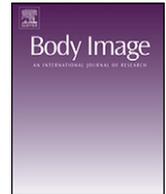




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Appearance-based comments, body dissatisfaction and drive for muscularity in males

Carly Nowell, Lina A. Ricciardelli*

Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the role of positive and negative appearance-based comments on body dissatisfaction and drive for muscularity among young adult males. The direct and moderating effect of self-esteem were also investigated; and BMI, age, and social desirability were included as covariates. The participants were 214 males aged between 18 and 30 years. More frequent negative comments were associated with higher body dissatisfaction whilst more frequent positive comments were associated with lower body dissatisfaction. However, both frequent negative and positive commentary were associated with higher drive for muscularity. Self-esteem was also associated with both body dissatisfaction and the drive for muscularity, but it did not moderate that influence of either positive or negative messages. Longitudinal research is now needed to determine the directionality of these relationships. Further research is required to establish the contexts in which positive and negative messages are associated with body dissatisfaction and the drive for muscularity.

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Introduction

Body image has received increasing attention over the last 20 years due to the association between body dissatisfaction and a range of physical and psychological health problems (Cash, 2004; Grogan, 2006). The current evidence indicates that a substantial percentage of males are dissatisfied with their bodies (Frederick et al., 2007; Thompson & Cafri, 2007; Vartanian, Giant, & Passino, 2001), however, their body image concerns differ from those typically reported by females. Unlike females who predominantly desire a thinner body (Tiggemann, 2006), evidence suggests that males desire a muscular physique, accompanied by minimal adipose tissue (i.e., body fat) (Cohane & Pope, 2001; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2003), a body shape known as the mesomorphic physique (McCabe &

Ricciardelli, 2005; Smolak & Stein, 2006). Further, the desire for muscularity appears to be predominantly associated with the upper torso (Hoyt & Kogan, 2001; Stanford & McCabe, 2005).

Body dissatisfaction among males has been found to be associated with a range of unhealthy behaviors such as exercise dependence, extreme weightlifting, and performance enhancing drug use (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2004). Overall, these problems are related to the drive for muscularity, which is a perception of being underdeveloped together with an intense pursuit to increase muscle mass (Olivardia, Pope, Borowiecki, & Cohane, 2004; Smolak & Stein, 2006). The prevalence of these unhealthy behaviors is relatively high, with the rate of anabolic steroid use in men found to be equal to the rate of bulimia, and greater than the rate of anorexia in females (Spitzer, Henderson, & Zivian, 1999). Olivardia et al. (2004) found that 27% of college males reported using either legal body-building supplements and/or illegal drugs such as steroids to change their body. Additionally, Rash (2004) found that 25% of young adult males displayed excessive exercise behavior. These problems have also been matched by an increase in clinically

* Corresponding author at: School of Psychology, Deakin University, 221 Burwood Highway, Burwood, Victoria 3125, Australia.
Tel.: +61 3 92446866; fax: +61 3 92446858.

E-mail address: lina@deakin.edu.au (L.A. Ricciardelli).

significant muscularity issues, such as muscle dysmorphia (Pope, Gruber, Choi, Olivardia, & Philips, 1997).

Both family and peers have been found play a significant role in the development of an individual's body image (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Sheffield, Tse, & Sofronoff, 2005). One of the main ways that parents and peers exert their influence is via verbal commentary, including feedback or messages made about an individual's body appearance and/or suggestions to improve their body (Barker & Galambos, 2003; Ricciardelli, McCabe, & Banfield, 2000). These messages can be negative such as teasing and criticism, or positive such as compliments and encouragement (Herbozo & Thompson, 2006a; Phares, Steinberg, & Thompson, 2004).

