

Chapter 6—Size Does Matter

“...American men are nearly as dissatisfied about their bodies as women and experience depression and self-esteem problems that are partly due to gendered cultural standards, some of which are produced by media.”
*Kari Lerum and Shari L. Dworkin*¹

For boys growing up in Western society, there is no escaping the message that size matters. From sports broadcasters chirping about the height and weight of professional athletes—especially in North American football—to David Beckham and various Calvin Klein models showcasing their physical endowments in risqué underwear ads, boys and men are, as Lerum and Dworkin note above, feeling the pressure of culturally generated body image ideals.

It is not just about muscles either. In a culture dominated by the heterosexual script, the responsibility for “good” sex is assigned to males. Feeling the need to be experts yet lacking adequate sexual education, many young men turn to X-rated films for guidance and are greeted with scenes of impossibly huge male sex organs that never fall limp, despite hours of action. It is quite a standard to live up to. Indeed, as social psychologist Petra Boynton has found in working with her male clients, many men feel threatened and inadequate in a culture that “defines modern masculinity by successful sexual performance, stamina, and stiffies.”² Few studies have been done on adolescent male sexual anxiety, but, as we will see, the fears men express in their adult years often have their roots in teenage experiences with erotic imagery and films.

The Sexualization of Male Bodies

The push for male physical perfection is not new. Among the first to promote male muscularity as an ideal was Charles Atlas with his famous exhortation against “97-pound weaklings.” The era in which Atlas first began marketing his fitness products was one of pin-up girls,³ male bodies were rarely, if ever, eroticized in calendars and posters. The Charles Atlas ads may have shown the muscled guy getting the girl, but there was nothing overtly sexual about the presentation of the man. The emergence of the *sexualized* male body in advertising began in the 1980s, led by Calvin Klein and his notorious underwear ads featuring muscular men in nothing but their briefs. Feminist philosopher Susan Bordo recalls that the placement of the first of these

¹ Lerum, Kari and Shari L. Dworkin. “‘Bad Girls Rule’: An Interdisciplinary Feminist Commentary on the Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls” *Journal of Sex Research*. 46, no.4 (2009), p. 258.

² Boynton, Petra. “Better dicks through drugs? The penis as pharmaceutical target.” *Scan: Journal of Media Arts and Culture* 1, no. 3 (2004) http://www.scan.net.au/scan/journal/display.php?journal_id=37 Accessed April 28, 2013.

³ Examples by famous pin-up artist Gil Elvgren can be seen at <http://www.thepinupfiles.com/elvgren1.html>. Accessed January 20, 2015.

Calvin Klein ads in Times Square in New York led to huge sales and widespread theft of smaller posters of the ad from bus shelters.

At this point, consumer culture discovered the “commercial potency” of sexual representations of the male body. Hollywood and other fashion houses would follow suit in the years to come,⁴ a trend noted by cultural theorist and media commentator Rosalind Gill who said in a 2005 article that “men’s bodies *as bodies* have gone from near invisibility to hypervisibility,” on display in action films, fashion and cosmetics ads, and the covers of magazines like *Men’s Health*. She wrote as well that “...it is not simply that the *number* of images of the male body has increased; more significant is the emergence of a *new kind of representational practice* in mainstream popular culture, depicting male bodies in idealized and eroticized fashions.”⁵ (Italics in the original text.)

Indeed. The “perfect” male physique is taking up more space in our media environment. Even if not directly eroticized, these ideal male bodies are associated with sexual success. As psychologist Marika Tiggeman notes, media do not present body ideals in isolation. Perfect bodies are part of complex cultural scripts that link muscularity (or thinness in women) to happiness, desirability, and status.⁶ This link between appearance and sexual attractiveness exerts a powerful influence on impressionable adolescents.

As with women, advertising is one of the main sources of sexualized male bodies. Retailer Abercrombie & Fitch (A&F) was one of the most well-known exploiters of male bodies, having produced several ads that not only sexualized but also objectified men. Case in point: a February 2013 visit to the Abercrombie & Fitch website showed a bare-chested, muscular young man with unbuttoned pants slung an almost indecent distance below his waist. His face was not shown and his body was positioned at a slight angle to the viewer—not full-out canting as per Erving Goffman’s definition, but not quite squared to the camera either. This man, like many others in the company’s history, was clearly being sexually objectified. (In November, 2015 the company launched its first campaign under their new branding strategy, which was designed specifically to minimize sexualized imagery.⁷)

A&F sells clothing so their erstwhile emphasis on the body—however objectifying—was to some degree understandable. But it is not just fashion retailers getting in on this game. Sellers of more mundane products have begun to use male bodies as a marketing tool, following the lead of companies that have, for decades, used female bodies in this manner.

