



“Guys with Big Muscles Have Misplaced Priorities”: Masculinities and Muscularities in Young South Korean Men’s Body Image

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Abstract Men’s body image is an issue of increasing importance as related illnesses continue to grow in prevalence around the world. However, cross-cultural attention to men’s body image experiences has been relatively understudied. Based on data derived from cognitive anthropological methods of cultural domain analysis, I develop the concept of “muscularities” to more effectively examine the expectations inherent in multifarious models of body image men continuously navigate. Related to but distinct from “masculinities”—the recognition of culture-bound hierarchies of ways of doing-being a man—“muscularities” attends to the culturally particular ways in which muscles are conceived and evaluated as indices of socioeconomic status, intelligence, social skills, and professionalism, to name a few. Young South Korean men’s experiences of *chan’gūnyuk* (“small muscle”) and *manūn kūnyuk* (“large muscle”) challenge universalist assumptions about the kinds of muscles people value in global perspective, demonstrate the necessity of recognizing multiple muscularities in research, and encourage new directions of inquiry that attend to the consequences of variable embodiments of muscularities.

Keywords Cultural domain analysis · Male body image · South Korea · Masculinities

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Introduction

Men's body image is a growing topic of study in psychological and social sciences, particularly in relation to the ballooning rates of body image-related mental illnesses being recognized among men. Nonetheless, the experiences of non-white, non-Anglophone men in relation to body ideals espoused in their cultures have been largely overlooked within this literature. In this paper, I describe young South Korean (hereby Korean) men's contested cultural models of body ideals, paying particular attention to the relationships among body image, masculinities, and muscularities espoused by men of varying socioeconomic statuses, educational backgrounds, and sexual orientations.

Body Image and Culture

Despite decades of cross-cultural body image research, projects that effectively engage the role of culture in body image are relatively few (Anderson-Fye 2018). Research into culture itself is necessary to counteract the assumption of "universality" that plagues this research, namely that cultural differences represent deviations from the white, Western norm (Monocello 2022). While most studies recognize cultural differences in body image at the categorical level, they tend not to explore what about culture actually contributes to these differences (Lee 2004). Recognizing that culture affects body image is not the end of the research, but the exposition of new questions of what *about* culture brings about these differences (Lester 2004).

Anthropological engagement with body image research has sought to address the concept of culture more thoroughly. Early work on ethnic Fijians found that, despite intense body surveillance throughout village life, young women did not experience widespread body dissatisfaction or any amount of disordered eating. Contemporarily, Fijians valued robust bodies for women, both because of the demands of the intense physical labor women had to perform and because body size indexed social-connectedness: big bodies are fed bodies, and fed bodies are loved bodies (Becker 1995). Following the arrival of television, however, a "thin ideal" emerged, and young women began to report disordered eating behaviors like purging. Particularly attracted to the lifestyles of the characters in *Beverly Hills 90210* and the strength and independence portrayed by Lucy Lawless in *Xena: Warrior Princess*, they viewed thinness as providing access to material goods and cosmopolitanism within their rapidly globalizing community (Becker 2004). More recent research suggests a shift to a "just-right ideal" between the thin ideal and the previous robust ideal, a compromise between the aesthetic demands of cosmopolitan living and the travel industry and the cultural emphasis on the sociocentric body-as-community-project. For example, women report eating big, calorically dense meals followed by diet pills and traditional herbal purgatives provided by their female relatives to assist them their body-management (Becker 2017).

Young Belizean women were also noted for lacking eating disorders in their community, despite the ubiquity of beauty pageants and the increasing prevalence

of American media. This was related to a mantra of “Never Leave Yourself,” which instructed women to avoid engaging in behaviors that compromised their physical and psychological well-being; a widespread valuation of a “Coca-Cola Shape,” a focus on a curvy silhouette regardless of weight; and a perspective that while bodies-proper are God-given and unchangeable through one’s own effort, padding and accessorizing were valid methods for approximating an ideal body (Anderson-Fye 2004). Despite the growth in the “fit-ideal” in recent years, many Belizeans recognize this as a foreign encroachment made necessary by the travel and service industry rather than a local standard (Anderson-Fye et al. 2017).

In a final example, African-American women have been portrayed in the literature as largely immune to body image concerns, due to their acceptance of larger bodies within the dominant, European-American thin-ideal framework. In fact, the emergence of the thin-ideal in the United States was predicated on white, Protestant, and eugenicist agendas that sought both “to degrade black women *and* discipline white women,” (Strings 2019:211) inextricably tied to the othering of black bodies employed to create a thin, white elite. Nonetheless, anthropological research on the lived experience of African-American girls’ and women’s embodiment demonstrates that they embrace components of fat negativity and experience body dissatisfaction. Rather than experiencing fat as compromising to one’s self-worth, however, it is often viewed more through an “ethos of acceptable personhood” (McClure 2017), that is, as a structural barrier to kinds of self-presentation that permit full engagement with a society that seeks to exclude them.

Body Image and Masculinities

Like culture, men’s experiences of body image have also been largely neglected in research. Due to dominant (Western) cultural norms about masculinity, men are often viewed as not particularly caring about their appearance; those men who do are often thought to be compromised in their masculinity and/or heterosexuality (Räsänen and Hunt 2014). Western psychological theories on the connection between masculinity and body image distress suggest that men may pursue body image goals, particularly muscularity, when they fail to live up to masculine ideals in other domains, like personality and occupation (Blashill 2011). Queer and heterosexual men all experience body dissatisfaction, but queer men tend to experience more of it (Tiggemann, Martins and Kirkbride 2007), which may be due to greater emphasis placed on men’s appearance in queer communities than in larger heterosexual lifeworlds (Tylka and Andorka 2012). Because men’s body image concerns have been increasing in prevalence over the last several decades, across sexualities and cultures, further investigation is merited (Mitchison and Mond 2015).

