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## **The appearance potency of gay and straight men's websites**

Glen S Jankowski<sup>a</sup>

Amy Slater<sup>b</sup>

Marika Tiggemann<sup>c</sup>

Helen Fawkner<sup>a</sup>

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### Author Note

<sup>a</sup>School of Social Sciences, Leeds Beckett University, United Kingdom <sup>b</sup>Centre for Appearance Research, University of the West of England, United Kingdom. <sup>c</sup>Flinders University, Australia. Corresponding author: Glen S Jankowski, Address: School of Social Sciences, Leeds Beckett University, Portland Way, Leeds, LS1 3HE, United Kingdom.

Email: [g.jankowski@leedsbeckett.ac.uk](mailto:g.jankowski@leedsbeckett.ac.uk) Tel: 01138 124 928

### **Abstract**

Gay men's greater body dissatisfaction compared to straight men has been explained as a result of gay men's more 'appearance potent' subculture. This study aimed to critically appraise this explanation by assessing images of men and women for their physical characteristics and objectification across 8 popular gay and straight men's dating and porn websites. 1,415 images of men and 715 images of women across the website's main pages were coded. Results showed that the gay men's websites featured more images of men that were appearance-ideal, nude, and sexualized in comparison to the straight men's websites. With the converse true for straight men's websites. These results highlight the continuing need to develop and provide interventions that critique the appearance potency of popular media, particularly so for gay men.

Word count: 127

Key words: body dissatisfaction; gay men; media; appearance potency

### **The appearance potency of gay and straight men's websites**

Men's body dissatisfaction, the dislike of any aspect a man has over his appearance, is now normative (Matthiasdottir, Jonsson, & Kristjansson, 2010; Tiggemann, Martins, & Churchett, 2008). Its impact should not be underestimated. Specifically, whilst the clinical impacts are well recognized i.e., (e.g., eating disorders, muscle dysmorphia, depression), the more frequent, intimate and seemingly 'mundane' impacts are less so (e.g. the avoidance of sex, love handle 'pinching'; Bordo, 1999; Jankowski, Gough, Fawkner, Halliwell, & Diedrichs, in prep.). Both types of impact are suffering engendered from body dissatisfaction, and should be taken as an urgent health issue.

On average, gay men report greater body dissatisfaction and related impacts (e.g., eating disorders) compared to straight men (Marino-Carper, Negy, & Tantleff-Dunn, 2010; Morrison, Morrison, & Sager, 2004; Smith, Hawkeswood, Bodell, & Joiner, 2011). This health inequality has been explained as a product of gay men's subculture being more 'appearance potent' (Martins, Tiggemann, & Kirkbride, 2007; Silberstein, Mishkind, Striegel-Moore, Timko, & Rodin, 1989). Appearance potency refers to the collective pressures exerted on individuals to conform to unrealistic appearance ideals (Jankowski, Fawkner, Slater, & Tiggemann, 2014). For men this ideal is young, White<sup>1</sup> and mesomorphic, with a full head of hair, symmetrical facial features, little chest hair etc. (Buote, Wilson, Strahan, Gazzola, & Papps, 2011;

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<sup>1</sup> The intersection of appearance potency and racism needs sensitive acknowledgement. The majority of the representations of appearance ideals tend to be White (Jankowski et al., 2014; Buote et al., 2012) and when racialized, tend to have 'White' features (such as narrow noses, lips, non Afro hair; hooks, 1992; Nudd, 2011; Wade, 2014) ). Further there are specific appearance pressures that compound with racism such as skin bleaching, westernizing cosmetic surgery and hair relaxing. Some of our research has also shown men, particularly men of colour, identify the male ideal as White too (Jankowski, Gough, Fawkner, Halliwell, & Diedrichs, in prep.). Intersectional work is needed then to explicate this intersection of racism and appearance potency if it is to be challenged (see also Jankowski, Tshuma, Tshuma, Hylton, & Barry, forthcoming).

Jankowski et al., 2014; Tiggemann et al., 2008). These pressures could come in the form of many representations of men that are 'appearance ideal' but also through adverts featuring appearance products (e.g., perfume, protein shakes) or discourses that imply conforming to appearance ideals is within an individual's control and desirable (Jankowski et al., 2014; Labre, 2005). It has been suggested that the gay male subculture is more appearance potent than the straight male subculture, that both these subcultures are relatively monolithic, and that this difference in appearance potency explains gay men's greater body dissatisfaction (Martins et al., 2007; Silberstein et al., 1989).

