

How Does LGBTQ+ Culture Affect Body Image?

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Abstract

This paper discusses the significant factors that impact the LGBTQ+ culture and their effect on body image. Six separate studies are evaluated to indicate which underlying factors such as the drive for muscularity, the impacts of media, and how each leads to creating unhealthy eating and dietary habits have the largest impact on mental health. The studies referenced all discuss experiences with sexual minority individuals. The references will indicate the effects of heterosexism on members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Keywords: culture, body image, heterosexism

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In the era of social media, the ability to compare oneself to others has increased, but what are the psychological effects of this in already marginalized groups? Several studies have been conducted on heterosexual males and the need to appear masculine, but new research is taking place on the effects of the need to be masculine in sexual minority groups. Heterosexism is defined by Merriam-Webster (2020) as “discrimination or prejudice against non-heterosexual people based on the belief that heterosexuality is the only normal and natural expression of sexuality.” Heterosexism and minority stress can amplify pre-existing body image issues that members of the LGBTQ+ community possess. If it is understood who is the most at-risk for body image issues, it is important to find solutions to better educate and prevent further psychological trauma.

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Drive for Muscularity

Cirleen DeBlaere and Melanie Brewster (2017) conducted a study where they used the Drive for Muscularity Scale (DMS) to uncover if sexual minority men were more or less likely to have body image issues because of societal pressures. Based on prior research conducted on heterosexual counterparts the authors hypothesized that the sexual minority men would be more inclined for the need to have a mesomorphic body, lean and highly muscular, based on their societal pressures and cultural stigmas. This research is important to understanding the culture within the LGBTQ+ community and changing that mindset through education and awareness. This research could also give individuals a front-end approach to preventing depression or suicide.

The researchers surveyed 202 predominately white men with the age parameters set between 18-62 years old. The overall goal was to uncover if the sexual

minority men were more inclined to obtain a gender-typical physique to conform and go against the heterosexism and stereotypes of gay men (DeBlaere and Brewster, 2017). The participants were directed to an online survey from the target marketing ads done by the researchers. When taking the survey, the participants were being measured on a scale from one to six, and they would put the number that correlated with their response. The two measurements were the drive for masculinity and psychological distress. The higher the number assigned by the participant, the more of a drive for masculinity, and likewise, the higher the number assigned, the higher the level of psychological distress. It is important to note that the researchers also took into consideration the participant's socioeconomic status and level of education on top of gender, sexual orientation, and age.

To conclude the results, the researchers compared their responses to the responses done in a separate study where sexual orientation wasn't a factor. The results show from the two-factor correlation that participants with higher levels of psychological distress were more inclined to have a drive for masculinity. When compared to their heterosexual counterparts, sexual minority men are more likely to have body image issues and are willing to go to unhealthy lengths to lose weight. This study is not conclusive of all races and the effects that culture has on societal norms and expectations (DeBlaere and Brewster, 2017). The researchers ask that future research be done to be more inclusive.

Reflective Embodiment

While the prior research cast a larger net to get quantitative data, Duane Duncan (2007) conducted his research to get qualitative responses from a much smaller pool of individuals. Duncan believes that many studies fail to take into consideration what he refers to as "gay identity" (Duncan, 2007). Duncan hypothesized that when given the opportunity, the participants would conceptualize the idealistic man from the contexts of a reflective embodiment.

The researcher interviewed four participants ranging in age from 22 to mid-'50s. The researcher was able to find the participants locally in Australia through pre-existing relationships and word-of-mouth. Each of the participants come from a different socioeconomic background to provide more robust research results. The interviews with the participants lasted between ninety minutes and two hours, but the questions asked of each individual were the same. The interviewees were asked to conceptualize the ideal male body and to discuss why they thought that body would be the best to understand the cultural framework behind their ideal body. With such a small group it could be understood that it is again, not a large enough pool to gain proper insight. The selection process also could limit the responses based on individuals all living in the same city and visiting the same establishments.

The research concluded that the individuals all came to the same concept of the ideal man and body. Each participant clarified their reasoning why an athletic, muscular body would allow them the most opportunity within the gay community in Australia. Duncan (2007) says that the comparisons to the heterosexual masculine counterparts and the history of homosexuality are the reasons for which gay men specifically view their bodies as needing to be perfect. The results fall directly in line

with the hypothesis in that each participant crafted a response that fell into the same category of ideals.