⁴ Bordo, Susan. *The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and in Private*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 1999, p. 168, 180.

⁵ Gill, Rosalind et al. “Body Projects and the Regulation of Normative Masculinity” *Body & Society* 11, no. 1 (2005): p.38-39.

⁶ Tiggeman, Marika. “Television and Adolescent Body Image: The Role of Program Content and Viewing Motivation” *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*. 24, no. 3 (2005), p. 364.

⁷ Moin, David. “Abercrombie & Fitch Campaign Goes Minimal, With Less Sex” *Women’s Wear Daily* November 1, 2015.

<http://wwd.com/media-news/fashion-memopad/abercrombie-fitch-campaign-minimal-less-sex-10271917/>

Accessed December 9, 2015.

In 2013 the male body was used in campaigns to promote air fresheners, salad dressing, and tequila.⁸ More recently, the makers of Stone Tile have used muscular men sporting the garb of contractors—jeans, tool belt, and work boots—to market their brand of floor tiles.

The salad dressing ads, in particular, received a considerable amount of attention, largely because of the suggestive poses of the male model. Known as the “Zesty Guy,” the model was shown shirtless in some television and print ads but bared more in others. In one ad, he was shown lying on the ground completely naked, save for a strategically placed picnic blanket.¹⁰ In another he was pictured wearing nothing but an apron, lying seductively on a table with his finger in his mouth.¹¹ *Adweek* magazine referred to this trend as “hunkvertising” and cited copywriter Rebecca Cullers who wrote: “What should worry men about these portrayals is that there’s really only one kind of guy being held up as ‘hot’ . . . It’s dangerous to limit the notion of attractiveness to a single model.”¹² Women no doubt shouted a collective and sarcastic, “You think?” upon reading that passage.

Men are showing more skin on television as well, including Oliver Queen of *Arrow*, who seems to spend at least half of each episode naked from the waist up. The program’s Instagram feed also features numerous photos of shirtless male characters. Although only 90 seconds long, the 2015 trailer for Netflix’s new *Daredevil* series showed protagonist Matt Murdock’s bare torso. He is not as large as some in the superhero genre but his six-pack was clearly visible.¹³ Reality programs also show their share of male chests, including the various incarnations of MTV’s *Real World* series and *Slednecks*.

Movies are another source of perfectly shaped male bodies. At the time of writing, the film *Magic Mike XXL* had just begun its promotional cycle. The release of its trailer made headlines on the websites of such serious news outlets as Canada’s CBC, *The Guardian*, CNN, *Time*, *The Washington Post*, and even *The Wall Street Journal*, along with the usual entertainment and

⁸ Gianatasio, David. “Hunkvertising: The Objectification of Men in Advertising” *Adweek* October 7, 2013.

<http://www.adweek.com/news/advertising-branding/hunkvertising-objectification-men-advertising-152925> Accessed February 6, 2014.

⁹ An example can be seen on this Instagram page, accessed June 30, 2015:

<https://instagram.com/p/3KujYDJTgc/>

¹⁰ Bahadur, Nina. “Kraft Zesty Dressing Ad Offends ‘One Million Moms,’ Sparks Debate.” *The Huffington Post*. June 14, 2013.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/14/kraft-zesty-dressing-ad_n_3441805.html Accessed November 20, 2013.

¹¹ Time Warner. *Entertainment Weekly*. #1257, May 3, 2013, p. 20-21.

¹² Gianatasio, David.

¹³ Marvel Entertainment. “Marvel’s Daredevil: Teaser Trailer” *YouTube* February 4, 2015.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XC7GPdBV9WQ> Accessed February 7, 2015.

gossip sites. The trailer was focused heavily on the male physique and packed plenty of pelvic thrusts into its very brief running time.¹⁴

Although less sexualized, the superhero genre puts hyper-muscled bodies front and centre. Superheroes need bodies that demonstrate their physical strength but even they take things to extremes. As an example, we can compare past incarnations of Superman to the most recent filler of the red and blue suit, Henry Cavill. A simple Google search will suffice, but you can go further and search for the Superman computer wallpaper I found which showed all of the actors who have played Superman in one image, in chronological order. The difference in muscle definition and chest-to-waist ratio from the 1960s to now is shocking.¹⁵ When you add in Thor, Captain America, and Wolverine, you have some pretty heavy heavyweights.

Male celebrities are also doing more of the body-centric posing that has been, in the past, the province of females. Consider Justin Bieber. Although derided by most adults, he maintains a considerable fan base, all of whom are transfixed by his transformation from mop-topped teen of slight build into a seriously muscled young man. His new physique was showcased in a 2015 Calvin Klein Jeans advertising campaign that featured several images of his “six-pack,”¹⁶ and a Calvin Klein underwear ad that showed more of his assets. Later stories suggested there was some editing involved in the underwear ad, particularly in the area immediately below the waist. An animated GIF claimed to show the editing of his “bulge” but it is not definitive proof. As for his muscular frame, a January 2015 picture on Bieber’s Instagram feed verified that it is real, although possibly enhanced for the Calvin Klein ad.

