

I Am (More than) My Body:
Reflexively Embodying and Resisting the Gay Male Adonis Complex

By

Philip Justin Pettis

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Approved:

Lijun Song, Ph.D.

Laura Carpenter, Ph.D.

To my late brother and grandfather for showing me how to live with integrity

and

To the late Mrs. Anne Wall for always encouraging me to stay true to my faith while becoming a

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Gay men in contemporary Western societies invest a considerable amount of time and energy into their physical appearance (Bergling 2007; Drummond 2005b; Duncan 2010a). Both scholars and popular press attribute this to gay male culture's heightened emphasis on physical appearance and attractiveness (Bergling 2007; Drummond 2005b; Duncan 2010b; Duncan 2007; Kassel and Franko 2000; Yelland and Tiggeman 2003). Gay male culture places an intense focus on physical appearance, which can encourage gay men to be overly concerned with their physical appearance, and leave them vulnerable to developing body image issues (Boisvert and Harrell 2009; Chaney 2008; Morrison, Morrison and Sager 2004).

Contemporary images of attractive men, with lean and muscular bodies, are pervasive throughout gay male culture (Drummond 2005b; Filiault and Drummond 2007; Schwartz and Andsager 2011). One needs to look no further than the popular magazines targeting gay male audiences— such as DNA, Out, Gay times, and XY magazine— which routinely display sexualized images of lean, muscular, and attractive male bodies. These idealized images of lean and muscular bodies represented in gay male culture – including in gay male magazines, the gay male pornographic industry, and the gay film industry – are unobtainable for most men without significant devotion (Bergling 2007; Drummond 2005b; Duncan 2007).

While in recent years there has been an increased focus on gay men's body image due to the recognition that gay men experience a greater vulnerability to body image related issues than heterosexual men, there remain significant research gaps. To date, limited research has examined how gay men from diverse ethnoracial backgrounds and across the life course reflect and act

upon their bodies in response to sociocultural influences. I draw on Nick Crossley's concept of 'reflexive embodiment' (Crossley 2001; Crossley 2005; Crossley 2006) to explore how gay men from diverse ethnoracial backgrounds and life course stages reflect and act upon their bodies and embodiment in response to sociocultural influences. Reflexive embodiment entails the examination of the self insofar as individuals have the capacity to "perceive, emote about, reflect, and act upon one's own body; to practices of body modification and maintenance; and to 'body image.' Reflexivity entails that the object and the subject of perception, thought, feeling, desire or action are the same" (Crossley 2006:1). For this study, I utilize two key features of reflexive embodiment. First, reflexive embodiment highlights the ability of the person, as the subject and object, to turn back upon the self and objectify their bodies. Second, it is through social interactions and social networks that the self emerges and, with it, the need for the body to be modified or maintained (Crossley 2006).

In this study, I examine the role of sociocultural influences on gay men's embodiment, particularly gay male culture and gay male peers. I do so because the process of embodiment is a social process, as the self emerges from social interactions (Crossley 2006; Mead 1967). I focus on gay male culture as studies show gay male culture's representations of lean, muscular, male bodies can encourage gay men to desire to achieve a physique similar to the bodies represented and idealized in gay male culture (e.g., Drummond 2005b; Duncan 2010a). However, to date, there is a dearth of literature that has examined how gay men reflect and act upon their bodies in response to the representations of male bodies salient in gay male culture through body-reflexive practices (Connell 2000; Crossely 2006; Vannini and Waskul 2006). Body-reflexive practices, "are not simply a matter of social meanings being imposed upon a body as surface, but rather

involve how a body, and the practices involved in managing, stylizing and living as an embodied individual in a culture call social meanings into play” (Connell 2000:92).

In this research, I examine how gay men from diverse ethnoracial backgrounds and across the life course reflect upon their bodies and embodiment in response to sociocultural influences (e.g. gay culture and gay male peers). To my knowledge, no study has examined the body-reflexive practices of gay men from diverse ethnoracial backgrounds and life course stages. Addressing this research gap is important; especially considering gay men come from diverse backgrounds. Previous studies examining body image for gay men from ethnoracial minority backgrounds highlight that gay men from diverse ethnoracial backgrounds recognize that the body image ideals salient in gay male culture are not only marked by a lean and muscular physique but also characterized by a young, white, male body (Brennan 2013; Drummond 2005a). Therefore, examining men from diverse backgrounds, not represented in dominant gay male culture, is important to gain more insight into gay men’s experiences.

I focus on gay male peers, as psychological research on gay men’s body image demonstrates peers can influence gay men’s body image dissatisfaction and body image pressures (e.g., Hospers and Jansen 2005; McArdle and Hill 2009). However, research on gay men’s body image has not accounted for how gay male peers influence gay men’s desires to embody an ideal physique similar to the images represented in gay male culture. I contribute to the literature by addressing these research gaps.

To undertake this study and to contribute to the literature on gay men’s body image, I ask three research questions. First, how do gay men reflect upon body ideals salient in gay male culture? Second, how do gay male peers reinforce body image ideals salient in gay male culture? Third, how do gay men reflect upon their bodies as embodied subjects, so as to modify and

maintain their bodies in response to sociocultural influences? For each research question, I consider the role of race/ethnicity and stage in the life course.

The outline of this thesis is as follows. I first provide an overview of the relevant literature that explores gay men's body image, by primarily focusing on sociocultural influences of gay men's body image, particularly related to gay culture and gay male peers. I also briefly mention the dominant psychological frameworks used in research on gay men's body image. Second, I provide the conceptual framework for this study. Third, I detail the methods used in this study. Fourth, I provide an overview of the findings, by research question. For each research question, I provide the dominant themes that emerged from analyzing the data. Finally, I give an overview of my contribution to the research on gay men's body image.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Gay Men and Body Image

Men's bodies have become increasingly objectified and commodified in Western culture, this is evident in the increasing appearance of fit, muscular male bodies on the covers of magazines, on television, and in advertising (Bordo 2000; Drummond 2005b; Harvey and Robinson 2003; Pope, Phillips, and Olivardia 2000). Although this physique is unobtainable for most men, many aspire to achieve the idealized images represented (Harvey and Robinson 2003; Pope et al. 2000). Due to the recognition that men are not immune to body image pressures, in the past two decades, research on men's body image has proliferated (Morrison, Morrison and Hopkins 2003; Thompson and Cafri 2007). However, much of this research focuses on heterosexual men.

In recent years, there has been a greater research emphasis on gay men's body image issues. This emphasis has arisen as empirical findings highlight gay men's vulnerabilities to a number of body image related issues, including eating disorders (e.g. Gil 2007; Matthews-Ewald, Zullig and Ward 2014; Russell and Keel 2002; Strong et al. 2000) and body image dissatisfaction (e.g. Conner, Johnson and Grogan 2004; Morrison et al. 2004; Martins et al. 2008). While there is an emerging body of research on gay men's body image, much of this research uses psychological frameworks, emphasizing individualistic explanations.

Psychological explanations trace gay men's heightened vulnerabilities to body image concerns to a number of mental processes. This includes low self-esteem (Wrench and Knapp 2008); self-objectification (Tiggeman, Martins and Kirkbride 2007); minority stress related to internalized homophobia (Kimmel and Mahalik 2005); homonegativity (Williamson and Spence

2001); levels of femininity (Lakkis, Ricciardelli and Williams 1999; Meyer, Blisset and Oldfield 2001); childhood abuse (Feldman and Meyer 2007a) and childhood gender nonconformity (Strong, Singh and Randall 2000). However, in recent years there are an increasing number of studies examining gay men's body image using sociological perspectives (e.g. Drummond 2005a; Drummond 2005b; Duncan 2010a; Duncan 2010b; Duncan 2007; Slevin and Linneman 2010; Slevin and Mowery 2012). These studies focus on the sociocultural factors that influence gay men's body image.

Body Image Ideals, Gay Culture, and Cultural Consumption

Sociocultural theory contends that body dissatisfaction for men (as for women) comes from viewing mass media representations of lean and muscular body ideals (Thompson, et al. 1999). Constant exposure to these images can encourage men to internalize these images and become dissatisfied with their bodies (McCreary 1997). Various cultural mediums propagate the body image ideals within gay male culture, including magazines, advertisements, and pornography (Brennan et al. 2013; Drummond 2005b; Duggan and McCreary 2004).

Duggan and McCreary (2004) find in a sample of 96 men, that both heterosexual (n=29) and gay men (n=67) become dissatisfied with their bodies after viewing muscle and fitness magazines. Consumption of muscle and fitness magazines causes men to desire a more muscular physique and creates social physique anxiety for both gay and heterosexual men. However, for gay men only, there is a greater desire to be thin in response to viewing these magazines. In addition, gay men, not heterosexual men, develop social physique anxiety due to consumption of pornography. Duggan and McCreary (2007) conclude that because pornography is widely consumed by gay men, routine viewing of fit, muscular, attractive men in pornography can

inspire gay men to embody these idealized bodies represented. McArdle and Hill (2009) similarly find in a sample of 136 gay (n=82) and heterosexual men (n=54), that the media's promotion of ideal bodies influences gay men's body image dissatisfaction more than heterosexual men; moreover, for gay men, there is a positive relationship between media influence and body dissatisfaction.