Male body image research has focused largely on muscularity (Pope, Phillips and Olivardia 2000; Tiggemann, Martins and Churchett 2008), particularly because present-day U.S. hegemonic masculinity values male strength, domination of space,¹ and instrumentality (Connell 2005; Monocello and Dressler 2020)—that is,

¹ These discourses of dominance and instrumentality are also indexed in commentaries on penis size, hand size, foot size, and height as embodied credentials justifying positioning in gender hierarchies.

a body that is good for doing things (Grogan 1998). Further, men who engage their bodies in primarily aesthetic labor—such as modelling or acting—find their labor devalued in the U.S. due to ornamentality’s association with femininity and male homosexuality. They are increasingly overlooked for marketing campaigns in favor of athletes, whose instrumental muscles may incidentally serve ornamental purposes but ultimately associate products with serious masculine endeavors (Mears 2011). Male bodybuilders sometimes recognize that their bodies are culturally legitimated because of the perception of their muscles’ instrumentality, despite their own personal goals being ornamental (Monaghan 2014). Likewise, gay men report valuing muscularity in themselves and partners because of its association with the masculinity from which their sexual orientation culturally distances them (Griffiths, Jotanovic and Austen 2021).

However, this notion of hegemonic masculinity as combined with instrumental, bulky muscularity is not universal. Modern Koreans have been shown to value images of male celebrities with thin, lean, and “pretty” presentations, known as the *kkonminam* (lit. flower boy; Maliangkay 2010). Relationships between male body ideals and hegemonic masculinities in South Korea have been shaped by the political and economic circumstances of the previous 120 years. The Neo-Confucian Chosŏn era (1397–1910) associated hegemonic masculinity with scholarship in relation to a framework known as *mun-mu* (literary-martial), viewing frail philosophers who eschewed both money and physical labor as the pinnacle of moral male development. Brutal Japanese colonialism (1910–1945) and the Korean War (1950–1953) engendered sentiments of emasculation among Korean men, and decades of military dictatorship—using propaganda intended to strengthen Korean men against the continued threat of North Korean aggression—instilled a “violent” masculinity that ostensibly valued blue-collar laborers and physical development (Moon 2005). However, the populist democratic and labor movements of the 1980s exposed the government’s lack of actual regard for labor, and the Asian financial crisis of the 1990s upended both blue- and white-collar male workers’ ability to fulfill the mid-century ideal of the man as sole-provider, due to mass layoff and demands for neoliberal “flexibilization” of the workforce from the International Monetary Fund (Lee 2011). Following the undermining of the provider-role among middle-class men, the economic independence of middle-class women—spurred by the need to replace men’s lost income—increased dramatically. These newly empowered women, desiring men who were emotionally available and who shared their interests, shaped the “soft” masculinity of the *kkonminam* currently in vogue (Jung 2011).

Members of the K-Pop group BTS, especially Park Jimin and Kim Taehyung (V), are globally recognizable examples of *kkonminam* embodiment. The *kkonminam*’s body is marked by his thin, leanly defined muscular frame, fashion sense, styled (and often dyed) hair, immaculate skin, and use of cosmetics ranging from moisturizers and sunscreens to makeup (Lim 2008). While described as “feminine” (*yŏsŏngsŭrŏpta*), it is more a statement of fact—that these behaviors and aesthetics have been typically associated with women’s interests—than an indictment of their status as men or a confounder to projecting heterosexuality (Maliangkay 2010). In fact, men’s beauty practices are so widespread that Korean media describes them as

natural and instinctive (Lim 2008), and cosmetics companies market lines of products directly to soldiers performing their mandatory military service (Chae and Cheng 2018). Portraying “soft” masculinity indexes cultural refinement, an attention to trends, access to material goods, and the practice of *chagi kwalli* (self-maintenance) required to maintain the image. Even men who desire to project a more “masculine” (*namjadapta*) image, like the more bulky and domineering *chimsŭngnam* (beastly guy), engage in many of these practices (Jung 2011).

Cultural Models

This research approaches the study of Korean body image and muscularities with a definition of culture as whatever one needs to know in order to survive in a particular social group (Goodenough 1964[1957]). This knowledge is encoded in “cultural models”—skeletal understandings of phenomena which are shared (people tend to agree overall) and distributed (there is variation in the extent to which individuals agree) throughout the group (D’Andrade 1995), and there are positive or negative consequences depending on individuals’ agreement with and practice of them (de Munck and Bennardo 2019; Dressler 2018).

The sharedness and distribution of cultural knowledge can be measured using methods of cultural domain analysis (Borgatti 1999), cultural consensus analysis (Romney, Weller and Batchelder 1986), and residual agreement analysis (Boster 1986; Dressler, Balieiro and Santos 2015). Using cognitive anthropological methods departs from previous studies of Korean male body ideals in that it involves co-constructing cultural models from the responses of the participants who live, internalize, and embody the models to varying extents themselves, rather than employing top-down analyses of media depictions with assumptions of cross-cultural uniformity in male body image experience (Monocello 2020).

Muscularities

Just as there are multiple masculinities in a cultural group (Connell 2005), I argue that there are also multiple muscularities. By “muscularities” I do not mean that there are ranges of muscularity present in a population at the anatomical level. Rather, “muscularities” attends to the multiple cultural models of muscularity recognized, hierarchized, and embodied within given populations. For example, the hegemonic muscularity of the United States can be argued to be an “instrumental” muscularity, that is, muscle that is utilized toward physical ends, often labor or athletics. However, cultural recognition does not equal cultural approval: ornamental muscularity, like that of actors, male models, and even bodybuilders, is comparatively devalued and derided (Mears 2011; Monaghan 2014; Monocello and Dressler 2020). More than just components of masculinities, muscularities take on specific meanings in diverse cultural contexts, indexing the varied cultural geographies navigated by those who embody them.