A few months prior to the Bieber video and photos, pop star Nick Jonas of Jonas Brothers fame was featured in *Flaunt* magazine, showing off his chiselled torso and, in a series of underwear shots, holding his penis to accentuate its size.¹⁷ The magazine might not appeal to teens but, much like the trailer of *Magic Mike XXL*, the media coverage of the photos likely caught their attention. The Jonas article was mentioned by *Billboard*, *Entertainment Tonight*, Ryan Seacrest, *The Huffington Post*, *E! News*, *TMZ*, and other gossip media. The same media outlets gave considerable attention to the Bieber ads as well.

And then there are the sports and fitness magazines. Although many cover shots showcase men’s torsos to the top of the pubic bone, the images in these publications are not completely sexualized. They do, however, promote the idea that sexy means “ripped,” with frequent headlines about sexual performance accompanying the flawless bodies on the cover. For example, the February 2014 issue of *Men’s Health* promised to show men how to get “RIPPED

¹⁴ Warner Bros. Pictures. “Magic Mike XXL—Official Teaser Trailer” *YouTube* February 4, 2015 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RwPR0q5es0A> Accessed February 7, 2015.

¹⁵ As of February, 2015 the wallpaper was available at <http://wallvever.com/superman-logo-2013-wallpaper-2/>.

¹⁶ Calvin Klein. “Justin Bieber + Lara Stone—Calvin Klein Jeans Spring 2015” *YouTube* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K0t-aBAYym8> Accessed January 27, 2015.

¹⁷ Ellis, Tagert. “Nick Jonas: Like a Bull in a China Shop” *Flaunt* October 21, 2014. <http://flaunt.com/people/nick-jonas/> Accessed October 21, 2014.

RIGHT NOW,” and also offered advice on how to solve bedroom blunders. Similarly, in June 2015 *Men’s Fitness* commanded readers to “Get Ripped Now!” while also learning how to “flip her sex switch.” And the January/February 2015 issue of *Men’s Fitness* implored men to lose their guts, and also claimed to have the inside track on sex secrets that would “blow her mind.” Between the text and the pictures, these magazine covers connect the dots between a hard body and a good sex life.

According to sociologist Rosemary Ricciardelli and colleagues, this kind of exposure is dangerous because it promotes a certain body type as an ideal and places men and boys at risk of “falling into the same appearance-orientated cultural trap that women have experienced for years.”¹⁸

While the outcomes of this trap might be the same—body shame, dissatisfaction—the experiences of males and females are different. Girls with low body-esteem feel pressure to be thin and buxom while boys with poor body image can suffer at both ends of the scale. Overweight boys typically want to be thinner while smaller boys may strive to be more muscular. Even boys of average weight are affected: according to one 2011 study, nearly 31% of average-weight boys wanted to be bigger.¹⁹

The reason is obvious and unchanged since the days of Charles Atlas: muscles are associated with masculinity, something boys feel compelled to prove at all stages of their life but especially as they enter adolescence. As psychologists Linda Smolak and Jonathan A. Stein note, adolescence is a time when teens feel more pressure to conform to societal expectations about gender. Boys, in particular, may feel the need to show physical proof of their strength and athleticism since those two traits are so intertwined with conventional views of masculinity and, increasingly, male sexual appeal.²⁰

Pediatrician Marla Eisenberg and colleagues conducted a study into how often boys and girls (mean age 14.4) used muscle-enhancing behaviours in the previous year to increase their muscle size or tone. The teens were asked to indicate whether they never, rarely, sometimes, or often did things like changing their eating, exercising more, taking protein powder or shakes, or using steroids or other muscle-enhancing substances like creatine, amino acids, or growth hormones.

The study showed that the majority of boys chose exercise as a means to increase muscle: 81% sometimes or often used exercise compared to 63.8% of girls. Drilling down a bit further, we see that 40.9% of boys “often” used exercise to improve muscle tone compared to 27.3% of girls.

¹⁸ Ricciardelli, Rosemary. “Investigating Hegemonic Masculinity: Portrayals of Masculinity in Men’s Lifestyle Magazines” *Sex Roles* 63, no. 1 (2010): p. 66.

¹⁹ Lawler, Margaret and Elizabeth Nixon. “Body Dissatisfaction Among Adolescent Boys and Girls: The Effects of Body Mass, Peer Appearance Culture and Internalization of Body Ideals” *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*. 40, no. 1 (2011), p. 65.

