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Perfect Bodies: The Relation of Gay Men’s Body Image to Their Appearance Enhancement

Product Consumption Behavior

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Introduction

As the gay lifestyle has gained increased acceptance in the U.S., companies are recognizing the need to tailor marketing efforts to align with this consumer group (O’Barr, 2012). Such efforts have included placing advertisements in gay-oriented media (e.g., The Advocate) and using themes with which the gay consumer can identify (e.g., two men in a domestic living situation). Within the gay community consumption reflects identity, belonging, and subcultural assimilation (Altaf et al., 2012; Hsieh and Wu, 2011; Kates, 2004). With
incomes on average 20% higher than heterosexual households, high conspicuous consumption behavior, and a buying power of over $800 billion in 2014, this segment of society cannot be ignored (Fuller, 2013). Based in a consumer culture theory framework, this study examined how dimensions of body image relate to product involvement among gay men. The empirical findings contribute to the existing knowledge on consumer cultures and appropriate target marketing as well as the consumer behavior of gay men.

*Gay men and body image*

Cultural socialization within the gay community influences men’s attitudes toward their appearance, which are expressed daily through their evaluation of, and investment in, their bodies. Through regular exposure to traditional environments men internalize ideals and expectations of what it means to be “masculine” and develop reference points for self-evaluation, including their bodies and overall physical appearance (Cash, 2002). These evaluations emerge from the amount of discrepancy or congruity that exists between the perceived self (as one actually is) and their ideal self (generally based on internalized societal ideals). Discrepancies between self-states create psychological instabilities within individuals that can lead to body image concerns and psychological distress (Higgins, 1987).

Body image is defined as the subjective mental image individuals have of their body (e.g., body size, body shape, attractiveness) and their attitudes regarding levels of satisfaction with appearance (Mayo and George, 2014). Body image is a multidimensional construct that is often experienced negatively (i.e., body dissatisfaction); therefore it can have consequences on psychosocial functioning and quality of life (Cash, 2004). Because a negative body image can impact self-esteem, it can significantly influence how we feel about ourselves as a whole (Tiggemann, 2012). Although researchers primarily have examined body image concerns in
relation to women (e.g., Mellor et al., 2010; Tiggemann, 2004), recent studies have demonstrated that men experience such concerns as well, though perhaps at levels slightly lower than women (Murray and Touyz, 2012; Olivardia et al., 2004; Tantleff-Dunn et al., 2011). Men are subjected to media images that promote a body ideal of leanness and muscularity, which if attained is believed to lead to success and admiration, as well as increased sexiness, health, popularity, and the ability to be financially successful (Pope et al., 2000). Research suggests that men who emphasize their appearance are likely to be affected by media imagery (e.g., advertisements, magazines), with younger men being most at risk of internalizing media representations of the ideal male body that highlights youth and muscularity (Diedrichs, 2012; Hargreaves and Tiggeman, 2009; Peat et al., 2011). After repeated exposure to media images individuals internalize such ideals, which become part of their cognitive schema. The internalized images are then used as a comparison point for men’s own body image goals and become a guiding principle that motivates them to modify their behavior with the hopes of exacting those body standards (e.g., dieting, obsessive exercising; Thompson, et al., 2004). In a meta-analysis on sociocultural factors and body image, Cafri et al. (2005) suggested that internalization should be assessed as a predictor of body image attitudes because individuals’ awareness of body standards is not as important as their embodiment of the ideal.

Gay, as opposed to heterosexual, men consistently express more body dissatisfaction, often at levels that parallel what has been found among heterosexual women (Alvarez, 2008; Cash and Smolak, 2011; Peplau et al., 2009; Schwartz and Andsager, 2011). Although heterosexual and gay men experience their bodies in essentially the same ways, gay men tend to report more dissatisfaction in a variety of areas, such as with their height, weight, leanness, and muscularity (Martins et al., 2008). This desire to be stronger and more muscular can manifest
itself as muscle dysmorphia, a preoccupation with the idea that one is not sufficiently lean and muscular, which has been related to higher levels of psychopathology, including eating disorders, mood and anxiety disorders, and substance abuse (Mayo and George, 2014; Murray et al., 2012).