Culture fundamentally alters peoples’ relationships with bodies and body ideals, and ostensible similarities in presentation often mask underlying cultural logics employed and embodied while navigating local and global cultural, social, and

political-economic systems. As the following data will show, muscularities are encoded in young South Koreans' cultural domain of male body ideals, embodying meanings and values shared widely within their society regardless of the affects and attitudes they elicit. Moreover, they challenge universalist narratives of appropriate masculine bodily presentation.

Methods and Results

This research was approved by the University of Alabama Institutional Review Board. This paper is based on data collected over 18 months of fieldwork conducted in the Seoul Metropolitan Area between 2019 and 2021, during which I engaged in participant-observation, formal interviews and informal conversations, structured cognitive anthropological methods, and person-centered ethnography with young Korean men and women ages 19–33.² Women's perspectives were also collected, as women are also involved with the construction and reproduction of cultural models of male bodies. Prior to the SARS-Cov-19 pandemic, I attended a gym four times per week to exercise and observe and began to approximate a "small muscle" physique (described below). While none of my participants directly commented on my body during interviews, a Korean language teacher once described my body shape to our class as "*mōshitta*" (cool or fashionable) and a gay Korean friend suggested that participants may have been more willing to talk to me because I was "hot."

Research participants were recruited via convenience—especially at university events and language exchange opportunities—and snowball sampling. When permission was granted, surveys and interviews were audio recorded. Participants were provided 5000 Korean won (approximately \$4.40 USD) following each interview in which they participated.

Body image becomes particularly salient in developed countries at this age range. Social media use, anxieties about economic mobility, and social pressures to find romantic partners come to the fore during young adulthood—particularly during the university years—and each increases one's vulnerability to concerns about body image (Becker et al. 2002). The university years in South Korea are also the first period of relative freedom most young Koreans experience. With newfound autonomy to date and express themselves through their bodies and clothes, finally unburdened by high school dress codes and oppressive studying schedules for the college entrance exam, pressures to emulate celebrities' appearances become particularly salient. As most young men interrupt their university studies³ to fulfill their mandatory military service, men tend to remain in university into at least their late 20s.

² Koreans calculate their age based on the year of birth, being one year old at birth and aging up on the first of the year. Therefore, a baby born on December 31st will be one year old, and then on January 1st they will be 2 years old.

³ At least 80% of Koreans engage in some tertiary education.

Table 1 Sample characteristics of the freelist participants

Variable	Male (<i>n</i> =13)	Female (<i>n</i> =12)	Total (<i>n</i> =25)
Korean Age (years)*	26 ± 3	22 ± 3	24 ± 4
Height (cm)*	175.0 ± 3.8	160.1 ± 4.2	168.5 ± 8.5
Weight (kg)	68.2 ± 8.9	–	–
BMI (kg/m ²)	22.3 ± 2.8	–	–
% Identifying as Heterosexual	46.2	75.0	60.0
% Completed Military Service	46.2	–	–

**p*<0.01

Cultural domain analysis typically involves populating the elements of the model through freelisting, determining the cognitive structure of the model through pilesorting, and exploring the dimensions by which people understand the model through cultural consensus analysis (Borgatti 1999). Across all phases of research, participants were also asked to report their age, height, weight, sexual orientation, university, major, parents' occupation, military service status, and experiences abroad. Due to the iterative nature of cultural domain analysis, I present the methods and results together and sequentially.

Freelisting

Twenty-five young people, men (*n*=13) and women (*n*=12), participated in the freelisting phase. The freelists reached saturation after 23 interviews, indicating that no new terms were being added. Table 1 describes the characteristics of the sample. The men were slightly older because of military service. Fewer than half of the male participants had completed their military service. Five of the men self-identified as gay, and two as bisexual; three women identified as bisexual. Most women chose not to report their weight, so women's BMI was not calculated.

Participants were first asked to list three to five male celebrities representative of the ideal male body in South Korea. They were then asked to list all the words and phrases people used to describe these men's features. They then repeated this exercise for celebrities who did not represent the ideal male body and list the words and phrases relevant to their appearance. These freelists were analyzed for frequency (the number of mentions of each word) and salience (the relative order in which they were mentioned) using Flame v1.2 (Pennek et al. 2016). Following the initial analysis, freelists were cleaned by standardizing words and phrases and combining synonyms into umbrella terms.

After cleaning the data 200 discrete words and phrases remained. Following the exclusion of vague terms (e.g., *chalsaenggyötta* "handsome"), those related to

personality rather than appearance (e.g., *hunnam* “warm-hearted man”), and slang⁴ that described a type of presentation rather than features themselves (e.g., *ojingŏ* “squid”—a considerably ugly person), 38 words and phrases were mentioned by more than 10% of the respondents and are presented in Table 2. I also included four items (denoted by a *) based on ethnographic observation and informal interactions: *t’ōri mant’a* (body hair), *hwaryōhan yōmsaek’an mōri* (colorfully dyed hair), *kar yōmsaek’an mōri* (brown-dyed hair), and *hwajanghada* (to wear makeup).

Freelists identified two kinds of muscularities: *chan’gūnyuk* (“small muscles”) and *manūn kūnyuk* (big muscles). *Chan’gūnyuk* referred to the thin, lean, defined muscles associated with swimmers, models, and K-Pop idols. *Manūn kūnyuk* referred to the bulky muscularity of bodybuilders or celebrity Kim Jong-Kook—muscles that were large *and* defined; the prototype does not refer to men who are both fat and muscular. Participants noted that, when they said “muscular” (*kūnyukchirida*), they were referring to “small muscles” rather than “big muscles.”

