

The sexism of men's body dissatisfaction accounts

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In this commentary I critically reflect on five discourses I have observed whilst working within the field of men's body dissatisfaction between 2011 and 2018. I have observed these in empirical work on men's body dissatisfaction, media coverage and participants' own accounts in qualitative research I have conducted. I argue these discourses are sexist and identify them as: (1) Men Are The Real Beauty Victims; (2) Women Should Stop Obsessing; (3) Superficial Women; (4) Mothers Are Body Shamers; and (5) Feminism Forces Muscles On Men. I conclude that these discourses further post-feminism, where women's gains are seen as men's losses, and neoliberalism, where blame is placed at the individual's (or woman's) feet. As an alternative, I outline the feminist approach that recognises the widespread cultural commodification of the body as driving body dissatisfaction.

In this commentary I critically reflect on the field of men's body dissatisfaction that I have worked in since 2011. I conducted my MSc in Health Psychology thesis on men's appearance conversations in 2011, my PhD on men's body dissatisfaction between 2012 and 2015 and have remained active in the field since, through teaching, research and advocacy. Through this work, I aim to highlight how sexism is (re) produced in the field through five discourses regarding men's body dissatisfaction. I aim to illustrate the existence of these discourses through: (1) existing empirical and theoretical research (e.g., The Adonis Complex; Pope Jr., Phillips, & Olivardia, 2000); (2) current media reports e.g., articles from the newspaper *The Guardian*; and (3) individual men's accounts on internet forums as well in focus group research with undergraduate British men (Jankowski et al., 2018). To do so, I outline some background to the field of men's body dissatisfaction, and present each of the

five discourses borne by this field, before giving some context to them. Finally,

I advocate for an alternative and non-sexist approach to men's body dissatisfaction. In this initial mapping of men's body dissatisfaction discourses, I hope to encourage others to produce empirical work that not only challenges the discourses identified, but also accounts for men's body dissatisfaction without (re)producing sexism.

Background: The field of men's body dissatisfaction

The pressure to conform to narrow appearance standards (for men, to be mesomorphic, tall, to have an able-body, a proportionate and symmetrical face, straight and white teeth, a full head of hair, clear, smooth and White skin and youth) is pervasive today (Buote et al., 2011; Jankowski et al., 2014; Law & Labre, 2002; Pope Jr., Olivardia, Gruber & Borowiecki, 1999). For example, researchers have documented the way in which various boy's toys such as GI Joe Action dolls that have gained muscle and lost body fat with each successive edition (Pope Jr. et al., 1999). Researchers have counted that at least 80 per cent of the men featured in popular media such as *Men's Health* magazine have low body fat combined with high muscularity (Jankowski et al., 2014). Subsequently, most men have one aspect of their own appearance (to be more muscular, to lose weight, to have a fuller head of hair, less wrinkles, lighter skin, a smaller nose, a bigger penis, to be taller) that they would change. This desired change is referred to academically as body dissatisfaction or body image/concerns (here the former is used for simplicity). Research confirms this is a common experience for men (Matthiasdottir, Jonsson & Kristjansson, 2010; Tantleff-Dunn, Barnes & Jessica, 2011; Tiggemann, Martins & Churchett, 2008). For example, questionnaires assessing muscularity, body-fat and/ or height dissatisfaction typically find at least a third of boys and men sampled report body dissatisfaction (e.g. Kruger et al., 2008; Silva et al., 2011; Frederick & Essayli, 2016;). Other research that

assesses any dissatisfaction with appearance finds higher rates (e.g., Jankowski & Diedrichs, 2011). The impact of body dissatisfaction is well established. For example men's body dissatisfaction is associated with psychological health consequences, such as muscle dysmorphia, depression, and suicidal ideation (Griffiths et al., 2016; Kanayama et al., 2006; Olivardia et al., 2004) and eating disorder pathology (Hrabosky et al., 2009; Olivardia et al., 2004; Smith et al., 2011). Subsequently researchers (e.g., Brown & Keel, 2015; Cheng et al., 2016), organisations (Men Get Eating Disorders Too in the U.K.; National Association for Males with Eating Disorders; Any Body.org) and others increasingly aim to understand, document and ultimately ameliorate men's body dissatisfaction.

