The Gay Image: Factors that Predict Thin and Muscular Body Image Dissatisfaction in Gay Men

Abstract
This study aimed to determine predictors of both muscular and thinness body image dissatisfaction in gay men. It was predicted that there would be a positive association between internalized homophobia, conformity to masculine norms, exposure to the media and gay media and body image dissatisfaction. One-hundred and nineteen gay men completed a web-based survey and four multiple regressions indicated that the factors of media, internalized homophobia and masculine norms contributed to thinness body image dissatisfaction (22% of the variance) and muscular body image dissatisfaction (41% of the variance). Internalized homophobia accounted for 4% of the variance. Exposure to the media and gay media accounted for 17% of the variance in thinness body image dissatisfaction and 40% of the variance in muscular body image dissatisfaction. The impact of cultural media imagery, traditional masculine ideologies, internalized homophobia and preventative and remedial clinical applications are discussed along with limitations and directions for future research.

Introduction
Recent investigations into body image dissatisfaction in men have revealed that men are increasingly concerned with their own bodies (Bergeron & Tylka, 2007; Frederick, Peplau, & Lever, 2006). Men have been more commonly found to exhibit dissatisfaction in relation to muscularity and muscle density of the upper torso (McCreary & Sasse, 2000). Alhert and Walker (2004) found that bodybuilders experienced pressure to conform to masculine ideals and that greater pressure contributed to psychological distress. Similarly, McCreary, Saucier and Courtenay (2005) found that men who endorsed gender role norms and who desired muscular bodies experienced higher levels of gender role conflict.

Although recent literature has begun to explore the nature of muscular body image dissatisfaction in men, limited research has been conducted examining the muscular body image concerns of minority groups such as the concerns of gay men. Gay men have often been found to be more aware and concerned with their physique compared to heterosexual men (Beren, Hayden, Wilfley, & Grilo, 1996; Russel & Keel, 2002; Seiver, 1994). Tiggerman, Martins and Kirkbride (2007) explored body image in gay men and heterosexual men and found that gay men described themselves as less muscular than heterosexual men and were more likely to constantly evaluate and be acutely aware of their bodies.

In contrast to studies of muscularity and body image dissatisfaction, other studies have shown that gay men express body image dissatisfaction in relation to weight and the pressure to be thin and youthful (Epel, Spankos, Kasl-Godly, & Brownell, 1996; Williamson & Hartley, 1998). Studies have shown the gay community and its media value physical appearance and attractiveness and that a gay man’s worth is often judged solely by his external appearance, weight and sexual prowess (Gil, 2007; Seiver, 1994). Williamson (1999) argued that internalized homophobia could contribute to the high prevalence of eating disorders in gay men. He postulated that gay men who did not have strategies to reconcile their self-loathing and disgust in relation to their sexuality and who did not have a close support network would be at a higher risk of developing an eating disorder. However, research is needed to determine whether internalized homophobia significantly contributes to eating
disorders or body image dissatisfaction. Several studies have found high concordance rates of homosexuality (10% - 42%) and anorexia nervosa in men (Carlat, Camargo, & Herzog, 1997; Herzog, Norman, Gordon, & Pepose, 1984; Olivardia, Pope, Mangweth, & Hudson, 1995; Russel, & Keel, 2002).

Advertising and the media in general have been identified as factors contributing to body image dissatisfaction (Leit, Gray, & Pope, 2002; Yang, Gray, & Pope, 2006). Adolescent men who watched prime-time television and music videos which featured muscular imagery and promoted masculine ideologies reported higher levels of body image dissatisfaction (Schooler & Ward, 2006). Leit et al. (2002) found in their study of undergraduate university students that participants shown muscular images reported a larger discrepancy between their own perceived muscularity and the muscular images.

Gay men are exposed to media in the gay community as well as mainstream media. However, research into body image dissatisfaction and the impact of gay community media has not received wide attention. With the introduction of the internet and online dating/sex sites, sexualised and idealistic male imagery is more frequent and readily available. The purpose of idealistic male images is to associate the physical form with feelings of desire and, in the case of gay men, sexual desire (Epel et al. 1996; Oakenful & Greenlee, 2005). Drummond (2005) has argued that the gay media decreases body image satisfaction. There is debate, however, as to whether gay men are more preoccupied with thinness or a muscular body image, as the literature provides evidence of both.

The aims of this study were threefold: first, to determine predictors of body image dissatisfaction in gay men in relation to muscularity and thinness with a view to determining which predictors influence body image dissatisfaction the most; second, to investigate whether masculine norms and internalized homophobia are predictors of body image dissatisfaction in gay men in relation to both muscularity and thinness, and third, to investigate the role of the media and gay media in predicting body image dissatisfaction.