### **The pathologisation of gay men in body image research**

This explanation is problematic not only because it homogenizes what some see as gay male subcultures (Duncan, 2010; Kane, 2009)<sup>2</sup>, but also depicts these subcultures as responsible for gay men's body dissatisfaction without any context as to why gay male subculture exists in the first place (arguably as a result of homophobia). For example, the Tripartite Influence Model (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999) is a popular framework used for elucidating how body dissatisfaction is caused. It specifies that there are four causes of body dissatisfaction "partner/ friend/ family/ media *pressures to be muscular and lean*" (Tylka & Andorka, 2012, p. 60). Recently, Tylka and colleagues (Tylka, 2011; Tylka & Andorka, 2012) extended the framework by adding 'gay community involvement' as an additional cause of body dissatisfaction. Notably, Tylka and Andorka (2012)

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<sup>2</sup> Despite the criticism of the over homogenization of the gay male subculture, gay male subculture rather than subcultures are referred to throughout the remainder of this article. This has been outlined by us previously as "gay men's and straight men's media attempt to capitalize on distinct subcultures by creating content for, and marketing to, gay and straight men separately. This occurs even if, in reality, either group of men resist participation, or do not participate exclusively, in such subcultures (e.g., when gay men read straight men's magazines)" (Jankowski et al., 2014, p. 474).

did not specify in the framework that 'pressures from the gay community' cause body dissatisfaction (as with the original four causes) explicating that the gay community itself is a cause. Indeed, in what is very likely to be the original write up of this study (Andorka, 2007, p. 19) the author candidly noted that "it would appear that there are some benefits to being involved in certain aspects of the gay community".

Unfortunately, this acknowledgment was not preserved in the published version of the study (Tylka & Andorka, 2012, p. 64) leaving the gay community itself as "set[ting] the stage for dissatisfaction with both muscularity and body fat for gay men". These researchers are not alone, we ourselves have depicted the gay community as a homogenous 'appearance potent' entity (Jankowski, Diedrichs, & Halliwell, 2013). Subsequently researchers have uncritically specified, not any specific facet of the gay community, but rather the entire community itself as a cause of gay men's body dissatisfaction, thus gay men (who after all make up the community) are implicated as the cause.

Kane (2010) argues that these explanations and poor methodological practices have led researchers in body dissatisfaction to depict gay men as being appearance obsessed, vain and superficial. Specifically, Kane notes a tendency in early research on body dissatisfaction to conflate bisexual men's responses with gay men's, to rely heavily on opportunity sampling and to treat ordinal data as interval, as contributing to this pathologization. There is merit to Kane's argument. For example, Michael Andorka's research project is titled: "*Being attractive is all that matters: Objectification theory and gay men*" which implies gay men are only interested in being attractive (Andorka, 2007). This is not a participant quote and is an assertion Andorka continues to make throughout his research project. For example, he states that "Since college men in general could have body dissatisfaction, gay men could

have significantly more body dissatisfaction due to their focus on physical features” (pg. 8). Kane has concluded then that researchers legitimize and fuel the flames of broader stereotypes about gay men by making “generalizations that gay men are socialized by the gay subculture to be fixated on their appearance” (pg. 311) further adding that these are “evaluations that reduce [them] to being universally fixated on their appearance” (Kane, 2010, p. 315).

### **The need for appearance potency media analyses**

With regards to differences in body dissatisfaction between gay and straight men it is important to look at a cultural agent such as the media. More specifically, there are five important reasons to conduct content analytical research when accounting for body dissatisfaction in general. Firstly, as outlined above, in order to examine these differences in ways that avoid further pathologising gay men via self-report methods (Kane, 2009, 2010).

Second, disclosing body dissatisfaction and its causes is not a straightforward process. Most pertinently to the current study, researchers have noted gay men tend to be more at ease in disclosing their body dissatisfaction compared to their straight male counterparts (e.g., Adams, Turner, & Bucks, 2005; Bordo, 1999). Participants in Adams et al's (2005) study, for example, recognized that for gay men, though not straight men, admitting body dissatisfaction was acceptable. Therefore, analysing media may be more likely to overcome the particular methodological hurdle that plagues self-report methods comparing gay and straight men (e.g., Jankowski et al., 2013) where it is not clear whether any differences between gay and straight men are more “*announced than pronounced*” (Kane, 2010, p. 315).

Third, it is difficult for anyone to account for the impact media has on them. The vast majority of sociocultural research, whether via experimental, cross-sectional, longitudinal and qualitative means, has asked participants what they think of media. For example, experimental studies ask participants to rate their body dissatisfaction before and after viewing appearance potent media images (readily allowing for participants to decide whether to inflate their post-score so as to deem the media culpable or satisfy the researcher's desires). Other research studies have asked men in groups or individually to account for media's effects (Diedrichs & Lee, 2010; Elliott & Elliott, 2005). These designs are problematic as people do not have access to aggregate data to assess their systematic exposure to media appearance potency or its impact on them. In addition, media effects may be hidden, subtle and depicted as normative; their effect may not be obvious. For example, *Men's Health* magazine positions itself as about health but - as content analyses show - is more about conforming to unrealistic appearance ideals (Jankowski, Fawcner, et al., 2014; Labre, 2005). In support, body dissatisfaction researchers have noted a 'media third person effect' in research where participants only ever regard others as impacted by media, never themselves (Davison, 1983; Diedrichs, Lee, & Kelly, 2011).