Like their body image concerns, gay men’s high drive for muscularity likely results from their internalization of cultural ideals of attractiveness that are presented in the media and within the gay community specifically (Doyle and Engeln, 2014; Parent and Moradi, 2011). Gay men also perpetuate these cultural appearance ideals through their selectiveness in partners, generally finding men who are thinner yet muscular the most attractive (Alvarez, 2008; Martins, et al., 2008; Murray and Touyz, 2012; Peplau et al., 2009; Tiggemann, et al., 2007). For gay men, exercising, with a focus on becoming lean, strong, and muscular has become a primary means through which they attempt to improve their physical attractiveness and counteract society’s perception of gay men as being feminine, physically inferior, and lacking in masculinity (Harris, 1997).

Gay men are also oriented toward their physical appearance in ways that extend beyond just body size and shape, and include behaviors such as grooming habits (e.g., cosmetics) and fashionable dress (e.g., luxury brands; Altaf et al., 2012; Kates, 2002; Reilley et al., 2008; Rudd, 1996; Vandecasteele and Geuens, 2009). Dress for gay men is primarily used to communicate sexual orientation, value, personality, and belonging to their community (Schofield and Schmidt, 2005). Therefore, involvement with fashion can be perceived as a conspicuous characteristic of gay identity, contributing to their distinctive consumption behavior (Sha et al., 2007). For example, Rudd (1996) found that gay and heterosexual men differed in their product preferences
for fragrances and apparel, proposing that marketing strategies needed to consider the importance of appearance and self-presentation in the creation of the gay identity.

*Consumer behavior and product involvement*

Consumer behavior is defined as the various activities a consumer participates in before purchasing, consuming, and disposing of products and services (Blackwell et al., 2006). Product involvement, though not necessary, often acts as a precursor to purchase-decision involvement in the consumer behavior process. Product involvement specifically refers to the relation between individuals and products and the general degree of significance, commitment to, or tendency to elicit feelings of interest in those products (Kim, 2005; Mittal, 1989). Consumers with high-product involvement (e.g., product/brand information and product/brand commitment) will be more involved in the decision process before making a purchase than consumers who are indifferent to a product or brand choice (Lockshin et al., 1997; Mittal, 1989). And, the more involved consumers are, the more likely they are to purchase the products, and even recommend them to others through word of mouth (Blackwell et al., 2006; Kim, 2005).

Product involvement is motivated by consumers’ belief that a product is an extension of their personal identity and used to maintain or enhance their self-concept (Kim, 2005; Solomon and Rabolt, 2009). Therefore, products that enhance individuals’ physiques and appearance, such as apparel and grooming-related products, are considered to be high-involvement products because they directly affect consumers’ self-image, making them feel positively about themselves, and help them project an image to others that reflects what they aspire to be (Kim, 2005; Malhotra, 1988; Sirgy, 1982).

People frequently manipulate physical attractiveness with clothing and other body modifications. For individuals who are dissatisfied with their appearance, including their body
size and shape, the consumption of appearance-modifying products, such as clothing and grooming products, may offer a temporary solution that camouflages unflattering bodies and/or improves one’s appearance to better coincide with societally-based standards of physical attractiveness (e.g., wearing makeup to look younger). Clothing also accentuates or reveals specific body parts and expresses individuality and fashionability (Chatraman and Rudd, 2006; Rudd and Lennon, 2000; Tiggemann and Lacey, 2009).