Gay men appear to be more susceptible to media images than heterosexual men and more likely to compare themselves with images of idealized male bodies in the media (Carper, Negy, Tantleff-Dunn 2010; Fawkner and McCurry 2002). Morgan and Arcelus (2009) examine body image concerns, including those concerns related to mass media for both gay and heterosexual men (n=15). Findings reveal that while both gay and heterosexual men use media images as a source of body comparison, gay men are more susceptible to media representations of attractive male bodies in regards to influencing the way they look and feel about their bodies.

Filiault and Drummond (2007) find representations of male bodies in gay male culture changed from the late 20th century to the early 21st century. Only within the last two decades have two dominant body ideals – the “twink,” categorized by youthfulness, attractiveness, and thinness; and the “gay straight aesthetic” characterized by a muscular, yet thin male body— become idealized in mainstream gay male culture. Schwartz and Andsager (2011) also find representations in gay male culture changed over a four decade period (1967-2008) by examining visual representations of male bodies in gay male culture. Findings reveal that male bodies became increasingly thin and muscular over time.

In summary, elements of gay male culture that emphasize a leaner, muscular physique may encourage gay men to desire a lean and muscular physique. In addition, these studies provide evidence that media images promoting a particular kind of image influence gay men

more than heterosexual men, and that images in gay male magazines have become leaner and more muscular over time. While these studies provide evidence that gay men are influenced by images of male bodies represented in both mainstream and gay culture, these studies do not explore how gay men reflect upon these images and pursue them.

Gay Men and Reflexive Embodiment

While numerous studies find support, that gay men's body image is influenced by gay culture's representations of male bodies (e.g., Brennan 2012; Drummond 2005a; Drummond 2005b) few studies examine how gay men reflect and act upon their bodies in response to these images.

Duncan's (2007; 2010a; 2010b) work on gay men and reflexive embodiment provide the foundation for research on gay men and reflexive embodiment. The contribution of Duncan's work is that he highlights that gay men are not simply passive agents, who work towards embodying body ideals represented in gay male culture. Rather, embodying an ideal physique represented in gay male culture is associated with a positive gay identity and empowerment for men who do embody an attractive, well groomed, lean and muscular physique.

Duncan (2007; 2010a; 2010b) notes, similar to other studies (e.g. Drummond 2005a; Drummond 2005b) that gay men are aware of the established hierarchies within gay male culture. The attractive, lean and muscular male body salient in gay male culture is on top of the aesthetic hierarchy in gay social worlds. Although many gay men acknowledge the pressures to attain the dominant body ideals salient in gay male culture, not all gay men find these body ideals problematic. Instead, many reflect on these body image ideals and their bodies, and in response they work towards embodying these body image ideals.

Other men, while acknowledging the pressures of gay culture to conform to an idealized body, are critical of gay men who feel the necessity to conform to these idealized representations. These men draw on mainstream notions of masculinity to negotiate their gay identity and embodying a particular body image. Many discuss feeling the obsession with appearance in the gay community is problematic and feel that it is unnecessary for men to spend excess energy and time on their physical appearance. These men who actively and reflexively negotiate these body image ideals do so by drawing on mainstream notions of masculinity and self-control as a method of resistance to gay culture's emphasis on physical appearance as a signifier of a positive gay identity. Some men still discuss the desire to embody the body image ideals salient in gay male culture to be considered attractive. While these men are aware of the pressures to conform to an ideal body, they feel less vulnerable to these body image pressures, by deemphasizing the importance of their sexuality, and therefore, the physical aesthetic representative of embodying a gay identity. Though being out of bounds of “acceptability” within the gay social scene, these men adopt ideas about normative masculinity as a means to reject gay culture’s focus on a certain kind of physical appearance.

While Duncan’s work provides an invaluable source of knowledge, there are limitations. First, Duncan’s work uses small samples (between 4 to 16 men). Second, Duncan does not account for racial diversity or racial differences in gay men’s experiences of embodiment. Third, although Duncan mentions age as being a factor for some men’s embodied experiences, there was limited attention to expand upon the complexity involved in body image for men across the life course. I address these gaps in this study. I also extend Duncan’s work by not focusing on gay men embodying a gay body identity; rather, I focus on more broadly why gay men elect to

embody, or in some instances, resist pursuing body ideals salient in gay male culture beyond the desire to embody a gay social identity.

Alternative and Marginalized Bodies

Not all gay men aspire to achieve the body ideals represented in gay male culture. For example, the bear subculture developed out of the 1980s and emphasizes the appeal of bigger, hairy, male bodies as being both physically and sexual desirable (Hennen 2005; Manley, Levitt and Mosher 2007; Hennen 2005). This is in contrast to the thin, muscular physique pervasive throughout gay male culture. According to Manley, Levitt, and Mosher (2007), bear culture intentionally removes itself from the body ideals represented as being desirable within mainstream gay male culture, which does not embrace larger, hairier male bodies as being desirable. While bear subculture provides an alternative to mainstream notions of male desirability, bear culture is marginal within gay male culture. In fact, self-identified bears often describe exclusion and rejection from the wider gay community (Gough and Flanders 2009).

Noting the diversity of gay male experiences, I examine how gay men who do not attempt to conform to body image ideals dominant in gay male culture reflect upon their bodies and embodiment. I believe it is important to examine body image for men who do not attempt to conform to mainstream body image ideals represented in gay male culture, not only because of this is an area of research that is largely unexplored, but by doing so, I acknowledge the diversity of gay men and their experiences.

Gay men of larger body sizes are not the only men excluded from being represented in mainstream gay male culture. Gay men, who by default of race/ethnicity or older age, do not fit in with the dominant ideal are also often underrepresented in gay male culture (Brennan et al.

2013; Drummond 2005a). Perhaps due to the exclusion of these men from gay male representations of physical attractiveness, research on gay men's body image primarily focused on young, gay, white men.

Race and Body Image

Body ideals salient in gay culture are aged and raced (Brennan et al. 2013; Drummond 2005a).

Although gay men are not a homogeneous group, nor are body ideals monolithic within gay male culture, few studies on gay men and body image focus on or examine differences by race and age. In my review of the literature, I found only six studies that focus on issues of body image for ethnoracial minority gay and bisexual men in Western societies. I summarize four studies only briefly, as these studies do not focus on how ethnoracial minority gay men respond to body image ideals salient in gay culture but rather body image issues and eating disorder behaviors.

Feldman and Meyer (2007b) find, in a sample of gay men from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds and across the life course, that Latino and African American gay and bisexual men engage in eating disorder behaviors more than white gay and bisexual men. A study by Heinberg, Pike, and Loue (2009) find in a sample of 18 gay and bisexual African American that 25% display eating disorder symptoms. Wilton (2009) examines body image in relation to HIV risk behaviors and finds that negative body image for African American gay and bisexual men (n=481) increases risky sexual behaviors. In examining eating disorders behaviors of gay Latino men, De Santis (2012) finds that 38% of men (n=100) engage in eating disorder behaviors.

Studies looking at broader areas on body image for ethnoracial minorities in Western societies regarding body image are limited. Brennan et al. (2013) examines how gay men (n=61) of color in Canada negotiate body image, race, and sexuality. The findings indicate that similar

to other studies (e.g. Duncan 2010a; Drummond 2005b), the media influences gay men's perceptions of idealized male bodies. Men also discuss being racialized and sexualized due to racial stereotypes. Some men engage in adverse health behaviors such as skipping meals and self-induced vomiting to control their bodies, to be more physically desirable. Men discuss the fact that what is considered "ideal" in gay male culture is a white, muscular body, which their non-white bodies cannot meet.

Similarly, Drummond (2005a) interviews six gay Asian men in Australia regarding body image related issues. Drummond finds that participants are cognizant that being an Asian gay man in a majority white society causes them to be aware of their inability to meet the standard body ideal in Western gay culture, as an ideal body is often represented as a white male body. Similar to the men in the Brennan's (2013) study, these men face the difficulties of negotiating their marginalized racial status within the dominant gay community, noting the significance of body image in their daily lives. Both studies also find that due to gay culture's heightened focus on physical appearance; men are tasked with the difficulty of having to negotiate their ethnoracial identity and their gay identity in regards to body image expectations.

Life Course and Body Image

Although there has been an increased focus of research on older gay men's body image, most of the studies on gay men and body image focus on men in their 20's and 30's (Filiault and Drummond 2009). Therefore, there is a need to examine how gay men across the life course experience their bodies and embodiment. A quantitative study by Feldman and Meyer (2007b) (n=388) provide evidence that there are differences in body image concerns for younger gay men (ages 18-30) and older gay men (ages 30-59). Feldman and Meyer find that younger gay men are

more likely to engage in eating disorder behaviors than older gay men. Similarly, Drummond (2010b) (n=17) finds that older and younger gay men have different body image concerns. Younger gay men express more concern with masculinity. Younger gay men, describe linking masculinity with muscularity, as they see muscularity as a symbol of achieving a desirable physical status within the gay male community. Older gay men address issues such as their bodies not being represented in gay culture, as gay culture places a heightened value on youthfulness and attractiveness.

