

Issues of male body image dissatisfaction sociology essay



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Body image dissatisfaction refers to a person's negative perception of his or her own physical appearance. Historically, people have associated body image dissatisfaction with women; women who have body image dissatisfaction take extreme diets to reduce the dissatisfaction which as a result, suffer from eating disorders. Also, some women even undergo surgical operations to rebuild their body shapes and appearances. Plastic surgery puts their lives at risks since the operation is not 100 percent safe, as well as having several undesired side effects. However, body image dissatisfaction is no longer just a phenomenon that affects women; men now suffer from it as well. Some men are obsessed with the ideal body image and go through extreme measures to attain it. Body image dissatisfaction is increasingly common among men because of the media. The media reinforces the concept of masculinity among men, and as a result men start to be concerned about their body image which eventually leads them to use life-threatening methods to attain the " perfect body".

The media strongly influences the way society perceive certain ideas, including how men perceive their own bodies by promoting the " ideal male body image". The exposure of these " perfect body" images in the media affects some men's perceptions of the perfect body shape, and creates a new form of social standard. Male bodies are commonly used in the media now. For example, images of the male body have been increasingly used as a way to sell products in advertisement, and as a result, " The proportion of undressed men has skyrocketed- from as little as 3% of ads in the 1950s to as high as 35 % in the 1990s" (Olivardia 211). Due to the increase of images of male bodies shown in the media, men feel more insecure about their body

images by comparing themselves and, “judging themselves by the ideal projected in the media” (Neimark 70). This eventually increases their obsession with attaining the ideal body image; men are now more concerned about their body image because of the media’s exposure.

Muscularity becomes a main concern for men and their views of body image dissatisfaction have become rather negative. Unlike women, men want all body parts bigger rather than only losing weight only. Men focus more on their weight and muscle mass, height, size of penis, and amount of hair because they want to be muscular and manly. According a survey about men’s bodies by Pertschuk and Trisdorfer, about 63% of male participants would like to lose some weight and about 19% wanted additional muscle mass (Neimark 36). Muscularity is important for men because they believe that it symbolizes health and power, and it can increase their physical attractiveness. The male penis is another focus of concern for some men; it is the most significant body part that symbolizes manliness and sexual power within a man’s gender role (Neimark 70). Men generally believe that their penis is too small; therefore, they try to increase the size of their penis through surgical operations (Honigman and Castle 35). Moreover, body hair is important for men too. Interestingly, the survey of men’s bodies also indicated that men are most worried about hair loss, and that “38 percent indicated they would be ‘very upset’ if they discovered they were rapidly losing hair” (Neimark 39). Hair generally represents youth and energy (Neimark 39); therefore, hair loss means that men are getting older and losing power, and thus, becomes a major concern for men. There is also another minor concern for men – height. Most men believe that taller men

are attractive to women (Neimark 39); thus, shorter men feel inferior and are ashamed of their body height. Furthermore, men have psychological difficulties to talk about their body image dissatisfaction. Most men think that body image dissatisfaction is a stereotype reserved only for women. It is difficult for men to admit they have this “feminine” problem and fail seek help, because “males face additional shame and/or stigma for acknowledging that they suffer from a disorder that is perceived to be a women’s problem” (Greenberg and Schoen 465). For example, a man who suffers from an eating disorder says that he would never talk about his disorder with anyone because “It’s a girl’s disease” (Hill 5). Unlike women, male body dissatisfaction is related to men’s perceptions of masculinity, and they are less likely to admit it.

Besides the influence of the media, historical evidences show that the male body image is not a new phenomenon, but rather a reoccurring problem that has gotten worse. Although historical factors do not affect male body image dissatisfaction directly, it shows that men have been concerned about their appearance throughout history. For example, men started to focus on their appearances since ancient Greece, where men wore fine clothes; during the Renaissance, men were portrayed beautifully and in the Elizabethan period, noblemen were always dressed up with tights, silks, stains, and jeweled codpieces (Neimark 37). Another historical example is when men used makeup and wore beautiful clothes and jewelry, depicted in ancient Egyptian paintings, because they symbolize wealth and power (Honigman and Castle 33). Male body image is nothing close to new, as history shows the pioneer of its development.

Additionally, the changing of social standards and gender roles contribute to the development of male body image dissatisfaction. Evidently, social standard toward muscularity have changed. Corson and Andersen, the authors of “ Body Image Issues among Boys and Men”, found that the toy body figures are increasingly more muscular from 1990 compared with 1960s, “ If the former were 5 feet 10 inches tall, his ‘ chest’ would measure 44 inches and his biceps would measure 12 inches; the latter, however, would have a 55-inch chest and 15-inch biceps... thereby setting the stage for muscle dysmorphia in males” (193). Therefore, boys come to misunderstand that those toy figures represent the social standard, and try to attain those bodies in an attempt to achieve manhood. Furthermore, gender roles play an important role for men to seek for a more muscular body. Nowadays, men feel less secure toward their gender role because as “ women are achieving more power and financial independence, they can be more selective in the mates they choose” (Olivardia 210). Men believe that being muscular can help retain their traditional male role; therefore, men start to aim for bigger and more body muscle mass. The change in social standards set the early stage for body dissatisfaction in men, and the concern of gender role urges men to attain a more muscular body.