It was predicted that there would be a positive association between internalized homophobia, conformity to masculine norms, exposure to the media and gay media and body image dissatisfaction (in relation to both muscularity and thinness), and that exposure to the media and gay media would contribute the most variance in muscular and thinness body image dissatisfaction. It was also predicted that media and gay media exposure would predict a larger proportion of variance in muscular body image dissatisfaction than thinness body image dissatisfaction. It was also predicted that internalized homophobia would contribute a unique amount of variance in both muscularity and thinness body image dissatisfaction. It was predicted that masculine norms would contribute a unique amount of variance in muscular body image dissatisfaction.

Method

Participants

The sample comprised of 172 gay men aged between 18 and 40 years (mean age = 28.83 years, SD = 8.84 years) because this age group was most likely to have the highest exposure to electronic media.

Materials

The Multidimensional Body-Self Relations Questionnaire – Appearance Scales (MBSRQ-AS) were used to measure the importance of physical attractiveness, grooming and thinness (Cash, 1990). Body ideal distress and desire for muscularity was measured using Kimmel and Mahalik’s (2004) Masculine Body Ideal Distress Scale (MBIDS). The Internalized Homophobia Scale (IHS) was used to assess how comfortable a participant was with his homosexuality (Martin & Dean, 1987). The Male Role Norms Scale (MRNS) was used to assess masculine norms and attitudes (Thompson &
The 26-item scale includes three factors: status, toughness and anti-femininity. All of the above have acceptable reliability and validity.

The Media Frequency and Impact Questionnaire (MFIQ) was devised for use in this study based on questionnaires and the findings of previous research (Labre, 2005; Low, 2007; Philaretou, Mahfouz & Allen, 2005; Pope, Olivardia, Gruber, et al. 1999; Schooler & Ward, 2006; Soban, 2006; Weber, 2006; Yang et al. 2005). It measures 13 diverse behaviours in relation to the media rather than a construct that might be called media exposure. As such it does not constitute a scale. For example, participants’ exposure to the print media doesn’t necessarily correlate highly with their exposure to the electronic media and, furthermore, their exposure to one form of print media (men’s health magazines) doesn’t necessarily correlate highly with their exposure to other forms of print media, such as gay newspapers. Therefore, each participant had 13 separate scores rather than a total score.

**Procedure**

An electronic version of questionnaires was published online for participants to complete anonymously. Seventeen Australian, two American and 11 British gay hobby groups and clubs were invited to participate in the study by email; this invitation contained a link to the online questionnaire which enabled all respondents to remain anonymous. A link to the online questionnaire was also posted on two high traffic gay interest websites.

**Results**

Eleven cases were deleted because participants did not meet the age criteria. Twenty-eight cases were removed from the initial data set because of large numbers of missing values. Missing values were replaced with the corresponding mean value for the questionnaire. Descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1 Means and Standard Deviations of Body Image Dissatisfaction and Internalized Homophobia, Masculine Norms and Media (N =119)</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Variables</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>MBSRQ-AS (attractiveness/thinness body image dissatisfaction)</td>
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<td>MBIDS (muscular body image dissatisfaction)</td>
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<tr>
<td>IHS (internalized homophobia)</td>
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<td>MRNS (masculine norms)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Media 1</td>
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<td>Media 5</td>
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As shown in Table 1, the ‘attractiveness/thinness body-image dissatisfaction’ mean score and standard deviation demonstrated gay men in the study showed moderate levels of dissatisfaction. The variable ‘muscular body-image dissatisfaction’ mean score was moderately high, suggesting there may be some level of muscular body-image dissatisfaction experienced by the gay men. The mean on ‘internalized homophobia’ shows that gay men reported low internalized homophobia. The mean score of the ‘media’ items showed a moderate involvement and exposure media/gay media.

The evaluation of assumptions led to the variables being checked for skewness and kurtosis. The assumption of normality could not be achieved for the variable ‘media 1’ and it was subsequently deleted. Two variables; ‘media 6’ and ‘media 13’ were negatively skewed. They were subsequently deleted because, despite transformations, normality could not be achieved. The remainder of individual MFIQ items in the questionnaire met the normality assumptions and were used in the regression model. The assumptions of linearity, multicollinearity and singularity were not violated.

Eleven cases were identified as univariate outliers by inspecting boxplots and were removed from the data set. No multivariate outliers were detected. The final sample size included 122 participants in the statistical analysis with a mean age of 26.9 years (SD = 6.45 years). The minimum ratio for cases to IVs was 116 for individual predictors in the regression model therefore statistical power requirements were met in concordance with Tabachnick and Fiddel (2007, pp. 123).

