

Pressure to look more muscular may lead some men to consider steroids

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Most people associate steroid use with oiled-up bodybuilders or professional athletes, but for some college-age men, steroids seem like the only way to measure up to the muscle-bound men in fitness magazines.

A survey of 270 male college students by Mike Parent, a University of Florida doctoral candidate in counseling psychology, showed that the same cultural influences that drive some women to feel dissatisfied with their bodies can also lead college-age men who highly value looking muscular to contemplate steroid use. Studies show that up to 5 percent of college-age men have used [steroids](#), Parent said.

Understanding why some college-age men consider steroids could help counselors recognize how underlying body-image issues affect their patients, Parent said.

In the study, published in December in the *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, Parent and UF psychologist Bonnie Moradi applied a concept from the psychology of women's body image - objectification theory - to steroid use. The study marks the first time objectification theory has been applied to steroid use.

When women are bombarded with messages about how their bodies should look, they can internalize those messages, comparing their bodies to idealized media images and worrying more about how their bodies look than how they function. Parent and Moradi applied the theory to college-age men to evaluate whether media-driven body image concerns had an effect on their intention to use steroids.

They found that, for men who had internalized those cultural standards, the desire to look more muscular coupled with the belief that steroids would help them achieve their goals could lead them toward steroid use.

"If they see these images and decide they want to look more muscular - and they think steroids will get them there - they're more likely to engage in steroid use," Parent said. "In most cases, they have no intention of playing competitive sports or bodybuilding - they're concerned about how they look. In many ways, these men are more at risk for steroid use than athletes. An athlete knows that steroid use would have huge consequences for his career. For an average guy, there are fewer barriers."

The study showed that while internalizing cultural standards affected the intent to use steroids, two other components of objectification theory - body shame and body surveillance - did not. That means that men seeking treatment from a counselor or psychologist might not share - or admit to - the type of body-image concerns typically seen in women who have internalized cultural standards of attractiveness, Parent said.

"Body image could be a concern in some male patients, but it's manifesting in a way clinicians are not used to seeing. A man who is at risk for using steroids might present with depression or anxiety, not body-image issues. More research in this area could help clinicians ask questions that get to the underlying issue," Parent said.

In the survey, Parent and Moradi evaluated to what extent participants had internalized cultural standards of attractiveness, as well as their body-monitoring habits, body shame, drive for muscularity, the effect they thought steroids would have on them and whether they had sought out information on getting and using steroids..

"This is an important study because it joins together two literatures that have not been brought together before: objectification theory and the drive for muscularity," said Ronald Levant, professor of psychology at the University of Akron and editor of the journal *Psychology of Men and Masculinity*.

"This breaks through academic silos of gender psychology and links two closely related fields that, strangely enough, rarely cross paths."

Provided by University of Florida

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