark Henry, holding the World’s Strongest Man title, shows his strength and power through several feats such as holding an accelerating limousine back with his legs (*Smackdown*, 04-11-02), lifting a 4600-pound car (*Smackdown*, 04-18-02), and bending a frying pan and lead pipe with his bare hands (*Smackdown*, 04-25-02).

Masculine strength was reinforced by the announcers who typically made comments regarding such displays of strength. For example, in an episode of *RAW* (01-28-02), Kane's Herculean-like strength is highlighted by the announcers when he body-slams the 500-pound Big Show:

JR: Unbelievable strength by Kane.

King: Scary strength.

JR: The Big Red Machine body-slaming a 500 pounder. Man, that is ungodly strength by Kane!

The live audience also contributed to the notion of the strong man ideal by expressing appreciation for displays of physical strength by male performers. For example, when Billy Gunn holds Christian overhead for some eight seconds, ready to deliver a suplex, audible appreciatory cheers come from the crowd for Billy's show of physical strength (*RAW*, 09-10-01).

Interestingly, strength was often linked to the other ideal male body characteristics. For example, large size and muscularity tended to contribute to body strength while displays of strength were thought to demonstrate athletic ability. These natural linkages seem to suggest that the features of the male body ideal are intricately inter-connected all contributing to the construction of the male body as a whole.

#### *Deviations from the Male Body Ideal*

Though the majority of male wrestling performers fit the male body ideal as big, muscular, and strong, some male performers deviated from this cultural ideal. Interestingly, male performers who did not completely fit the male body ideal were frequently ascribed other masculine characteristics as if to compensate, or characteristics that were in sync with the ideal were especially highlighted. For example, even though Spike Dudley weighs only 150 pounds, he was quite often described as "tough," "resourceful," and "athletic"—all distinctly masculine traits. As JR comments, "He's certainly not the most physically intimidating man in the WWE, but he's got a lot of heart, a lot of guts, does little Spike Dudley" (*RAW*, 07-01-01). Furthermore, while Tajiri is small in comparison to other men in the WWE, he nonetheless is described as possessing "toughness," "athleticism," and "heart." As JR remarks, "He may be a little undersized in this environment with these participants, but Tajiri knows no limits as far as his competitive spirit is concerned" (*No Mercy*). Thus, Tajiri's small size is compensated for by other masculine traits. Additionally, though big, Bubba Ray Dudley is not lean and muscular. Bubba Ray is, however, often described as "tough," "powerful," and "dominating" all culturally ideal masculine traits. Similarly, Rikishi, at approximately 400 pounds, also does not fit the lean and muscular male body ideal. Nevertheless, Rikishi's agility, athleticism, and strength are routinely emphasized.

To be sure, the culturally ideal male body as large and muscular was presented in the wrestling programs as the ideal for male performers. Any deviation from this male

body ideal tended to be compensated for by ascribing to male performers other culturally dominant masculine characteristics (such as toughness and athleticism) or by explicitly calling attention to the body characteristics that did fit the cultural ideal (such as strength). In this way, the male body ideal was effectively reinforced despite occasional non-conformities.

### Discussion

Extensive examination of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) programming revealed that these professional wrestling television shows generally constructed, as well as promoted, the culturally ideal male body as big, strong, and muscular. Both the images of men's bodies and the comments made by the announcers during play-by-play commentary served to construct and to reinforce this cultural ideal by emphasizing large size, muscularity, and strength as inter-connected and desirable body characteristics in the male wrestling performers.

The results of this study are consistent with the findings of other media studies examining the presentation of men's bodies, which have revealed idealized images that depict most especially the male muscular ideal. The findings of the current study further suggest that, while muscularity is a key feature of the contemporary male body ideal, large size and strength are also important characteristics that define the quintessential male body.

Arguably, the images presented in WWE programs were, for the most part, "hyper-male." Many of the male wrestlers were above average in height, weight, and musculature, and displays and descriptions of strength were often Herculean in nature. In this respect, presentations of the male body in professional wrestling may be more extreme than images typically found in magazines (except perhaps men's bodybuilding periodicals), TV, print advertisements, and film.

