



Relations among media influence, body image, eating concerns, and sexual orientation in men: A preliminary investigation[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The current study explored the relation between sexual orientation, media persuasion, and eating and body image concerns among 78 college men (39 gay; 39 straight). Participants completed measures of sexual orientation, eating disorder symptoms, appearance-related anxiety, perceived importance of physical attractiveness, perceptions of media influence, and media exposure. Gay men scored significantly higher on drive for thinness, body dissatisfaction, and body image-related anxiety than their straight counterparts. Additionally, perceptions of media influence were higher for gay men, and significantly mediated the relation between sexual orientation and eating and body image concerns. Sexual orientation also moderated the relation between perceived media influence and beliefs regarding the importance of physical attractiveness, as this relation was significant for gay men, but not straight men. The current findings suggest that gay men's increased vulnerability to media influence partially accounts for the relatively high rate of eating pathology observed in this population.

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Introduction

The influence of mass media on individuals' pathological preoccupation with their bodies' appearances and eating habits has been well-documented in both women and men (e.g., Agliata & Tantleff-Dunn, 2004; Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008). However, the literature has largely ignored the extent to which this relationship exists in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) population. Empirical evidence has overwhelmingly suggested that gay men are at elevated risk for developing eating disorders (e.g., Russell & Keel, 2002; Yelland & Tiggemann, 2003). Ironically, however, gay individuals are less likely to be marketed to or depicted by the media (Oakenfull & Greenlee, 2005; Oakenfull, McCarthy, & Greenlee, 2008). Thus, the extent to which the media impacts the eating and body image concerns of gay men is unclear.

Media and eating and body image concerns in men

The bulk of research on the relation between eating and body image concerns and the media has focused on women, with findings consistently demonstrating that the promulgated unreal-

istically thin ideal female body type has a negative impact on females' body image and eating behavior (see Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Levine & Harrison, 2004, for reviews). In recent years, the literature has also begun to examine how the media impacts these concerns in men.

Whereas the media emphasis for women is on thinness, the ideal portrayed for men is that of a lean, muscular mesomorphic body type (McCreary & Sasse, 2000). This emphasis on muscularity and bulkiness has been characterized in pop-culture in a variety of ways. An analysis of *Playgirl* models revealed that muscle mass discernibly increased from 1973 to 1997 (Leit, Pope, & Gray, 2001). This trend of increasing muscularity also has been found in male action figures (e.g., G.I. Joe), with more recent figures depicting near-impossible body proportions (Pope, Olivardia, Gruber, & Borowiecki, 1999). Other forms of dissemination of the ideal male body type include television advertisements (Agliata & Tantleff-Dunn, 2004), print media (Grogan, Williams, & Conner, 1996; Hausenblas, Janelle, Gardner, & Hagan, 2003; Humphreys & Paxton, 2004), television programs, and movies. As with women, the ideal male body type is significantly discrepant from that of the average male body size (McCabe, Butler, & Watt, 2007).

In one of the earliest studies investigating media impact on male body image, Leit, Gray, and Pope (2002) found that men who were exposed to print advertisements depicting muscularity reported a significantly larger inconsistency between their actual and ideal body than those in the control group. This result was corroborated in a non-experimental investigation as well, with McCabe et al. (2007) finding that self-reports of exposure to muscle-focused print advertisements significantly predicted

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greater discrepancy between actual and ideal chest and waist sizes in men. Television commercials have a similar impact, with research finding that men who viewed commercials depicting the ideal male body type reported significantly higher levels of body dissatisfaction (Agliata & Tantleff-Dunn, 2004) and lower feelings of physical attractiveness and muscle satisfaction (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2009) than those who viewed neutral commercials. Barlett, Harris, Smith, and Bonds-Raacke (2005) found similar results using action figures; male college students who were asked to engage in structured play with unrealistically muscular action-figures reported significantly lower body image esteem than those who were asked to play with moderately muscular action-figures as well as those who did not play with the toys. A recent meta-analysis determined that the effect size (d) for the negative impact of muscular images on men's body image was -0.28 for magazine images, -0.26 for television images, and -0.23 for action figures (Barlett, Vowels, & Saucier, 2008).

Two main theories have been proposed to explain the impact of media messages on body eating/body concerns. Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) posits that individuals make self-appraisals by evaluating themselves relative to others. Several researchers (e.g., Cattarin, Thompson, Thomas, & Williams, 2000; Groesz et al., 2002; Heinberg & Thompson, 1995) have proposed that upward social comparison, defined as social comparison with individuals perceived as somehow superior, plays a vital role in the negative effect of media images. Tiggemann and McGill (2004) provided empirical support for this idea, with findings suggesting that upward social comparison significantly mediates the relationship between media exposure and body dissatisfaction. Cultivation theory (Gerbner, 1969) hypothesizes that internalization of media messages, even those that are implicit in nature, have cumulative effects on perceptions of social reality. As applied to body image and eating pathology, cultivation theory suggests that the more exposure one has to mass media, the more likely he or she is to internalize body image ideals and view them as a realistic goal (Duggan & McCreary, 2004). This theory has also received empirical support in the literature (Nabi & Clark, 2008; Stice, Schupak-Neuberg, Shaw, & Stein, 1994).

