



“Appearance potent”? A content analysis of UK gay and straight men’s magazines



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ABSTRACT

With little actual appraisal, a more ‘appearance potent’ (i.e., a reverence for appearance ideals) subculture has been used to explain gay men’s greater body dissatisfaction in comparison to straight men’s. This study sought to assess the respective appearance potency of each subculture by a content analysis of 32 issues of the most read gay (*Attitude*, *Gay Times*) and straight men’s magazines (*Men’s Health*, *FHM*) in the UK. Images of men and women were coded for their physical characteristics, objectification and nudity, as were the number of appearance adverts and articles. The gay men’s magazines featured more images of men that were appearance ideal, nude and sexualized than the straight men’s magazines. The converse was true for the images of women and appearance adverts. Although more research is needed to understand the effect of this content on the viewer, the findings are consistent with a more appearance potent gay male subculture.

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Introduction

Gay men consistently present greater body dissatisfaction and related health consequences in comparison to straight men. For example, a meta-analysis of 20 studies comparing these two groups found that gay men reliably report greater levels of body dissatisfaction (Morrison, Morrison, & Sager, 2004; Smith, Hawkeswood, Bodell, & Joiner, 2011). More recent research has replicated these findings (Jankowski, Diedrichs, & Halliwell, 2013; Marino-Carper, Negy, & Tantleff-Dunn, 2010; Tiggemann, Martins, & Kirkbride, 2007). Gay men also report higher levels of disordered eating, socio-cultural appearance pressures and other related health outcomes (Jankowski et al., 2013; Marino-Carper et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2011). The central question then becomes why?

One explanation proposed for these differences is that the gay male subculture is more ‘appearance potent’ than the straight male subculture. That is, even though both gay and straight male cultures endorse the prevailing cultural appearance ideal (i.e., the young, White, mesomorphic male with facial symmetry, a full head of hair and minimal body hair; Saucier & Caron, 2008; Tiggemann et al., 2007), gay male culture places a greater importance on appearance and objectifies and reveres the male appearance ideal to a greater

extent than does straight male culture (Silberstein, Mishkind, Striegel-Moore, Timko, & Rodin, 1989). Differences between gay and straight men’s body dissatisfaction are therefore at least partly attributed to the different subcultural environments in which gay (e.g., gay bars, gay men’s magazines and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) organizations) and straight men are thought to live.

To the best of our knowledge, there exist only five studies that have explicitly compared differences in appearance potency between gay and straight male subcultures via analysis of dating adverts and magazines (Bartoş, Phua, & Avery, 2009; Epel, Spanakos, Kasl-Godley, & Brownell, 1996; Kaufman & Chin Phua, 2003; Kenrick, Keefe, Bryan, Barr, & Brown, 1995; Lanzieri & Cook, 2013). These media formats represent one element of or proxy for gay male and straight male subcultures. Specifically, although some have questioned whether discrete subcultures actually exist (Duncan, 2010; Kane, 2009), gay men’s and straight men’s media attempt to capitalize on distinct subcultures by creating content for, and marketing to, gay and straight men separately. This occurs even if, in reality, either group of men resist participation, or do not participate exclusively, in such subcultures (e.g., when gay men read straight men’s magazines).

Four of the above five studies that examined differences between gay and straight men’s subcultures analyzed dating adverts. Two of these examined the stated age preferences of US dating adverts posted by gay and straight men (Kaufman & Chin Phua, 2003; Kenrick et al., 1995). Whereas Kaufman and Chin Phua

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(2003) found that gay men were more likely than straight men to request an older partner, Kenrick et al. (1995) found that the two groups specified similar age preferences. The third study, conducted by Epel et al. (1996), found that US dating adverts posted by gay men mentioned aspects of appearance of both the user and the desired partner significantly more often than adverts posted by straight men. Finally, in contrast, Bartos et al. (2009) found that Romanian men-seeking-women dating adverts stipulated the desired weights, heights and youth of their potential partner more often than men-seeking-men dating adverts (although both groups were equally likely to give their own weights and heights).

The fifth study, conducted by Lanzieri and Cook (2013), is the first to compare gay and straight male targeted media. This study assessed the degree of body fat and muscularity of male images in widely read US gay and straight men's magazines. The researchers found that images of men in the gay men's magazines had lower levels of body fat compared to straight men's magazines, but did not differ in levels of muscularity. Given body fat and muscularity are both important components of the cultural male appearance ideal (Tiggemann et al., 2007), these results offer partial support to the proposition that gay men's subculture (at least as displayed in these magazines) is more appearance potent than its straight counterpart.