Pilesorting and Correspondence Analysis

Twenty-five young people, men ($n=16$) and women ($n=9$), participated in the pilesorting and correspondence analysis exercise. Table 3 presents the characteristics of the sample. Two men and one woman self-identified as bisexual and four men self-identified as homosexual.

Participants were provided the forty-two terms from the freelisting phase and asked to sort them into piles however they saw fit, as long as they made at least two piles. The SARS-Cov-19 pandemic hit Seoul, South Korea halfway through the pilesorting phase of the research, forcing planned in-person interviews to move online to Qualtrics. All the questions remained the same whether the interview occurred in person or on Qualtrics. By using the “Pick, Group, and Rank” question option, opening the maximum number of “Groups” (10), and stating clearly to participants that they could use as many or as few groups as they felt necessary, as long as they used at least two groups, Qualtrics effectively mimicked the in-person pilesorting experience. Further, text-entry boxes were provided directly below the groups for participants to describe the “piles” they created. I remained reachable by phone or Kakaotalk to answer any questions during and after the survey. The only questions I received were from women’s participants asking if they had to respond truthfully to the weight question; I assured them that they did not.

Figure 1 depicts the nonmetric multidimensional scaling and cluster analysis of the pilesort data. It suggests axes pertaining to the attractiveness of features (left to right: more attractive to less attractive) and location on the bodily topography (top to bottom: body to face). Stress in two dimensions was 0.187, and cultural consensus analysis found both a high degree of agreement (eigenvalue ratio: 12.449) and cultural competence (0.715 ± 0.126). Cultural competence was associated with heterosexuality among men (Spearman’s $\rho=0.657$, $p=0.006$), and residual

⁴ I speak, read, and write Korean and translated the data myself in consultation with dictionaries, Namu Wiki, and local native speakers of Korean competent in English. During data collection, participants, knowing that I am a competent but not a native speaker of Korean, would indicate when they were using slang and attempt to define it for me in English.

Table 2 Freelist results

A 한글 (Hangül)	McCune- Reischauer Romanization	English	%
뚱뚱하다	<i>ttungttunghada</i>	Fat	68
키가 크다	<i>k'iga k'üda</i>	Tall	60
피부가 하얗다	<i>p'ibuga hayat'a</i>	White skin	56
코가 높다	<i>k'oga nopta</i>	High Nose	52
키가 작다	<i>k'iga chakta</i>	Short	52
어깨가 넓다	<i>ökkaega nölta</i>	Wide Shoulders	52
이목구비가 뚜렷하다	<i>imokkubiga tturyóthada</i>	Well-defined features	52
근육이 많다	<i>künyugi mant'a</i>	Big muscles	52
눈썹이 진하다	<i>nunssöbi chinhada</i>	Thick eyebrows	48
얼굴이 작다	<i>ölguri chakta</i>	Small face	48
팔등신/칠등신이 있다	<i>p'aldüngsin/ ch'ildüngsini itta</i>	8-/7-head body	48
옷을 잘 입다	<i>osül chal iptä</i>	Dresses well	48
V라인이 있다	<i>V-raini itta</i>	V-line jaw	48
눈이 크다	<i>nuni k'üda</i>	Big eyes	44
여드름이 있다	<i>yödürümi itta</i>	Acne	44
피부에 잡티가 없다	<i>p'ibuë chapt'iga öpta</i>	Flawless skin	44
스타일한 머리가 있다	<i>süt'ailhan möriga itta</i>	Styled hair	40
깔끔하다	<i>kkalgülhada</i>	Clean and neat	40
눈이 작다	<i>nuni chakta</i>	Small eyes	36
코가 낮다	<i>k'oga natta</i>	Flat nose	32
옷을 못 입다	<i>osül mot iptä</i>	Dresses poorly	32
다리가 길다	<i>tariga kälta</i>	Long legs	28
구릿빛 피부가 있다	<i>kuritbit p'ibuga itta</i>	Tan skin	28
탈모가 있다	<i>t'almoga itta</i>	Thinning hair	28
잔근육이 있다	<i>chan'günyugi itta</i>	Small muscle	28
안경을 다	<i>an'gyöngül ssünda</i>	Wears glasses	24
180센치 이상	<i>180 sench'i isang</i>	At least 180 cm	20
머리가 작다	<i>möriga chakta</i>	Short hair	20
건강하다	<i>könjanghada</i>	Burly	20
쌍꺼풀이 있다	<i>ssangkköp'uri itta</i>	Double-eyelids	16
날씬하다	<i>narssinhada</i>	Thin	16
이가 고르다	<i>iga korüda</i>	Straight teeth	16
복근이 있다	<i>pokküni itta</i>	Abs	16
손이 크다	<i>soni küda</i>	Big hands	12
수염이 있다	<i>suyömi itta</i>	Beard	12
보조개가 있다	<i>pojogaega itta</i>	Dimples	12
튼튼하다	<i>t'ünt'ünhada</i>	Strong	12
배가 나오다	<i>paega naoda</i>	Stomach comes out	12
털이 많다	<i>t'öri mant'a</i>	Body hair	8*

Table 2 continued

A 한글 (Hangül)	McCune- Reischauer Romanization	English	%
화려한 염색한 머리	<i>hwaryōhan yōmsaek'an möri</i>	Colorfully dyed hair	*
갈염색한 머리	<i>karyōmsaek'an möri</i>	Brown-dyed hair	*
화장하다	<i>hwajanghada</i>	Wears makeup	*

*Denotes an item included by the researcher

Table 3 Sample characteristics of the Pile-sort participants

Variables	Male (n=16)	Female (n=9)	Total (n=25)
Korean Age (years)	25±3	24±4	24±3
Height (cm)*	173.5±7.3	164.5±7.4	171.1±8.7
Weight (kg)	68.8±9.7	–	–
BMI (kg/m ²)	22.0±2.8	–	–
% Heterosexual	56.3	88.9	68.0
% Completed Military Service	50.0	–	–
Average Cultural Competence:			
Pile-sorts	0.68±0.14	0.78±0.07	0.71±0.13
Handsome	0.61±0.24	0.63±0.21	0.62±0.22
<i>Kkonminam</i>	0.60±0.17	0.67±0.12	0.63±0.16
<i>Chimsüngnam</i>	0.72±0.12	0.71±0.18	0.72±0.14

* $p < 0.01$

agreement was associated with height among men (Spearman's $\rho = -0.528$, $p = 0.035$). Cluster analysis indicated four clusters: positive body-related items (blue), facial and appearance-related items (green), unappealing features (purple), and indeterminate features (gray).