Eating and body image concerns in gay men

In recent years, the literature on eating and body image concerns in men has begun to focus on gay men more specifically. Research findings thus far collectively suggest that, among men, being gay is a risk factor for poor body image and eating pathology. In particular, gay men have been found to have significantly higher levels of muscular dissatisfaction, body dissatisfaction, drive for thinness, bulimic tendencies, dieting behaviors, and pathological eating attitudes and significantly lower levels of body esteem compared to straight men (Beren, Hayden, Wilfley, & Grilo, 1996; Boroughs & Thompson, 2002; Conner, Johnson, & Grogan, 2004; Duggan & McCreary, 2004; Kaminski, Chapman, Haynes, & Own, 2005; Lakkis, Ricciardelli, & Williams, 1999; Morrison, Morrison, & Sager, 2004; Russell & Keel, 2002; Siever, 1994; Yelland & Tiggemann, 2003). However, there is evidence to suggest that these two groups do not significantly differ on the desire to become more muscular (Duggan & McCreary). Findings regarding the extent to which gay and straight men differ in ideal body size have been mixed, with some evidence suggesting gay men choose a significantly slimmer ideal body (Williamson & Hartley, 1998), and other findings indicating that the two groups do not significantly differ in this regard (Boroughs & Thompson).

Several explanations have emerged as to why gay men are more likely to report eating and body image concerns. Siever (1994) found that gay men are similar to straight women in regard to these concerns and posited that this is due to the shared goal of

attracting men who generally place priority on the aesthetic value of their partners (Buss, 1989). In contrast, straight men and lesbian women, due to the shared goal of trying to attract females (who tend to place priority on stability and power), are more concerned with attaining high social status and a large income (Lacey, Reifman, Scott, Harris, & Fitzpatrick, 2004). Hoppers and Jansen (2005) implicated the role of peer pressure, finding that, compared to straight men, gay men reported that their friends placed a significantly greater importance on physical attractiveness. The authors argue that this finding is consistent with prior research indicating the importance of physical aesthetic value in the gay male community. Finally, given the impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the associated stereotypes, it also has been suggested that part of the reason gay men place a higher emphasis on body image is due to a desire to present themselves as being healthy and disease-free (Klein, 1993; Shernoff, 2002; Wood, 2004).

Mass media and the gay population

Although the media are frequently evoked as a contributor to eating and body image pathology, anecdotal and empirical evidence suggests that the mass media are much less likely to target and/or depict gay individuals (Bonds-Raacke, Cady, Schlegel, Harris, & Firebaugh, 2007; Oakenfull & Greenlee, 2005; Oakenfull et al., 2008). With the exception of a handful of corporations (e.g., IKEA, Benetton, and Banana Republic), the majority of companies have been disinclined to target gay consumers via mainstream media due to a fear of alienating the straight market (Oakenfull & Greenlee, 2005). Given that the gay population is believed to have a higher disposable income than the general population (Witek & Combs, 2006), advertisement executives are faced with what Oakenfull et al. (2008) refer to as the "Marketer's Dilemma": how to advertise to the LGBT sector without estranging the larger straight population. As such, it has been suggested that advertisement campaigns include implicit imagery and symbolism that are likely to be overlooked by straight individuals, but recognized by and understood by the gay subculture (e.g., pink triangles; Oakenfull et al., 2008).

Mainstream television shows and movies are depicting gay characters more than ever before. However, their visibility is still very small compared to that of straight characters, with only 2.6% of lead characters on television series portrayed as LGBT (Bonds-Raacke et al., 2007; GLAAD, 2008). In addition, conspicuous shows and movies depicting gay characters, such as *Will and Grace* and *My Best Friend's Wedding*, may serve to perpetuate inaccurate stereotypes regarding the LGBT community and strengthen heterosexist beliefs (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002; Mitchell, 2006; Papacharissi & Fernback, 2008; Shugart, 2003). Collectively, information on media depiction of and targeting towards gay individuals implies that it greatly differs from that of the mainstream culture.

Sexual orientation, media images, and eating and body image concerns

To date, only three studies have examined the relations among sexual orientation, media images, and eating and body image concerns. Duggan and McCreary (2004) found that among both gay and straight men, consumption of fitness magazines was significantly related to pathological eating attitudes and drive towards muscularity. However, fitness magazine and pornography consumption were related significantly to greater social physique anxiety in gay men only. The authors subsequently concluded that sexual orientation serves as a moderator between these two forms of media and body image-related anxiety. Taylor and Goodfriend (2008) experimentally evaluated the effects of viewing sexualized

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