These are legitimate and important aims. However, this set of aims, as well as the accompanying popular interest in men's body dissatisfaction, produce wider discursive patterns that can be problematic. I now describe five such discourses, observed within empirical studies, and the media, between 2011 and 2018 (though some of these discourses, for example, from The Adonis Complex (Pope et al., 2000) originate from before this period).

Discourse 1: Men are the real beauty victims (Davis, 2002)

The first of these discourses is 'Men are the real beauty victims first identified' by Kathy Davis (2002). Davis argues that a discourse that depicts men as the new victims of socio-cultural appearance pressures has flourished in recent years. Davis takes media coverage of men's increased uptake of cosmetic surgery as an exemplar. Davis notes this uptake is regarded as reaching parity with women's and even as something to celebrate because men can now finally shake off their ugliness and 'seiz[e] their right to self-improvement' (2002, p.50). Men are now seen as dealing with the problems of body dissatisfaction equally to – if not more so – than women.

Such comparisons of men and women are constant in this discourse. For example, in 2006, The Observer newspaper published an article titled: ‘You’re so vain: Do men care more about their bodies than women?’ (Leith, 2006). Other examples are provided on the popular internet forum Reddit (which brands itself as ‘the front page of the internet’) Like other men’s forums (discussed below) it includes content on male body dissatisfaction. This includes the following threads which compare men and women: e.g. ‘Male Body Image Issues VS Female Body Image Issues: Who has it harder?’ and ‘Do you believe men or women face a more difficult time concerning body image?’ (Reddit, 2014).

This discourse is flawed. First because it ignores the different experiences men and women typically have surrounding body dissatisfaction. For instance, Davis (2002) argues cosmetic surgery media depictions ignore how the practise is a transgression against hegemonic masculinity for men but for women it is depicted as a rational step to correct their defective appearances. These gendered experiences mean the same practice – cosmetic surgery – will be experienced differently for men and women, for example, men may be more likely to hide their cosmetic surgery use, women may be more compelled to uptake it. A further example of this erasure is provided by a meme created by ‘A Voice For Men’ member in 2014 (Lions Gate, 2014) popular internet meme featuring two images: one with a man, the other a woman, both looking worryingly at their appearances in the mirror. The image is captioned: ‘Pressure to be beautiful is not a gender issue’. However, the image’s final caption implies otherwise: ‘Women: 3 per cent will develop eating disorders; Men: 4–6 per cent will turn to steroids’. The choice selection of statistics implies up to twice as many men are impacted severely by body dissatisfaction through steroids (6 per cent) than women (3 per cent)

This discourse then depicts men’s body dissatisfaction not only as reaching equal levels to women’s but often as surpassing them. For instance, an article

by Campbell (2012) in The Guardian newspaper covered a study I was involved in (Jankowski, Diedrichs,

& Halliwell, 2012). Although the study and its press release only concerned men, the news-paper article was headlined: ‘Body image concerns more men than women, research finds’ The article further stated: ‘Physical appearance is more of a concern among men than women, according to recent research’ (Campbell, 2012). Another example of this discourse is provided by the following Reddit thread titled: ‘Male actors may now have stricter body image requirements than women’ (Reddit, 2014).

The second flaw with this discourse is that it erases the greater inequality that women face compared to men in body dissatisfaction, specifically women’s harsher and more ubiquitous appearance pressures. An illustrative example of this occurred in focus group style research I conducted with groups of British university men in 2014 (Jankowski et al., 2018). When asked what appearance pressure he found annoying, one participant Ron (19 years old, White British, heterosexual) answered: ‘I find it annoying that men get objectified and more annoying still is “when I mention it, women [say:] ‘Ohhh we get it much worse’. In this instance...”, Ron was annoyed less at the appearance pressures men face and more at the accurate objection that women’s appearance pressures are worse.

It is women, not men, who face greater appearance pressures. One example to demonstrate this is provided by Sociological Images. The blog points out that Hollywood male stars can age overtime whilst still gaining prominent roles in films (Denzel Washington, Harrison Ford, George Clooney, Sean Connery, etc.) whereas older female stars often cannot; who are instead replaced by younger women. Another is provided by bloggers who have daubed the tendency for popular TV show husbands to be heavier, older and more balding compared to their on screen wives as the ‘thin sitcom wives’ phenomenon (see: Pianoshootist, 2014). Empirical content analyses support this, showing