Other studies on gay men focus on how older gay men come to terms with their aging bodies while existing in a culture which values young male bodies (e.g., Drummond 2006; Slevin and Linneman 2009; Slevin and Mowery 2012). For many older gay men, coming to terms with their bodies evolves with age (Slevin and Linneman 2009). Slevin and Mowery (2012), examine gay men (n = 10) ages 65-85 and find that some older men feel that older gay men are more attentive to their bodies than similar-aged heterosexual men, due to their desire to remain youthful looking.

Considering the dearth of research on body image for both gay male ethnoraacial minorities and gay men across the life course in Western societies, I examine the experiences of gay men from diverse ethnoraacial backgrounds and across the life course. In particular, I examine how they reflect on and act upon their bodies while existing in the gay male subculture which values a youthful, white, physically fit male body. It is important to understand how gay men not represented in mainstream gay culture reflect upon their bodies in light of their marginalized statuses and act back upon their bodies in response to the ideal bodies—which are not their bodies—represented in gay culture.

While, it is important to consider the role of gay male culture in creating body image norms among gay men, which can influence the way gay men feel about their bodies and embodiment, gay male culture does not act alone. Research demonstrates gay men may also be more vulnerable to peers than heterosexual men in regards to body image pressures. Therefore, it is important to consider specifically the role of gay male peers.

Peers and Body Image

Another explanation for gay men's body image pressures is related to their peers and the gay community. While the gay community increase gay men's vulnerabilities to body image related issues (Beren et al. 1996; Doyle and Engeln 2014; Hunt, Gonsalkorale, and Nosek 2012; Tiggeman, Martin, and Kirkbirde 2007), few studies examine the role of peers. Hospers and Jansen (2005) find in a sample of 108 men and women (65 men mostly attracted to other men, and 25 men mostly attracted to women) that there is an interaction effect for sexual orientation and peer pressure for men. Men who were mostly attracted to other men experience greater peer pressure related to body dissatisfaction than heterosexual men. Another study by McArdle and Hill (2009) also find that gay men experience greater body dissatisfaction than heterosexual men. Furthermore, the results indicate that gay men experience more weight-related peer teasing than heterosexual men.

In summary, there are, limited studies that have examined how peers influence gay men's body image. However, considering the fact that the gay community may influence gay men's body image concerns, it is important to consider the role of gay male peers in influencing gay men's embodiment. I draw on the limited findings that peers influence the way gay men feel about their bodies. However, these studies do not focus on gay male peers encourage gay men to

work towards achieving a body type represented in gay male culture. I extend the literature beyond body dissatisfaction and examine how gay male peers influence gay men's embodiment of body image ideals salient in gay male culture.

Conceptual Framework

Crossley's concept of 'reflexive embodiment' draws from the theoretical tradition of symbolic interactionism. Drawing on Mead's concept of the "I" and the "me," Crossley articulates that reflexivity, "allows us to turn back upon and objectify ourselves" (Crossley 2005:1). In other words, for Crossley, we as individuals are both the subject and the object. I draw on this perspective to guide the interviews and the analysis of the data. Furthermore, according to Crossley, the self develops from our social interactions and our social networks. Reflexive embodiment, therefore, places the person at the center of their embodied experiences by highlighting their ability to reflect and act back upon the body as a response to and within the social world. Thus, reflexive embodiment provides the conceptual and theoretical framework to explain how gay men modify and maintain their bodies in response to sociocultural influences. Considering the self develops from social interactions, I examine how macro level factors (e.g., gay culture and interaction with gay male culture) and the micro level (e.g., gay male peers) influence gay men's experiences of embodiment.

I utilize Crossley's concept of 'reflexive body techniques' (Crossley 2005; Crossley 2006; Crossley 2007) to understand body modification and maintenance. Reflexive body techniques are any sets of body practices done to modify or maintain the body. According to Crossley (2005; 2006), reflexive body techniques facilitate reflexive embodiment. Therefore, reflexive body techniques are central to studying body modification and maintenance practices

for three reasons: First, bodies are maintained and modified by way of bodily effort and embodied competence. Second, reflexive body techniques enable us to distinguish the mindful and social aspects of embodied actions. Third, reflexive body techniques provide for sufficient empirical analysis. The different reasons individuals modify and maintain their bodies are important to consider in the analysis of reflexive body techniques. I examine how both gay men engage in body-reflective practices in responses to sociocultural influences and engage in reflexive body techniques in order to modify and maintain their own bodies in response to sociocultural influences.

CHAPTER III

DATA AND METHODS

Participants

To gain insight into how gay men reflect upon their bodies and embodiment, so to modify and maintain their bodies in response to sociocultural influences, I collected data from 64 self-identified gay men from diverse ethnoracial and age backgrounds. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 63 years, with an average age of about 37 years. The mean age of participants varied across ethnoracial groups. The mean age for white men was about 40 years, black men 38 years, multiracial men about 33 years, Latinos about 26 years, and Asian men 23 years. Participants had diverse educational and income backgrounds. The level of educational attainment ranged from less than a high school diploma to earning a Ph.D. Annual incomes ranged from less than \$10,000 to over \$120,000. I relied on self-reported demographic information.¹

Procedure

I gathered data for this study through two data collection techniques: in-depth semi-structured interviews and online surveys. To recruit participants, I used convenience and purposive snowball sampling. Patton (2002) recommends the use of convenience and snowball sampling for recruiting individuals from marginalized social groups. These types of sampling methods have limitations as nonrepresentative samples prevent generalizing findings beyond gay men in

¹ See table 1 for detailed information on the number and percentage of participants by racial/ethnic group, age group, and by educational attainment.

this study. However, the goal of this study is not to generalize findings to all gay men but to gain insight into a subject that has been largely unexplored.

In the spring of 2013, I contacted six Facebook group administrators to gain permission to recruit participants from their Facebook groups to complete an online survey via Qualtrics, online survey software. All six administrators provided me with permission to recruit participants. To yield a diverse sample, I intentionally recruited men from Facebook groups focused on gay men of diverse ethnoracial backgrounds. Of the 64 men included in this study, 28 participated via Qualtrics. I additionally conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews in the spring of 2013. Of the men interviewed in 2013, fourteen, are included in this study. The Wichita State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved data collection in 2013.

To increase the diversity of the sample regarding race/ethnicity and age and to see if similar or different themes emerged from gathering additional data, I gained approval from the Vanderbilt University IRB to conduct additional semi-structured interviews. I interviewed 20 of 64 men included in this study in the spring of 2017. To recruit participants for the semi-structured interviews, I started with men in my personal and professional network and asked if they knew of men who were eligible to participate in this study. I then asked each interviewee after the interview if they knew of other men who were eligible to participate in this study. If participants knew of other gay men over the age of 18 that might be interested in this study, I provided them with my contact information. Of the 64 men included in this study, 34 participated via semi-structured interviews.

The interview questions and online survey questions were similar, in that they covered topics related to the body and embodiment; cultural media that promoted and influenced body image ideals; gay peers and their influence on gay men's body image and body image pursuits;

and reflexive body techniques. Asking everyone about the same content categories allowed me to examine similarity and differences across men in this study. However, because the interviews were semi-structured, the interview questionnaire served only as a guide. For in person interviews, I was able to ask additional questions to gain further insight into participants' responses. In person interviews took place one-on-one, in locations where the participants felt most comfortable, including at Vanderbilt University, coffee shops, parks, and places of residence. I interviewed twenty-eight men in person and seven interviews by phone. Interviews lasted between 1 to 3 hours. Interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

Before each interview, I read the consent form to the participant. I emphasized that participation in this study was voluntary and that participants could skip any questions that made them feel uncomfortable or terminate their participation in this study at any time. I ensured participants that interviews were confidential and only I would know their identities. I required participants to provide only verbal consent, to further protect their confidentiality.

Methods of Analysis

Before data analysis, I changed all participants' names to ensure anonymity. Because few differences in reported experiences emerged between the men who completed the survey online via Qualtrics and the men I interviewed, I analyzed all data together. I read transcripts of each interview several times to allow salient themes to emerge. I additionally compared thematic differences in men's experiences, by ethnoracial group and for men across three different age groups: 18-29, 30-49 and 50-63. Both Brennan (2013) and Feldman and Meyer (2007b) used two categories: men ages 18-29 and men 30 and older in exploring body image among gay and

bisexual men. Consistent with these studies, I categorized men ages 18-29 into one age group. I, however, created an additional age category for men ages 30-49. I did this to separate these men from the baby boomers, men ages 50-63.

To look for similarities and differences, I used a combination of content (Zhang and Wildemuth 2009) and thematic analysis (Gibson and Brown 2009; Saldaña 2013). Content analysis allowed for cross-case exploration of similarities and differences in how participants felt about their bodies in response to body ideals represented in gay culture, where they garnered ideas about these body ideals, and their experiences of reflexive embodiment and negotiation. Such descriptive information later assisted me in gaining a better understanding of the salience of larger underlying themes emerging from participant accounts. I employed thematic analysis during the next stage, which involved secondary level hierarchical coding, including the identification of code families and larger umbrella codes, in addition to concept mapping for relationships (Saldaña 2013; Tracy 2012).

