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## In Bod We Trust

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In August of 2004, I moved from my native Montreal to South Beach. I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to attend graduate school on scholarship anywhere within the State of Florida, but I had selected South Beach to be my home. I wanted to live as a dispassionate observer and study the “*real*” South Beach Diet. My struggle with my own weight runs as far back as my memory of childhood. I grew from an overweight child into an obese young man without a concept of self-worth; my only concept of worth was the worthlessness I’d felt about my size.

Before relocating, I’d begun a journey of weight loss that marked my transformation into a thin person whose only concept of *worth* was my size. I felt drawn to a place whose concept of worth was just as *thin* to understand just how *heavy* the subject of body weight and body image are to men’s health – *my* health.

Two decade ago “No pecs. No sex.” appeared on a billboard advertising David Barton’s gym in New York City, and on the walls of the Crunch gym on South Beach: “*In Bod We Trust.*” I have long held the assertion that advertising and marketing professionals sometimes best understand human psychology and how to motivate behavior.

As a society we have this phenomenal preoccupation with control which carries to our bodies. It was no mistake that products emerged in the 1970s and ‘80s toward the masculine ideal of having abs or “*buns of steel.*” Then companies like Proctor & Gamble, makers of Secret deodorant, had developed special “feminine” products to aid women in the pursuit of a “*hard*” body - *strong enough for a man, made for a woman.* We’re also told that you are what you eat, but when are you simply -who you are? It’s all so confusing!

**IN BOD WE TRUST**

Fashion is a major contributor to this internalization of body controls; a hard body is one that dictates power. Over the past decade, men's body image concerns have gained the attention of many researchers in the field of psychology. Research shows that men on college campuses are reporting greater levels of body dissatisfaction. Fitness magazines cunningly sandwich content between advertisements for male enhancement products and sexual innuendo; it is not hard to read between the lines. The problem with so much of this research is that in practice, men are not usually inclined to seek treatment for these concerns - going to the gym *is* the treatment of choice.

It is often suggested that the goal of advertising is to create a sense of deficiency within its audience, resulting in efforts and acquisitions aimed at fulfillment. Shame, guilt and fear are all emotions that are used to elicit a response in much of mainstream advertising. The *Dove Campaign for Real Beauty* launched in 2004, by Unilever, targeted only women in an attempt to embrace the natural physical variation embodied by all women and inspire them to have the confidence to be comfortable with themselves. The campaign generated the least amount of revenue for Unilever than any other campaign before it; if you make people feel good, they don't need to buy something to feel better.

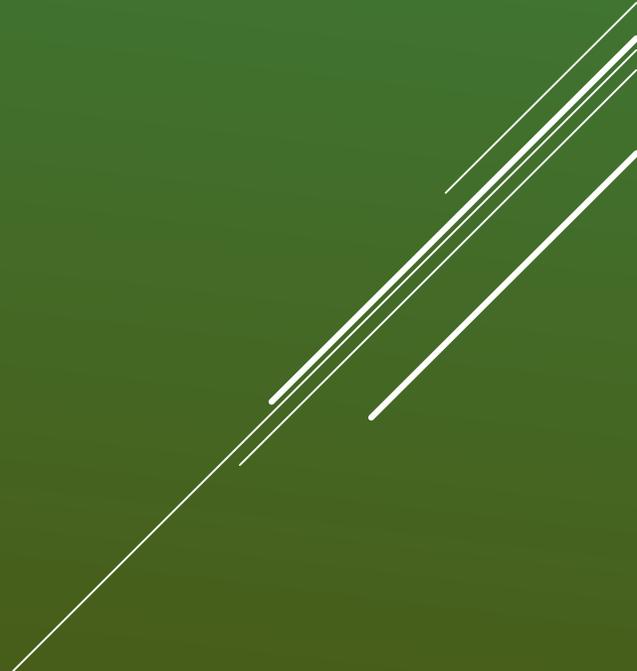
Feminist theorists have long supported the concept that traditionally male-driven industries including media, advertising, cosmetics, etc. have conspired to promote widespread dissatisfaction of women's bodies. It is common and expected that women be unhappy with their bodies; this feeling has been termed "*normative discontent*". The concept of normative discontent has been referenced a great deal within women, however, the extent to which body dissatisfaction and its correlates of body image concerns and eating disorders among men is quite similar. As is the case for women, men's body dissatisfaction has been linked to health consequences including excessive exercise, eating pathology, steroid use, depression and low self-esteem. Some research suggests that men and women's body image concerns are more similar than one might believe.

As cultural tastes evolve, that which is normative – or normally occurring – falls less and less in favor as compared to what can be improved upon through products and procedures available in the marketplace. While body hair on men was once perceived as a sign of masculinity and virility, there has been a clear shift in the use of hairless, bare-chested men in advertising. A 2008 study found that on average men wanted to be thinner, more muscular, have a fuller head of hair and less hair on their bodies. It is not a small subset of narcissistic men who experience dissatisfaction, but rather a substantial proportion - over 50 percent. Additionally, these men who were dissatisfied by their weight, natural muscularity, height, and body hair also demonstrated lower overall self-esteem related to appearance.

The field of men's health is exploring issues related to body weight, body image and self-concept but is slow to uncover these dynamics which are rapidly becoming critical in our society. Perhaps the transgender movement that is becoming a part of the mainstream is challenging more than policy and social acceptance. Gender roles are in the spotlight, as are our bodies. In 1972, Charles Aznavour wrote what would become one of his most famous songs – “What makes a man a man?” 44 years later, I present *Laith De La Cruz*, the 26-year old model featured in the next photograph.

I still live on South Beach, heavier in weight, but firmly grounded.

**ELLIOT MONTGOMERY SKLAR, AUTHOR**



▶ *Laith De La Cruz, the 26-year old model featured in this photograph is transgender and was born a female.*

▶ *“To me, masculinity is the ability to verbalize who you are, your feelings and your emotions, without the fear or the feeling of being bound to what society’s expectations are.”*

*-Laith De La Cruz*

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