mass media features more men who do not conform to narrow appearance ideals than it does women. Buote et al., (2011), for instance, across a series of US media formats, found that there were more images of heavy men (22 per cent) than heavy women (one per cent), facially ‘unattractive’ men (nine per cent) than facially ‘unattractive’ women (one per cent) and older men (44 per cent) than older women (six per cent). Other research has found similar across different media in the US and elsewhere (Conley & Ramsey, 2011; Fouts & Burggraf, 2000; Fouts & Vaughan, 2002; Jankowski et al., 2014; Jankowski et al., 2016). This greater diversity in men’s appearances across media has been found to be protective; leaving fewer men to develop body dissatisfaction compared to women (Buote et al., 2011; Diedrichs, Lee & Kelly, 2011). Which is a consistent researching finding (e.g. Brennan, Lalonde & Bain, 2010; Matthiasdottir et al., 2010; Yean et al., 2013). Ultimately, whilst men do now have to contend with greater pressures around their appearance, there remains the cultural space for men to still find validity elsewhere. As Bordo (2003, p.154) sums up: ‘Individual style, wit, the projection of intelligence, experience, and effectiveness still go a long way for men, even in our fitness-obsessed culture.’

Discourse 2: *Women should stop obsessing*

The second discourse is ‘Women should stop obsessing’, which speaks to the societal appearance pressures women face, and the backlash they get for giving the pressures attention. For example, in February 2014 a psychologist and eating disorder specialist tweeted to her 3000 followers: ‘Stop obsessing: Women waste two weeks a year on their appearance Today survey shows’. The tweet included a link to a *Today news* article which presented the results of a survey that found women, on average, spent 55 minutes every day working on their appearance (Dahl, 2014). Another example of this discourse was provided by Mark (19, White British) a participant in my focus groups who indicated that women who had body dissatisfaction were just ‘moaning [and]... mak[ing] such a big deal out of [it]’ (Jankowski et al., 2018).

Women are depicted as being obsessed unnecessarily because they no longer face appearance pressures. For example, Pope Jr. and colleagues (2000, p.240) write in *The Adonis Complex*, a popular ‘hands-on advice’ book on men’s body dissatisfaction:

In recent years, commentators have called women’s attention to this phenomenon [i.e. appearance pressures], and, as a result, women have begun to learn, slowly, that they don’t have to buy in to the media images that they see, and that it’s okay for them to look ordinary rather than to pursue a forever unat-tainable ideal’.

Subsequently the authors: ‘hope to help men achieve the freedom and relief that has been attained by many women with eating disorders and body image problems’ (p. 26). Bordo (2003, p. 252) notes that women are seen as ‘never happy with themselves’. This unhappiness is due to their nature, is certainly not a political issue and should not to be taken too seriously, she further notes. Women’s body dissatisfaction is depicted in this discourse as needing no intervention as that is how things should be (though men’s body dissatisfaction is not and does need intervention).

The author of the Today article, for example, points out that ‘we [women] are certainly our own worst critics’. Similarly, some participants in my focus groups viewed women who complained about appearance pressures as ‘hypocritical’ (Johnathan, 18, White British) because, the participants explained, women ‘create their own prob-lems’ (Mark).

If women create their own problems then the assumption is that they can also solve them. Demonstrably, the author of the Today article argues women should simply stop being unhappy with their appearances because it is ‘terribly unhealthy, potentially leading to mental health problems like anxiety...etc’. Others advocate women ‘kiss the mirror’ (see Jankowski, 2015) or as Gill and

Elias (2014) note, ‘awaken their incred-ible’, ‘celebrate their curves’ and more simply ‘love their bodies’ in order to stave off body dissatisfaction once and for all.

Trivialised in this discourse is the impact of body dissatisfaction on women (i.e. that it often precipitates serious health crises including disordered eating, low self esteem, self harm etc.; Bordo, 2003; Rumsey

& Harcourt, 2012). Also minimised in this discourse is just how severe and extensive the appearance pressures women face are, from media, fashion, beauty and dieting industries among others (Buote et al., 2011; Jankowski et al., 2014; Kilbourne, 2010). Such pressures dictate women should be thin, young (Buote et al., 2011; Jankowski et al., 2014) light skinned (Jankowski et al., 2017), with a ‘designer vagina’ (Braun & Tiefer, 2010) and, more recently, should have a thigh gap (like Kendall Jenner), plump lips (like Kylie Jenner) and a round but firm bum (like Nicki Minaj). These pressures are extensive, unattainable to most (even American supermodel Cindy Crawford said she wished she woke up looking like Cindy Crawford; Kilbourne, 2010) and constantly shifting. They are extremely hard to resist.