Table 1. Race/Ethnicity, Age and Education of Participants

Characteristics	N = 64	Percent
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>		
White (Non-Latino)	25	39%
Black (Non-Latino)	23	36%
Latino (Any race) ²	9	14%
Asian American	4	6%
Multiracial (Non-Latino)	3	5%
<i>Age</i>		
18-29	24	37.5%
30-49	24	37.5%
50 and Older	16	25%
<i>Education</i>		
Less than High School	1	1.5%
High school Diploma	7	11%
Some College	24	37.5%
Associate's Degree	1	1.5%
Bachelor's Degree	14	22%
Master's Degree	13	20%
Current PhD Student	2	3%
PhD/JD/MD	2	3%

² All men who identified as Latino regardless of self-described racial identification (e.g., Afro-Latino, White, Multiracial, etc.) are included in the Latino category.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

I present the findings identified by the participants thematically. I first present findings on where gay men garner ideas about body ideals and how they reflect upon these body ideals salient in gay male culture. Second, I present how gay male peers both influence gay men's pursuits as well as their negotiations of these body ideals represented in gay male culture. Third, I present findings on how gay men reflect upon their bodies, so modify and maintain them in response to sociocultural influences. For each set of findings, I explore the role of race/ethnicity and stage in the life course.

Research Question 1: How do gay men reflect upon body ideals salient in gay male culture?

The pressure to be attractive developed from the representations of fit male bodies in both mainstream and gay male culture. However, gay male culture's promulgation of idealized male bodies was mentioned more frequently. Nearly all participants discussed that gay male culture places a heightened emphasis on physical appearance and attractiveness, by promoting an ideal body that is attractive, fit and young.

They All Look Like Models!

Participants often used words like "perfect," "models," "muscular" and "unrealistically thin" to describe images of male bodies pervasive throughout gay male culture. For many men, the idealized bodies represented in gay male culture are unobtainable without considerable investment. While, participants, acknowledged these bodies as being unobtainable for most gay

men, these images are revered and ubiquitous, and therefore influence gay men's perceptions of body image ideals. The following participants described the representations of male bodies in gay male culture.

You have the two types of bodies– the thick 'bear,' with the hairy chest, and you have the small 'Twink' type with the flat stomach, and the modelesque body, that looks like they have just come off the runway in Milan or something.
– Grayson 32, African American

The body in gay male culture is portrayed as unrealistically thin. Everybody has 6-pack abs. And everybody is super ripped. You do not see a lot of people who look like your everyday person, and that is just unrealistic. Because what is presented is not what your average person looks like, it is what everyone is I guess supposed to look like. – Julian, 38, Latino

These images serve as a reminder of what gay men, are supposed to find desirable.

Kellen, like many participants described his vivid awareness of these idealized images of fit, attractive, men as being an important component of gay male culture. Due to gay male culture revolving around physical appearance, these images create expectations for men to be physically attractive.

Yes, gay culture is built around looks. Everything about gay culture is about looks. If you are not attractive, you really do not fit in with gay men. It is in the magazines, movies, I mean, it is just everywhere. – Kellan, 21, Latino

The goal of embodying these images are important as participants described that gay male culture places a heightened emphasis on physical appearance. Many participants explained that gay male culture revolves around physical attractiveness. The objectification of male bodies within gay male culture can encourage gay men to desire to change their bodies, so to emulate the idealized images represented in gay male culture. Braedon described the focus on physical appearance in the gay community.

This is just what a lot of emphasis is put on. It is the worshiping of the body. It is what we put so much attention on. Just in being over sexualized. You have to be this, and you have to be that. A guy can be straight skinny, but gay fat. You know all that stuff. – Braedon, 24, African American/Mexican American

Braedon like many other participants, compared the body image pressures of gay men to body image pressures of heterosexual men, emphasizing that within gay male culture there is a greater focus on a particular physical aesthetic marked by a lean and muscular physique, devoid of fat. This revered body is pervasive throughout gay male culture, which encourages him to be aware of his body and feel pressures to conform to an ideal body represented.

Transmitters of Body Ideals

Participants discussed how various cultural and advertising media (e.g. gay themed pornography, gay themed magazines, mainstream movies, TV, athletes, etc.) influenced how they developed ideas about what was considered a desirable body. Participants also discussed how they felt about their bodies and other gay male bodies. These cultural media transmit the idea that to be physically desirable, it required having a lean and muscular physique.

Gay male themed pornography, and gay male themed magazines were two of the most mentioned influencers for how men felt about their bodies and other male bodies. Some men discussed the fact the men in gay male themed pornography represent what is considered ideal for physical and sexual desirability within gay male culture since these bodies reinforce body norms within gay male culture. For example, Charlie (39, white) suggested pornography “initially colored my judgment,” describing, the fact that the bodies represented in gay male pornography influenced the way he felt about his and other male bodies. Similarly, Damari (25, African American) described gay themed pornography as being influential for him and other gay

men since men in gay themed pornography embody the ideal physique that is revered in gay culture – a lean, muscular physique, devoid of fat. As Damari stated: “I think the majority of images are muscular, fit males and they kind of have the same stereotype, that most people want us to have in our actually real sexual experiences.”

While participants referenced gay themed pornography as a cultural media that influenced the way they felt about their bodies and other male bodies, often men were critical of the body types represented. For example, Noah described the influence of pornography on the perception of his body, but also his fear of developing what he referred to as a “porn brain.” This was problematic for Noah as he used gay pornography to hold himself accountable to a particular body physique. Noah not only used gay themed pornography as a basis to hold his body accountable to, but he also held other gay men’s bodies accountable to these idealized male bodies. In his description of gay themed pornography, he described a desire to look like the men represented in gay themed pornography, while acknowledging that the body types represented in gay themed pornography may be unobtainable.

It looks like they never eat at all, and go to the gym all the time. [They are] people with abnormally large penises, everybody has this great body. For the most part, I am worried about developing a porn brain, in that when I think about my engagement with the world; it is based on porn, and not the world itself. Sometimes I have to remind myself, that what I have expected myself to see is what I have seen in porn. – Noah, 32, African American

Noah expressed shame over his body, as he has gained over 40 lbs. in the last three years. He recognized that although the male bodies represented in gay themed pornography are considered ideal, he does not have this body type. This fostered body dissatisfaction; in spite of recognizing the body, physiques represented in gay culture are not obtainable for most gay men.

Noah acknowledged that gay male pornographic actors go to extremes to look the way they do, such as dieting and excessive working out to maintain their bodies.

Most men described various cultural media that served, as a model for what their bodies should become as they depicted the lean and muscular physique revered in gay male culture. Other men, described how some cultural media, such as gay themed films have allowed for them to be more comfortable in their bodies, as a result of a wider range of male bodies represented. For Jesse, the increased visibility of a variety of male bodies provided him with affirmation that he did not have to look like the idealized bodies represented in gay male culture.

It influences my body positively. Their bodies are not like the men in gay porn, where they are very muscular and buff, in more recent gay films on Netflix, they have more realistic bodies, which is the affirmation that my body is ok. It influences me, but it is more positive than gay porn. – Jesse, 24, Asian American

Whiteness and Youth as the Embodiment of Desirability

Many participants discussed that men of color are largely invisible in gay culture. Parker contended that gay men of color are not represented in gay culture intentionally, due to the commodification of white male bodies in gay male culture.

It is not represented. It is not represented. There is absolutely no intention of representing it any time soon because of white sex sells, profit margins, the reality is my body is not represented at all.
– Parker, 27, Dominican American

While participants widely acknowledged the promotion of lean, muscular, attractive male bodies within gay male culture, they also discussed the role of race and age in describing what gay male cultures promotes as being desirable. Over a third of participants referenced race when describing the ideal body represented in gay male culture, and nearly one-fifth referenced age.

Participants described the body ideal represented in gay male culture as a white male body that is also well groomed, fit, and young. For many men, this representation was problematic.

Several men discussed the fact that the focus on young, white male bodies within gay male culture creates the notion of what is considered desirable within the gay male community. Representing gay white men as desirable creates a standard that many-- by default of race, age, or body size-- are unable to meet. For Kellen, this often creates uncomfortable social interactions with gay white men, who often reference his ethnicity when providing him a compliment. Kellen credited these unwarranted comments to the lack of visibility of gay men of color within gay male culture.

[They are] Just really attractive, lean and muscular men. You know he has the great hair and great skin...I also do not really see any men other than white men. You know professional men in their 30's and early 40's. Gay men are always [depicted as being] attractive, but realistically obviously, that is not what all gay men look like. It is a little insulting because even it gets to me. I am not white, but I am attractive. Do you know how many times I hear from white [gay] men, you are attractive, but I am not usually attracted to men of color? You know, it is just stupid.
– Kellen, 24, Latino

For many men, the emphasis on whiteness as a maker of desirability within gay culture helped to establish racial hierarchies within gay male culture and the gay male community. Some men like Braedon discussed the necessity of working upon their bodies to be more attractive, as they recognized that to be attractive and a man of color in the gay community, one had to be the exception, whereas white gay men do not experience these pressures.

