

Raising the bar on the body beautiful: An analysis of the body image concerns of homosexual men

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Abstract

Research suggests that gay men are at particular risk for body image dissatisfaction. This study seeks to extend research on gay men's body image concerns. A survey assessed the nature and correlates of body image dissatisfaction among 64 gay men. The survey included assessments related to involvement in and perceived acceptance within the gay community, social comparison tendencies, body image satisfaction, self-esteem, and depression. The results indicate that most participants were concerned with muscularity rather than weight. Greater social comparison tendencies and higher body mass index (BMI) were associated with greater body dissatisfaction. Although involvement and perceived acceptance in the gay community did not independently predict general body image dissatisfaction, there is evidence to suggest that the association between body image and self-esteem may be moderated by integration into the gay community, defined as involvement and perceived acceptance. Implications for the further study of gay men's body image are discussed.

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Introduction

Most body image research has focused on women who constitute approximately 90% of those diagnosed with eating disorders (Striegel-Moore, Silberstein, & Rodin, 1986) and who express greater body image dissatisfaction than men (Feingold & Mazzella, 1996). On average, Caucasian women especially express a desire to be thinner (Fallon & Rozin, 1985) and many women believe they weigh more than they do and that they are less physically fit than objective assessments reveal (Lynch & Zellner, 1999). In an effort to identify the causes of body image dissatisfaction, researchers have often focused on the influence of idealized bodies shown in the media (e.g., Levine, Smolak, & Hayden,

1994), which serve as comparison others (e.g., Heinberg & Thompson, 1992). Although exposure to, comparison with, and internalization of idealized media images are not the only causes of body dissatisfaction, research has shown that exposure to images is associated with increased body dissatisfaction (e.g., Stice & Shaw, 1994). Not surprisingly, body dissatisfaction among women is associated with lower self-esteem, depression, and disordered eating at the clinical and sub-clinical levels (for a comprehensive review see Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999).

Although men's body image has not been the focus of as much research as has women's body image, recent evidence suggests that many men are dissatisfied with their bodies (e.g., Pope, Phillips, & Olivardia, 2000). For example, a *Psychology Today* survey revealed that 43% of men were unhappy with their appearance in general (Garner, 1997). The nature of dissatisfaction for men may be different from the apparent unidirectional

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drive among women to be thinner in that men may express a desire to be thinner or a desire to be more muscular. Several studies suggest that men are roughly equally divided between desiring to lose weight and desiring to gain muscularity (Drewnowski & Yee, 1987; Silberstein, Striegel-Moore, Timko, & Rodin, 1988). Among younger (Serdula et al., 1993) or underweight (Harmatz, Gronendyke, & Thomas, 1985) males the desire to gain muscle mass appears to predominate whereas other groups, such as older men, may show a stronger preference for reducing weight (Lynch & Zellner, 1999). Of course, weight reduction may reflect a desire to lose body fat and increase lean muscle mass. Although the desire for thinness and muscularity may yield different effects, it seems likely that men who experience either type of body dissatisfaction are subject to a variety of negative consequences (Harmatz et al., 1985; Tucker, 1982). For example, men who perceive themselves to be less muscular or to have a higher percentage of body fat than their ideal may experience low self-esteem (Lynch & Zellner, 1999; Yelland & Tiggemann, 2003), engage in risky behavior related to eating (e.g., Anderson, 1992) or abuse steroids (Blouin & Goldfield, 1995). The limitations of our extant knowledge notwithstanding, research suggests that many men are dissatisfied with their bodies and that such dissatisfaction may impact psychological and physical health.

Body image concerns may be more pronounced among particular groups of men; that is, subgroups of men may be more at risk for body image dissatisfaction. One such subgroup may be gay men (e.g., Russell & Keel, 2002; Siever, 1994). Research demonstrating the over-representation of gay men among males diagnosed with eating disorders (Anderson, 1992) supports the contention that gay men are at greater risk for body image dissatisfaction because body image is a major risk factor for developing eating disorders (e.g., Carlat, Camargo, & Herzog, 1997; Thompson et al., 1999). Using the records of men suffering from eating disorders, Carlat et al. (1997) found that 27% reported being either homosexual or bisexual. Other studies have found that in comparison to heterosexual men, homosexual men report greater body image dissatisfaction and more disordered eating (Beren, Hayden, Wilfley, & Grilo, 1996; French, Story, Remafedi, Resnick, & Blum, 1996; Russell & Keel, 2002; Silberstein, Mishkind, Striegel-Moore, Timko, & Rodin, 1989; Yager, Kurtzman, Landsverk, & Wiesmeier, 1988). A recent meta-analysis of studies comparing heterosexual and homosexual men on several indices of body image satisfaction supports

the general conclusion that gay men are less happy with their bodies (Morrison, Morrison, & Sager, 2004).

It is less clear from such studies what gay men are particularly unhappy with regarding their bodies. Herzog, Newman, and Warshaw (1991) summarized the early research on disordered eating by suggesting that homosexual men idealize an underweight body and have a “higher pursuit of thinness” than heterosexual males. However, given more recent evidence regarding male body image concerns (e.g., Yelland & Tiggemann, 2003), it is reasonable to argue that some gay men exhibit a strong drive for thinness whereas others, perhaps the majority, express a strong desire for muscularity. Moreover, the increasing value of muscularity may reflect the tendency to associate muscularity with masculinity (e.g., Halkitis, Green, & Wilton, 2004; Mishkind, Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1986). Within the gay community, muscularity may be an important signal of health, which may be especially important as the community deals with the impact of HIV/AIDS. The present research is intended to examine both thinness and muscularity desires and the correlates of those desires.

In addition to the evidence regarding disordered eating, aspects of gay male culture appear to support the proposition that gay men are more at risk for body dissatisfaction. Several studies suggest that gay male culture emphasizes physical appearance more than heterosexual male culture (Epel, Spanakos, Kasl-Godley, & Brownell, 1996; Siever, 1994; Silberstein et al., 1989) and individuals, including gay men, endorse the stereotype that gay men are more appearance oriented than heterosexual men (Gettelman & Thompson, 1993). Perhaps, this emphasis on physical appearance is a result of needing to attract men, who value physical appearance more strongly than women (Feingold, 1990). The heightened value of physical appearance is reflected by the tendency of gay men to integrate physical appearance more strongly into their self-concepts (Silberstein et al., 1989). Consequently, the influence of body dissatisfaction on self-esteem and depression may be especially powerful for gay as compared to heterosexual men.

If gay male culture emphasizes appearance, it seems reasonable to expect that increasing involvement in “gay culture” would increase body dissatisfaction. Beren et al. (1996) found that community involvement was, in fact, a significant predictor of body dissatisfaction for gay men. One explanation for this linkage is that, as gay men become more integrated into gay culture they are more frequently exposed to the body type of the desirable gay man and experience greater

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