Participants were also asked to indicate whether each term was associated with being handsome (*chalsaenggyōtta*), unattractive (*motsaenggyōtta*), cute (*kwiyōpta*), a “flower boy” (*kkonminam*), or a “beastly guy” (*chimsüngnam*), with the ability to indicate more than one association. Previous research indicated these categories to be relevant to the ways in which South Koreans think about male bodies (Monocello and Dressler 2020). Responses were analyzed using correspondence analysis in XLSTAT (Addinsoft 2020), presented in Fig. 2. Items are in blue, and categories are in red. It shows two axes: a horizontal axis of attractiveness (left to right: handsome, cute, ugly), and a vertical axis of presentation-type (top to bottom: *kkonminam*, *chimsüngnam*), which account for 91.2% of the total inertia. In the correspondence analysis, “small muscle” was typically associated with the *kkonminam*, while big muscles were associated with the *chimsüngnam*. In interviews, participants noted

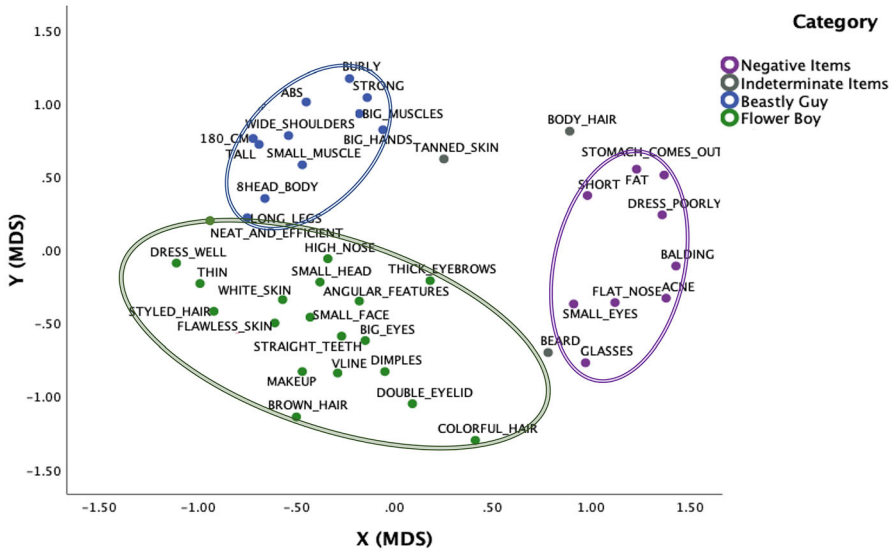


Fig. 1 Pile-sort data analyzed by nonmetric multidimensional scaling and cluster analysis

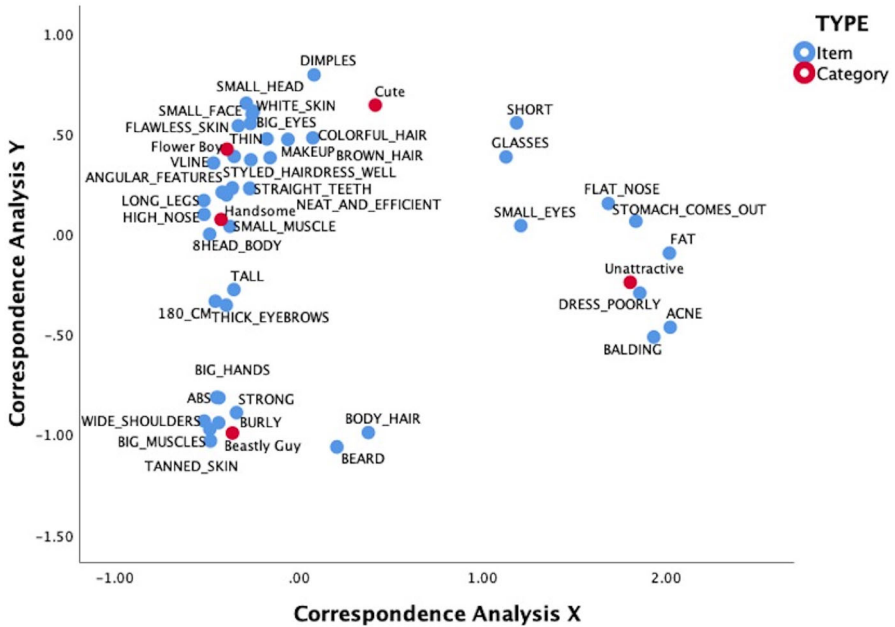


Fig. 2 Correspondence analysis of categorization exercise

that, while big muscles were typical of the *chimsŭngnam*, what made one a *chimsŭngnam* was attitude, personality, and self-presentation rather than specific muscle-type. BigBang member Taeyang was noted as an example of a

chimsŭngnam with “small muscle.” Moreover, while “small muscle” was typically associated with the *kkonminam*, it was not a necessary condition.