Frith and Gleeson (2004) examined men’s subjective feelings about how their bodies influenced clothing practices and found that men, like women, try to manipulate others’ perceptions of the shape of their bodies in order to conform to cultural ideals (e.g., clothing that conceals weight). In a sample of 730 men (primarily heterosexual), Strubel and Petrie (2016) found that men’s dissatisfaction with their bodies, involvement with their appearance, and internalization of appearance ideals were all related to how important grooming and apparel products were in their lives. Further, gay men’s appearance orientation (their investment in their appearance) predicts increased frequency of shopping for clothing, fragrances, and other grooming products (Reilley et al., 2008). In another study, the majority (82%) of the men said they felt more attractive when they were well-groomed, and half reported experiencing increased pressure to look attractive and maintain a youthful appearance, thereby motivating them to invest more in beauty products (“Men’s Personal Care,” 2014). These studies, along with others (e.g., Hargreaves and Tiggemann, 2009; Shim et al., 1991), demonstrate that anxieties about, dissatisfaction with, and investment in the body commonly drive appearance management behavior because of the socially attributed meanings that can be passed on to individuals (e.g., Rosa et al., 2006; Van Paaschen et al., 2015).

*Conceptual framework*
Consumer culture theory is a holistic approach to examining consumer behavior as a cultural experience (Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Arnould and Thompson, 2007). This perspective considers consumer goods to have a social significance beyond their utilitarian and monetary value. Consumer goods are no longer about the end-use, but rather about arbitrary meanings assigned to the goods (Featherstone, 1987). Cultural meanings are acquired through socialization, drawn from the object and then transferred to the individual (Arnould and Thompson, 2007). It is through the assemblage and consumption of such goods that consumers construct individual identities. Therefore, the marketplace offers consumers the resources for expressing lifestyles, collective identities, and social structures (e.g., sexual orientation) that systematically influence consumption. Influential studies in the area of dress behavior have found clothing represents a common strategy for appearance management because of how easily it can be manipulated for the purpose of defining and communicating identity (Chatraman and Rudd, 2006; Rudd and Lennon, 2000; Tiggemann and Lacey, 2009). Dress (i.e., modifications or supplements to the body) is frequently used as an overt announcement of identity and facilitates the development and maintenance of a sense of self (actual or ideal). At the same time, dress, in its various forms, can also communicate individuals’ membership in social groups, such as through the use of uniforms or other culturally established symbols. In their influential article on Harley Davidson motorcycle owners, Schouten and McAlexander (1995) demonstrated the importance of segmenting the market based on subcultural consumption patterns. Their findings illustrated the importance of shared consumption interests of a homogenous style (e.g., Harley Davidson branded clothing, leather jackets, boots, wallet chains) as a means of communicating authenticity and commitment to the subculture.
Gay men place a higher value on image, appearance, and fashion consumption than their heterosexual counterparts (Altaf et al., 2012; Dodd et al., 2005; Kates, 1998; Kates, 2002; Kates, 2004). For example, in a sample of 225 gay men and 225 heterosexual men in the United Kingdom, Dodd et al. (2005) found that gay men displayed a significantly stronger dependence on apparel shopping to satisfy personal needs (e.g., self-image) compared to the heterosexual men. Historically, being gay has been synonymous with fashion and brand loyalty because appearance expectations are more rigid and ubiquitous in the gay community compared to what exists in straight society, especially for men who internalize the gay appearance ideals (Kates, 2002; 2004). Thus, it is not surprising that the consumption of fashion and grooming products is higher within the gay, as opposed to heterosexual, community (Sha et al., 2007; Strubel and Petrie, 2016; Vandecasteele and Geuens, 2009). Gay men negotiate their appearance through the brands and types of products they consume, which also may influence their identity and self-perceptions (Kates, 2004). Maintaining a characteristic appearance through the consumption of certain goods and brands is therefore important because it carries considerable social meaning within the gay community (Kates, 2002; Schofield and Schmidt, 2005; Sha et al., 2007). Thus, being invested in their appearance is one way for gay men to demonstrate their affiliation with gay culture/community and establish their gay identity.

Purpose and hypotheses

Despite clear evidence of the importance of physical attractiveness and appearance among gay men (Alvarez, 2008; Murray and Touyz, 2012; Tiggemann et al., 2007) and gay men’s involvement with, and use of, appearance enhancing products (Altaf et al., 2012; Dodd et al., 2005), few studies have examined the relation of these two areas with body image (e.g., Reilly et al., 2008). With a continuing growth in consumer spending in the gay community
(Fuller, 2013), analyzing consumption and product involvement of gay men in relation to how they feel about their bodies and appearance will be of benefit for academia, marketers, and fashion retailers.