Finally, whilst there may be more awareness of women’s body dissatisfaction than men (e.g. a Psych Info search on 5 September 2018 returns 1980 results for the keywords of ‘body dissatisfaction’ and ‘women’ and 653 for ‘men’), there is a paucity of support for both women’s and men’s body dissatisfaction. Specifically, current interventions for body dissatisfaction are typically small scale (Centre for Appearance Research, 2016), show limited effectiveness beyond three months after it has been delivered, and if larger, are delivered by a corporation whose own business model (marketing anti-cellulite, -wrinkle, and -blemish creams) arguably conflicts with the genuine combatting of body dissatisfaction (e.g. Dove).

Discourse 3: ‘*Superficial women and innocent men*’

The third discourse, titled Superficial women and innocent men, positions women as the cause of men's body dissatisfaction whilst men have no influence on women's body dissatisfaction. For example, back in 2001, Pope Jr. and colleagues (2001, p.191) wrote that 'in the eyes of modern women, men's value as breadwinners and physical defenders has declined...so that the relative value of their physical appearance has risen'. Another of my focus group participants, Mark (20, White British), decried the ubiquity of hair-less men in the media 'I mean come on, like the chances of, like say for instance, if I had the body for it, I'd never be able to get a modelling [job] because [editors would] like photoshop every single bit of hair off me. Which it's, it's such a pain for guys like: 'guys don't look like that, women, they look hairier'' (Jankowski et al., 2018). Here Mark validly critiques the ubiquity of men presented in mass media that have minimal or no body hair (e.g. 97 per cent on average across *Men's Health* and other UK magazines; Jankowski et al., 2014). However, his acknowledgement that the media is responsible for this depiction becomes a little bit hollow when he suddenly addresses his complaints to women (as if women are responsible for the editing practises of the media conglomerate *Men's Health*). Other participants in my focus groups echoed this discourse. For example, Ronnie (19, White British) argued that: 'I think woman are actually worse than men for [being superficial]' whilst Tom (19, White British) claimed: 'It's the...women [who] introduced [appearance pressures] though I think'.

A further example of this discourse is provided by the best-rated comment (at the time of analysis) on the most popular Reddit thread about men's body dissatisfaction: 'It seems more and more like lazy women are just trying to convince everyone else to be lazy too so they don't look so bad' ([deleted], 2014). Other examples of Reddit thread comments include: 'When women see a beautiful person they try to shame them down to their own hag-whale levels' (yojymbro, 2014) and 'If any man has body image issues, it's probably because women tell him he's unattractive' (icanteventhecat, 2014).

Beyond Reddit, this discourse is also evident on the popular website HairLoss-Talk.com. This website claims to provide a forum and information to support women and men with hair loss. The misogyny on the forum is common, however. For example, one forum thread is titled: ‘Which girls should you avoid?’ (HughJass, 2012) and includes comments like ‘girls who used to be fat but have lost weight’ (justinstocks, 2012) and ‘girls who drink beer [as]... for women, drinking beer lacks decorum and is conducive to weight gain’ (HughJass, 2012).

Other examples of this discourse include one forum user’s profile image of a bald man’s head with the captions: ‘women hate you’ and the following insults: ‘trash’, ‘loser’ and ‘scum’ that women are depicted as leveling at the balding man. Further examples are provided by this forum’s comment: ‘Knowing what I know, that the only thing holding [women’s] attention is fibres on top of your head... it’s hard to have any respect for them’ (BaldMan, 2014) and the comment thread titled ‘Woman are terrible about hair loss and it sucks’ (baldguy28, 2005).

The few women who are regarded as not derisive of men’s hair loss are deemed worth-less on the forum anyway. For example one commentator wrote: ‘Woman at a certain age [will go for bald guys]’ (Simptonne, 2014) to which another poster replied: ‘Yes, the washed up old ones with five kids and plenty of debt. Let’s face it, we’ll never get prime good looking women simply because of this curse’ (Chris2pher, 2014). As another forum poster complains: ‘Women will ‘settle’ after being jerked around by better looking guys [but only when] their vaginas are completely torn up’ (swingline747, 2013). Women who are attracted to bald men then are depicted as unworthy because they are either ‘prosti-tute[s]’ or ‘deviant’ in some other way as one commentator says: ‘Only slutty, tomboy, bad girl type women would prefer guys who are totally bald’ (HughJass, 2012).