Fourth, asking individuals to account for media draws attention away from culture and onto individuals. This may collude with neoliberalism. Neoliberalism, as well as being an economic ideology, is also a dominant cultural ideology that encourages individuals to see themselves as individually responsible (and therefore to blame) for their body dissatisfaction, health, income etc. (Petersen, 1996). Asking individuals to account for cultural agents may imply that individuals are responsible for its impact.



Finally, we must hold media, culture, to account. Media is not unproblematic with regards to body dissatisfaction despite worrying conclusions otherwise. For example the biggest meta-analysis of experimental research to date on media's impact on body dissatisfaction has concluded: "*media effects are generally minimal and limited to those with preexisting body dissatisfaction*" (Ferguson, 2013, p. 20). Others in the body dissatisfaction field have not only dismissed other cultural agents such as the fashion industry, as responsible for body dissatisfaction but also firmly placed individuals as responsible: "[body dissatisfaction] is not a cultural construct that exists to tyrannize...[and] line the pockets of fashion designers, but a universal fascination with the human form which developed along Darwinian lines since the dawn of man" (Etcoff, 2002). In contrast, research that actually assesses cultural appearance potency by analysing media (rather than individual people's accounts) provides compelling evidence that it is appearance potent, that is harmful, that it needs challenging. A review of this research follows.

### **Content analyses of media appearance potency**

The appearance potency of media content has increased (Leit, Pope Jr., & Gray, 2001; Pope Jr., Olivardia, Gruber, & Borowiecki, 1999). Images of men, for instance, have become progressively more mesomorphic in Western media over the last three decades. For example, Law and Labre (2002) comprehensively blind-coded images of shirtless men from three popular US men's magazines (*GQ*, *Sports Illustrated* and *Rolling Stone*) that had been issued over a 30 year period. They found that the images of men became progressively more muscular and leaner from 1967 to 1997 and the V-type body shape also became more prevalent over this period. A further example is provided by Pope and colleagues (Pope Jr. et al., 1999), who assessed the waist, chest, and bicep measurements of popular male action

figures (e.g., GI Joe) created between 1964 to 1998. They found that the action dolls became more mesomorphic over time and indeed the latest edition of the GI Joe was so mesomorphic it was beyond the realms of achievement for a real man. This narrowing of the male appearance ideal (i.e., in that even great mesomorphy is now idealized) has also been found in media that is not targeted at men, as progressive muscularity and leanness have been found in male images in women's magazines such as *Playgirl* centrefolds (Leit et al., 2001) and general lifestyle magazines (Pope Jr., Olivardia, Borowiecki, & Cohane, 2001).

Not only is the male appearance ideal unrealistic, so too is it pervasive within the media. For example, Buote and colleagues found that of those images of men whose bodies were visible (between 48-52% of the total images coded), 76% of the images of men were "*fit*" or "*very muscular*" on a popular US website (*celebritypro.com*), as were 75% in popular US magazines and 80% on popular US TV shows (Buote et al., 2011). Similarly, in our own research (Jankowski et al., 2014) where we analysed four of the most popular UK men's magazines, we found that of those images of men whose bodies were visible (64% of the total images coded), that 69% were mesomorphic. This is further exemplified by the recent use of airbrushing abdominal muscles onto actor's bodies in the films *300* (Murray, 2007) and *Crazy Stupid Love* (Lewinski, 2011). In the latter film actor Ryan Gosling revealed that whilst filming he "*just [wore] a motion capture suit, and suddenly [he] ha[d] abs*" (Lewinski, 2011).

In contrast, images of men with body types that unambiguously do not conform to appearance ideals are rarely depicted. Specifically, Buote and colleagues (Buote et al., 2011) found that only 2-11% of men featured had heavy body types in their content analyses of US popular media. Others have found only 13% of men

featured were above average weight (Fouts & Vaughan, 2002) and only 4% had medium or higher body fat (Labre, 2005). Finally, we found that few images of the men we coded were thin, average, hypermesomorphic, overweight or obese (11%; Jankowski et al., 2014). Men who do not conform to the appearance ideal, in ways other than body type, are also rarely featured. For instance, Buote et al. (2011) found that only 2% of men featured in popular US TV shows were facially unattractive and only 10% appeared older than 50 years.

Not only is the male appearance ideal prevalent, it is also very difficult for men to attain as it is very different from what men, on average, look like (Leit et al., 2001; Pope Jr. et al., 2001). Representations of the male appearance ideal (e.g., in the mass media) are often meticulously airbrushed so that the images have no blemishes, no wrinkles and often no body fat (Pope Jr. et al., 2001). Furthermore, Pope et al (2001) found that some images of men had such low levels of body fat and high proportions of muscularity as to be only achievable through steroid drug use; making discrepancies between the ideal portrayed and the actual capability of the average man to achieve this ideal, vast.