I also performed cultural consensus analysis on the responses to the *chalsaenggyŏtta* (handsomeness), *kkonminam* (flower boy), and *chimsŭngnam* (beastly guy) categories in the correspondence analysis, respectively, using the multiple-choice method, followed by residual agreement analysis to examine potential within-group variation (Dressler, Balieiro and Santos 2015; Henderson et al. 2022). Cultural consensus analysis of the dimension of “handsome” per responses to the correspondence analysis found strong overall agreement about how attractive these young South Koreans tended to find each feature. The eigenvalue ratio between the first and second factor was 4.3, indicating agreement, with an average cultural competence of 0.617 ± 0.223 . Cultural consensus analysis of the “flower boy” dimension also found overall agreement. The eigenvalue ratio between the first and second factor was 3.6, and the average cultural competence was 0.627 ± 0.154 . Finally, there was also cultural consensus on the “beastly guy” dimension. The eigenvalue ratio between the first and second factor was 5.6, and the average cultural competence was 0.718 ± 0.138 . Table 4 presents the items associated with each dimension by an “X.”

Residual agreement analysis of the “flower boy” dimension shows that military service predicts intracultural variation among men (Spearman’s $\rho=0.652$, $p=0.006$), and that completing military service is associated with higher cultural competence on the “flower boy” dimension (Spearman’s $\rho=0.584$, $p=0.017$). Military service is not associated with cultural competence or residual agreement in the “beastly guy” or “handsome” dimensions.

Finally, Property Fitting (PROFIT) Analysis was conducted in ANTHROPAC using the cultural answer keys of *chalsaenggyŏtta* (handsomeness), *kkonminam* (flower boy), and *chimsŭngnam* (beastly guy) against the coordinates derived from nonmetric multidimensional scaling and correspondence analysis, respectively. Property fitting (PROFIT) (Fig. 3) analysis fitting the “handsome” cultural answer key derived from correspondence analysis to the MDS ($R^2=0.776$, $p=0.001$) show that attractiveness is a strong organizing dimension with which these South Koreans think about men’s bodies. PROFIT analyses to the MDS plot return R^2 values of 0.738 ($p=0.001$) for the *kkonminam* dimension and 0.834 ($p=0.001$) for the *chimsŭngnam* dimension, showing that these dimensions were also employed in the pilesorting phase. The *kkonminam* line cuts through the appearance-related features, while the *chimsŭngnam* line cuts through the body-related features. The *chalsaenggyŏtta* (handsome) dimension cuts between the *kkonminam* and *chimsŭngnam* dimensions, suggesting that both *chimsŭngnam* and *kkonminam*-related traits are desirable. Based both on the cultural answer key and on their positions in the MDS and correspondence analysis relative to the PROFIT line, both small muscle and big muscles are considered attractive in men.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Interview data and ethnographic observation elucidates the associations these Korean young adults espoused in regard to muscularities during the freelisting and

Table 4 Cultural answer keys from correspondence analysis

Items	<i>Kkonminam</i>	<i>Chimsŭngnam</i>	<i>Chimsŭngnam</i>
Tall	X	X	X
High Nose	X		X
Short			
Wide Shoulders		X	
White Skin	X		X
Thick Eyebrows	X	X	X
Small Face	X		X
8-Head Body	X		X
Big Eyes	X		X
Small Eyes			
Long Legs	X		X
Flat Nose			
At Least 180 cm	X	X	X
Dress Well	X		X
Double Eyelids	X		X
Angular Features	X		X
V-line Jaw	X		X
Thin	X		X
Small Head	X		X
Straight Teeth	X		X
Tanned Skin		X	
Wears Glasses			
Dress Poorly			
Thinning Hair			
Acne			
Abs		X	X
Big Muscles		X	
Styled Hair	X		X
Body Hair		X	
Flawless Skin	X		X
Small Muscle	X		X
Neat and Efficient	X		X
Big Hands		X	
Beard		X	
Dimples	X		
Burly		X	
Fat			
Strong		X	
Stomach Comes Out			
Colorful Hair	X		
Brown Hair			X
Makeup	X		

inappropriate. Male idols are sometimes seen on television variety shows embarrassedly covering their armpits if a particular activity (e.g., demonstrating a dance that requires them to raise their arms) might expose unshaven hair, and the only men I ever saw wearing sleeveless shirts in public outside of athletic settings—despite oppressive heat and humidity in the summer—were occasional younger men unloading heavy deliveries from trucks. During televised K-Pop performances, male idols have to be careful not to expose more than one nipple at a time due to censorship guidelines, and men who wear slimmer fit dress shirts wear nipple guards to prevent them from sticking through the fabric. Presently, young Korean men’s casual style consists overfit t-shirts or sweatshirts with tight pants, leaving the shape of the underlying torso to be inferred from shoulder width and how the fabric drapes over the chest.

Overall, however, participants had much more to say about large muscles, especially in how men with large muscles deviate from typical expectations about men’s bodies. Like small muscles, big muscles index one’s involvement in self-maintenance practices, considering that the diet and exercise regimens required to develop big muscles can be strict. Men often admire the diligence of men with big muscles and many women find their strength to be comforting. However, this has negative sides as well. For example, men in high-paying careers are understood to be too exhausted by work to want to go to the gym afterward; therefore, men with big muscles probably are not engaged in high-paying, stable careers.

In fact, men with big muscles often find employment as personal trainers and physical therapists,⁶ both of which are lower-status jobs in South Korea. The physical labor involved in these careers is contrasted with the intellectual managerial, legal, academic, and medical labor typically performed by graduates from more highly ranked universities. Jin (23, male) said, “Muscular guys aren’t smart. It’s hard to have a conversation with them because they don’t care about anything but working out. They don’t know anything but working out.” Therefore, these jobs carry assumptions about one’s ability to study—and, consequently, one’s intelligence—which get transferred into judgments about men with large muscles.

Soo-hyun (25, male), who attends the gym at least four times per week, reflected this point:

I admire them for their bodies, they worked hard, but I don’t want it myself. Guys with big muscles have misplaced priorities. I think many guys with big muscles also use steroids...Even though I go to the gym most days, I lift weights ‘low-weight-high-rep’ so my muscles tone without getting too big. I don’t want people to judge me, because I graduate soon and will need to find a job.