Unhealthy Habits

In the last two studies, the focus was understanding if the LGBTQ+ community was in-fact at a higher risk for body image issues and obsessive behaviors. In a research study conducted by Brewster, Sandil, Deblaere, Breslow, & Eklund (2017), the focus was to understand the behaviors of how far their participants would be willing to go to achieve their ideal bodies, even if it meant harming them in the process. Acting upon unhealthy thoughts proves that this is an important pandemic within the LGBTQ+ community that needs to be proactively addressed. The researchers hypothesized if participants had strong enough body dissatisfaction, the need for muscularity, and internalized heterosexism, then they would be at higher risk to use anabolic-androgenic steroids (AAS) and have obsessive workout habits (Brewster et al., 2017).

Brewster et al. (2017) gathered 326 sexual minority men, predominantly white and within the same realm of socioeconomic status and education levels. In this study, the researchers measured the internalization of sociocultural standards of attractiveness, internalized heterosexism, body surveillance, body dissatisfaction, drive for muscularity, openness to using steroids, and compulsive workout behaviors. The participants were asked scaled questions in which they would assign a number as their answer. To ensure their findings were correct they compared them to prior studies done by researchers on heterosexual men (Brewster et al., 2017).

From analyzing the data, Brewster et al. (2017) found that “internalized standards of attractiveness was directly and uniquely related to higher body surveillance, body dissatisfaction, and drive for muscularity. Additionally, internalized standards of attractiveness were indirectly and positively related to intention to use AAS through drive for muscularity.” It is important to note that one’s “role” within the relationship should gay men utilize heterosexual gender roles in relationships, could dictate the type of physical appearance a participant might want to have, the drive to be thin versus the drive for muscularity. Brewster et al. (2017) found that it could be helpful to therapists supporting sexual minority men to understand how their patients understand and internalize sociocultural standards of attractiveness.

Effects of Pornography

Many studies have understood the relation between heterosexism, the need for a mesomorphic body, and how it leads to appearance-related issues in sexual minority men. Tracy Tylka (2015) takes a unique approach to the effects pornography has on sexual minority men, with the notion that there is a correlation between body image issues and pornography. This is an easily disregarded area of focus; however, this is still a medium in which sexual minority men take in comparisons of one another. It is important to note that one could find it difficult to fully understand the ramifications as each individual could have specific sexual preferences.

The study was broken into three different models with three individual hypotheses. The “Tripartite Influence Model” gave an understanding of the influence media has on societal ideals (Tylka, 2015). This model is important to understand how pornography may influence societal norms on sexual minority men. Tylka (2015) hypothesized that this model would show that with increased exposure to media that reinforces mesomorphic body image, it would increase the pressure that sexual minority men feel. The “Model of Appreciation” was the second model that measures one’s appreciation and ability to hold positive opinions of one’s own body (Tylka, 2015). This measure serves as important to measure the conceptualization one experiences when watching pornography, specifically the differences between one’s own body and those of the models. The differences in the body can translate to one’s understanding that their body isn’t seen as a societal norm, leading to further body dysmorphia. The “Model of Relational and Emotional Well-being” measures the intimacy patterns of those who watch pornography and Tylka (2015) hypothesized that there would be a correlation between individuals watching pornography and intimacy and attachment issues.

This study surveyed 359 undergraduate students of different ethnicities, sexual orientations, and ages that were enrolled at a university. The findings for the first model, while on a smaller scale of increase than the others, showed enough data to correlate the link that men compare themselves to the individuals in the pornography and internalize the conceptualization of a mesomorphic body. The second model revealed that men who watch pornography are more focused on how their body looks than its physical use and led them to consider unhealthy ways to lose weight and increase their internalized perception of a mesomorphic body. The third study showed a relation between men who watched pornography and an increased likelihood of “romantic avoidance and anxiety” (Tylka, 2015). The findings of this study directly relate to the implication that pornography can negatively affect sexual minority men in relation to their body image. This study primarily focused on heterosexual men, so further research should be conducted on a majority of sexual minority men to enhance the qualitative data.

