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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to explore the existence of male ideal body and the extent to which pressure to conform to such an ideal may now be operating on males within contemporary Irish society. In a society dominated by visual imagery, the concept of body image has come to have increased significance (Richins, 1993, Faludi, 1999, Fallon, 2000; Markula, 2001). It is only in recent years that authors such as Potter (2001), Thomas (2000) and Cloud (2000) have indicated that societal expectations of beauty may now be operating on men. Recent research has suggested that men must also adhere to certain standards of ideal body (Bovey, 1994, Cloud, 2000, Palmer, 1989). (Cloud, 2000), claims to reveal a ‘troubled obsession for men’ and shows that male self worth is becoming increasingly tied to body image.

Brunner (2001) additionally posits that sexual orientation may play a vital role in terms of feeling dissatisfied with one’s physical appearance. Remafedi and Resnik (1996) found that homosexual males were far more likely to have negative body image and admit to frequent dieting and binge eating, than heterosexual males. Explanations of such a trend note the emphasis homosexual culture places on appearance, a sense public self-consciousness, feeling dishonest about ones true identity (Ballew, 2001) and a preoccupation with finding a mate (Gideon, 1998).

Working within the interpretive paradigm, an exploratory, depth interview approach was adopted. Overall, the depth interview allowed respondents to express views, which may be considered less acceptable or contrary to the current value system operating within Irish society. A total of nine respondents were interviewed. Three homosexual males were sampled as previous studies have identified this group as being more lightly to suffer from body image dysphoria (Gideon, 1998, Siever, 1996, Brunner, 2001, Ballew, 2001).

Four principle themes emerged for the data:

Theme 1: The Ideal Male Body?

Overall respondents (regardless of gender or sexual orientation) offered what could be classified as a “typical” description of the ideal male physique and one, which they personally would aspire to attain. The most common adjectives employed where “tall”, “broad” and “well built”. While both heterosexual males and females expressed a belief that when it came to
muscle: “a little is better than a lot”, their homosexual counterparts emphasised their preference for the larger physique;

Theme 2: The Rejection of the ‘Overweight’ Body

Although “muscle” dominated much of the discussion in terms of the male body-ideal, a general theme emerged which pointed toward the rejection of the “fat” body. Both males and females alike supported the notions that the overweight person is seen as possessing negative character traits.

Theme 3: Expectations to Conform to The Ideal Body

Females were seen to be the primary victims of societal expectations of physical perfection. The criteria for the ideal female body were also identified as far more restrictive and demanding with an emphasis on actual body size rather than any particular physical attribute. This finding cuts across the boundaries of gender and sexual orientation. Younger respondents admitted that the male concern with regards to appearance represented a break from the past and quite a new stage for men in general. This finding coincides with the arguments of Gwilliam (1998) who noted the greater social and self-awareness of today’s man, and indeed his increasing attraction to products such as clothes and cosmetics.

Theme 4: Sexual Orientation

Homosexual respondents claimed to experience far greater levels of anxiety and concern with respect to how they look. The “gay scene” and the fact that gay males are a little “different” and possess “varying degrees of female hormones” were identified as the routes of this “problem”.

In conclusion, this study serves to put forward the argument that a specific “ideal” male body type exists within contemporary Irish society. While homosexual males were found to place greater emphasis on musculature there was a general consensus that the preferable male body shape would be simultaneously broad, well built and lean. Thus, actual body size was found to be an important evaluative cue for determining an individual’s level of attractiveness. This was particularly the case for females and homosexual males who were identified as the people under most pressure to conform to rigid standards of beauty. Overall, however, it was found that males throughout Ireland, regardless of sexual orientation, are becoming increasingly self-aware in terms of their appearance. Thus, a new era has come about whereby concerns which merely plagued the female species in the past are now operating on the men of today.