Negative verbal commentary has been found to be a strong predictor of body dissatisfaction for women (Cash, 1995; Rieves & Cash, 1996). Although less research has been conducted with males, negative messages have also been found to predict body dissatisfaction (Gleason, Alexander, & Somers, 2000) and the drive for muscularity among males (Vartanian et al., 2001). This research has shown that negative messages relating to muscularity are associated with increased strategies to increase weight and muscle mass (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2003; Smolak, Murnen, & Thompson, 2005), as well as an increased drive for muscularity among adolescent boys (Smolak & Stein, 2006). Similarly, Vartanian et al. (2001) found that appearance-based teasing was the strongest predictor of body dissatisfaction and muscularity concerns, for college-aged males.

Research concerning positive verbal commentary and body image is very limited. Only three studies were located which have investigated this relationship; one with adult women (Herbozo & Thompson, 2006a) and two with adolescent boys (McCabe, Ricciardelli, & Ridge, 2006; Ricciardelli et al., 2000). Herbozo and Thompson (2006a) found that young women who had greater appearance dissatisfaction and lower self-esteem, reported that both negative and positive comments had a detrimental impact on them. These findings suggest that any comments even positive ones may serve as a reminder that other people are evaluating their appearance and body image. Moreover, positive comments may continue to reinforce one's preoccupations with appearance and body image (Herbozo & Thompson, 2006a).

However, the findings from two interview studies with adolescent boys suggest that unlike in women, positive comments may play a protective role and help to promote a more positive body image among males (McCabe et al., 2006; Ricciardelli et al., 2000). Ricciardelli et al. (2000) found that boys reported receiving primarily praise and compliments about their bodies, and these messages were associated with positive feelings about their bodies. Similarly, McCabe et al. (2006) found that adolescent boys mainly interpreted the comments they received as positive, and these were associated with body image satisfaction. We now need to determine whether these findings also generalize to adult males.

One factor that may account for the effect that positive messages may have on males' body image is self-esteem. Self-esteem refers to the judgement an individual makes

about their overall worth (O'Dea, 2004) and self-esteem tends to be higher among men than women (Kling, Hyde, Showers, & Buswell, 1999). Self-esteem has already been found to be significantly correlated with body dissatisfaction and the drive for muscularity among males (McCreary & Sasse, 2000; Olivardia et al., 2004; Van den Berg et al., 2007). However, whether a higher self-esteem may equip males to be less influenced by negative messages and place more importance on positive messages has yet to be examined. Other factors found to be associated with body image and muscle concerns among males also need to be controlled for. These include body mass index (BMI; Cafri, van den Berg, & Thompson, 2006; Wiseman, Peltzman, Halmi, & Sunday, 2004), social desirability (Miotto, De Coppi, Frezze, Ross, & Preti, 2002; Steins, 1996), and age (Gray, 1977; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004).

The present study was designed to investigate both negative and positive verbal commentary experienced by males in relation to body dissatisfaction and the drive for muscularity. In addition, given that there are no available scales which assess both positive and negative body image related comments experienced by males, a new scale was specifically developed for this study.

It was hypothesized that experiencing a higher frequency of negative comments would be associated with higher body dissatisfaction and a higher drive for muscularity. Based on research with adolescent males it was hypothesized that experiencing a higher frequency of positive verbal commentary would be associated with lower body dissatisfaction and a lower drive for muscularity. In particular, it was expected that if males' self-esteem was low then negative comments would be associated with higher body dissatisfaction and drive for muscularity but if self-esteem was high then positive comments would be associated with lower body dissatisfaction and drive for muscularity. In addition, the study examined the direct effects of self-esteem; and BMI, social desirability and age were included as covariates.

Method

Participants

The participants were 214 male volunteers aged between 18 and 30 years ($M = 22.52$, $SD = 3.36$). They were recruited from classes at Deakin University and football clubs. The authors also used snowballing techniques to recruit additional participants from persons who had already taken part and from eateries, cafes and other hangouts on campus. The participants' BMIs ranged from 16.14 to 33.24 ($M = 23.68$, $SD = 2.87$). Over half of the participants were students (63%).

Materials

A questionnaire pack consisting of five scales to assess body dissatisfaction, muscularity concerns, verbal commentary relating to body appearance, self-esteem and social desirability, as well as demographic information was used.

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