

Visualizing masculinity across ages: Social representations of the male body and identity

Abstract

Building on the theory of social representations (Moscovici, 1961), this study conducts a comparative analysis of young and middle-aged men's perceptions, beliefs, and shared understandings of the male body. The objective is to explore how these views reflect contemporary notions of masculinity in different age groups and to identify which body features are most likely to convey representations of male identities. The study uses a mixed-method approach, with image selection and drawing production techniques, that intends to identify anchoring and objectivation processes and facilitate the visualization of diverse perspectives of social representations (De Rosa, 2014; Silva et al., 2020; Martikainen & Hakokongas, 2022; Nicholson & Awad, 2024). A total of 112 men from Brazil aged 18 to 50 participated in this study. Group 1 consists of 68 men aged 18 to 25 and Group 2 consists of 44 men aged 26 to 50. In the first section of the study, subjects were presented with a series of figures which were randomly selected from a set of icons gathered from the internet. They were asked to choose the icon they felt was most related to the body and provide comments on their choices. The image selection technique encourages the elaboration of analogies between the body and the icon. The content analysis was used as a qualitative approach to analyse the data, offering an opportunity to code and categorize both visual and textual data, and to identify common themes, and concepts. These were explored as possible indicators of anchoring processes in social representations. In the second section of the study, subjects were asked to produce two drawings in response to the prompts: 'my current body' and 'the ideal body'. An initial analysis produced an inventory of the prevalent physical features, or body patterns. This analysis generated four main categories and eight subcategories describing characteristics of both body types. A comparative analysis followed, examining the differences and similarities between the two body types, and across the two age groups. The results highlight how men of different ages integrate cultural and social norms with their unique life experiences, indicating possible changes in representations as they age. This study adds to the literature on the topic and investigates the role of image production techniques in social representation research.

Keywords: social representations; male body; image production techniques; aging

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