A standard regression procedure was performed between ‘attractiveness/thinness body-image dissatisfaction’ (MBSRQ) scores as the DV and ‘internalized homophobia’ (IHS), ‘media’ (MFIQ items), and ‘masculine norms’ scores (MRNS) as IVs. The regression analysis was shown to significantly differ from zero, $F(12, 109) = 2.71, p < .05$. An $R^2$ value of .23 (adjusted $R^2 = .14$) demonstrated the contribution of 23% (or 14% using adjusted $R^2$) of the variance in ‘attractiveness/thinness body-image dissatisfaction’ by the predictors; ‘internalized homophobia’, ‘media’ and ‘masculine norms’. To determine the unique contributions of variables in the DV, standardized beta values were observed as shown in Table 2.
As shown in Table 2, ‘internalized homophobia’, ‘media 5’ (frequency of playing video games) and ‘masculine norms’ significantly contributed to attractiveness/thinness body-image dissatisfaction scores with standardized beta values of -.24, .23 and -.32 respectively. Squared semi-partial correlations were also obtained for ‘internalized homophobia’ (-.21, contributing 4% of the variance), ‘media 5’ (-.29, contributing 8% of the variance) and ‘masculine norms’ (.20, contributing 4% of the variance).

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A second standard regression analysis was conducted using ‘muscular body-image dissatisfaction’ (MBIDS) as the DV. Results from the regression model significantly differed from zero, \( F(12, 109) = 6.19, \ p < .05 \). An R² value of .40 (adjusted R² = .34) indicated 40% (34% using adjusted R²) of the variability in ‘muscular body-image dissatisfaction’ could be predicted by ‘internalized homophobia’, ‘media’ and ‘masculine norms’. To determine unique contributing predictors in the model, standardized beta coefficients were examined as shown in Table 2. A significant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Attractiveness/thinness body image dissatisfaction</th>
<th>Muscular body image dissatisfaction</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internalized homophobia</td>
<td>-.25*</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masculine norms</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media 1</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media 2</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.08</td>
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<tr>
<td>Media 3</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Media 4</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media 5</td>
<td>-.26*</td>
<td>-.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media 6</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media 7</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media 8</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media 9</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.42*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media 10</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.03</td>
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</table>

\*p < .05 (two-tailed)
contribution by ‘media 9’ (attractive models influencing clothing purchases) was found to be a predictor of ‘attractiveness/thinness body-image dissatisfaction’ (\(\beta = .43\)) with a semi-partial correlation of .23 contributing 5% of the variance.

To examine the predicted variance in ‘attractiveness/thinness body-image dissatisfaction’ scores by ‘media’ alone, a regression analysis was performed using the MBSRQ as the DV and ‘media’ items 1 to 10 as IVs. It was found that ‘media’ significantly contributed to the variance in thinness body-image dissatisfaction scores, \(F(10, 111) = 2.29, p < .05\). An \(R^2\) value of .17 (adjusted \(R^2 = .10\)) revealed that ‘media’ contributed 17% (or 10% using adjusted \(R^2\)) of the variance in ‘attractiveness/thinness body-image dissatisfaction’. ‘Media 5’ was, again, found to provide a significant contribution to the variance (\(\beta = -.29\)) with a semi-partial correlation of -.27 contributing 7% of the variance.

The regression analysis using ‘media’ 1 to 10 was repeated for ‘muscular body-image dissatisfaction’ using the MBIDS as the DV. ‘Media’ items in the regression model were significant predictors of ‘muscular body-image dissatisfaction’, \(F(10, 111) = 7.34, p < .05\), with an \(R^2\) value of .40 (adjusted \(R^2 = .34\), contributing 40% of the variance in ‘muscular body-image dissatisfaction’ (or 34% using adjusted \(R^2\)). ‘Media 9’ again provided a unique contribution to the variance in ‘muscular body-image dissatisfaction’ with standardized beta and semi-partial correlation values of .44 and .23 (contributing 5% of the variance) respectively. ‘Media 8’ (frequency of watching action movies) also contributed to the model with standardized beta and semi-partial correlation coefficients of .17 and .15 (contributing 2% of the variance) respectively.

**Discussion**

The prediction that there would be a positive association between the combination of internalized homophobia, conformity to masculine norms, exposure to the media and gay media and body image dissatisfaction (in relation to both muscularity and thinness) was supported. Exposure to the media and gay media contributed the most variance in muscular and thinness body image dissatisfaction and predicted a larger proportion of variance in muscular body image dissatisfaction than thinness body image. The prediction that internalized homophobia would contribute a unique amount of variance in both muscular and thinness body image dissatisfaction was partly supported as internalized homophobia was a predictor of thinness body image dissatisfaction. The prediction that masculine norms would contribute a unique amount of variance in muscular body image dissatisfaction was not supported.