Across mass media, representations of men are also often sexualized, defined by the American Psychological Association (APA, 2007, p. 1) as: "evaluating individuals based on their sexual appeal or sexual behaviour [and] equating standards of appearance to being sexually attractive". For instance, Pope et al (2001) found that 28% of images of men, on average, were undressed in images of popular US women's magazines. Others have similarly found that 34% of images of men were sexualised (Jankowski et al., 2014).

As outlined earlier, appearance potency can come in many forms not only just representations of appearance ideal and objectified men. In particular many content

analyses have documented the high prevalence of appearance ideal and objectified women in mass media (Buote et al., 2011; Jankowski et al., 2014; Kilbourne, 2010). Despite the limitations of body dissatisfaction impact studies outlined above, early research has shown that men report feeling more body dissatisfaction and other attitudinal changes when seeing such representations of women (Aubrey & Taylor, 2009; Wright, 2012). This has been theorized as occurring because (heterosexual) men feel they need to be as appearance ideal in order to match the images of women seen (Aubrey & Taylor, 2009).

In sum, the high prevalence of appearance ideal and sexualized images of men and women across different Western media formats has been documented extensively (Jankowski et al., 2014; Leit et al., 2001). Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) argues that this content gradually socializes consumers to view and monitor their own bodies from an outsider's perspective (i.e., to self-objectify), resulting in a range of potential psychological problems.

To date, there has been little assessment of whether appearance potency differs in gay and straight men's media. What research has been conducted has compared gay and straight men's magazines (Epel, Spanakos, Kasl-Godley, & Brownell, 1996; Jankowski et al., 2014; Lanzieri & Cook, 2013). In general, these studies have found that gay men's magazines feature more images of appearance-ideal men (Jankowski et al., 2014; Lanzieri & Cook, 2013) or, via dating adverts, specify body shape preferences more frequently (Epel et al., 1996) than their straight counterparts. These collective findings are consistent with the explanation that these gay male media formats are more appearance potent.

Although magazines represent one facet of men's subculture(s), they may well be less relevant than other media sources, most notably the internet. Unlike

magazines, many internet websites are free, are instantly accessible, and have content that is frequently updated. Additionally, in recent years, there has been a significant increase in internet usage in the Western world, whilst print media consumption has decreased (Stempel, Hargrove, & Bernt, 2000). For these reasons, websites may provide a more accurate indicator of gay and straight men's appearance ideals and therefore, a better gauge of the appearance potency of gay and straight men's subculture(s). Whilst the most visited websites by all men are those that are geared towards general audiences, such as news websites and social networking websites (Alexa, 2012), dating and porn websites reflect attempts to capitalize on distinct subcultures by creating content for, and marketing to, gay and straight men separately.

In sum, there are three important reasons for exploring gay male and straight male dating and porn websites when accounting for the health inequality that is gay men's heightened body dissatisfaction. The first is to shift the focus from the individual to culture. The second, to avoid the tendency to pathologise gay men. The third, because websites are a more relevant form of media than traditional print media previously content analysed.

The present study therefore aimed to assess:

- 1) The appearance potency of websites (dating and porn sites) targeted at gay men and websites targeted at straight men by coding the number of appearance-ideal, nude, sexualized and dismembered images of men and women.

- 2) Whether the gay men's websites featured more images of men and women who are appearance-ideal, nude, sexualized and dismembered than the straight men's websites.

## **Method**

### **Materials**

According to Alexa.com (Alexa, 2012), the web-trafficking information site, the two dating websites most visited in the UK (and targeted at straight men) are Match.com followed by Shagaholic.com. The porn websites most visited in the UK (targeted at straight men) were Xhamster.com followed by Xvideos.com. For gay men, the most visited dating websites were Gaydar.co.uk and Adam4Adam.com, and the most visited porn websites were Manhub.com and Gaytube.com. Each of the homepages and all of the main pages (i.e., each page listed in the top banner of the website in line with the home page) of these websites were captured to get a representative and practically manageable overview of the website content. In addition, it was reasoned that these pages are those most likely to be seen by all website visitors (as opposed to pages that require clicking specific embedded links at the bottom or side of the home page).

Website content was captured using a screen capture programme that created video files of the websites. This allowed capture of the website content featured at a specific time to ensure both raters coded the same content. This was conducted between February and March 2013.

### **Procedure: Coding**

Any image larger than 4.25cm<sup>2</sup> of an adult man and woman (i.e., appeared to be 18+ years) featured on any of the pages captured was coded. This included featured

members' profile pictures on the dating websites, porn actors, advertising banner models etc. Only images over 4.25cm<sup>2</sup> were coded as their physical attributes were more readily visible. If an image featured the same person more than once, this was treated as one instance unless the image differed significantly so as to not violate the independence of observations assumption.