It is like if you are a black guy, you have to be a sexy black guy. If you're an Asian, you have to be sexy. Otherwise, no one is going to be interested in you. No body is interested in the average looking Asian boy. Even if you're not ugly. No one is interested in your everyday Asian boy. The same thing is for Latinos. No one is interested in your everyday Latino. No one is interested in your everyday black boy. They want a sexy black guy. But, if you're white, you are just white, that is fine.

– Braedon, 24, African American/Mexican American

For Jesse, the emphasis on whiteness within gay male culture as the embodiment of desirability fostered his initial inability to be attracted to other gay Asian men. This also caused him to question his own desirability within gay male social spaces. Jesse described the consequences of treating white men as a standard of desirability and attractiveness.

Even when you look at like porn, it is always young white men, very muscular. And so even for young gay men who are starting to get comfortable with their sexuality, they often go to gay porn, and what they see is what is perceived as sexually attractive, and what is attractive is having a white body. For the longest time, not until college, I was uncomfortable with being attracted to other Asians. I would say things like I was not attracted to other Asians, but when I came to college; I saw how problematic it is to say that I am not attracted to people of my own race. – Jesse 24, Asian American

Jesse later described that being an Asian man he often finds it difficult to have other gay men find him attractive, and it affects the way he feels about himself.

Especially if you go on grinder or those apps people are every specific about what they want “no Asians, no fatties.” Even like finding a partner, even if you are looking for hook up. You see no Asians, or no this or that. So you feel like you are not wanted there either. You already feel like you are not wanted in general society, but you are also not accepted in the gay society either.

Men in this study discussed the necessity of expanding representations of gay men within gay male culture. Some participants made references to the lack of representation of diverse gay male bodies prevents the possibility of gay men envisioning other kinds of male bodies (e.g., older gay men, men of color, men who do not have an “ideal” body, etc.) as desirable.

Empowerment through Representation

Some gay men of color also discussed the rise in men of color in media targeting gay male audiences. This has allowed them to draw alternative narratives, through greater representation of other gay men of color. Men discussed characters from Noah's Arc and the recent film Moonlight, such as Braedon (24, African American/Mexican American) described "My body would look like, what his name from moonlight? That's what it would look like. You know the main character from Moonlight... He's a model of the Calvin Klein. He's beautiful."

Austin (32, Multiracial) similarly discussed how he found self-affirmation through going beyond the mainstream representation of gay white bodies.

It took me a long time, to get comfortable in my skin, as I was not what was represented in gay culture. It is always the handsome white guy, and when you do not look like that what you see you start to question yourself, and doubt yourself, and it brings on a host of insecurities. Maybe, it is why I tried to hard for so long to conform to a perfect body, to make up for the fact that I was not white, but I still could be considered attractive. It was only as I got older, I began to look for images outside of gay white culture, and my connections with other gay men of color, allowed me to see that it was ok not to be white. But, it took me a long time. Now, the only person I am working on becoming is my best self.

These results highlight that gay men are not simply passive consumers of gay culture. They are cognizant of the role that the media's play in creating a narrative of desirability, and are aware that these ideals are socially constructed. Men also were able to look beyond mainstream notion of desirability within gay male culture in their definitions of desirability.

Research Question 2: How do gay peers reinforce body ideals prominent in gay male culture?

Men in this study discussed the pressures from interactions with other gay men to pursue a body ideal represented in gay male culture. I refer to these men as gay male peers. Gay male peers played a significant role in participants' desires to conform to an ideal body. In response to pressures from interactions with other gay men, participants expressed the desire to go to the gym, to be physically attractive, and to change their bodies (e.g., lose weight, have a flat stomach, gain muscle, etc.). While many men expressed feeling pressured from gay male peers to achieve an ideal body, other men discussed how gay male peers allowed them to negotiate and resist dominant body image ideals represented within mainstream gay culture.

Welcome, Fit Bodies!

For many men not only does gay male culture encourage gay men to pursue body image ideals represented in gay male culture, but gay male peers also influence gay men's pursuits of these body ideals. Gay male peers can influence other gay men through practices of inclusion for those bodies that are deemed physically attractive and exclusion for bodies deemed undesirable for a number of reasons (e.g., being too old, perceived and real racial/ethnic discrimination, being too large, etc.). Men routinely described, "fit," "lean," and "muscular" bodies as being welcomed in the gay community, and the rejection of undesirable bodies. The inclusion and exclusion of individuals based on physical appearance help to establish image-based hierarchies in which attractive, young men with the fit, gym bodies are on top of the hierarchy, while men with less desirable bodies are at the bottom of the hierarchy. Men often described how men are rejected in gay social spaces when they were unable to conform to an ideal body represented in gay male

culture and reinforced by gay male peers. Many participants discussed the reinforcement of body ideals by gay male peers and gay male culture. For example, Braedon (24, African American/Mexican American) stated: “Oh yeah, I mean we pressure ourselves, and we pressure each other. Just in everything, and the images we are attracted to and the views we listen to and the places we go. All of it.”

Other men described the rejection of men who do not meet the ideal body. Some men explained how bodies that are deemed undesirable do not get a second look by other gay men. Many men discussed the importance of physical appearance for first impressions. For example, Lewis (40, African American) stated: “You will not get a second look if your body is not looking good. Fit body men want fit body men, and everyone likes looking at a fit body man. Physical appearance is a huge first impression for gay men.”

Gay male peers can also create a necessity for gay men to conform to body image ideals dominant in mainstream gay male culture, by reinforcing body image pressures, already central to gay men’s everyday social lives. For men who do not conform to the ideal body, they may find their social and dating life curtailed. Martin, for example, described the rigid standard of physical attractiveness within gay culture that gets reinforced by other gay men in the dating market.

The emphasis on it makes it hard to date. One could have one minor off feature that turns off a potential mate, or in other words, you could be the smartest, nicest, most charming individual, but if your appearance does not match or supersede then, you are deemed unattractive to potential partners. – Martin, 38, African American

This keen awareness of the reality of having one’s body being constantly assessed by others served as an encouragement for gay men to be more self-conscious of their bodies, which therefore encourages them to pursue or maintain an ideal body, so to not be rejected by other gay

men. For some men, this is a vicious cycle that encourages them always to be aware of their bodies, which also reinforces the need to monitor and work on their bodies continually. For example, Keon (26, Latino) stated: “I feel the need to constantly meet body image pressures. I have to be thin, and I have to exercise. If not I would probably not have friends or people who cared about me.”

Keon discussed the role of gay male peers, in influencing his body image pressures. This expectation to be fit motivates his desires to exercise to maintain a thin body physique. Keon later described the considerable investment he puts into thinking about his physical appearance due to feeling pressured by gay male culture and from other gay male peers.

I spend so much time weighing myself, watching what I eat, it is ridiculous. I spend more money on my clothing and appearance oriented up-keeps because it is expected of me. I also tend to have my self-esteem tied into my current body weight and shape. –

Rejecting Undesirable Bodies

Some men described personal experiences of being rejected due to not having a body that was considered ideal. For many of these men, not having an ideal body created a heightened awareness of their bodies, not meeting an ideal body. For example, Omar (32, African American) described that his body left him feeling vulnerable to constant critique from himself and other men, as well as recognizing instances of rejection from gay men due to his body size. Omar realized that his body does not embody an ideal physique represented in gay culture, and because of it, the gay male community has not been receptive to him.

It makes me definitely want to lose weight, and it makes me insecure and frustrated, and it makes me feel honestly less than. Not because I feel like I am less than other people, but this is an area that makes me vulnerable and sensitive, because of how people treat overweight individuals within the gay community... I have a jaded and insecure view of my body, I look at my body, and feel that it is disgusting... it makes me desire to be a different aesthetic, such as having a flat stomach and being in shape, and I want to be wanted.

For gay men rejection due to their bodies not embodying a body ideal represented in gay culture, resulted in consequences such as feeling undesirable, developing what some men called “depression,” or developing negative feelings about their bodies. Omar recognized that gay men do not typically find him desirable, due to his body size. Omar, like other participants, also described witnessing and experiencing weight-related discrimination in the gay male community. Having experienced weight based discriminated encouraged him to want to lose weight. For Omar, this desire to change his body was similar to other men who described themselves as being overweight, in that they felt rejected and often expressed their desire to lose weight was to be accepted by other gay men. For men who do not embody a body ideal salient within gay culture, it can be a painful, lonely process. Often men are rejected by potential sexual partners and are excluded from gay male social networks. For example, Owen (44, African American) similarly explained his experiences of discrimination due to being overweight.

It can be incredibly painful as I am not what most people want. I am too fat, not muscular enough, dick not huge. It portends long-term loneliness. And the rejection is painful. I experience intense depersonalization in other areas of my life. Sometimes I just want to experience intimate human congress to know that I matter, if only to someone for a moment.

Participants discussed the sociocultural pressures for gay men to be physically attractive, as both gay male culture and gay male peers work together to create and maintain hierarchies of desirability and exclusion. As a result, many men regularly reflect upon their bodies and

described the desire to continually work upon their bodies so to modify and maintain it, to conform to an ideal body represented in gay male culture, to avoid being excluded from potential partners and gay male peers.