**Media and Gay Media Exposure**

The current study found that the media and gay media was a larger predictor of muscular body image dissatisfaction than of thinness body image dissatisfaction, which supports the findings of previous research (Epel et al., 1996; Labre, 2005), although comparisons must be made with caution because of the different sampling methodologies: Epel et al. extrapolated their findings from advertisements in the personal columns of newspapers, while Labre’s findings were based on a small, qualitative sample of heterosexual university students.

The findings showing the combination of idealistic body types in television and music videos, highly sexualised images in gay magazines and images of topless models in advertisements and billboards contributed to muscular and thinness body image dissatisfaction provide the first quantitative evidence of the role of the media and gay media and their impact on body image dissatisfaction, although various writers have proposed such a relationship (Grogan, 1999; Labre, 2005; Mishkind et al., 1987; Pope, Olivardia, Borowiecki & Cohane, 2001; Schooler & Ward, 2006).
An unexpected finding was that the frequency of playing video games on consoles such as the Playstation and X-box contributed a unique proportion of variance in thinness body image dissatisfaction. This finding supports the suggestion made by Low (2007), that video games provide a virtual world in which the player, often a young man, can manipulate his virtual body weight and create his perfect and idealistic body image. This study also reported a finding not reported previously, that exposure to pornographic imagery in the form of idealistic, naked and muscular men in films or still images contributed a small proportion of variance in muscular body image dissatisfaction.

**Internalized Homophobia and Body Image**

Internalized homophobia significantly predicted a relatively small proportion of variance in thinness body image dissatisfaction, thereby supporting Williamson’s (1999) theory that by being perceived as attractive and thin by members of the gay community, men experiencing internalized homophobia could combat their self-disgust by immersing themselves in a community that rewards and reinforces physical beauty, thinness and provides a support network.

The findings also support those of Seiver’s (1994) who found that many gay men strive to achieve thin and boyish physiques and may do so in response to growing pressure from the gay community to appear youthful. Kimmel and Mahalik’s (2004) findings that internalized homophobia predicted muscular body image dissatisfaction were not supported in this study.

**Masculine Norms and Body Image**

The findings of this study did not support those of McCreary et al. (2005), which showed that masculine norms and ideology were associated with muscular body image dissatisfaction. It is possible that heterosexual masculine norms relating to masculinity do not apply to gay men in the same way as heterosexual men because the gay community values muscular appearances as a form of sexual desirability.

Gay men in the current study did not express the desire to build muscular bodies in response to their perceived masculine deficiencies or self-loathing and this may have resulted in masculine norms not predicting muscular body image dissatisfaction. Secondly, the accepted presentation of well-defined, muscular gay men in the gay media may have associated sexual prowess with masculinity in concordance with the findings of other studies (Drummond, 2005; Epel et al. 1996; Grogan, 1999; Oakenful & Greenlee, 2005). A further explanation is that gay men in the current study may have been far more concerned with the masculinity and body type of their sexual partners than their own body shape as suggested by the findings of Epel et al. (1996) and Halkitis et al. (2004).

**Limitations**

A few methodological considerations should be noted. First, the majority of participants were recruited from the internet. As the internet is a highly sexualised forum for gay men seeking sex, the participants may have been overly concerned with their own body image for the sole purpose of attracting sexual partners. Second, because of the difficulties of measuring the impact of the media on body image, generalisations from the findings of this study about the media’s influence on body image dissatisfaction in gay men should be made with caution.

**Directions for Future Research**

Continuing research into media and male body image dissatisfaction could examine the impact of the video game revolution on body-image dissatisfaction among heterosexual and gay men. As video games are becoming more sexualised with the inclusion of playable sex acts on screen, one could anticipate a correlation between virtual body image and real-world body image dissatisfaction.
This study found that the depiction of muscular pornographic actors and models predicted a small proportion of muscular body image dissatisfaction. An analysis of various types of pornographic media (i.e. film, advertisements and still images) featuring muscular male body types could examine whether exposure to pornographic content is a predictor of muscular body image dissatisfaction in gay men.

Further research could construct a scale which focuses on the habits of gay men in relation to the gay community and their use of gay community media. An ‘involvement in the gay community’ scale could possibly serve as a predictor of muscular and thinness body image dissatisfaction and provide insight into unique challenges faced by gay men.

References


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