²⁰ Smolak, Linda and Jonathan A. Stein. “A Longitudinal Investigation of Gender Role and Muscle Building in Adolescent Boys” *Sex Roles* 63, no. 9-10 (2010), p. 738-746.

The discrepancies between males and females are even sharper when it comes to the more extreme behaviours. Between the “sometime” and “often” users:

- nearly 19% of boys reported using protein powders (12.4% sometimes and 6.3% often), compared to 8.2% of girls (6.2% sometimes, 2% often)
- just over 3% of boys used steroids (2.3% sometimes and .8% often), compared to just over 1% of girls (0.9% sometimes and 0.3% often)
- 6.4% of boys used other muscle-building substances (4% sometimes and 2.4% often), compared to just over 2% of girls (1.6% sometimes and 0.7% often).²¹

Although the percentages for the most extreme behaviours were relatively low for both sexes, the boys’ numbers are significant. Important as well is the 17% difference between boys and girls using exercise to increase muscle. Clearly the building of muscle, while of concern to some girls, is a much bigger issue for boys. And if Major League Baseball player Bryce Harper is any sort of example, the pressure on boys may be getting worse. The Washington Nationals right fielder appeared on the cover of the 2015 edition of *ESPN Magazine’s* Body Issue. As per the mandate of the issue, his body was the focus and it looked as chiselled as one would expect. The problem is the extreme actions he took to make his body look the way it did. He is clearly a man in excellent physical condition, but that wasn’t enough for him. The *Huffington Post* outlined the regimen he followed in the days leading up to the photo shoot:

[Harper's preparation] consisted of three workouts and six meals a day until it consisted of none, that final week when Bryce Harper consumed only juice. Seven different raw juices. Over the final two weeks, before he exposed each of his muscles to ESPN’s photographers, he put salt in his drinking water so he could hydrate himself without gaining weight.

On the final day, before he stripped naked and recorded the results for the world, he rose for one final workout, but when he went to refresh himself, he spit the water out. When he arrived at the field at the University of Nevada Las Vegas for the shoot, his system was completely depleted. He shoved raw, white potatoes down his throat because he knew the glucose and glycine they contained would run straight to his muscles — which yearned for something, any kind of nourishment they could find.

“It makes you pop,” Harper said. “It makes you stand out.”²²

In the article journalist Lucy McCalmont described Harper’s actions as “grueling and seemingly dangerous.” That is an understatement. Comparing Harper to Kevin Love, an NBA player who

²¹ Eisenberg Marla E. et al. “Muscle-enhancing Behaviours Among Adolescent Girls and Boys” *Pediatrics* 130, no. 6 (2012), p. 1020-1021.

²² McCalmont, Lucy. “Bryce Harper’s Extreme Regimen for ESPN’s Body Issue Shows Body Image is a Problem for Men Too” *The Huffington Post* July 15, 2015.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/bryce-harper-body-issue-diet_55a69f57e4b04740a3deb188

Accessed July 15, 2015.

also appeared in the issue, McCalmont noted that Love did nothing out of the ordinary ahead of his photo session. There is a four-year age gap between Love and Harper—not huge but maybe enough to show evidence of a generational shift in attitudes about body image?

Examples from pop culture and the world of sports show how male bodies are currently depicted, but it is important to realize that media affects boys in different ways. Other factors contribute to boys' body esteem, including the degree the internalization of body ideals, peer influence, and a boy's pubertal development or lack thereof.

Internalization is the degree to which people adopt cultural body ideals into their own beliefs about what is physically attractive. Levels of internalization are tested with a standard questionnaire (SATAQ-3) that asks participants to indicate their level of agreement with statements like: "I would like my body to look like the people who are in the movies" or "I compare my body to that of people who are athletic."²³ Unsurprisingly, recent studies with adolescent boys have found that those who internalize body ideals have lower body-esteem.^{24,25}

These body ideals are omnipresent in our media, as I showed above, but Tiggeman's research on television's impact shows that not everyone who sees idealized bodies internalizes them. Her 2005 study discusses two factors that contribute to internalization: what kids are watching and why. Programs that contain more "realistic" portrayals—like soap operas in her day and, I would surmise, some of the soapier superhero and reality programs today—affect boys' drive for muscularity because they send the message that romantic success comes from physical appearance. The reasons for watching are also a factor: teens who use television for social learning, particularly about behavioural and appearance standards, are more likely to internalize the body ideals they see and experience negative body image.²⁶

Media portrayals are not the only route for body ideal internalization. Peers also play an important role, often by reinforcing the messages media sends. A few recent studies have drawn similar conclusions about peer influence:

- Psychologists Diana Carlson Jones and Joy K. Crawford²⁷ looked at the "peer appearance culture" that surrounds adolescents. They found that boys face a high degree of appearance pressure and teasing from their peers, and even perceive more of such pressure than girls. For boys, appearance pressure includes suggestions for body change and critical comments about muscularity, as in, "You're too skinny." Teasing can affect

²³ Thompson, Kevin J. et al. "The Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Scale-2 (SATAQ): Development and Validation." *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 35, no. 3 (2004), p. 299.