Peer pressure and partnership are interpersonal factors that contribute to male body image dissatisfaction. In social situations, men tend to compete with others. Men believe that by having a good physical appearance, they can attain higher authority than others and become more successful. “

Participants at boys’ camps select the ‘ best looking, most athletic boy who shows the most mature physique’ as pack leader” (Corson and Andersen

194). As a result, men try to look good in order to achieve superiority in society. However, some men are afraid of competing with others; they always see themselves as less handsome, less attractive and look smaller. They feel pressure in competitions because they cannot achieve social standards due to looking different from others. An interview by Grogan and Richards, authors of “ Body Image – Focus Groups with Boys and Men”, indicated that some interviewees agree that peer pressure negatively affects their perceptions of body images: “ Tobias: Yeah, I need to be a bit bigger because my brothers are like six foot and I’m a couple of inches shorter than all my friends as well and I feel pressure” (229). As long as men feel inferior, their body image dissatisfaction increases, which directly influences men’s confidence in a negative manner. Moreover, men believe that physical appearance becomes one of the categories that women seek for a man. Men think that a muscular body can catch women’s attention easier because “[Men] are socialized to believe muscular men are more masculine and attractive than less muscular men” (Greenberg and Schoen 465). Therefore, in order to gain women’s preference, men want to be more muscular. Interpersonal competition and women’s preference become factors that affect male body image dissatisfaction.

Men use inappropriate methods to reduce their body image dissatisfaction that are life- threatening and damaging to them. In order to reduce body image dissatisfaction, some men hide themselves to avoid exposing their body in public, and most men use extreme diets, exercise, and medicine, or even plastic surgery to retain and improve their body shape. Interestingly, the minority of men try to resolve their body image dissatisfaction by hiding

their bodies from public. “ Such individuals may wear baggy sweatpants and sweatshirts, or layers of clothes, even in summer” (Pope 550). By avoiding exposure in public, men can feel more confident because no one can see their bodies and condemn judgment on it. Avoiding public exposure is the least harmful method in solving body image dissatisfaction; however, most men instead try to gain muscle by eating special body-building supplements and weight-lifting (Honigman and Castle 38), because they think they are not muscular enough, or are too thin. In contrast, some men think that they are too fat so they stop eating outside, and eat less for each meal. Some even vomit after eating to purge themselves (Pope 551). Eventually, those men suffer from body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) such as muscle dysmorphia, where person becomes obsessed with the idea that he is not muscular enough (Olivardia 213), and eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia nervosa. They can also be compulsive and debilitated with doing overloaded weight-lifting (Corson and Andersen 196). These strict diets and extreme exercises are detrimental to men’s health. For example, a man spends 6 days a week and at least 4 hours a day lifting weights, and he also forces himself to eat because he fears that not eating will result in a decrease in muscularity. The result is that he has panic disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder (Pope 554). Furthermore, according to Olivardia, author of “ Body Image and Muscularity”, some men even use anabolic steroids to stimulate and speed up the development of muscle. In his study, he concluded that “ males in these studies disclosed that they used steroids purely for body appearance ideals rather than for athletic ideals or goals” (214). Olivardia also says that anabolic steroids is a physically damaging drug, or it can cause side effects such a acne, breast enlargement, liver

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cancer, arteriosclerosis (a chronic disease), mood disturbance, psychotic symptoms, and severe aggressiveness (214). Also, the numbers of men who have undergone plastic surgery to reduce body image dissatisfaction has increased rapidly. Davis, author of “‘ A Dubious Equality’: Men, Women and Cosmetic Surgery”, found that “ as of 1998, about 10 percent of the 2. 8 million cosmetic surgery procedures in the U. S. were performed on men – that’s 5 percent more than in 1992” (50). However, it is not a good way for men to resolve their body image dissatisfaction because it is life-threatening due to surgical failures, and men “ are notoriously less satisfied with the results of the operations” (Davis 57). Men use a variety of compulsive methods to reduce their body image dissatisfaction which are harmful and put themselves at risk.

However, mental therapy by mental health professionals and medical management can help men who have body image dissatisfaction reduce their problems. Greenberg, a doctoral candidate in counseling psychology at the University of Iowa, and Schoen, a senior staff psychologist at the University of Iowa Counseling Services, suggest that men who suffer from body image dissatisfaction should refer themselves to a mental health professional, who “ can help males with eating disorders feel more understood and less isolated in a society” (465) Also, mental health professionals can inform the client about realistic body images, proper nutrition, and educate them on the dangers of steroids (Olivardia 216). For muscle dysmorphia patients, since it is a form of body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), the treatments for other forms of BDD can be effective. An example of mental therapy is cognitive-behavioral therapy, which helps to re-educate

people to build up a positive value of their self-perception. A man called Steve has benefited from cognitive-behavioral therapy. After 4 months of treatment, he reconfigured his life and set new goals for himself that were unrelated to physical and dietary changes. He decided to spend more time with his family and friends rather than spending time in the gymnasium. Moreover, medical management is recommended for men who have eating disorders (Corson and Andersen 197). It helps clients to have a balanced diet and retain their mental health. There are many ways to help men reduce their body image dissatisfaction; thus, men should not hesitate to seek for help.

In conclusion, body image dissatisfaction is not a phenomenon for women only; it is a disease that also affects men, and is being promoted by the media. Men with body image dissatisfaction are mainly concerned about their body shape, height, weight, amount of hair, and penis size whilst having a negative attitude towards body image dissatisfaction. Throughout history, men have been concerned about their appearance, and social standards have changed. Men are under peer pressure now, and while men try to resolve their body image dissatisfaction by engaging in excessive exercises and extreme diets, these methods increase their mental health risks. However, there are some useful therapies that help resolve body image dissatisfaction, like seeking help from mental health professionals and medicinal control. Body image dissatisfaction is becoming a serious condition among men; men should stop being obsessed with muscularity and should review their life as well as set new goals for themselves.

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