



# The clothes make the man: The relation of sociocultural factors and sexual orientation to appearance and product involvement



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## ABSTRACT

In a sample of 730 men, using hierarchical regression, we examined the relation of appearance orientation, body satisfaction, internalization, perceived pressures to be lean and muscular, and sexual orientation to the importance men place in apparel and grooming products. Although investment in appearance was the strongest predictor for both product categories, internalization, body satisfaction, pressures about leanness and muscularity, and sexual orientation also were related, explaining 30–39% of the variance. Thus, men may use such appearance-enhancing products as a result of sociocultural factors but also to meet internalized societal ideals about attractiveness.

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## 1. Introduction

Sociocultural models of body image and disordered eating suggest that appearance-ideals are transmitted via different socialization agents, such as the media, peers, and family (Cash, 2002; Tiggemann, 2011). According to Cash (2002), this socialization process is central in determining how men think and feel about their bodies. Over time, and through consistent exposure to sociocultural messages and pressures, men come to internalize certain body and appearance ideals as reference points for self-evaluation. For men, regardless of their sexual orientation, muscularity and leanness are central to these ideals with a focus on strength, dominance, masculinity, and overall attractiveness (e.g., Engeln et al., 2013; Martins et al., 2008). Men's body image evaluations subsequently stem from the discrepancy, or congruity, that exists between their perceived self-state (actual-self) and the masculine appearance ideals they have internalized (ideal-self). Discrepancies between these self-states generally lead to feelings of dissatisfaction with body and self, whereas congruence is associated with a reduction in body image concerns and general psychological well-being (Higgins, 1987).

When men have internalized societal pressures to achieve specific appearance ideals, are dissatisfied with their bodies, and

are invested in how they look, they are motivated to reduce the discrepancy between their real and ideal physical self-states through one of two routes. First, they may engage in behaviors that they believe will actually change their body size and shape so as to more closely approximate how they want to look, which is generally leaner, taller, and more muscular (Ridgeway and Tylka, 2005). Such behaviors may include dieting, engaging in muscle-building behaviors (e.g., extreme weightlifting), and taking muscle enhancing products (e.g., anabolic steroids, creatine; Cafri et al., 2005; Grieve, 2007; Ricciardelli and McCabe, 2004). Second, men may seek to reduce the discrepancy through their self-presentation, that is, their choices in apparel and how they are groomed. According to Frith and Gleeson (2004), men, like women, use clothing to conceal or reveal their bodies and to approximate cultural ideals of masculinity. Third, men could lessen the importance (or centrality) of the ideal state to their sense of self and body image. Such an approach also would decrease the actual-ideal discrepancy and, theoretically, lead to improvements in body satisfaction and psychosocial well-being (Higgins, 1987). Although these three routes exist, research has focused primarily on the first, demonstrating relations between internalization, pressures, and body dissatisfaction and men engaging in more muscle building behaviors, restricting caloric intake, and having positive expectations for steroid use (Karazsia and Crowther, 2008; McFarland and Petrie, 2012; Parent and Moradi, 2011). Equally important, and more central to this study, is how men might engage in self-presentational choices to manage the discrepancy. At present, there is little information about how a broad range of

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sociocultural factors may influence men's self-presentational choices (e.g., Afonso Viera, 2009; Frith and Gleeson, 2004; Rosa et al., 2006; Shim et al., 1991), which thus is the focus of this study.

## 2. Body image and product importance

Cultural socialization predisposes men to certain body image attitudes, which are operationalized in everyday life through their investment in, and self-evaluation of, their bodies. Investment is the amount of importance men place on their appearance, and the belief that physical appearance is central to their sense of self (Cash, 2002). Through consistent exposure to traditional, gendered environments men internalize the ideals and expectations of what it means to be "masculine" and develop reference points for self-evaluation, including their bodies and physical appearance (Cash, 2002; Striegel-Moore and Bulik, 2007; Tiggemann, 2011). Body image evaluations ultimately stem from the amount of discrepancy or congruity that exists between the actual self (as one perceives oneself to be) and their ideal self (often based on internalized societal ideals). Higgins (1987) suggested that discrepancies between self-states create a psychological disequilibrium within individuals that, if not resolved, can lead to general psychological distress, depression, body dissatisfaction, and lower self-esteem. Thus, men are motivated to reduce such discrepancies to minimize their distress and improve how they feel about their bodies and appearance.