Likewise, Hyun-cheol (26, male), said, “My mother scolded me the other day because my neck muscles were getting too big. She said I shouldn’t go to the gym as much, because I’m starting to look unprofessional.” Similarly, when I suggested to my friend, Deok-su (29-male), a former member of a K-Pop idol group preparing to

⁶ While physical therapy is a doctorate in many parts of the world, it is a two- to three-year degree in South Korea.

debut as a solo artist, that the juice cleanses his CEO suggested he follow to lose weight were potentially harmful and that he should try lifting weights to build a little muscle that would passively burn calories, he first responded, “I can’t do that. I’ll just be careful,” and said that he would only follow the juice cleanse for a week. He did not want to risk building too much muscularity.

On the topic of professionalism, maintaining strict, low-fat-low-carbohydrate diets is incompatible with participating in the *hoisik* (company dinners)—replete with fatty meats, soju, and beer—during which the relationships that pave advancement opportunities are established. Soojin (25, female) said:

I know one person who is struggling with this problem. He goes on a strict chicken breast diet, but he also wants to maintain relationships with his professors and colleagues. And so he sometimes has to skip eating chicken breast and he has to resort to eating fatty foods. And he does eat normal food when there are other people around, but if he is on his own he would never eat those. And he would starve for one whole day.

Even friendships can sometimes be damaged by the pursuit of large muscles, because schedules and diets proscribe spontaneous gatherings, according to Moo-Hyun (32, male):

[If a guy has big muscles], he’s a fuck-up, because he’s addicted to lifting weights. He’s so worried about losing muscle that he can’t hang out with people, because most people drink beer or eat *samgyŏpsal* (pork belly). It doesn’t help with their muscle. So, their social skills are very low.

Moreover, men with big muscles even receive judgments about their mental states. Hyemin (25, female) noted:

Men who are too muscular tend to work out to compensate for something... I know someone who is about my height (156 centimeters)—a guy—and he has masculine features. He has thick eyebrows, and he looks kind of masculine, but he had a small body, he was not really muscular, and he hated being called cute because many people call him cute. And he wanted to compensate for that, so he went to *haebyŏngdae* (Republic of Korea Marine Corps).

Hye-min’s implication was that her acquaintance joined the Marine Corps to change his body, grow his muscles and get stronger to compensate for his height. Moo-hyun agreed about the development of large muscles as a compensation behavior: “They have some trauma. They want to get big muscles, and some guys have some trauma about bullying during adolescence. So they want to get big muscles.” In my experience, however, discussions of muscular men’s desires to protect themselves from physical bullying was the closest to instrumental-muscle discourse I encountered. None of the men with whom I spoke or observed in the gym, nor those fitness models and trainers I followed on Instagram, ever talked about how much weight they lifted. Overall, the concern was not strength, but the look.

Focus on the aesthetics of muscle may have contributed to the fact that even muscular men's sexual orientations were sometimes called into question. Ji-hoon, a 21-year-old self-identified heterosexual male bodybuilder recalled:

I was watching a YouTube video by a bodybuilder about stretching before lifting early in the morning. My dad walked in and said “I thought you must have been watching pornography on your computer at dawn with the lights off. What is this? Tell me son, do you like men?”

In his case, Ji-hoon's father appeared concerned about his son's culturally atypical interests in muscle development for the sake of showing off his body, and interest in looking at other men's undressed bodies. This is within a larger understanding of large-muscled men being *kwahada* (excessive), *yahada* (oversexualized), and *paramdung-i* (playboys), particularly for the ways in which they present their bodies in public.

Discussion

This paper sought to explore the “muscularities” encoded in the domain of the ideal male body espoused by Korean young adults living in and around Seoul. These muscularities include *chan'gūnyuk* (“small muscle”) and *manūn kūnyuk* (big muscles). I distinguish “muscularities” from their typified “masculinities” because, in the Korean context, there is not a necessary correspondence between doing-being a flower boy or a beastly guy and embodying small or big muscularities, respectively. These are primarily ornamental muscularities, meaning that muscularities are embodied as something for others to look at, rather than primarily instrumental in the way that American muscularities are often approached. This supports previous research among university students in the US in which Americans distinguished the instrumental muscle of swimmer Michael Phelps from the ornamental muscle of Ryan Reynolds, while Koreans talked about the muscularities of swimmer Park T'ae-hwan and actor Cho In-sōng as primarily for “showing off” (i.e., ornamental; Monocello and Dressler 2020).

The MDS, correspondence, cultural consensus, and PROFIT analyses suggest that both the big muscularity typical of “beastly guys” and the small muscularity typically associated with “flower boys” are both considered to be attractive features in men. However, “flower boys”—and therefore small muscularity—are more closely associated with the dimension of handsomeness espoused by these Koreans. The finding that completing military service predicts higher competence in the flower boy dimension bolsters this argument: finishing physically demanding military service appears to instill a greater internalization of hegemonic flower boy ideals. It is also supported by reports that Korean men exchange beauty and skincare tips during military service (Chae and Cheng 2018), effectively consolidating and co-constructing cultural models of beauty practices in the highly regimented period of isolation from larger society. Small muscles and big muscles, therefore, appear to be expressed in the cultural model of male body ideals as hierarchized with small

muscle as the hegemonic muscularity and big muscles as a subordinated—but still valued—muscularity.

This observation is supported in the interview data as well. Men with small muscles are largely viewed as being culturally refined and engaging in socially appropriate bodily practices. They do “being healthy” while also conforming to the body norms presented in Korean pop music and dramas. Moreover, they are attuned to the needs of others, and present themselves as aware of social expectations. These male body ideals are also becoming increasingly acceptable outside of South Korea through fan cultures (Maliangkay and Song 2015; Oh 2018), but are, in other countries, encountering backlash (e.g., Ainslie 2017 [Malaysia]; Chowdhury 2021 [China]).

