



The association between sexual orientation, susceptibility to social messages and disordered eating in men



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ABSTRACT

Objective: Much research points to higher levels of disordered eating and more negative body image in gay and bisexual men than in heterosexual men. The reasons for this difference, however, remain unclear. We hypothesized that disturbed body image and eating attitudes in gay and bisexual men would be partially explained by susceptibility to social messages.

Methods: Two hundred and sixty-two men (203 heterosexual, 46 gay and 13 bisexual) between 18 and 35 years of age participated in the study. They completed measures of disordered eating, body image, internalization of attitudes toward appearance, and concern for appropriateness. In addition, they were asked to what extent they were influenced by ten advertisements, four that emphasized physical appearance, and six that did not.

Results: As shown in previous research, gay and bisexual men reported higher levels of disordered eating and dissatisfaction with their bodies than heterosexual men. In addition, the gay and bisexual men were more susceptible than the heterosexual men to social messages, and reported being significantly more influenced than heterosexual men by advertisements focusing on physical appearance, but not by other advertisements. Susceptibility to social messages fully mediated the association between sexual orientation and disordered eating.

Discussion: Results provide support for the hypothesis that sensitivity to social messages about appearance explains, at least partially, the link between sexual orientation and disordered eating in men.

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Gay men have consistently been found to present with greater body dissatisfaction, more negative body image, and more disturbed eating attitudes than heterosexual men (Dakanalis et al., 2012; Gill, 2007; Kaminski, Chapman, Haynes, & Own, 2005; Morrison, Morrison, & Sager, 2004; Nelson, Castonguay, & Locke, 2011; Peplau et al., 2009; Smith, Hawkeswood, Bodell, & Joiner, 2011; Yean et al., 2013; Yelland & Tiggemann, 2003). They are also at greater risk of developing eating disorders (Feldman & Meyer, 2007). These differences are gender-specific, with far less support for a connection between sexual orientation and eating disorder symptoms in women (Feldman & Meyer, 2007; Morrison, Morrison, & Sager, 2004). Understanding why gay men are at risk for eating and body image disturbances is important for prevention

and for treatment in this population. One explanation emphasizes physical appearance in the gay sub-culture as a major determinant of body dissatisfaction (Drummond, 2005; Morrison, Morrison, & Sager, 2004). Another explanation suggests that gay men are more influenced than heterosexual men by social and interpersonal messages about appearance because gay men, like heterosexual women, wish to be perceived as attractive by men (Jankowski, Diedrichs, & Halliwell, 2013; McArdle & Hill, 2009). Both explanations support the importance of social messages in the development of negative body image, yet the role of susceptibility to social messages has not been examined in relation to eating attitudes.

1. Sexual orientation, body dissatisfaction and eating pathology in men

A meta-analysis including 20 studies published between 1985 and 2003 showed slightly higher body dissatisfaction in gay men than in heterosexual men. This finding seems to be most significant

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when body dissatisfaction is assessed using reliable and valid measures (Morrison, Morrison, & Sager, 2004; Peplau et al., 2009). Gay men also report higher levels of disordered eating than heterosexual men (Dakanalis et al., 2012; Kaminski et al., 2005; Nelson et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2011; Yean et al., 2013; Yelland & Tiggemann, 2003). These findings seem hardly surprising, since body dissatisfaction and disordered eating are closely associated. Negative body image and disordered eating are both risk factors for eating disorders (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999), which are more common in gay men than in heterosexual men (Feldman & Meyer, 2007).

Since bisexuality is relatively uncommon, research on eating attitudes and body image in bisexual men is scarce and this group is often omitted from statistical analysis (Gill, 2007; Jankowski et al., 2013; Yelland & Tiggemann, 2003). When included as an independent group, bisexual men showed more pathological eating symptoms (Austin et al., 2009; Hadland, Austin, Goodenow, & Calzo, 2014) and a higher prevalence of eating disorders diagnoses (Feldman & Meyer, 2007) than heterosexual men.

Fredrickson and Roberts' Objectification Theory (1997) and Festinger's Social Comparison Theory (1954) are often used to explain the connection between sexual orientation and disordered eating in men. According to Objectification Theory, contemporary Western society evaluates women largely according to body shape and sexual attractiveness to men. Women therefore internalize a self-objectifying role, learn to base their self-esteem on physical appearance, and experience anxiety and shame when their body does not comply with prevailing standards of attractiveness. Levels of self-objectification, distorted body image, and disordered eating, although lower for men than for women, are positively intercorrelated in samples of both genders. Interestingly, these intercorrelations are stronger and more stable in gay than in heterosexual men (Dakanalis et al., 2012; Wiseman & Moradi, 2010). In addition, gay men report higher levels of self-objectification than heterosexual men (Wiseman & Moradi, 2010). Objectification Theory explains this by pointing out that men wanting to attract other men tend to adopt social norms similar to those of women wanting to attract men (McArdle & Hill, 2009; Peplau et al., 2009).