²⁴ Frisen, Ann and Kristina Holmqvist. "Physical, Sociocultural, and Behavioral Factors Associated with Body-Esteem in 16-Year-Old Swedish Boys and Girls" *Sex Roles* 63, no.5-6 (2010), p. 381.

²⁵ Lawler and Nixon, p. 68.

²⁶ Tiggeman, Marika. p. 361-381.

²⁷ Jones, Diana Carlson and Joy K. Crawford. "The Peer Appearance Culture During Adolescence: Gender and Body Mass Variations." *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 35, no. 2 (2006), p. 257-269.

boys directly and indirectly: even if they are not a target, they may feel pressure from witnessing the teasing that other “97-pound weaklings” endure.

- Looking at boys aged 8-11, psychologist Lina Ricciardelli and colleagues concluded that merely perceiving pressure to increase muscles from parents, close friends, or media increased the likelihood boys would be concerned about their weight and take steps to improve their muscularity.²⁸
- Psychologist Trent Petrie and colleagues found that sociocultural pressures to be muscular were especially salient to boys.²⁹
- In a 2011 study, psychologists Margaret Lawler and Elizabeth Nixon—echoing Carlson Jones and Crawford—noted that peer appearance criticism had an impact on boys’ body image and concluded that the peer group is “an an important vehicle for the transmission of socio-cultural messages of appearance ideals.”³⁰

For boys, appearance-based teasing centres on excessive weight, absence of muscle tone, or small stature in general. With or without teasing, boys are keenly aware of whether they fit the masculine body ideal. Studies show that boys with a high body mass index or BMI (tending toward overweight) and a low BMI (tending toward smaller frames and thinness) are less satisfied with their bodies than average-weight boys.³¹

Most of us are aware of the tremendous pressures placed on overweight individuals in our society. According to Lina Ricciardelli and colleagues, children as young as seven already associate excessive body weight with being less attractive and having fewer friends. Jones and Crawford found that boys with higher BMIs tended to frequently discuss muscle-building strategies with friends, a sign of their body dissatisfaction. Boys with lower BMIs are also teased about their appearance but there is little they can do in the face of pressure to be bigger other than accept the fact that some boys are just naturally smaller than others—a tall order during adolescence when the size discrepancy between boys can be vast, largely because of the varying ages of pubertal development.

Indeed, research has shown that the timing of puberty plays a significant role in the weight-based body-esteem of boys. Boys who perceive themselves as late in reaching puberty tend to be more dissatisfied with their weight. Even those who have a similar BMI to more physically mature boys may feel unhappy with their weight, likely because being less developed means being less muscular. Late-developing boys also tend to be shorter than their peers and feel the differences in their overall size more acutely.³²

²⁸ Ricciardelli, Lina A. et al. “A Longitudinal Investigation of the Development of Weight and Muscle Concerns Among Preadolescent Boys.” *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 35, no. 2 (2006), p. 184-186.

²⁹ Petrie, Trent A. et al. “Biopsychosocial and Physical Correlates of Middle School Boys’ and Girls’ Body Satisfaction.” *Sex Roles* 63, no. 9-10 (2010), p. 641-642.

³⁰ Lawler and Nixon, p. 68.

³¹ Jones and Crawford, p. 266.

³² Frisen and Holmqvist, p. 382.

The news does not get better as boys get older. Jones and Crawford found that appearance pressure is greater for boys in high school than middle school, especially for late bloomers.³³ It continues into adulthood as well. A study by pediatrician Alison Field and colleagues interviewed young men about body image from 1999, when they were aged 12 to 18, and followed up with until 2011. In 1999, approximately 8.5% were “extremely concerned” about their muscularity. By the time these boys reached adulthood, 17.9% had become extremely concerned about both their weight and physique.³⁴ In her research, Rosalind Gill concluded that appearance-based teasing and critiques are an inevitable part of the male experience, even after adolescence. She describes the ways boys and men police the bodies of their peers, noting that contrasts with other males are “powerful and persuasive means of upholding norms of masculinity.”³⁵

Those norms of masculinity are judged not only by the size of a man’s pecs, but also his penis and its ability to perform.