Based on consumer culture theory, the current study replicated and extended Reilley et al. (2008) in two ways. First, the authors conceptualized body image through multiple measures, including dissatisfaction, shame, appearance orientation, drive for leanness, muscle dysmorphia, and internalization of different societal appearance ideals, which more closely aligned with the realities of how gay men view their bodies (e.g., leanness, muscularity). Second, the authors focused on consumer involvement (specifically importance) with products directly related to appearance management (i.e., apparel and grooming products) and on their shopping frequency in each product category.

Thus, the researchers made the following hypotheses:

H1: Body image, specifically body dissatisfaction, body shame, drive for leanness, muscle dysmorphia, appearance orientation, and internalization of societal appearance ideals would be related to greater involvement with apparel products and to greater involvement with grooming/appearance-enhancing products.

H2: Body image, specifically body dissatisfaction, body shame, drive for leanness, muscle dysmorphia, appearance orientation, and internalization of societal appearance ideals would be related to a greater frequency of shopping for apparel products and for grooming/appearance-enhancing products.

**Research Methodology**

*Participants*
Participants were 147 men who self-identified as gay on the Kinsey scale; mean age was 23.52 years ($SD = 6.22$; range = 18 to 45 years). In terms of ethnicity, 22.4% ($n = 33$) reported being Hispanic; regarding racial status, 68.0% ($n = 100$) indicated they were White, 8.2% ($n = 12$) Black, 8.2% ($n = 12$) Asian American, 6.1% ($n = 9$) biracial, and 2.7% ($n = 4$) Native American; 6.8% ($n = 10$) checked “other.” The majority were single (78.2%, $n = 115$) and had either some college education or a bachelor’s degree or higher (86.4%, $n = 127$). Participants were full-time college students (46.3%, $n = 68$) or employed full-time (27.9%, $n = 41$) or part-time (17%, $n = 25$). In terms of household income, 34.7% ($n = 51$) reported earning less than $25,000 per year, 19.7% ($n = 29$) between $25,000.00 and $49,999.00, and 45.5% ($n = 67$) more than $50,000.00. Their mean body mass index was 25.29 kg/m$^2$ ($SD = 5.88$).

**Instruments**

*Body image.* The 25-item Body Parts Satisfaction Scale for Men (BPSS-M; McFarland and Petrie, 2012) assesses satisfaction with upper body (17 items), legs (4 items), and face (4 items). On items that focus on leanness and muscularity of different body parts (e.g., “muscularity of chest”) as well as overall body (e.g., “Overall leanness of body”), men rated their satisfaction from 1 (extremely dissatisfied) to 6 (extremely satisfied). Total score for each body dimension is the mean of those items; higher scores indicate more satisfaction with that area of the body. McFarland and Petrie (2012) reported extensive information regarding the scale’s reliability and validity. Cronbach’s alphas from the current study were .75 (Face), .96 (Body) and .91 (Legs).

The six-item Drive for Leanness Scale (DLS; Smolak and Murnen, 2008) assesses men’s attitudes and behaviors associated with having a lean body. The men responded to questions such as “I think the best looking bodies are well toned” on a 6-point scale that ranged from 1
(never) to 6 (always). Total score is the mean of the six items; higher scores indicate a stronger drive to attain a lean body. Smolak and Murnen (2008) reported a Cronbach’s alpha of .79 in a sample of college-aged men, and provided information on the scale’s validity, including its uniqueness from measures of drive for thinness and drive for muscularity. Cronbach’s alpha for the current study was .88.

The 13-item Muscle Dysmorphia Disorder Inventory (MDDI; Hildebrandt, Langenbucher, and Schlundt, 2004) measures individuals’ preoccupation with their level of muscularity along three dimensions, including drive for size, appearance impairment, and functional impairment. On items such as “I feel anxious when I miss one or more workout days,” the men responded from 1 (never) to 5 (always). Total score is the mean of the 13 items; higher scores indicate a stronger endorsement of the symptoms of muscle dysmorphia. Hildebrandt et al. reported a Cronbach’s alpha of .81 in a sample of 245 male weightlifters (aged 18-72 years), and provided extensive information about the scale’s validity. Cronbach’s alpha for the current study was .74.