Televised professional wrestling is undoubtedly part of the popular culture media environment that contributes to the construction of idealized body images. Male-dominated entertainment venues where men's bodies are essentially on display, professional wrestling television shows such as the popular WWE programs *RAW* and *Smackdown*, and pay-per-view events contribute especially to images of the idealized male body, emphasizing, in particular, the desirability of big, strong, muscular male bodies. These images, combined with the various actions of the male wrestlers, become part of an elaborate performance of gender, which prescribes what it means to be a man and what it means to be truly masculine. In televised professional wrestling, such performances tend to be traditional with body images supporting the hegemonic ideal.

Cultivation theory (Gerbner, 1999) and sociocultural theory (see Morrison et al., 2004 for a discussion of sociocultural theory as it applies to media images of the male muscular ideal) suggest that media images and messages may influence viewer perceptions of the body and may encourage viewers to internalize body image ideals. Furthermore, exposure to idealized media body images may prompt social comparison whereby viewers compare their own bodies to the ideal and assess whether or not they measure up. Media images and messages that promote the male body ideal as big, strong, and muscular may, therefore, have important implications.

A growing body of research suggests that exposure to media ideals contributes to body image dissatisfaction among men and boys as it does among women and girls (Schooler & Ward, 2006). Men who experience body dissatisfaction may subsequently suffer a variety of physical and mental health consequences. Body dissatisfaction in men has been linked to low self-esteem and higher levels of depression (McCreary & Sassine, 2000; Olivardia, Pope, Borowiecki, & Cohane, 2004) as well as poor psychological adjustment (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004). Moreover, men who are dissatisfied with their bodies may be driven to attain the ideal and, consequently, may engage in behaviors that could potentially contribute to poor health such as pathological or disordered eating, excessive exercise, and abuse of performance-enhancing substances including food supplements and anabolic steroids (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004; Olivardia et al., 2004).

Dissatisfaction with one's body, as a result of exposure to media images of the male muscular ideal, may further contribute to body image disorders such as muscle bittlement (Olivardia et al., 2004) and muscle dysmorphia, a pathological preoccupation with muscularity and leanness (Leone et al., 2005). Many have argued that muscle dysmorphia, a disorder primarily seen in men (Olivardia, 2001), is similar to anorexia nervosa, a body image disorder found mostly in women, which has been linked to attempts to achieve the "thin ideal" frequently promoted by the mass media.

Despite these potential negative consequences on men's health, Labre (2002) contended that media images of the male muscular ideal may also have the positive effect of promoting physical activity and involvement in athletics. Similarly, Saunders (2004) noted the potential health and social benefits for men attempting to achieve the male body ideal including decreased risk of chronic diseases, increased self-esteem and well-being, and enhanced popularity among peers.

For those men who do not measure up to these idealized media images and who may experience difficulty attaining the ideal, there is also a possibility that they may focus their attention, even to the extreme, on some aspects of the male body ideal (e.g., muscularity) or may compensate by pursuing other culturally dominate masculine traits such as aggressiveness, toughness, and risk-taking. These traits may pose health risks including the increased chance of physical injury and psychological maladjustment. In the WWE programs analyzed, evidence suggests that male wrestlers who did not conform completely to the male body ideal were generally ascribed other masculine traits (toughness, athleticism) to ensure the adequate maintenance of their masculinity.

It should be kept in mind that adolescents, in particular, may be at risk for developing body image concerns and experiencing body dissatisfaction. Jones and Crawford (2005) noted that issues surrounding body image satisfaction might become especially important during adolescence because of "the tremendous physical, cognitive, and social changes that occur during this developmental period" (p. 629). Smolak (2003) suggested that it is during adolescence that boys become concerned with both their body size and muscularity causing them to experience levels of body dissatisfaction comparable to adolescent girls. Given that professional wrestling's audience consists primarily of young men, many of whom are adolescents, the potential effects of the presentation of such idealized male body images are important to consider. In addition, as a "mas-

culinized" context similar to mainstream sports, televised professional wrestling provides a "safe" (acceptable) venue for male viewers to assess male wrestlers' bodies and to make comparisons to their own bodies. Given the acceptability of social comparison in this masculine environment, the effects that such idealized male body images have on male viewers, particularly adolescents, are especially important.