There were six codes for the physical appearance attributes of images of men including:

- 1) Age: (1a) Very young (under 25 years), (1b) Young (26-40 years), (1c) Mid-life (40-60) and (1d) Older (60+);
- 2) Facial attractiveness: (2a) Symmetrical facial features and unblemished skin (no obvious wrinkles, spots, or discolouration), (2b) Non-symmetrical facial features and/ or blemished skin and (2c) Other/unknown;
- 3) Body type: (3a) Thin, (3b) Average, (3c) Ambiguously average or mesomorphic –man's level of muscularity and/or leanness obscured but evident he is not thin, hypermesomorphic, overweight or obese, (3d) Mesomorphic - sufficiently low level of body fat and high degree of muscularity that the outline of his muscles are visible (e.g., biceps, abdominals), (3e) Hypermesomorphic – extreme level of muscularity where veins are present akin to a bodybuilder, (3f) Overweight – endomorphic body shape, excess weight is visible particularly around stomach, (3g) Obese – heavily overweight;
- 4) Head hair amount: (4a) Full head of hair, (4b) Some recession of hair, (4c) Bald (i.e., no hair visible on head) (4d) Shaved (i.e., no hair visible though

scalp on head reveals full and complete hairline in form of stubble) (4e)

Unable to tell/ other;

5) Ethnicity (as visible to reader): (5a) White, (5b) Black, (5c) Asian, (5d) Mixed Race and (5e) Unknown;

6) Chest hair amount: (6a) Man is clothed/unknown, (6b) No chest hair, (6c) Some chest hair visible and (6d) A lot of chest hair visible.

Further, these images were coded for degree of nudity and objectification (i.e., sexualisation and dismemberment). The specific codes follow:

7) Nudity: (7a) Fully clothed, (7b) Shirtless, (7c) In underwear only, (7d) Naked – genitals covered and (7e) Naked – genitals shown;

8) Sexualisation: (8a) None, (8b) Subtle - man part undressed, in suggestive pose and (8c) Explicit - man in sexual pose (i.e. focus on crotch, with phallic prop etc; (APA, 2007);

9) Dismemberment, where part or all of the man's body is featured without their face visible: (9a) None and (9b) Dismembered.

Any adult woman in an image over 4.25cm<sup>2</sup> was also coded. One code was constructed specifically for images of women:

1) Conformity to the female appearance-ideal: (1a) Yes - from what is visible woman appears to be: young (under 40 years of age), White, thin and has medium or larger sized breasts, (1b) Yes except for one attribute—woman is not young, (1c) Yes except woman is not White, (1d) Yes except woman is not thin or has small breasts, (1e) No – woman conforms to two or fewer of the attributes above and (1g) Unable to tell.



The following codes used for images of men were also used to code images of women:

- 1) Nudity;
- 2) Sexualisation;
- 3) Dismemberment.

The codes and levels are presented in Tables 1 and 2. Four of the websites (50%) were double-coded by the first and third authors to establish inter-rater reliability. Any discrepancies between raters were resolved via discussion, revisiting the images concerned, appropriate revision of the coding and recoding until inter-rater reliability for both sets of coding reach acceptable levels (i.e., where  $k$  ranged from .71 for Ethnicity for XVideos.com and to .92 for Body Type on Gaydar.co.uk, respectively). All eight websites were then coded by the first author. Ethical approval was granted from the first author's institutional ethics review board.

## **Results**

### **The appearance potency of the websites**

Across the websites 1,415 images of men and 714 images of women were coded. Across all websites, the majority of men were young (84.6%), had symmetrical and unblemished faces (100.0%), were mesomorphic (71.2%), had a full head of hair (95.1%), were White (87.4%), had no chest hair (93.6%), were nude (79.6%) and were sexualized (82.7%). About a fifth of the images of men were dismembered (22.8%). The majority of the images of women were also appearance-ideal (87.0%), nude (61.7%) and sexualized (93.9%). Fewer were dismembered (15.5%). A full breakdown of the frequencies and percentages of the levels at which the images of men and women are coded are presented in Tables 1 and 2

respectively. Note: percentages may be different to those presented in Tables 1 and 2 as percentages are calculated minus the proportion of images coded as 'Unknown' for that code.

### **Differences between gay and straight men's websites**

In order to test the prediction that gay men's websites would feature more images of men that are appearance-ideal, nude, sexualized and dismembered than straight men's websites, a series of Pearson Chi Squares was conducted. In order to meet the expected frequency assumption of Chi square analysis (Pallant, 2010), levels within some variables were collapsed (i.e., the levels mid-life and older of the Age variable were collapsed to one single level: mid-life or older). *Cramer's V* statistic, a chi-square effect size, is also presented (with .10= small, .30 = medium and .50 = large, (Pallant, 2010).