The authors used a four-item body shame scale (Tripp and Petrie, 2001) to assess men’s feelings of shame associated with the size and shape of their bodies. On items such as “I try to hide my body because I am ashamed of it,” the men responded from 1 (definitely disagree) to 5 (definitely agree). Total score is the mean of the four items; higher scores indicate more feelings of bodily shame. Tripp and Petrie (2001) reported a Cronbach’s alpha of .90 among female undergraduates and provided evidence for the scale’s validity. The Cronbach’s alpha from the current study was .93.

The 12-item Appearance Orientation subscale from the Multidimensional Body Self-Relations Questionnaire (Cash, 2000) assesses individuals’ investment in their appearance and
grooming related behaviors. On items such as “It is important that I always look good,” the men responded from 1 (definitely disagree) to 5 (definitely agree). Total score is the mean of the 12 items; higher scores indicate greater behavioral and attitudinal investment in appearance. Cash (2000) has provided extensive information about the scale’s validity and reported a Cronbach’s alpha of .89 in a sample of adult men. Cronbach’s alpha from the current sample was .87.

Five items from the Athletic subscale of the Sociocultural Attitudes Toward Attractiveness Questionnaire – 3 (SATAQ-3; Thompson et al., 2004) assesses identification with sociocultural ideals of attractiveness with respect to having an athletic appearance. On items such as “I try to look like sport athletes,” the men responded from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The total score was the mean of the five items; higher scores indicate greater internalization. Thompson et al. have provided extensive information about the scale’s reliability and validity. Cronbach’s alpha from the current sample was .90.

Product involvement. Unlike Reilly et al. (2008), who measured shopping behavior using four items about frequency of shopping, venue, time spent shopping, and frequency of shopping for specific products, this study assessed product importance, specifically for apparel and grooming products. Ten items from Lastovicka and Gardner’s involvement scale were used to assess the dimension of product importance (Jensen et al., 1989; Lastovika and Gardner, 1979). The items were presented twice, first to measure the importance of grooming/appearance enhancing products, and second to assess the importance of apparel products. For items such as “Grooming-related enhancing products help me attain the type of life I strive for,” the men responded from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Total score for each measure of product importance is the mean of those 10 items; higher scores indicate greater importance placed on those types of products. Jensen et al. (1988) have provided extensive information
about the scale’s factor structure and validity. Cronbach’s alphas from the current study were .94 (grooming) and .93 (apparel).

*Shopping frequency.* Consistent with Reilley et al. (2008), this study assessed how often the men shopped each month for apparel and grooming-related products through two independent questions (e.g., “How many times a month do you shop for apparel [such as, shoes, jeans, jackets, dress shirts, etc.]”). For each question, the men used the following scale: 0 (never), 1 (once), 2 (twice), 3 (three times), 4 (four times) or 5 (five times or more).

*Demographics and sexual orientation.* At the end of the questionnaire the men provided information on their current age, current weight and height (to compute body mass index), ethnicity, race, educational level, relationship status, employment status, and annual household income. The men also responded to the one-item Kinsey Scale to assess their sexual orientation (Kinsey, Pomery, and Martin, 1948). The scale’s format recognizes that people do not fit into absolute categories regarding their sexual orientation, thus response options range from 0 (exclusively heterosexual with no homosexual contact) to 6 (exclusively homosexual with no heterosexual contact). Consistent with previous research (Tiggeman et al., 2007), men who selected any of the three “homosexual” responses were included in the sample.

*Procedure and Data Analysis*

Following IRB approval, the authors recruited men from a university located in the south central U.S. as well as from social media websites (e.g., Facebook, Reddit) to participate. Each participant accessed a secure website where they provided consent and then anonymously completed the measures.