The assessment of appearance potency in the Lanzieri and Cook (2013) study was limited to the body fat and muscularity of the images of men in these magazines. However, there exist other components of the male appearance ideal, such as having a full or shaved (though not balding¹) head of hair, youthfulness, and little body-hair. This is supported in qualitative research where men consistently list these appearance aspects as what the ideal man should have (Fawcner & McMurray, 2002; Tiggemann et al., 2007). In addition, there are other types of appearance potency beyond ideal images of men (discussed further on). Accordingly, a fuller and more detailed appraisal of the appearance potency of gay and straight men's media is warranted.

It can be seen that the existing empirical evidence for greater appearance potency in the gay male subculture (presented above) is conflicting and limited. Thus it seems premature to explain gay men's higher body dissatisfaction as a result of a more appearance potent subculture when this has not been definitively established. More generally, there has been recent criticism of researchers "stereotyping [gay men]...[by making] generalizations that gay men are socialized by the gay subculture to be fixated on their appearance; evaluations that reduce [them] to being universally fixated on their appearance" (Kane, 2010, p. 315).

Therefore the present study aimed to appraise the appearance potency via a detailed content analysis of samples of gay and straight men's media. As in the studies above, content analytic methodology provides a more objective and reliable appraisal than the self-report data used to compare gay and straight men in many previous studies (e.g., Jankowski et al., 2013) where it is not clear whether any differences between gay and straight men are more "announced than pronounced" (Kane, 2010, p. 315).

What Elements of the Media are Appearance Potent?

To assess the relative appearance potency of gay and straight male media in any detail, it is necessary to understand which elements can be deemed appearance potent. A number of different theories (Aubrey & Taylor, 2009; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Price

& Tewksbury, 1997; Tiggemann, 2012) have identified appearance ideals and sexualized media content as sources of multiple detrimental effects on their consumers and therefore as appearance potent content. In particular, Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) argues that pervasive sociocultural pressures in the form of sexual objectification gradually socialize individuals to view and monitor their own bodies from an outsider's perspective (i.e., to self-objectify), resulting in a range of potential psychological problems including body dissatisfaction (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Tiggemann, 2013). Although Objectification Theory was formulated as a formal account of women's experience, its application has been extended to gay men. Two studies have found that when gay male participants (but not their straight counterparts) are randomized into objectifying conditions (e.g., trying on a swimsuit, viewing idealized images of men), their self-objectification and body dissatisfaction significantly increase (Martins, Tiggemann, & Kirkbride, 2007; Michaels, Parent, & Moradi, 2013). This evidence suggests that gay men may experience body dissatisfaction and related consequences at least partially due to a self-objectifying perspective arising from the greater appearance potency and socio-cultural objectification of their subculture. For straight men, on the other hand, encountering sociocultural objectification may be a new or rare experience and thus have little effect.

More general support for the above sociocultural theories and the appearance potency of this media content comes from the finding that men's self-reported pressure from the media correlates with higher levels of body dissatisfaction (Barlett, Vowels, & Saucier, 2008). In addition, several meta-analyses of experimental studies have concluded that acute exposure to lean and muscular images of men leads to increases in body dissatisfaction (Barlett et al., 2008; Blond, 2008; Ferguson, 2013), as well as depressed mood, disordered eating and other related health problems (Hausenblas et al., 2013) for some men. This evidence and research highlights the appearance potency (e.g., via its resultant effects on men's body dissatisfaction) of appearance ideal and sexualized media content.

However, as mentioned above, there are other components of the male appearance ideal beyond a man's body shape, e.g., his level of head hair or age (Tiggemann et al., 2007), that are potentially important aspects of media images that have not been assessed. In addition, other characteristics of the photographic image, such as the degree of nudity and objectification present, have also not been examined. There is also reason to suggest that appearance potency effects may result from media content other than images of men. In particular, research has documented that straight men's magazines contain a plethora of images of appearance ideal, sexualized and nude women (Aubrey & Taylor, 2009; Conley & Ramsey, 2011; Taylor, 2005) and that (straight) male participants' exposure to these images is related to higher levels of body dissatisfaction (Aubrey & Taylor, 2009). In line with Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), women are the object of straight men's gaze. Therefore images of women should be more likely to conform to the cultural appearance ideal, be nude and sexualized in the straight men's magazines than the gay men's magazines (as men will be the object of gay men's gaze in the gay men's magazines).

Finally, media content other than images of people (men or women) can be judged as appearance potent. With regards to magazines, such content includes both advertisements and articles that focus on appearance. Specific examples include advertisements for skin care or fragrance products, and feature articles on fashion or muscle building. So although the effects of this content have not been explored in experimental or quantitative studies this content is still theorized to be appearance potent and therefore is important to assess when appraising the media's appearance potency.

¹ UK company Skalp highlights how a full head of hair – even if shaved – is considered more culturally appearance ideal than a balding head. The company tattoos ink follicles onto men's scalps in order to "create a full, convincing, youthful and attractive hairline" (Skalp™, 2014).

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