The Chi-square analyses showed a significant difference between the website genres on Age ( $\chi^2 (3) = 154.55, p < .001, Cramer's V = .33$ ), Facial attractiveness ( $\chi^2 (1) = 111.05, p < .001, Cramer's V = .28$ ), Body type ( $\chi^2 (5) = 192.86, p < .001, Cramer's V = .37$ ), Ethnicity ( $\chi^2 (3) = 10.53, p = .015, Cramer's V = .09$ ), Nudity ( $\chi^2 (5) = 99.42, p < .001, Cramer's V = .27$ ), Chest hair amount ( $\chi^2 (2) = 147.65, p < .001, Cramer's V = .32$ ), Dismemberment ( $\chi^2 (1) = 120.30, p < .001, Cramer's V = .29$ ) and Sexualisation ( $\chi^2 (5) = 7.66, p = .022, Cramer's V = .07$ ). More specifically, analyses of the standardized residuals revealed there were more images of men on the gay genre websites coded as young, as having symmetrical and unblemished faces, as being mesomorphic, as having full heads of hair, as having no chest hair visible, as being shirtless and in underwear only and as not being dismembered compared to the images of men on the straight genre websites.

Unfortunately, there were too few images of women on the gay men's websites ( $n = 4$ ) to meet the expected frequencies assumption of a Chi Square analysis. Nonetheless there were clearly more images of women in total, as well as that were appearance ideal, sexualised, nude and dismembered on the straight men's websites in comparison to the gay men's websites. Overall the gay men's website were the more appearance potent of the two website types (whether accounting for images of women or not).

Table 1

*Number of images of men coded at each level of the physical and objectification characteristic codes on the websites*

		Gay men's websites			Straight men's websites		Z score	Total	
		<i>n</i>	%	Z score	<i>n</i>	%		<i>N</i>	%
Age	Very young	97	8.1	1.7	0	0.0	-3.9	97	6.9
	Young	828	69.5	2.0	89	39.9	-4.6	917	64.8
	Midlife or older	58	4.9	-.1	12	5.4	.3	70	4.9
Facial attractiveness	Symmetrical and unblemished	889	74.6	2.3	87	39.0	-5.4	976	69.0
	Non-symmetrical and/ or blemished	0	0	-	0	0	-	0	0
Body type	Thin or hypermesomoprhic	15	1.3	-.3	4	1.8	.6	19	1.3
	Average	37	3.1	-.9	14	6.3	2.1	51	3.6
	Ambiguously average or mesomorphic	166	13.9	-.3	35	15.7	.6	201	14.2
	Mesomorphic	723	60.7	3.2	40	17.9	-7.3	763	53.9
Head of hair	Overweight (or obese)	36	3.0	.7	2	0.9	-1.6	38	2.7
	Full	832	69.8	2.3	81	36.3	-5.2	913	64.5
	Some recession or balding	37	3.1	-.4	10	4.5	1.0	47	3.3
Ethnicity	White	1037	87.0	.3	182	81.6	-.7	1219	86.1
	Black	111	9.3	-.1	22	9.9	.2	133	9.4
	Asian or mixed race	30	2.5	-1.0	13	5.8	2.4	43	3.0
Chest hair amount	Chest hair covered	493	41.4	-3.5	191	85.7	8.0	684	48.3
	None	663	55.6	3.2	31	13.9	-7.5	694	49.0
	Some or a lot	36	3.0	.9	1	0.4	-2.0	37	2.6
Nudity	Fully clothed	213	17.9	-1.2	62	27.8	2.8	275	19.4
	Shirtless	255	21.4	2.2	9	4.0	-5.1	264	18.7
	Underwear only	75	6.3	1.5	0	0.0	-3.4	75	5.3
	Naked – genitals covered	140	11.7	1.1	11	4.9	-2.6	151	10.7
	Naked – genitals shown	443	37.2	-2.1	139	62.3	4.9	582	41.1
Dismemberment	None	983	82.5	2.1	109	48.9	-4.8	1092	77.2
	Some	209	17.5	-3.8	114	51.1	8.8	323	22.8

Sexualisation	None	194	16.3	-.9	51	22.9	2.0	245	17.3
	Subtle	18	1.5	-.5	6	2.7	1.1	24	1.7
	Obvious/explicit	980	82.2	.5	166	74.4	-1.1	1146	81.0

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Table 2

*Number of images of women coded at each level of the physical and objectification characteristic codes on the websites.*