For each variable in the study, total scores were computed and distributional properties (e.g., skewness, kurtosis) were examined; all were within normal ranges so no transformations
were made. Means, standard deviations and bivariate correlations were computed to examine the simple relations between the body image variables and the product importance and shopping frequency measures. Multiple regression was used to examine the relations of the significant body image variables to each of the consumer behavior outcomes in separate analyses. The significant body image measures were entered simultaneously into each model. Alpha was set at .05 for all analyses.

**Results**

**Correlational analysis**

The bivariate correlations, along with the means and SDs, for all the variables are presented in Table 1. The men’s dissatisfaction with their upper bodies and legs, as well as higher drive for leanness, more muscle dysmorphia, greater body shame, more investment in appearance, and stronger internalizations of athletic appearance ideals were significantly related to their perceiving apparel products as more important to them. A greater desire to be lean, a more intense preoccupation with their muscularity, more body shame, greater attention to appearance, and stronger identification with athletic appearance ideals were related to the men rating grooming-related products as being more important to them.

**Regression analyses – shopping frequency**

Because only appearance orientation had a significant bivariate relation with the shopping frequency questions, it was the only variable entered into each model. Appearance orientation predicted shopping frequency for apparel, $F(1, 145) = 21.68, p < .0001$, Adj. $R^2 = .12$, and for grooming-related products, $F(1, 145) = 20.50, p < .0001$, Adj. $R^2 = .12$. The more the men were behaviorally invested in their appearance predicted a higher frequency of shopping each month for apparel ($\beta = .36, p < .0001$) and grooming-related ($\beta = .35, p < .0001$) products.
Regression analyses – product importance

In examining the importance of apparel-related products, the authors regressed the seven body image variables that had significant bivariate relations with this outcome (i.e., satisfaction with upper body, satisfaction with legs, drive for leanness, muscle dysmorphia, body shame, appearance orientation, internalization athletic). Although the overall regression model was significant, $F(7, 139) = 15.44, p < .0001$, Adj. $R^2 = .41$, only two body image variables contributed uniquely. The stronger the men’s psychological drive to have a lean body ($\beta = .25, p < .01$) and the more they were focused on their appearance and invested in their looks ($\beta = .44, p < .0001$), the more likely they were to view apparel as important to them.

For grooming related products, the authors regressed the six body image variables that had significant bivariate relations with this outcome (i.e., drive for leanness, muscle dysmorphia, body shame, appearance orientation, and the internalization measure). These measures were related significantly to the importance the gay men placed in grooming products, $F(5, 141) = 17.99, p < .0001$, Adj. $R^2 = .37$, yet only appearance orientation contributed uniquely ($\beta = .53, p < .0001$). The more psychologically and behaviorally involved the gay men reported being with their appearance, the more importance they gave to grooming-related products (e.g., hair, cologne) in their lives.

Discussion

This study examined the relationships of eight different dimensions of body image to gay men’s involvement in consumer products and their frequency of shopping for such products. Yet, similar to other studies (e.g., Reilly et al., 2008), only appearance orientation predicted how frequently the gay men reported shopping each month, explaining 12% of the variance in their shopping. The more the gay men were invested in their appearance, the more often they shopped
each month for apparel and for grooming-related products. The link between shopping and being invested in one’s appearance suggests that gay men use shopping as a means to improve their self-image. Tiggemann and Lacey (2009) found similar results with a sample of women, where higher appearance investment predicted shopping more frequently for clothes. Thus, men (and women) are motivated to consume apparel and grooming products (e.g., fragrances) to cultivate a self-image or desired identity through the transfer of symbolic meaning from the product to the self, which is a key tenant of consumer culture theory (e.g., van Paaschen et al., 2015). Although material possessions assist with self-expression, people frequently engage in consumer culture to shape their identities or to compensate for perceived inadequacies in their identity (Dittmar, 2007). Men may use material possessions to help them enhance their self-concept, achieve congruity between their self-states, or to match the prototypical appearance standard of their consumer culture (Sha et al., 2007). For example, advertisements for appearance enhancing products (grooming products, apparel) usually emphasize the reduction in discrepancy between the idealized self and the image in the ads through the use of their products (Diedrichs, 2012; Sirgy, 1982).