Performance, Stamina, and Size

“The penis is a player on the sexual world stage—an organ of performance, a barometer of self-worth, an indicator of sexual profit and loss, and a contributor to the sexual performance index particular to each and every male, regardless of sexual orientation.” So wrote sociologist Michael Kimmel and colleagues in their introduction to the *Cultural Encyclopedia of the Penis*.³⁶ Many men would see truth in this statement, having been taught from their teenage years onward to believe that penis size and erectile function are the ultimate signifiers of manhood. As Petra Boynton notes, men’s sexual identities are “structured around performance, stamina and size” in contrast to women, for whom sex is “constructed as being a mix of the physical and emotional.”³⁷

The emphasis on penis size is not a modern invention. Scenes in *Fanny Hill* describe a man’s “oversized” and “unwieldy machine” and the 1873 erotic novel *The Romance of Lust* describes the considerable size of the male protagonist’s member.³⁸ Given that both novels were written by men, one can assume that a certain fixation on penis size must have existed then as it does now. This particular anxiety was captured more recently in a dryly humorous manner by psychologist Bernard Zilbergeld:

³³ Jones and Crawford, p. 266.

³⁴ Field, Alison et al. “Prospective Associations of Concerns about Physique and the Development of Obesity, Binge Drinking, and Drug Use Among Adolescent Boys and Young Adult Men.” *JAMA Pediatrics* 168, no. 1; (2014), p. 36-37.

³⁵ Gill, Rosalind et al, p. 58.

³⁶ Kimmel, Michael et al. (eds). *Cultural Encyclopedia of the Penis*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014, p. 1.

³⁷ Boynton, Petra.

³⁸ Anonymous. *The Romance of Lust*. Kindle Edition.

Real men with real penises compare themselves to the models and find themselves woefully lacking. Most men believe that their penises are not what they ought to be. They are not long enough or wide enough or hard enough, they do not spring forth with the requisite surging and throbbing, and they do not last long enough or recover fast enough. A recent magazine survey of over a thousand men found that 'all male respondents, with the exception of the most extraordinarily endowed, expressed doubts about their own sexuality based on their penile size' ... The problem is that we think we should measure up to what are basically impossible standards ... Accepting your own merely human penis can be difficult. You know it is somewhat unpredictable, and, even when functioning at its best, looks and feels more like a human penis than a battering ram, or mountain of stone. Not much when compared to the fantasies you are brought up on.³⁹

Those fantasies are based on the “pornographic penis,” which, according to cultural studies professor Stephen Maddison, has never been “bigger or harder” than it is in current XXX films. In porn, the process of attaining male arousal is completely absent, so as to avoid showing anything other than the “mountain of stone” Zilbergeld described—no limp penises allowed. Male porn actors are always fully erect and ridiculously well-endowed, a “biological fiction” in Maddison’s words,⁴⁰ achieved through various tricks of the film trade. Porn men are also shown as “always sexually willing and able to perform sexually for hours,”⁴¹ another imperative in our culture where the erect penis is “manhood personified” and the flaccid penis is “femininity in a male organ, all abject vulnerability and failure.”⁴²

Even if boys and men recognize the considerable distortions in porn—and most do—their anxieties remain, in part because they have no understanding of what constitutes a normal penis or sex drive.

As we saw in chapter 3, sexual education is of dubious value to boys, and doctors rarely inquire about their male patients’ sexual health or offer any kind of guidance about sexual activity when boys reach their teenage years. To answer questions about how their penises should look and behave, many boys turn to media depictions, whether in pornography or elsewhere. As a result of the exaggerated images they see, many boys and men overestimate average penis size and underestimate their own size,⁴³ leading many who are perfectly normal to believe they are far from adequate.

³⁹ Zilbergeld, Bernard as quoted in McKee, Alan. “Does size matter? Dominant discourses about penises in Western Culture.” *Cultural Studies Review* 10, no. 2: (2004), p. 178.

⁴⁰ Maddison, Stephen. “The Biopolitics of the Penis” *Cultural Studies Now Conference*, 2007. <http://culturalstudiesresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/MaddisonBiopoliticsPenis.pdf> Accessed February 17, 2014.

⁴¹ Löfgren-Mårtenson, Lotta and Sven-Axel Månsson. “Lust, Love, and Life: A Qualitative Study of Swedish Adolescents’ Perceptions and Experiences with Pornography” *Journal of Sex Research*. 47, no. 6 (2010): p. 7.

⁴² Kimmel et al. p. 2.

⁴³ Lever, Janet et al. “Does Size Matter? Men’s and Women’s Views on Penis Size Across the Lifespan” *Psychology of Men & Masculinity* 7, no. 3 (2006), p. 129.