Of course, the media is not the only influence on ideal body image construction and body satisfaction. It has been found, for example, that parents and peers also play a role in constructing body ideals as well as influencing levels of body satisfaction (Kearney-Cooke, 2002; Palladino & Pritchard, 2003; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2004; Stanford & McCabe, 2005). In the context of this study, then, it is important to remember these alternative influential factors in assessing any potential effects of media images and messages disseminated through WWE programming. It can also be argued that, in addition to being exposed to alternative influences, viewers may actively discount the "hyper-male" images presented by these wrestling programs as "cartoonish" representations impossible to achieve. Such discounting may be part and parcel of the image of professional wrestling as exaggerated and "over-the-top," which may be extended to include wrestlers' bodies as well as their performances. Nevertheless, Barlett and colleagues (2005), who examined negative body image in men by exposing them to highly muscular action figures (which included WWE wrestler figures), concluded that body satisfaction and esteem still decreased significantly as a result of interacting with unrealistically muscular action figures. This trend suggests that exposure to even exaggerated media body images may produce some pronounced effects.

In addition, potential gender effects must be taken into consideration when discussing possible implications. First, while televised professional wrestling appears steadfast in its presentation of the hyper-masculinized cultural ideal, it is recognized that these images may not be representative of most media images of men's bodies. Murnen and colleagues (2003) have asserted that media content, to which men are regularly exposed, is more varied in the presentation of body ideals offering considerably more flexibility and variability regarding body shape and size for men than for women. Morrison et al. (2004) have also pointed out the greater exposure of women to mass media representations of idealized body images suggesting that media effects may be consequently stronger for women than for men. Smolak (2003) likewise contended that girls may be more directly and extensively affected by media images than boys, and, hence, they may also face greater sociocultural pressure than boys to achieve a particular body type. Any discussion of potential implications of idealized media images on men and boys, such as those presented by the WWE programs analyzed, must therefore take into account such gender impact differences.

Though content analyses can provide an important contribution to understanding the way men's bodies are constructed and presented by popular media, such analyses are limited. Analyzing content alone cannot reveal anything about the actual effects that such content may have on those exposed to it. Potential effects logically linked to theory and grounded in the research literature can only be speculated. Therefore, further research is recommended to extend the current research examining the presentation of

men's bodies in televised professional wrestling to include an examination of viewer perceptions of such popular media presentations to obtain a better understanding of how viewers interpret, and possibly internalize, these idealized body images. Future investigations could also examine the eating and exercise behaviors of viewers versus non-viewers of WWE programs to assess the degree to which the drive to attain the male body ideal is related to idealized media images. Future research endeavors might also extend to examine both men and women's bodies in professional wrestling to assess how these images might affect both male and female viewers. Finally, since few analyses of television programs have been undertaken to investigate portrayals of men's bodies, it is recommended that further research be conducted that examines television presentations of the male body with comparisons between programs that offer mostly "hyper-male" images (e.g., World Wrestling Entertainment, Ultimate Fighting Championship) and programs that may provide more variable and flexible images of men.

### Conclusion

Men's bodies are prominently on display in televised professional wrestling. The findings from this study suggest that the male body is constructed and presented in World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) television programs in its culturally ideal form, albeit somewhat "hyper-masculinized," emphasizing large size, lean muscularity, and strength as inter-connected features of the male body ideal. As part of the cultural environment that constructs and presents idealized images of the body, professional wrestling shows have the potential to influence young viewers' perceptions of, and satisfaction with, their own bodies through social comparisons and by internalizing the messages that promote this particular body ideal.

Adolescent male viewers, who comprise a substantial proportion of the televised professional wrestling audience, are likely to experience body image concerns at this developmental stage, and exposure to such idealized body images may encourage the drive for lean muscularity. The subsequent pursuit of this drive may have negative health consequences. Further research that explores the association between exposures to "hyper-male" body images presented in televised professional wrestling and body image satisfaction, as well as eating and exercise behaviors of viewers, is recommended in order to extend the recent burgeoning research literature examining men's bodies, body image concerns, and men's health.

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