Extending Reilly et al. (2008), this study found that two specific dimensions of body image concerns were related to gay men’s investment in apparel-related products, explaining 41% of the variance. Specifically, men’s devotion to their appearance and their desire to achieve a lean body were associated with viewing apparel as more important. Gay men use their appearance, and the clothing they wear, to communicate their identity as members of the gay community and specific subcultures found within the broader gay community (Altaf, 2012; Kates, 2000; Oakenfull, 2012; Schofield and Schmidt, 2005). For example, Shim et al. (1991) found that men who were dissatisfied with their body could maintain a positive attitude toward clothing, possibly
because they viewed clothing as a way to create congruity between the actual and ideal self-states, thereby enhancing their self-concept. Frith and Gleeson (2004) also found that men’s decisions to reveal or conceal the body with clothing depend on context and how they experience their body.

For grooming-related products, although several dimensions of body image had bivariate relationships, only appearance orientation was a significant predictor when considered in the regression model, accounting for 38% of the variance. Men who were concerned about their appearance were more likely to view grooming products, such as hair and skin care, as central in helping them achieve the lifestyle that they wanted. Consistent with Reilley et al., (2008), gay men may use grooming-related products to manage their appearance, attempting to create an image that closely approximates their community’s ideals. The use of certain grooming products may alter men’s appearance enough to reduce discrepancies between their actual and ideal self-states, allowing them to feel more positively about all aspects of their bodies.

Implications

Theoretical implications

This paper adds to the small amount of academic literature on body image and consumer behavior. The findings shed light on the relationship between gay consumption and identity from a psychological and consumer behavior perspective, within the framework of consumer culture theory. More specifically, it adds to an understanding of how dress and grooming behaviors affect and modulate gay men’s self-image during the development and maintenance of their gay identity.

Self-image is a powerful motivator of purchase behavior because goods frequently act an extension of the self (Dittmar, 2007; Malhotra, 1988; Sirgy, 1982). The marketplace offers
optimism to the consumer who is negotiating the disparity between their perceived and ideal selves through the consumption of appearance-modifying products, such as supplements, dieting aids, clothing, and even plastic surgery. These goods and services also carry socially attributed meanings that can be transferred to the individual through their consumption, permitting the individual to better construct a collective identity in their chosen consumer culture.

Gay men, like women, strategically use clothing and other grooming products to manipulate their appearance to meet cultural ideals of masculinity, hiding parts they are ashamed of and accentuating parts of which they are proud. Certain products, such as clothing, are also no longer about the end use for the gay consumer. Arbitrary meanings assigned to the good allow the owner to customize their life as a gay man. Clothing is a cultural commodity and semiotic code that suggests and communicates the gay identity. These codes are important among gay men for identification and communication purposes within the larger population (Dodd et al, 2005; Featherstone, 1987).

Marketing and retail implications

Product involvement is a complex construct comprised of multiple dimensions that may be related to each other (e.g., perceived risk, emotion, value, price, importance and commitment; Jensen, Carlson, and Tripp, 1989; Lastovicka and Gardner, 1979; Zaichkowsky, 1987). These dimensions are viewed as the antecedents of involvement, and they are commonly used to measure involvement and define differences between consumer types (Kim, 2005). Because product involvement can result in perceived difference in product attributes, relative importance of the product class, or preference for a particular brand, a measurement of involvement can be used as a basis for classifying and segmenting the market and creating optimal marketing
strategies for differing product categories (Blackwell et al., 2006; Lockshin et al., 1997; Solomon and Rabolt, 2009).

The data provide insights on grooming/beauty products and apparel involvement in the gay consumer and a clear need to understand niche marketing. Awareness is important considering these industries represent billions of dollars of the market share (Statista, 2016). True understandings can be achieved through information exchange about what motivates gay consumer purchase behaviors of apparel and appearance enhancing products and how to utilize that information without compromising their psychological well-being. The findings of the current research demonstrate the importance of appearance management products (e.g., apparel) to the gay market, where commodities are often used to enhance or maintain a perceived self-image. Specifically, the analysis revealed that dimensions of body image, in particular being invested in one’s appearance, are related to product involvement and frequency of purchasing apparel and grooming products. Men’s desire to be lean also illustrates the importance of apparel and grooming products for appearance management and the need for shopping experiences that positively influence how they feel about their bodies.