Even If I Do Not Want to Be Fit, He Encourages Me!

While many men acknowledged they work out routinely, their rationale for going to the gym appeared to vary. For some men working out was about fitness and health, while others for aesthetics. Some, men such as Damari described that gay men pressure each other to be physically fit.

They may feel like ok, well now I have to go to the gym every day. They may not even like going to the gym every day, but that person does not want to be talked about around their peers and social groups. – Damari, 25, African American

Men discussed the fear of being treated negatively if their bodies do not meet an ideal body; this encouraged a constant awareness of their bodies. As a result, men often felt external social pressures to work on their bodies actively, which highlight the fact that gay male peers play a central role in gay men's pursuits of an ideal body. However, in some instances, they spoke of resistance and negotiation to body image ideals.

Resisting and Negotiating Peer Pressure

Participants were highly aware of the fact that other gay men, influenced their desires and other gay men's desires to pursue and maintain a particular body ideal. The men illuminated their active and reflexive awareness and negotiation that their bodies' did not conform to body image ideals represented in gay male culture, that become reinforced by peers.

Some men spoke of indirect resistance, by suggesting their focus was not solely on the external, but rather on other factors that they found attractive internally in themselves and other

men such as intelligence, personality, and warmth. Leonardo (30, African American/Cuban American) described his resistance by intentionally stepping away from the gay community. He described the gay community as problematic in the over focus on physical appearance.

I am no longer as involved as I was in the gay community, because of that fact. Because I'd rather be in the company of people who are just open-minded individuals. Or if anything it has made me, you know much stronger. In terms of me believing that I do have self-worth that I am a lot more than this physical frame that you look at. It strengthens my resolve to be an authentic man and no longer care. – Leonardo 38, African American/Cuban American

Other men discussed direct resistance. These men suggested that the focus on body image within gay culture and among gay male peers was unnecessary and superficial. For example, Parker (27, Dominican) spoke of active resistance to peer influence. He described himself as being active in his resistance against gay male culture and what other gay men expected of him.

No, no, they don't influence my image. No, I am very much set in stone to deliberately confuse and oppose what is expected of me as a gay male. They play absolutely no influence in how I'm going to perceive myself because I am already set in stone in who I am.

My Peers Help Me Love Me

Other men, particularly those who experienced marginalization due to lack of representation based on their age, ethnoracial background, or body size, often relied on similar peers to negotiate negative feelings about their bodies from the wider gay community and gay culture. For example, Noah (32, African American) described the fact that although his larger body is unacceptable in mainstream gay culture, it was acceptable among other African Americans, who Noah believed are more accepting of larger body sizes. Noah emphasized that body ideals are not monolithic in the gay community and race plays a critical role.

It also varies by race. Men who are comfortable with my size, are themselves African American, more in shape black guys have been attracted to me more than in shape white guys, or men from other races. I think black folks, I don't know if that is because we have a history of understanding thickness and larger hips, or thighs and hips, of larger bodies, being welcomed and not as something negative. Maybe? I am just guessing.

Life Course and Resistance to Peer Influence

Many participants, who discussed awareness of the ability to resist pressures from peers to conform to an ideal body, often discussed a journey towards self-acceptance as they aged. Men made sense of their body-reflexive practices (e.g., acting upon the body via exercise, eating healthy, dieting), as activities done for self-improvement or health as opposed to feeling pressure from other gay men.

For a brief period of my life, it did affect me. I viewed myself as not being desirable because I wasn't of a certain body type for so long. After so much time hearing the language, "no fats," "no fems." I started thinking about well truthfully, what is it that someone would consider fat? Where are the limits here? No one completely understands someone's preferences. It is not my job to consider someone else's preferences. What I do now regarding exercise, I do it for me. I really don't care what is going on in gay culture in regards to language whereas body type is concerned.
– Leonardo 38, African American/Cuban American

Research Question 3: How do gay men reflect upon their bodies as embodied subjects, so to modify and maintain their bodies in response to sociocultural influences?

I will now examine how gay men reflect upon their bodies in response to sociocultural influences and how they engage in practices so to modify and maintain their bodies. For many men, the idealized bodies salient in gay culture are often unobtainable without considerable investment. Many discussed the active recognition of this awareness and responded in various ways.

Men in this study reflected upon their bodies as embodied subjects regarding the idealized bodies represented in gay male culture in a wide variety of ways. I report on three distinct ways in which gay men respond to body image ideals represented in gay culture. First, some gay men they had a positive reflection on their bodies described as “I Am Content In My Body.” Second, some participants were able to recognize their bodies did not embody an idealized body represented within gay male culture but were able to negotiate with these body ideals described as “Reflexive Negotiation.” Third, some gay men had a negative reflection on their bodies described as “I Am No Adonis.” I then follow with what men do to embody and in some instances negotiate and resist body image ideals represented throughout gay male culture.

I Am Content In My Body

For some men there was a positive sense of self-worth related to their bodies that came from the fact that their bodies allowed them to gain access to social capital. For these men, the ideal body in gay culture was not an oppressive representation, but benefited them, in their interactions with other gay men, thus encouraging them to maintain their bodies. Elliot (56, white) discussed how being a dancer allowed his body to gain “cultural” and “social capital,” granting him high body esteem.

I have rather higher self-esteem as my body has been instrumental in making my living as a worker dancer, and choreographer, which has high social and cultural capital in the gay male culture. Generally, my body has been a positive sign for who I actually am in the world.

Other men, described the positive feelings with their bodies came from drawing on their intimate relationships to combat body ideals represented in gay male culture. Gay male culture did not influence all participants' body image goals. For some, their partners were a greater

influence on their body image. For example, Gabriel (58, white) stated: “I am mostly influenced by my man, and the men I have dated.”

Some men in relationships described that if they were single, then they would be more focused on pursuing body image ideals to be able to find a partner. For example, Michael (36, Latino) said: “If I were single, it would push me to try and get that perfect body, just for someone to look my way.” Michael is aware of the importance of physical appearance in gay male culture, and the necessity of embodying a body ideal represented in gay culture. However, for him, like other men, being in a relationship protected him against the need to embody an ideal body. However, not all gay men described being completely at ease with their bodies due to their relationship.

For example, Jayden (36, Jamaican American/Latino) who is married to his partner described the pressure to remain physically attractive while being married to his partner from himself, his partner, and also the outside gay social world.

People are attracted to both of our body types and so we kind of like see that. So, I am like well, I can't just let myself go because I don't want him to feel like ok, I'm just letting myself go, and now all these other guys are you know pushing their muscles upon him. And then I don't want him to like let himself go, then feel like now all sudden these other 'girls'³ are coming here.

He continued:

I think most of the pressure comes from people getting comfortable with each other. But I think over time it is the outside pressures and the influence around that, and that can sometimes cause a lot of problems with folks saying you can't go to that party without me or pride without me. Because there is this idea that you're going to see someone with a hotter body than what you have and then, but for me, I'm like go ahead. I'll see you later.

³ Jayden used the term “girls” to refer to other gay men.

Jayden's response is in contrast to other men, who experienced a sense of comfort from being with their partners and feeling less pressured to achieve a particular physique. His response highlights how even in a committed relationship some gay men may feel encouraged to continually reflect and work upon their bodies, to maintain a particular physique for themselves, and for their partners.

For other men, contentment with one's body came from lack of involvement in the gay male community. Although these men acknowledged that gay male culture places a heightened emphasis on physical appearance, they were, however, uninterested in working on their bodies to adhere to body image norms within the gay male community for various reasons. This included not being "in the scene" or "no longer being involved in the community," which encouraged these men to be less concerned with their body image.

Other men discussed body acceptance developed from growing older, regardless of their current age. These men discussed being more satisfied with their bodies as they aged. For example, Hunter (47, white) stated: "I'm far more comfortable with my looks and my body than I was 20 years ago – and so I am measurably happier. I'm not sure why that is, but I'm glad."

Reflexive Negotiation

For other men in this study, they were able to negotiate with their bodies' inability to personify an ideal body represented in gay male culture. These men were aware that their bodies did not meet the body ideals represented in gay male culture. However, unlike men who had positive feelings about their bodies, these men discussed that at some point, they actively tried to achieve an ideal body, but were unsuccessful at achieving or maintaining this physique, but were ok with this inability to meet or maintain this physique. On the other hand, some men discussed that their

bodies are something that they are actively working on. These men were also, however, comfortable with their bodies not meeting the ideal physique, as their bodies are a work in progress.

This is actually why I started working out because up until a year and a half ago I weighed close to 300 lbs. and I was really depressed about that, so I started working out and started eating sort of healthy. I still wrestle with the food issues, but I love food, oh my God. But just losing the weight and getting to that more fit ideal that I have in my head helps me to be more confident, it helps me to be more assertive because I am comfortable in my skin. So, I feel like I can project an emotional confidence because of my physical confidence. I think when I guess I was 300lbs, I was in the societal pressure, you know for gay man there is that pressure to be fit, then I took a step back from that, and I said if I start exercising just to fit that pressure I am doing it for the wrong decisions. I had to do it for me, and when I made that decision, it was a lot better for me. Because I was working out kind of at my own pace, not doing anything nuts, but a year and a half work, it is starting to pay off, a year and a half work, I am getting to where I want to be. – Charlie, 39, White

For other men, they made mention that they had tried to pursue an idealized body, but they recognized this physique was unobtainable for them. As a result, they became comfortable with their bodies. For example, Ivan (19, white) stated: “I have before tried to be someone who is unrealistically thin, I thought am I ok? Is that someone I want to be, but I realize that was not going to happen, I am not built that way.”