		Gay		Straight		Total	
		<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Appearance-ideal	Appearance-ideal	4	-	594	80.6	598	80.7
	„ except not young	0	-	1	0.1	1	0.1
	„ and not White	0	-	57	7.7	57	7.7
	„ except not thin/toned	0	-	15	2.0	15	2.0
	Non	0	-	17	2.3	17	2.3
Nudity	None	1	-	283	38.4	284	38.3
	Some	3	-	454	61.6	457	61.7
Dismemberment	None	3	-	623	84.5	626	84.5
	Some	1	-	114	15.5	115	15.5
Sexualisation	None	1	-	44	6.0	45	6.1
	Subtle	3	-	70	9.5	70	9.4
	Obvious/ explicit	0	-	623	84.5	626	84.5
Total		4	-	737	100	741	100

## Discussion

Across both websites types, appearance ideal (i.e., who were young, mesomorphic, White, with symmetrical and unblemished faces, full heads of hair and no chest hair visible) and sexualized images of men abound. In addition, this was also true for images of women on the straight men's websites. This concurs with the findings of media content analyses including men's magazines (Jankowski et al., 2014), women's magazines (Leit et al., 2001) and mainstream TV shows (Dallesasse & Kluck, 2013). Appearance ideal images represent an unrealistic appearance standard for the majority of the population (Leit et al., 2001). For example, whilst only 5% of men featured across the websites showed any hair recession whatsoever, in the UK around 30% of 30 year old men will experience some hair recession rising to 70% by the age of 70 (NHS Choices, 2013). Similarly, despite an ageing global population, where for example, 49% of the UK population is over 40 years of age, only 15% images of men on the websites were over 40 (Office for National Statistics, 2012). This study provides early evidence that like other media, men's websites are also appearance potent.

It is important to be clear that this study did not specifically assess the impact of this content on the viewer. As outlined previously, alternative research designs that have attempted to do so have been decidedly mixed in their conclusions perhaps because these studies ask individuals to account for media effects. However, just because the current study cannot necessarily detail the impact of this content on men, it should not be taken that this content is unproblematic as some have claimed (Ferguson, 2013). In terms of impact, there is currently an absence of evidence not evidence of absence. Arguably appearance potent media content would not be created— or exist in the high proportions that it does - if it had no effect

whatsoever on those who consume it. More specifically those who create appearance potent media (e.g., companies through their adverts) aim to engender insecurities (in this case about appearance) in order to make the consumer feel they need to purchase the product (to feel secure again) (Curtis, 2002). It is reasonable to assert then that these representations contribute to the widespread body dissatisfaction and disordered eating men have and therefore may be harmful in this respect (Morrison et al., 2004; Smith et al., 2011).

In order to critically appraise the problematic explanation that gay men's subculture is more appearance potent than its straight male counterpart, this study also compared the appearance potency of websites targeted at gay and straight men. The gay men's websites featured more images of men that were appearance ideal and sexualized compared to straight men's websites. Further, there were too few images of women on the gay men's websites to statistically compare their characteristics to those on the straight men's websites. The lack of images of women on the gay men's websites relates to the intended audience's sexuality, i.e., gay men desiring other men. In addition, it was difficult to categorise the physical characteristics (e.g., facial attractiveness, age) of many of the images of men on the straight men's websites, as a high proportion of these images were dismembered (51.1%) so these characteristics were obscured. This again likely relates to the heteronormativity of straight men's websites; where men are depicted as the subject and women as the object of attention (e.g., McKee, 2005). Thus men's faces were often not shown in the images, with the bodies being in the background or side of the image and the focus of the image being on the woman.

Nonetheless, these results extend and supports previous research with more traditional forms of gay male media (Epel et al., 1996; Jankowski et al., 2014;



Lanzieri & Cook, 2013). Specifically, there was a greater appearance potency of the gay male websites (whether accounting for images of women or not) which adds indirect support to the theory that gay men report more body dissatisfaction than straight men because of their exposure to a more appearance potent subculture (Martins et al., 2007; Silberstein et al., 1989).

How to explain the heightened appearance potency of the LGBT community, without pathologising gay men as appearance obsessed? The co-option of the LGBT movement by corporations should be considered. This refers to the tendency for companies to claim to be 'pro LGBT' (for example by having corporate floats at prides) with little or no actual pro LGBT work or policies enacted (Sears, 2005). The company is not motivated by pro LGBT rights per se but rather wishes to reach the relatively untapped market of LGBT consumers (aka the 'pink pound').

What are the consequences of this co-option? As Sears explains in a recent interview (Sernatinger & Echeverria, 2013, para. 32):

*"[The LGBT movement has] won the rights that were most compatible [with capitalism]...we mark ourselves by the consumption of very specific commodities. You see that in terms of clothing and hairstyles, going to certain places. That cuts out people with low-income; they can't be visibly queer. Often people of colour are excluded because the character of that commercialization has whiteness built into it, often in fairly clear ways. It seems like we've won a lot, and then you realize that what we've won is the relatively easy stuff that fits with this system. In fact, it risks dividing ourselves much more and potentially limits what we can gain".*

Apart from this depoliticisation and the exclusion of LGBT people who are too poor for the commercial LGBT movement an additional consequence may be appearance potency. Appearance potency sells and LGBT people's income is 'up for grabs'.