Retailers can also use this information to establish appropriate service options and effective marketing initiatives that do not exacerbate body image disturbances in a population that exhibits high internalization, but rather provide a more realistic depiction of body diversity in society and sell products that encourage a healthy lifestyle rather than focusing on unrealistic beauty standards. Focusing on body negativity and how consumers can “fix” or compensate with the use of products does not work for sales growth because they exaggerate negative feelings about the self. However, body positivity in marketing could appeal to consumers (practicing self-acceptance or cultivation of a positive body image) because they create a positive
association with the product that does not highlight the consumers’ flaws. For example, Dove’s Campaign for Real Beauty and Movement for Self-Esteem, focus on self-acceptance rather than how their product can “fix” their perceived flaws to mold them into the cultural ideal. The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty, which was launched in 2004, has reportedly helped boost Dove sales from $2.5 billion to $4 billion in ten years (Chumsky, 2015). This increase in sales shows that the body positivity focus of the campaign has not only reached over 15 million girls through educational programs, but it has also been very profitable for Unilever (http://selfesteem.dove.us). Creating a positive consumer experience is especially important with the recognition of the gay market as one of the most powerful and favorable groups of consumers at the moment.

Furthermore, gay consumers are more involved than heterosexual consumers with respect to their apparel and grooming products because appearance ideals are not limited to body leanness and muscularity. The gay ideal incorporates other physical qualities as well, such as overall attractiveness, grooming, a youthful appearance, and fashionable dress (Cash and Smolak, 2011; Reilly et al., 2008; Schwartz and Andsager, 2011). To effectively reach gay consumers there is a clear need for marketers to cultivate relationships with this community, and draw a connection between their products/brands and the identity that many gay men are trying to control through their appearance management. By targeting specific consumer needs (emotional and social), marketers can reduce the complexity of the consumer decision-making process. Businesses can use this information to create tailored marketing programs, offer appropriate products and a shopping experience that is customized to the community, while delivering a consistent branding message.

Limitations and Conclusion
Like all studies, this one is not without limitations. First, the sample was drawn primarily from a college population and is younger than studies of other gay men (e.g., Reilly et al., 2008). Thus, the findings are limited to similarly aged and educated populations and may not fully reflect the relationships between body image and product-involvement that exist with older groups of gay men. In such groups, body satisfaction may play a more prominent role because of the natural effects that aging has on the body that take it farther away from societal/cultural ideals. Second, all the constructs were assessed via self-report and thus are subject to potential bias (e.g., underreporting of less flattering characteristics). Measures, however, were completed anonymously and the relationships that the study found were consistent with the predictions (e.g., more body shame and a higher drive for leanness were related to higher levels of importance being associated with the purchase of apparel products). Finally, the methodology was cross-sectional, thus the authors could not make any determination regarding the temporal relations among the variables. Future research might examine the extent to which body image measure predict future involvement and even actual purchase behaviors (e.g., over a subsequent period of time, such as six months).

Replication, and in this case extension, is the cornerstone of science. Because original studies are never definitive, reproducibility of research is necessary to determine the robustness of findings. In this study, the Reilly et al. (2008) study was replicated and extended by including additional dimensions of body image and by examining consumers’ involvement in two different product classes along with their shopping frequency. Although multiple dimensions of body image were related to the outcomes at the bivariate level, within the regression analyses, appearance orientation was the primary predictor of the two consumer involvement measures and the two shopping measures. In all cases, the more invested the gay men were in their appearance
the more frequently they reported shopping and the more important grooming products and apparel were to them. The findings suggest that gay men, like women, are motivated to engage with different products to improve their appearance and more closely align with sociocultural ideals of attractiveness.

References


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