A 2005 study by Rany Shamloul, a specialist in andrology and sexual medicine, showed that an overwhelming majority of participants thought they had a short penis, but none actually did.⁴⁴ Even men who consider themselves “average” are not necessarily happy with their size. In research by sociologist Janet Lever and colleagues, 46% of men who believed they had an average-sized penis wanted it to be bigger. Further, only 54% of these “average” men were satisfied with their size, compared to 86% of men who considered themselves “large.” Men who saw themselves as small had it even worse—only 8% were satisfied with their penis size. Lever’s study also showed that men who think they have a below-average penis may become self-conscious and less likely to undress in front of their partners or let their partners see their penis during sex.⁴⁵

Recent research has shown that the impact of “small penis syndrome” may extend beyond the bedroom. Studies are ongoing but a survey of male and female post-secondary students showed that men with a healthier perception of their penises had lower levels of sexual anxiety and self-consciousness, and higher sexual esteem.⁴⁶ The report by Lever and colleagues also found a possible link between perceived penis size and body satisfaction: men who think they have large penises rate their faces as more attractive and feel much happier with their bodies overall than men who believe their penises are small.⁴⁷

What role does media play in small penis syndrome? We’ve already seen pornography’s distortions of penis size and performance, but other media reinforce that message. A few recent examples stand out.

The very popular 2014 film *Ride Along* includes plenty of the female objectification typical of the “buddy cop” genre—montages that emphasize the cleavage and legs of the female lead, a scene in a strip club—but there is also commentary on men’s physical assets. Dedicated to his fiancée, lead male Ben is far from the stereotypical, promiscuous male but feels the need to do a little bragging, telling her that his video game nickname “Black Hammer” is a reference to the sound his supposedly huge penis makes after he drops his pants and it hits the floor: “Kaboom! Boom!” Another character, acting crazed in a farmer’s market, strips down to his underwear, prompting a woman to say: “He is packing.”

In music, Nicki Minaj refers to a “dude” having a “dick bigger than a tower” in her hit *Ananconda*, a song that samples Sir Mix-A-Lot’s infamous *Baby Got Back* and the lyric that compares his penis to an anaconda. Staying on the snake theme, Flo Rida references his “cobra”

⁴⁴ Shamloul, Rany. “Treatment of Men Complaining of Short Penis” *Urology* 65, no. 6 (2005), p. 1184.

⁴⁵ Lever et al, p. 134.

⁴⁶ Morrison, T.G. et al. “Correlates of genital perceptions among Canadian post-secondary students.” *Electronic Journal of Human Sexuality*. 8 (2005).

⁴⁷ Lever et al.

in *GDFR*, a top ten song on the Billboard Hip-Hop chart in early 2015.⁴⁸ In *No Mediocore*, T.I. talks about his “pipe” being so big that women have trouble sitting down the morning after being with him.⁴⁹ Clearly very proud of his size, T.I. raps in mega-hit *Blurred Lines* that he would give a woman “something big enough to tear [her] ass in two.” The video for the song also includes the message that Robin Thicke has a “big dick.”⁵⁰ A tongue in cheek reference? Perhaps, but it still makes it clear that size matters.

Beyond popular culture, Boynton believes some of the blame for male sexual anxiety lies with the pharmaceutical industry which has created exacting standards of performance for the penis: “It must get hard when desired, stay hard as long as required, and be able to regularly repeat this exercise.”⁵¹

Lad magazines include plenty of ads for products that help improve performance and increase penis size,⁵² as do other men’s magazines. In addition to erectile dysfunction drugs like Viagra, Levitra, and Cialis, there are also “herbal” remedies. I saw one such ad on the “Sex & Women” page of the *Men’s Health* website in February of 2015. The advertisement read “KEEP IT UP. Conquer low T and revitalize your life.” The ad clicks through to keepitupbook.com, a site that tells visitors they can “once again have it all—the muscle, the emotional drive, the sexual power, the vigor and cognitive sharpness that you enjoyed when you were a younger man.” The program claims to involve “crucial supplements,” “hormone optimization,” and “stuff you may never learn from your family doctor.”⁵³ Ad copy like that is a big red flag in my eyes, but would likely appeal to men who have fallen prey to media messages about the importance of optimizing their bedroom performance.

It is not just advertising contributing to male sexual anxiety but the general content of men’s magazines as well. We have seen how these publications objectify women and fixate on their appearance, but they also target men’s insecurities. Magazines like *Men’s Health* and *Men’s Fitness* focus on exercise and fitness but also devote considerable space to the discussion of penises and sexual performance.

In February, 2015 I searched “penis size” on the website of *Men’s Health* magazine. It was hard to gauge the volume of articles since there were many duplicates in the 507 search results, but

⁴⁸ Flo Rida. *GDFR* Rap Genius.