On the other hand, men with big muscles were often viewed as pathologic, undereducated, and having misplaced priorities, a feeling shared by older Korean men as well (Elfvig-Hwang 2021). While their bodies were admired—mostly by other men—these same admirers had little interest in pursuing these bodies for themselves. Muscular bodies were often coded as immoral, lacking in education, overly strict, antisocial, and engaged in labor associated with subordinated, instrumental masculinities. In fact, large muscles appear to blur instrumental-ornamental distinctions, and as instrumentality creeps into the body, the social valuation of that body decreases. This recalls the *mun-mu* (literary-martial) distinction that organized neo-Confucian masculinities until the twentieth century (and, to some extent, continues into the present), with the scholars at the top of the social ladder and the physical laborers near the bottom (Jung 2011; Louie 2014).

Yet, it is meaningful that—unlike fatness and its associated negativities (Brewis et al. 2011; Monocello 2020)—big muscles are inarguably a product of agency. Despite predominantly negative cultural associations with big muscles, an increasing number of Korean men actively pursue them. As the job market contracts and traditional models of success—studying hard, graduating from a top university, and securing a well-paid, stable job with social status—dwindle in available pathways (Song 2007), this growing preoccupation with the muscular body may be a strategy for dealing with ballooning economic precarity among Korean youth. Perhaps the large-muscled body is an emergent “spec”—a qualification traditionally associated with intellectual endeavors (Cho 2015)—that diversifies opportunities in the dearth of certain economic futures: in the absence of a stable career, they could still potentially make money as trainers or Instagram models. Instagram models particularly attempt to hybridize large muscles with fashion and pretty, cosmetically and/or surgically enhanced facial features. It is here that the concept of hybrid masculinities becomes instructive. “Hybrid masculinities” refers to privileged men’s selective adoption of elements of subordinated identities into their own presentation (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). What appears to be happening in these data is that some are embodying elements appropriated from subordinated masculinities—especially the large muscles prototypically associated with *mu*-masculinity—to account for inabilities to live up to Korean hegemonic masculine ideals in other domains (e.g., the scholar, the white-collar provider), and are redefining local muscularities in the process.

I argue, therefore, that muscularities cannot be reduced to their associated masculinities, but need to be problematized and investigated thoroughly in their own right. This involves understanding not only their “locations” in the cultural domains but also the ways in which muscularities relate to their societies more broadly. Muscularities are not mere indices of masculinities, but are themselves meaningful units of culture that inform peoples’ relationships among their bodies, their selfhoods, and their societies. Studying hegemonic and subordinated muscularities, like instrumental versus ornamental muscularity in the U.S. and “small muscle” versus “large muscle” in South Korea, as well as their locally constructed hybrid muscularities, allows for a deeper understanding of the pressures, meanings, and vulnerabilities men navigate in embodying messages about beauty and social value.

The hegemony of ornamental muscularities in South Korea may have health implications, as well. Body image research argues that cultural emphases on ornamentality can predispose people to eating disorders, which may explain why American women, whose bodies are valued for their ornamentality, report higher rates of disordered eating than American men, whose bodies are largely valued instrumentally. Because South Korean men experience their muscles as primarily ornamental—and, in fact, socially devalue instrumental muscularities—they may also experience elevated vulnerability to eating disorders.

The concept of “muscularities” is not limited to “instrumentality-ornamentality” or “*mun-mu*” paradigms, despite their instructiveness in these particular data. Nor should its analytical capabilities be limited to men. Rather, the concept of “muscularities” is imagined as a radically emic lens with which researchers may view the body, encouraging bottom-up investigation of the intersectional ways in which people navigate, co-construct, and (literally) incorporate cultural models of the body within global and local networks of meaning. In this way, the concept of muscularities confronts universalist narratives of bodies drawn from narrowly circumscribed, largely young, Western, Anglophone, and Caucasian populations (see: Henrich, Heine and Norenzayan 2010), especially important as “muscularity-oriented disordered eating” is being increasingly recognized and studied in men (Cunningham, Nagata and Murray 2021).

This data is limited by sampling, in that it was recruited via convenience and snowball sampling. While not random, the sample was diverse in gender, socioeconomic class, university prestige, sexual orientation, and body-type. Moreover, the sample was recruited from a population at an age particularly vulnerable to body image concerns and involved in the co-construction of these ideals through interactions with peers and media (Anderson-Fye et al. 2017). Multiple lines of analysis suggest that these data reflect broader cultural ideas about muscularities, at least in younger men. Because this research was exploratory, future research should test hypotheses about muscularities and their relationships to broader social conditions with larger, more representative samples to test the replicability of these results. Future research should also explore muscularities from perspectives of marginalized or non-dominant groups, such as athletes, body-builders, aesthetic laborers and athletes, and LGBTQ+ people within their own particular cultural milieus.

Conclusion

With rates of body image-related illnesses exploding among men around the world, greater understanding is needed of men's experiences of body image across cultural groups. The concept of "muscularities," introduced in this paper, allows for a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which men navigate cultural expectations through their bodies. I argue that South Korean men navigate muscularities—large and small—as ornamental features and aesthetic choices that index their relationships with society more broadly, as well as their health. Moreover, the hegemony of ornamental "small muscle" in South Korea challenges universalist assumptions about relationships between masculinities and muscularities. Likewise, the emerging popularity of ornamental large muscles—couched within growing cultural ambivalence about the value of these bodies—underscores the need for detailed, ethnographically informed understandings of cultural particularities in hierarchies of body types when conducting research into men's health, psychology, and social experiences.

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Declarations

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