For some men aging allowed them to negotiate body ideals represented in gay male culture. Many men discussed increasing comfort with their bodies with ages, this ability to reflect upon their bodies aged. Other men discussed the fact that when they were younger, and first coming to age within the gay community, they felt an intense pressure to embody a body ideal represented in gay culture, but as they have aged, they were able to negotiate and resist these body ideals.

Speaking from my own experience. When I was say in my 20's, I was very much concerned about how I appeared. What size I wore and how my body looked like. But I guess as I got older, here I am in my late 30's, and the only thing that I look forward is just good health. No matter what that would like.

– Leonardo 38, African American/Cuban American

Drew similarly discussed:

I mean it did at first, I felt like I was not the best I had to be the best I could be, but now it honestly doesn't it affect me at all. If you don't like the way, I look then find someone else. As I have aged, I mean I am 30, so I am looked at as being too old anyway for going to gay clubs. It took me a long time to get my self-esteem up, to not really care what other gay men thought about me.

– Drew, 30, African American

Austin (32, multiracial) admitted that he had struggled with an eating disorder for years as an attempt achieve an ideal body. Although for years, he described being able to maintain an ideal body, which other gay men found desirable. However, this eventually took a toll on his health, which encouraged him to stop engaging in adverse behaviors, and accept his body.

Of course, when I was in better shape, I was hit on more often; I had guys checking me and a lot more. There are definitely perks to looking good, but for my own state of mind, and where I am at this current stage. I am ok with not being the center of attention. Being hot to other gay men is exciting, but eventually, it has to be about something bigger. So now, I focus on working out to be healthy, and you know eating healthy to be healthy. But, oh yes, when I was super fit, I definitely experienced the benefits of looking, I guess more conventionally attractive to other gay men.

The attention was an incentive for Austin to foster his continued engagement with eating disorder behaviors. However, he is now at a place in which he is ok with his body, and not having to maintain an ideal body, which highlights body image is a constant, lived and embodied experience. Austin described a feeling of freedom, by no longer engaging in these behaviors.

It has been very liberating to me now that I don't have to spend so much time working out and dieting. It was honestly exhausting. Now that I am not there anymore, and I am in a weird place, to experience my changing body, but I don't want to go back. It has made me more conscious of what I do with my body, such as jogging, and eating certain things, and why I do it.

Being a part of a subculture that places less emphasis on thin, muscular body norms was another way for some men to legitimate their bodies as desirable within that particular community. For example, Gilbert (38, white) a self-described 'bear' stated: "I'm a big 'bear' guy, so my body represents masculinity. Being a bear is a subculture within the gay community. Some guys like big guys while most don't." Gilbert was able to negotiate his bear physique by equating it with masculinity and recognizing his desirability within the gay community, while acknowledging that some men find this physique desirable, he also acknowledged.

Of the three men who self-identified as bears, all made references to being accepted within the bear community, while, not being accepted within the mainstream gay community. Due to them being too large or hairy for most gay men to consider desirable. It is also important to note that only one of the three men in this study who self-identified as a bear engaged in behaviors, to attempt to lose weight. The other men expressed contentment with their bodies, which highlights that a bear identity may not simply develop, as a result of failure to embodying an ideal body represented in dominant gay male culture.

I Am No Adonis

Most gay men desired to change something about their bodies due to existing in a culture that places a heightened emphasis on physical appearance. For some gay cultures emphasis on physicality, never allows them to be fully satisfied with their bodies. For example, Luke (22,

Latino) stated: “Yes, though I am happy with my body, I am never entirely satisfied because the media projects this great Adonis as the gay stereotype and I do not live up to that expectation.”

Other men described experiencing negative feelings about their bodies due to no longer having an ideal body. For some men, this was due to their bodies changing in unexpected ways, and often beyond their control such as aging or illness. For example, Daniel (54, white) stated: “It is quite hurtful, as I no longer fit the image, and when I did, it inspired an ugly lust in others... I feel worse now that I am heavy and sometimes crippled.” It was common for men to express frustration and discontentment with their bodies as a result of these unexpected changes. Often men, similar to Daniel reminisced on periods of time in which their bodies did meet a body image ideal or were closer to where they are now.

Life Course Expectations

Although gay culture privileges young men in terms of representation and what is deemed desirable, men in this study had different perspectives about how they viewed gay men’s bodies, at the various stages in the life course. Younger gay men were expected to be thin, toned, fit, aesthetically pleasing and image conscious. Much of this derived from the fact that gay male culture is centered on youth, and so while younger gay men are privileged by representation and what is considered desirable, they are more vulnerable to body image pressures due to being expected to adhere to an ideal body type. For example, Jack (18, white) stated: “Younger gay men are expected to be more of the perfect body or trophy gay.” In contrast to the pressures placed on younger gay men, older gay men did not exhibit the same body image pressures in that the expectation was not to be physically attractive, and fit. Often men discussed becoming more relaxed about their appearance as they moved across the life course.

While many participants discussed that gay community as being ageist and noted that ageism was a problem in both gay culture and the gay community, participants also discussed age as a protective factor against body image pressures, as discussed by Warren and Porter.

I think that younger you are more concerned. You usually get to a certain age, and you do not care as much about appearance. It is about more of the internal processes. Your priorities change.
– Warren, 44, white

Well, older men do not have to be so obsessed with their bodies. Young gay men, we are obsessed with our image, because we have to be. But you know, it is just the way it is. But I think it is the same way for everyone, gay or straight. The older you get, the more money you make, so you do not have to focus so much on being attractive, or skinny, or muscular or you know any of that.
– Porter, 22, White

Although the general idea was that as gay men age they are less body image pressures, this was mainly related to the fact that gay culture focuses on young gay men, and due to gay culture's focus on young gay men, older gay men are largely invisible. For older gay men to be visible, they had to be someone that stands out. For example, Braedon (24, African American/Mexican American) stated: "Oh God, the older you get, the sexier you better be." It was not uncommon for gay men to make references to the fact that for older gay men, like men of color, in order to be seen as physically attractive, one had to be an exception.

Disciplining the Body, Pursing the Adonis

While men in this study discussed they had the ability to resist and negotiate body image norms represented in gay male culture, many men still engaged in reflexive body techniques in order to strive to resemble a body image ideal represented in gay male culture. Participants were reflective in their embodiment, and the behaviors they engaged in to pursue a body ideal represented in gay male culture. The participants affirmed their recognition that the ideal body is

something that is actively contemplated and worked upon routinely. For some after recognizing that their bodies fell outside of a body ideal, they discussed engaging in behaviors to modify their bodies, including engaging in adverse behaviors. To modify their body, participants engaged in active, reflexive body techniques such as exercise and skipping meals, while others discussed what I refer to as considered reflexive body techniques.

When discussing reflexive body techniques, it is important to consider the meaning of why individuals engage in these behaviors and how they think about these behaviors. Of the major reflexive body techniques discussed by participants, 41% of men skipped meals, 23% engaged in what they described as excessive weight training, 17% of men engaged in self-induced vomiting and 12% stated they used laxatives. Participants engaged in these behaviors for different reasons such as body size control, to achieve a perfect body, and to be physically attractive to others.

Kellen (21, Latino) described engaging in a number of reflexive body techniques to “look good” as illustrated in his response:

Because I want to look good, and sometimes you have to do extreme things to look your best. I do not think most people realize how much pressure is placed on gay men. We have unrealistic expectations; it is the wait a minute you have got so thin and fit you look great! Oh but now you are too thin! Then when you gain a pound, you are ignored. It is totally frustrating! It is two extremes either you are thin, or you are totally buff...Nothing is going to stop me from doing whatever it takes. It's just what it is, I know if I skip a meal I can lose a pound or two.

Kellen, like other participants, admitted to engaging in strategies to modify his body, so to conform to an ideal body represented in gay culture.

Participants discussed an awareness of their bodies not being stable; they change in unpredictable ways, often outside of their control, such as due to age or illness. However, in

other instances bodies' change due to failure to maintain their bodies in ways previously managed, such as failure to consistently work out, creating undesirable weight gain or muscle loss. For example, Braedon (24, African American/Mexican American) stated: "I have skipped meals because I didn't like the way my stomach looked... if I haven't been in the gym lately, and I noticed my body changing. I just wanted it to stop."