<http://genius.com/4809131/Flo-rida-gdfr-goin-down-for-real/So-that-birthday-cake-get-the-cobra>
Accessed February 27, 2015.

⁴⁹ T.I. *No Mediocore* Rap Genius

<http://genius.com/3327762/Ti-no-mediocre/What-she-say-when-she-got-to-sit> Accessed February 27, 2015.

⁵⁰ Thicke, Robin “Blurred Lines” *Vevo*

[http://www.vevo.com/watch/robin-thicke/Blurred-Lines-\(Unrated-Version\)/USUV71300526](http://www.vevo.com/watch/robin-thicke/Blurred-Lines-(Unrated-Version)/USUV71300526) Accessed March 30, 2013.

⁵¹ Boynton, p. 1.

⁵² Attwood, 2005, p. 92.

⁵³ Comite, Florence. *Keep It Up*. <http://www.keepitupbook.com/keepitupbook/index?keycode=240597>
Accessed February 7, 2015.

what caught my attention were the themes that emerged. Articles included: “Your Perfect Penis Size;” “What’s an Average Penis;” “Is My Penis Normal;” and “Penis Size and Sexual Satisfaction.” On the home page of the site I also saw several headlines pertaining to performance: “8 Ways to Protect Your Erection;” “Make Missionary Sex Incredible;” “Make Doggy Style Even Hotter,” and, my personal favourite, “How to Have Sex for an Hour!” The latter theme was picked up on by *Men’s Fitness* in an article entitled “Too Quick(ie)” which offered expert advice on how long women want to have sex. (The recommended time is considerably less than the hour suggested in the *Men’s Health* headline: 20 minutes is considered ideal while anything less than 7 minutes is thought to be rather lacking.)

Adding to the ego-bruising for men are the numerous articles purporting to share women’s opinions on men’s penises. These examples come, again, from *Men’s Health*: “Penis Size: What Women Think,” “Women’s Penis Size Preference,” “Her Thoughts on Your Penis,” and “What She Thinks About Your Body.”

Some of these articles deal with genuine health concerns but are couched in language that heightens readers’ insecurities while also reinforcing the notion that the responsibility for “good” sex lies with men. The overall message? If a man doesn’t measure up or happens to “misfire”⁵⁴ before his partner climaxes, he has somehow failed.

Messages about male size and performance may be resonating with young people. Pediatricians Michael Westwood and Jorge Pinzon noted that adolescent boys may have an “unfounded perception” of normal or desirable penis size, especially if they have watched pornography or seen advertisements for penis enlargement products.⁵⁵ Other research bears out the conclusions of Westwood and Pinzon: two recent studies show that about 40% of adult men trace their problems with penis size to adolescence and their experiences watching erotic films.^{56, 57} Sociologist Marshall Smith came to a similar conclusion. He conducted detailed interviews with young adults about their experiences with sexually explicit online material during their adolescence. Many respondents—both male and female—reported learning from these media that males are responsible for women’s sexual pleasure, an expectation that many men said led to

⁵⁴ The word “misfire” was used in an article on Men’s Fitness to indicate that a man climaxed too soon. Madison, Amber. “Ask Men’s Fitness: How Long Do Women Really Want to Have Sex?” *Men’s Fitness* February 8, 2015.

<http://www.mensfitness.com/women/sex-tips/ask-mens-fitness-how-long-do-women-really-want-have-se-x> Accessed February 17, 2015.

⁵⁵ Westwood, Michael and Jorge Pinzon. “Adolescent male health.” *Paediatric Child Health* 13, no. 1 (2008), p. 32.

⁵⁶ Shamloul, p. 1184.

⁵⁷ Wylie, Kevan R. and Ian Eardley. “Penile size and the ‘small penis syndrome.’” *BJUI* 99, no. 6 (2007), p. 1451.

anxiety and stress.⁵⁸ Other men blame teasing about penis size or performance by a classmate or teenage romantic partner for their lack of sexual self-esteem.⁵⁹

Raised on impossible standards of size and performance, boys, like girls before them, are increasingly questioning their physical attractiveness and taking steps to remedy their perceived bodily imperfections. As male bodies are increasingly eroticized and objectified in our culture, this problem stands to get worse.

Now, more than ever, our sons need to be shown the value of critical thinking and the importance of questioning the peer and media influences around them. And who better to guide them than their own parents?

⁵⁸ Smith, Marshall. "Youth Viewing Sexually Explicit Material Online: Addressing the Elephant on the Screen" *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*. 10, no.1 (2013): p. 65, 72.

⁵⁹ Pappas, Stephanie. "Size Doesn't Matter: 'Penis Shame' Is All in Guys' Heads" *LiveScience* October 4, 2013. <http://www.livescience.com/40192-penis-shame-guys-heads.html> Accessed February 17, 2015.