Attitude magazine, the most read gay men's magazine in the UK (Ponsford, 2012), provides a good example of appearance potency arising from commercial co-option of the LGBT movement. Attitude, like other print media with declining sales, is

heavily reliant on corporations advertising in its pages. Long term editor, Matthew Todd brought this reliance to the fore in an article he wrote criticising corporations for their homophobic reluctance to advertise in LGBT publications (Goldfingle, 2014). It is notable that Todd stopped short of condemning the corporations in the article as his magazine still needed their sponsorship. Hence at the end of the article he urged corporations to reconsider and advertise in Attitude (Goldfingle, 2014). These corporations influence what content Attitude magazine can feature. Hence Attitude magazine is appearance potent. This is also supported by our own research (Jankowski et al., 2014) that showed that Attitude magazine featured on average 23 adverts per issue and just under a quarter of these (23%) explicitly promoted an appearance product (such as protein shakes, perfume and underwear). A brief look at Attitude's website reveals similar appearance potency. In January 2015 the website includes a weight loss programme (Bond, 2015), weight loss pills and protein shakes (Attitude, 2015) as three 'promotional features' (i.e., adverts disguised as editorial content) across its site.

Pride marches have also faced particular criticism for their extensive co-option by corporations. Sponsors of recent UK Prides include Starbucks, The Telegraph and the alcohol brand: VK. The appearance potency of such marches is also evident, whether through the hiring of heterosexual, appearance ideal, bodybuilders to dance on floats in parades (Cole, 2015), the 'how to get a pride body' guides including skipping meals, taking protein shakes and self-tanning (Fleming, 2015) or the explicit shaming of higher weight gay men (Rodriguez, 2012).

It is important also to be mindful that this media may be harmful beyond its appearance potency. Most explicitly, and as coded in this analysis, there is a dearth of representations of men of colour. Specifically, across the websites only 12.4% of

images of men were Black, Asian or Mixed Race. Similarly, Schug and colleagues (Schug, Alt, Lu, Gosin, & Fay, 2015) found that of 3,983 images, only 457 (11.5%) of the images across the magazines *Maxim*, *GQ* and *Men's Health* were of Black men. Appearance potency overlaps and compounds with racism. For example, some have pointed to the continued devaluation of Afro-textured hair by associating it with unemployment or being "uncivilized" in contrast to chemically straightened hair for Black women or short, cropped hair for Black men (Afro-Europe, 2013; Nudd, 2011). Demonstrably a Nivea Men's skincare advert recently depicted a Black man with short hair "*re-civiliz[ing] [him]self*" by preparing to throw away his old head which included an afro. The text of the advert said "*look like you give a damn*" (Nudd, 2011). It is therefore important that content analyses take an intersectional lense to its content (especially as many content analyses could attend more to the intersections of appearance potency and other oppressions; Buote et al., 2011; Jankowski et al., 2014) in order to highlight the varying and significant ways in which mass media representations contribute to sexualized racism and gendered homophobia etc.

Relating to the above, one limitation of the current study was the somewhat surface level nature of the analysis. The meanings behind the images on the websites were not analysed. Qualitative content analyses are needed to delve further into the ways appearance potency is promoted across these media platforms. A further limitation of our study is our selection of websites. Specifically, although our choice of websites was guided by the need to assess aspects of gay and straight men's subcultures, dating and porn website types may not be homogenous, and indeed other types of websites such as social networking sites are likely to have

more salience for both groups of men given their known universal popularity (Alexa, 2012).

Efforts aimed at alleviating men's body dissatisfaction have usefully highlighted the appearance potency of media via promoting media literacy. Specifically, media literacy has been promoted in interventions by highlighting the problematic messages, ideals and content of media as well as the ways in which media manipulate consumers (e.g., via airbrushing). For example, Media Smart (Wilksch & Wade, 2009) was an 8-session intervention run with 107 Australian boys (M age = 13.62, SD = 0.37 years) that involved lessons on how the media manipulated images and how to challenge media messages. The intervention had some success in that it improved boys' body dissatisfaction and restrained eating at post-test and their body dissatisfaction at 3-month follow up (Wilksch & Wade, 2009). The results of this study can be used to concretely highlight how appearance potent one form of media is in such efforts. Knowing the problem can be the first step in consciousness raising and ultimately in challenging cultural appearance potency. Such interventions may be particularly suited to gay men.

## **Conclusion**

This study found that popular UK websites aimed at both gay and straight men are appearance potent. By virtue of the high number of appearance ideal and sexualized images of men featured, gay men's websites appear to be the more appearance potent of the two types and this may explain gay men's greater body dissatisfaction. Interventions designed to consciousness raise regarding cultural appearance potency are needed particularly so for gay men.

Word count: 7,025

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