Many men acknowledged that gay culture promotes a young, attractive, male body image. However, this resulted in more body image pressures for young men to be physically fit and attractive to conform to gay male culture's body norms. Young men (ages 18-29) were more likely to engage in adverse reflexive body techniques such as self-induced vomiting and skipping meals than men from the other two age groups (30-49 and 50 and above). Perhaps due to young gay men experiencing more body image pressures since images of young, attractive, fit men in gay culture are aimed at younger men. For example, Jesse (24, Asian) stated:

It influences my idea of what is an attractive body. Younger men are expected to have a more fit body, so I am supposed to be more fit. It influences my idea of what is an attractive body. Younger men are expected to have a more fit body, so I am supposed to be more fit. It influences my idea to want to lose weight.

Although younger gay men (18-29) in this study engaged in reflexive body techniques at a higher percentage than men in the other age groups, men from the other two age categories were not exempt from working upon their bodies. However, the results did reveal that as individuals aged across the life course; men became less likely to engage in adverse behaviors associated with body shape and size control. Younger gay men were more likely to engage in reflexive body techniques to work on or to maintain a lean and muscular physique, whereas men from the other age groups were more likely to engage in reflexive body techniques to look younger or to change their appearance. One strategy was working to maintain a youthful body.

For example, Ethan (46, white) stated: “I feel pressured to look attractive and to look younger, as long as I can and to be fit and athletic.” Ethan like other older men discussed engaging in practices such as going to the gym and watching what he ate in response to aging.

Another strategy was changing one’s appearance via permanent or temporary changes to one’s aesthetic, such as hair coloring or cosmetic work. For example, Zackary [Black, 40] stated: “I’ve colored my hair to look younger and brow waxing for cosmetic reasons.” It was not uncommon for men to describe engaging in behaviors to look younger, which was equated with being more appealing to other gay men.

Considered reflexive body techniques included the desire to get work done, via cosmetic surgery, or a desire to work out or change eating habits. Many men discussed the desire to get plastic surgery to lose weight or to get butt implants, a nose job, etc. However, few men had plastic surgery or had their bodies worked on (e.g. Botox, fillers) to maintain or achieve a particular physical aesthetic. For example, Noah (32, African American) stated: “I thought about getting liposuction to get rid of some of this fat.” Noah described a desire to be thinner, to be physically attractive to other men, but also a desire to want to be healthier, this was important for him as he was getting older. This was a common sentiment expressed by men who had desires to change their physical appearance. Some men for a variety of reasons such as time commitment or finances did not pursue changing their bodies.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was to examine how gay men reflect upon their bodies, so to modify and maintain it in response to body image ideals salient in gay male culture. My goal for this study was to make a unique contribution to the sociology of the body and embodiment, by examining gay men's body image as a process of a constant and reflexive embodiment, resistance, and negotiation to sociocultural pressures. While embodiment might be thought of as a personal, process, what I hoped to do with this research was to illuminate the reflexive embodiment is rooted in the social world, as it is through interactions where the self emerges (Crossley 2006).

This study illuminated that the body is central to the everyday social experiences of gay men. Participants in this study demonstrated that body image is a constant, negotiated, and lived process in response to sociocultural influences. Men in this study also highlighted that gay men are not without agency; they are not simply consumers of cultural consumptions without being critical of the images put in front of them. Gay men in this study were critical of these representations of these body ideals and engage in strategies of reflexive embodiment, as well as reflexive negotiation and resistance.

Similar to other studies (Drummond 2005b; Duncan 2010a; Duncan 2010b) participants also highlighted that gay men's body image is not simply something that is written upon their bodies by social forces as a result of gay men existing within gay male culture that places heightened emphasis on physicality. Gay men can and do reflect and act upon their bodies through various strategies of modification and maintenance so to resist, negotiate, or embody,

body expectations salient within gay culture. This highlights the importance of sociological research in gay men's image. There are powerful sociocultural factors that encourage gay men to pursue body image ideals within gay male culture, such as being rejected or excluded from gay male peers and potential partners for not having a desirable body.

Gay culture has been noted to place a heightened emphasis on physical appearance and attractiveness (Bergling 2006; Drummond 2005b; Kassel and Frank 2000). Men in this study described the task of existing in a subculture that places a heightened emphasis on physical appearance and attractiveness. For gay men, the focus on physicality within gay male culture can encourage them to desire to emulate a body ideal pervasive throughout gay male culture. The ideal body within gay male culture, one that is lean, muscular, and devoid of fat, sets the standard for desirability within the gay social and cultural world. While this body is unobtainable for most men without considerable investment, men still spend a considerable amount of time working towards this ideal body.

Not only is the ideal body represented within gay male culture a body that is lean and muscular, but it is also marked but by a young and white body. Participants were critical of the raced and aged component of what is considered desirable within gay male culture, but less critical of the idealized bodies represented promoting a lean and muscular physique, as men used these bodies as a blueprint for desirability. However, gay men do not simply adhere to body image norms due to their inability to reject these body ideals, but rejection of these body ideals comes at a considerable cost (Drummond 2005b; Duncan 2010a; Himel and Engeln 2006; Gough and Flanders 2009)

Previous studies note gay men are more influenced by peers than heterosexual men, when it comes to body image related concerns (Hospers and Jansen 2005; McArdle and Hill

2009). However, to my knowledge, this is the first study that has explicitly examined gay male peers and their influence on gay men's body image pursuits. Participants demonstrated that gay male peers play a large role in gay men's pursuits of the body image ideals. Although peers often reinforced body ideals represented in gay culture, by engaging in practices of exclusion for those who are unable to conform to an idealized physique, they also created aesthetic based hierarchies where young, fit bodies are on top of the hierarchy.

Results of this study showed that peers and interactions matter when it comes to reinforcing body ideals within gay culture. A significant contribution to this study is the finding that peers can also provide gay men's ability to negotiate or resist unrealistic body image representations within gay culture. In addition, peers can provide positive reinforcement for men who are marginalized by gay culture by providing a foundation for negotiation and resistance of body image ideals represented in gay culture.

I also contribute to the literature, by extending Duncan's work on gay men and reflexive embodiment. Duncan (2007; 2010a; 2010b) focused on how gay men pursue and negotiate a gay social identity marked by a high focus on physicality. I was able to articulate that embodiment extends identity salience and negotiation among gay men, reflexive embodiment involves a day-to-day lived social experience in which body image norms salient in gay culture can be actively embodied, negotiated, and resisted. I demonstrated that body image must be understood as a daily, lived experience, which involves gay men's capacity to be reflexive on and with their bodies in conversation with salient ideals represented in gay culture and reinforced by sociocultural factors.

Previous research on gay men's body image has primarily or exclusively focused on gay white men, which is problematic as gay men are not a homogeneous group. Therefore, the

diversity of their experiences should be accounted for when exploring body image related issues. This study also highlights the importance of considering intersectionality when conducting research on gay men's body image. As race/ethnicity and life course can shape one's feelings about their bodies, their responses to body image salient in gay male culture, and their embodied strategies to resist, negotiate or conform to body image pressures within the dominant gay male community.

In summary, I make three contributions to the literature. First, I extend Duncan's work on reflexive embodiment, by going beyond embodiment as a process of embodying a gay identity. Instead, I examined embodiment as constant, day-to-day process that develops based on how gay men reflect upon their bodies, and modify and maintain them in response to sociocultural pressures. This study also highlighted that gay men also actively negotiate and resist these pressures. Second, this study demonstrated that gay male peers, not only shape gay men's pursuits of body image ideals, by reinforcing the necessity of gay men embodying a body ideal salient in gay culture, but they can also support gay men's negotiation and resistance of body image ideals represented in mainstream gay culture. Third, by having a diverse sample, I was able also to highlight that race/ethnicity and life course shape one's feelings about their bodies, and their responses to body image ideals represented in gay male culture. Most important, men who are often not idealized as being desirable within gay male culture by default of their race and age do create their own standards of physical attractiveness and can embrace their bodies, in spite of not being considered ideal within mainstream gay male culture.

Limitations

This study demonstrated that gay men reflect on their bodies so to modify and maintain their bodies. Although this study provided valuable knowledge to gay men's body image, many questions remain unaddressed, and there were several limitations. Limitations of this study include the sample and the design. Although not a representative sample, some ethnoracial groups were underrepresented. For example of the 64 men in this study, only four were Asian American men. A more diverse sample including men who were underrepresented and unaccounted for in this study (e.g. Asian American men, men of Middle Eastern/North African heritage, Native American men) would provide better insight into how gay men from these backgrounds, reflect and act upon their bodies due to sociocultural influences. In addition, this study provides only a snapshot of participants' experiences. A longitudinal study would be beneficial to follow men across the life course as they work on their bodies in response to their bodies that changes across the life course.

Directions for Future Research

Not all changes to the body are intentional some are due to illness, age, and other unintended body changes. Participants discussed this reality in a number of ways. One area that should be developed is related to HIV status and other chronic illnesses. Many men in this study acknowledged their in relation to body image and body image concerns. HIV-positive status. However, this topic extended beyond the scope of this study, therefore emerging themes related to HIV and body image, were not presented in the results. However, a future study examining gay men who are HIV-positive would be beneficial to explore, especially how gay men adjust to body changes as a result of a having chronic illness such as HIV. I would additionally be

interested in exploring how gay men embody their sexual position status, as this was another emerging theme discussed by some participants not reported in the results. Furthermore, a potential area of future research would be to examine how gay men embody multiple identities that are often context dependent.

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