Depression and Eating Disorders

The study of men’s health has led researchers Mike Parent and Tyler Bradstreet (2017) to want a deeper explanation of the relationship between the need for muscularity and its effects on self-concept and depression. This study is important as it aims to place a direct correlation on the attitudes and need for a hetero-normative muscular body and how that desire can translate into eating disorders and depression in sexual minority men. Before the study, the researchers made an important note that homosexual and bisexual men were hypothesized to be at higher risk of unhealthy behaviors.

To get a comprehensive understanding the researchers collected a sample of 207 heterosexual men and 197 men that identify as homosexual or bisexual. These individuals were random sampling and surveyed through an online questionnaire. The researchers had six different individual hypotheses that summarize the correlation between the need for muscularity leading to body dissatisfaction, which leads to

unhealthy habits such as eating disorders and depression (Parent and Bradstreet, 2017). The two sampling groups were asked questions in regards to their workout routine, their need for muscle, body image, self-esteem, symptoms of depressions, eating disorder identifiers, and scaled questions (one to six) to verify the severity of their answers.

The research results indicated that “the relationships between drive for muscularity attitudes and behaviors, and depression and eating disorder symptoms, were mediated by physical self-concept, global physical self-concept, and self-esteem” (Parent and Bradstreet, 2017). Thus, there is sufficient data to show an indirect relationship between the need for muscularity and self-concept, eating disorders, and depression. Although there are mental and physical benefits to physical exercise, in the LGBTQ+ community there is a relationship between physical exercise and muscularity-related behavior and attitudes (Parent and Bradstreet, 2017). An added area of research could surround the need for comparison between sexual minority men and the need for a lean body versus a lean muscular body and its relation to gender roles in a relationship.

Gender Stereotypes

The need for masculinity has been established between heterosexual and sexual minority men, and in the research compiled by Francisco J. Sánchez, F. Javier Blas-López, María José Martínez-Patiño, and Eric Vilain (2016) compare the need for masculinity within the LGBTQ+ community between cultural divides. The research question they were aiming to answer is whether Latin American sexual minority men were more likely to be more aware of their masculinity, be more likely to hide their femininity, have higher importance of masculinity, and the likelihood of disapproving of effeminate sexual minority men, as compared to their white counterparts. This research is important to draw the comparison between two groups within the LGBTQ+ community and how their drive for masculinity affects their body image and self-concept.

The researchers used an online survey of 108 individuals and equally divided the results between those identified as Latin American and white. The online survey utilized questions modeled to understand four key areas: the importance of masculinity, masculine consciousness, anti-effeminacy, and negative gay identity. When asked about the importance of masculinity in oneself or their partner, Latin American men found it to be more important than their white counterparts. Latin men also were more conscious of how effeminate they were perceived to be when compared to their white counterparts; however, both groups had similar low judgment when it came to other effeminate gay men. This shows that both groups of sexual minority men view masculinity in oneself as important, Latin men at a higher rate which could be attributed to cultural differences and acceptance, but neither group sees femininity in other men to be an issue. In the final area of focus, the researchers found that “Latino gay men expressed a greater need for privacy and greater need for acceptance compared with the White gay men. On the other hand, the White gay men expressed having a more difficult coming-out process compared to the Latino gay men” (Sánchez et al., 2016).

Summary

In a world where everyone is raised in heteronormative environments, this creates the drive for sexual minority men to fit in with societal norms and the drive for masculinity and a mesomorphic body. The research conducted in this paper shows the drive for masculinity across cultures, age, and status of sexual minority men. The conceptualization of the mesomorphic body and negative self-concept is reinforced through pornography. This self-concept can be directly and indirectly related to anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and unhealthy workout habits. Sexual minority men need to understand the effects of comparison to their heterosexual counterparts, the effects of the drive for masculinity and muscularity, and the effects that pornography has on the conceptualization of creating a self-concept and self-identity. On a societal scale, the summation of these attitudes and behaviors create the culture within the LGBTQ+ culture and raise the expectations others experience. The culture within the LGBTQ+ community puts great pressure on an already marginalized group suffering from trauma. Individuals suffering from these should consider seeing a therapist to properly understand how to deal with the internalized feelings of heterosexism and societal influences on body image. By effectively educating individuals before establishing these habits, it could greatly change their outcome for the better. From each of these six research findings one would concur that the LGBTQ+ community is at higher risk for body image issues, self-confidence issues, body dissatisfaction, eating disorders, unhealthy workout habits, drug abuse, and internalization of heterosexism.

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