According to Social Comparison Theory, we learn about and evaluate ourselves by comparing ourselves to others (Festinger, 1954). Women who compare their bodies to those of thin models experience increased body dissatisfaction (Richnis, 1991; Tiggemann & McGill, 2004). Similarly, men exposed to pictures of muscular men express less satisfaction with their muscularity and their physical attractiveness than men exposed to pictures that do not emphasize appearance (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2009). Environmental conditions that encourage social comparison to an unobtainable body ideal therefore seem to be detrimental to body image and eating attitudes.

Young gay men interviewed by Drummond (2005) and Hutson, 2010 spoke about such conditions in the gay subculture. They reported comparing their physical appearance to that of other men and emphasized the unobtainable thin, muscular body ideal in the gay subculture. They reported a sense of failure when they felt their own bodies deviated from the strict norms of the gay subculture, and also when the bodies of men they dated deviated from these norms. Jankowski et al. (2014) found that gay men mentioned appearance in conversations more frequently than heterosexual men. The frequency of comments about appearance mediated the association between sexual orientation and body satisfaction.

2. Sexual orientation and social messages

Much research has focused on the influence of mass media on

body image and eating attitudes. The mass media, which influence virtually everybody in the Western world today, are saturated with messages about appearance that have cumulative, negative effects on body image (Thompson et al., 1999). The internalization of attitudes towards appearance predicts body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (Levine & Murnen, 2009). Whereas the idealized female body is thin, the idealized male body is muscular (Leit, Pope, & Gray, 2001; Parent, 2013; Spitzer, Henderson, & Zivian, 1999). Media efforts targeting the gay community present an idealized male body that is both muscular and thin (Lanzieri & Cook, 2013; Yelland & Tiggemann, 2003).

Gay men may also tend to be more susceptible than heterosexual men to the influence of messages about appearance promoted by the media. For gay men, intercorrelations between media influence, body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem are stronger than for heterosexual men, after controlling for media use (McArdle & Hill, 2009). Self-esteem and body image are stronger mediators of the link between the internalization of media messages and disordered eating in gay men than in heterosexual men (Yean et al., 2013). We aimed to clarify whether gay men's sensitivity to media messages reflects a heightened general sensitivity to interpersonal messages, or a specific sensitivity to messages about appearance.

3. Social messages, protective self-presentation and disordered eating

According to Lennox and Wolfe (1984), concern for appropriateness, as measured by the Concern for Appropriateness Scale (CAS; Lennox & Wolfe, 1984), is a protective self-presentation style motivated by a need to gain approval and avoid rejection. CAS scores have been found to be positively related not only to restraint, conformity and social anxiety. Of special relevance to this study, they have also been found to correlate with the tendency to conform, to be influenced by interpersonal communication and to be susceptible to peer pressure (Johnson, 1989; Slama & Celuch, 1995).

Seeking to gain approval and avoid rejection in terms of body shape and size involves giving a society or a subculture what it is values and seeks, looking to be accepted and to avoid being discounted. When conformity to social messages about body shape and size is taken to an extreme, a person will go to extreme lengths to diet and adopt unhealthy eating behaviors in an attempt to achieve the proscribed body shape. Paradoxically, this can result in a body shape and weight that stand out as being different, as in the extreme case of anorexia nervosa.

A major aim of people with high "concern for appropriateness" is to fit in order to be approved, liked, found agreeable and attractive. In terms of the gay community's attitude towards ideal body shape, this means being thin and muscular (Drummond, 2005; Hutson, 2010). Gay men who try to lose weight often strive less for health than for aesthetics. They seek to look attractive, to conform to the expectations of their subculture, and to avoid what stands out negatively – being fat and flabby (Drummond, 2005). So looking attractive (e.g. thin and muscular) is in fact a form of conformism and not standing out as different and condemnable. It is therefore paradoxical that the underweight body resulting from an eating disorder attracts negative attention.

Bachner-Melman and her colleagues (2009) found concern for appropriateness, as measured by the CAS, to be higher in a group of women with a lifetime diagnosis of anorexia nervosa than in a control group of women, and reported a positive link between concern for appropriateness and symptom severity in the anorexia nervosa group. In this study, an association was also observed between concern for appropriateness and disordered eating in a non-clinical female population. Of relevance to the present study, the

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