

*“Eric Shapiro, a high school student at the time this article was written, chose to investigate the connection between media and self-image in adolescent boys as part of a research project for New Jersey’s ROGATE program for gifted students. Though the issue of media and self-image is one that receives a lot of attention regarding its impact on girls and women, the question of how boys are similarly affected has not been examined in near as much depth. Mr. Shapiro’s research helps to establish that boys can be every bit as vulnerable to the omnipresent influence of media and cultural messages as girls.” - Malia Blom, Director, Boys and Schools Project.*

## **Adolescent Males and the Media’s Influence on Their Self-Image**

### **Eric Shapiro**

In American society today, the prevalence of popular culture and the imposition of its standardized messages of perfection are greater than ever. We are living in a time when various forms of media – television, movies, radio, magazines, internet, etc. – are readily accessible to all, and their ubiquity has even given way to a title for this time: the Information Age. Under these conditions, some would argue that self-expression has a newfound ability to thrive and spread. However, in reality, American popular culture, in all of its manifestations that have collectively been donned “the media”, have the unique and sometimes unheralded ability to negatively influence our way of thinking about the world, and more importantly, ourselves.

The third-party ideals that define us are a disseminated, passive force that indirectly inhibits humans, and in particular, adolescents, from fully realizing their potentials. Society dictates to kids from a very young age through constant subconscious marketing what it really means to be attractive, successful, or even happy. These days, contentment has been taken out of the hands of the individual, and its definition has been objectively reset to something that is more pertinent to society at large. This holds serious consequences for the subjectivity and individuality that is usually connoted by the term “human”. Now, society tells *us* what to think of our own selves as our judgments, thought patterns, and general outlook on the world are

subliminally molded into what other people want them to be. Beauty has been standardized by popular culture; success has been established as having a particular kind of job with a particular kind of salary that yields particular kinds of luxuries; and happiness has been solidified as the total acquisition of both. However, it is important to note that perhaps we have all redefined who we are to the exclusion of how we would think and act if our intuition had not been altered by American culture.

A few years ago, I chose to participate in a yearlong research program called ROGATE, an acronym for "Resources Offered for Gifted and Talented Education", part of the National Talent Network ([www.eirc.org/ntn](http://www.eirc.org/ntn)). This would be my second project in the ROGATE program, and I sought a qualitative, definite proof that society was getting the best of many teenagers. Such recourse would perhaps foster my awareness and allow me to spread it to others in a similar mental predicament. Having followed up on a fair amount of contemporary studies, I was aware of the connection established between societal standards and the heightened manipulability of young girls, mainly in the rise of eating disorders. However, to enlist a stereotype of men as an example, sometimes an adolescent male would be more inclined to contain their insecurities rather than have them be outwardly visible. Thus, it would be rare for a male to fall into a trend as readily self-destructive as anorexia, and more likely for him to, say, go to the gym and lift more than he ought to. With that thought in mind, I began where any self-respecting researcher ought to and formulated a hypothesis: Adolescent male self-image is influenced by the media and popular culture.

I spent an entire school year collecting data to either prove or refute my hypothesis. However, much more than a research project, my search was one that

dealt with myself; a study of my own nature as a member of a greater population of young men to whom I was attempting to discover an affinity. In a self-conducted online survey of 125 anonymous males between grades six and twelve, I found that 52.4% of the surveyed population cared what other people think of their body. Sixty-four percent think that is important for someone to be attractive, and 69.4% believe that if they could change something about their appearance, they would be happier people. It was shocking to me to realize that young boys have a mentality that places a high importance on physical qualities and defines their contentment by these qualities. Surely such high numbers of discontented, self-effacing adolescent males require some sort of remedy to regress this growing trend of fickle and dependent self-image. It is unfair to rob a generation of boys of their distinctiveness, even if this byproduct is caused by an indirect force. In our society, television, movies, magazines, and all of the other bombardments of flawless images have a slow but evident withering effect on the security of adolescent boys. We currently live in the buffer period before we all wear identical jumpsuits out of the growing inherent need for uniformity that American society seems to preach to its most easily influenced citizens. Now is the time for a revamping of our culture to encourage individuality and uniqueness, rather than instill an intrinsic uphill battle in every young boy to become something that he simply may not be.

After noticing the trends of my survey, I presented my initial deductions to Dr. Pauline Bergstein, a child psychologist. She agreed with my hypothesis, saying that, "There are so many messages of what and how a person should be [in our society] that it can't help but make the more vulnerable of us desperate to fight for and embrace external definitions of success and beauty." Dr. Bergstein's conclusion was that people,

especially adolescents, find it easier to emulate society's given definitions of perfection than to create and implement their own into their lives. Thus, human beings convince themselves that their happiness applies to everyone, and thus everyone else accepts and operates on the same plane – sort of like a third-party-approval complex.

I then contacted Malia Blom, a professional researcher who is the Executive Director of Boys and Schools, a division of the Men's Health Network that deals with issues facing school-age males. An expert on societal hurdles preventing males from achieving their potential, she agreed with my hypothesis and said "media and pop culture influences are so pervasive that they can often be difficult to ignore." She underscored the dangers of such a trend, specifically the parallel between impressionability in adolescents and full-blown mental illness in grown men. She said that "the under-treatment of male incidences of mental illness [is related to] the stigma that prevents many from seeking necessary help," a stigma reinforced by the media images of the ideal, masculine ego that typically prevents men from admitting weakness. This ego is based only on appearance – *appearing* to be flawless when, in fact, one or more flaws may exist. The ostensive outer shell to cover insecurity is, interestingly enough, one of the main reasons why adolescent males subscribe to a pop culture ethos, use it to build a façade, and pretend to be impervious.

To see what physical effects the repercussions of insecurity could have, I spoke with Dr. Arnold Rabinowitz, a pediatrician whose focus was to limit the problem to better the chances of reversing it. His philosophy is a "lead by example" message for society's role models. The best way we can reverse the trend of total conformity to external ideals is to defy them ourselves and hope that it will encourage others to follow the

trend. He also said “Our role models have to be adjusted...they need to be responsible across the board.” Instead of looking up to figures who seem to be total products of their environment, we need to choose role models who are openly comfortable with themselves, and then perhaps we can learn that doing so is both acceptable and, to an even greater extent, healthy.

The solutions are clear-cut. The first logical step is consciousness. If young boys are aware of the issue, they can begin to change their focus from the current standards to new ones. If our role models and principles change to better accommodate young men, the influences to think and act a certain way are cut off, and the negative trend dies out. However, the most important step is our own self-security. If we are OK with who we are and what we want out of life, then no magazine advertisement can alter the true perceptions of ourselves. That is the true essence of the American spirit; to stand up and be the people who we want to be. To question established figures of authority. To dream the impossible dream. If we can do this, as adolescent males, as Americans, as people, then the effect is far more profound than anything we can achieve while we continue to define ourselves by what others think. With self-confidence as the basis, the possibilities are endless.