When studying men's body image concerns, it is necessary to consider sexual orientation because of its potential role in enhancing risk. All men, whether gay or heterosexual, experience pressures to maintain societally-constructed body ideals (Blond, 2008; Engeln et al., 2013), and research suggests that these ideals are internalized similarly for both groups of men (Martins et al., 2008; Tiggemann et al., 2008). For example, in separate studies, Tiggemann and her colleagues (Martins et al., 2008; Tiggemann et al., 2008) found that both gay and heterosexual men were dissatisfied with all six assessed body parts (i.e., weight, height, muscularity, body hair, head hair, and penis size). Further, in each sample, of the six body parts, body weight and muscularity were the most important components in predicting men's perceptions of themselves as physically attractive. Despite this similarity, gay men's appearance ideals are not limited to body leanness and muscularity, but incorporate other physical attributes as well, such as overall physical beauty and attractiveness, being well-groomed, having a youthful appearance, and being fashionably dressed (Cash and Smolak, 2011; Martins et al., 2008; Schwartz and Andsager, 2011). Given these different experiences between gay and heterosexual men, researchers need to consider the extent to which men's sexual orientation may play a role in their involvement with and use of self-presentational strategies (e.g., importance of using grooming products).

Men, gay or heterosexual, may seek to reduce the discrepancies between actual and ideal selves by engaging in behaviors that help them approach the desired end-state. Although common behaviors include increasing exercise frequency (e.g., weightlifting), taking anabolic steroids or other muscle-enhancing supplements, and changing eating patterns (e.g., eating less to achieve a lean body state; Engeln et al., 2013; Mayo and George, 2014), men also may rely on apparel and grooming-related products to help them enhance their self-concept or achieve congruity between their self-states (Diedrichs, 2012). Men can use apparel and grooming products to alter their appearance and help them to better approximate societal expectations. Thus, men are motivated to consume apparel (e.g., clothing) and grooming products (e.g., hair care, fragrances) to cultivate a self-image or desired identity through the transfer of meaning from the grooming product to the

self (e.g., Kressmann et al., 2006; Sturrock and Pioch, 1998; van Paaschen et al., 2015). For example, in a sample of young adult men and women, Sun and Guo (2014) investigated the extent to which self-discrepancy moderated the relation between media exposure and fashion clothing involvement. They found that the relation between internalization of media images and fashion involvement was strongest for those individuals with the highest levels of self-discrepancy. That is, the men and women who had internalized societal appearance ideals and saw themselves as being very different from those ideals were the most likely to be attentive of, involved in, and identified with fashion clothing.

The consumption of appearance-modifying products, such as clothing and cosmetics, offers men another means to negotiate the disparity between their perceived and ideal selves. Through the direct management of physical appearance, such as by wearing clothes that accentuate leanness and/or muscularity or covers up excess body fat, men may be able to reduce their body dissatisfaction and improve their appearance esteem. Thus, the importance of grooming and apparel products may be partially determined by men's dissatisfaction with their bodies, their investment in their appearance, and the extent to which they feel pressures about and have internalized societal ideals about attractiveness. Consistent with this idea, 82% of men said they felt more attractive when they were well-groomed, and half reported experiencing increased pressure to look attractive and maintain a youthful appearance, thereby motivating them to invest more in beauty products ("Men's Personal Care", 2014).

## 3. Congruity, body image, and product importance

Although discrepancy theory offers a specific set of predictions regarding the relation of body image concerns (and other socio-cultural variables) and men's self-presentational practices, from a congruity perspective, men's motivation for the use of apparel and grooming products may be a result of their desire to define themselves through their possessions. Sirgy (1982) suggested that people choose products that are consistent with their self-image, known as self-image congruity. Individuals are likely to value, or find important, a product that they believe is congruent with a corresponding positive self-image belief (Ekinci and Riley, 2003; Govers and Mugge, 2004; Kang et al., 2011; Kressmann et al., 2006; Sirgy, 1982). For example, the study by Kressmann et al. (2006) suggests that consumers have a greater attachment to automobiles with a brand personality that is congruent to their self-image. Thus, someone who is very conscientious of the environment would be more likely to purchase a hybrid or electrical car versus a gas guzzling SUV.

Studies have shown that high body satisfaction has a direct influence on consumer involvement with apparel and other means of appearance management because of the socially attributed meanings that can be passed on to the individual (Kressmann et al., 2006; Rosa et al., 2006; Tiggemann et al., 2005). For example, Rosa et al. (2006) found in a sample of men and women that high body esteem positively influenced involvement with apparel (i.e., concern with, and importance of, apparel to the individual), which ultimately affected purchase intentions. Thus, from a self-image congruity perspective, men who are satisfied with their bodies would be expected to demonstrate a high interest in, and attribute greater importance to, body-involving products; they would view these products as affirming their physical attractiveness and projecting an impression of themselves they would want others to have of them. Shim et al. (1991) found that men who were more satisfied with their bodies had favorable attitudes towards clothing and were more likely to be confident in choosing the right apparel for themselves, patronize certain stores,

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