Thus, women’s rejection of bald men doesn’t just relate to the women’s perceived superficiality but as also denying men what they are entitled to (sex). As one commen-tator demonstrates: ‘Women expect us to be perfect...

being handsome and tall... A lot of guys of my age I know are still virgins, and it's no wonder. It's not that they're losers and unattractive, it's because of the insanely high standards of women' (swingline747, 2013).

For these women, retribution is seen as justly deserved. For instance, a video was posted on the hairlosstalk.com forum showing a young woman interviewing a balding man who sells hair loss products.

Many forum posters believed the woman would not be sexually attracted to the balding man, though her attraction to him was not the topic of the interview. Demon-strably Exodus2011 (2014) wrote on this thread: '[The] bitch needs to get ****ed two ways to Sunday to knock that smile off her face.... we need to start a porn site where its bald guys gangbangng sweet girls like her'. This discourse implies women's value for men is through their bodies and, in particular, their youthful, 'ideal' bodies. So that women's value is time limited; expiring when they pass their 'prime' or when their 'vaginas [are] torn up', when they have 'debt' or 'five kids'. Missing from these accounts of men's hair loss, are the roles of others in hair loss dissatisfaction notably large pharmaceu-ticals that profit through the sale of hair loss 'treatments' (discussed further below). Or indeed how women face extensive appear-ance pressures (including to not go bald) and thus could be men's natural allies against them. Finally, this discourse treats women not as autonomous human beings who have a right to choose who they are attracted to, and partner with, but as denying men what they are owed: Sex.

Whilst, this discourse depicts women as responsible for men's body dissatisfaction, it conversely also shows men as innocent in the aetiology of women's body dissatisfaction. In fact, men's assessment of (and entitlement to) women's bodies is arguably encouraged. A common research design in this field, for instance, is to ask groups of men to judge what the most attractive female- weight, waist to hip ratio and breast size are (Bergstrom, Neighbors & Lewis, 2004; Marlowe et al., 2005). 'Do men find bony women attrac-tive?' one of these studies is titled (Berg-strom et al., 2004). Such research has led to

the recommendation that researchers educate women on what men think the perfect woman looks like (Espinoza, 2015). The proposed logic is that men not only like women heavier than women think but also men like women's other physical characteristics (such as their eyes) and that this knowledge will reduce women's body dissatisfaction. This discourse therefore reinforces the sexist idea that women's value is primarily in their physical attractiveness to men. Such an idea is flawed not least because women are more than their appearance, but also that no woman is likely to conform to a man's ideal of attractiveness forever (even if it is slightly heavier than previously thought).

When men are acknowledged as potentially having a harmful role in women's body dissatisfaction, this is minimised in the discourse. In my focus groups, men pressuring women to change their appearance was dismissed as: 'what lads do though, isn't it?' (Darren, 20, White British). This minimisation of men's appearance pressures on women is an idea the participants may have got from body dissatisfaction researchers. Specifically some researchers have repeatedly down-played boys' appearance harassment of girls (as previously noted by Drage, 2014; Larkin & Rice, 2005; Levine & Smolak, 2006). As Larkin and Rice (2008) note: 'Racist and sexist body related comments are euphemistically labelled as teasing [by body dissatisfaction professionals] with cosmetic surgery promoted as a reasonable solution [to reduce this rather than any solution to the harassment itself]' (p.228). Elsewhere, girls have frequently reported that boys sexual harassment (e.g. through 'Slap Ass Fridays' where schoolboys compete to slap as many school-girls' bums as possible) harms them including through body dissatisfaction (Drage, 2014; Larkin & Rice, 2005; Slater & Tiggemann, 2011). Furthermore other forms of sexual harassment and sexual abuse, behaviours predominately perpetrated by men onto women (White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault, 2014), consistently precipitate women's and girls' body dissatisfaction, disordered eating and other associated forms of harms (Drage, 2014; Larkin & Rice, 2005; Levine & Smolak, 2006). This discourse effaces this male perpetrated body dissatisfaction harm.

Discourse 4: 'Mothers are body shamers'

The fourth discourse, Mothers are body shamers, attributes children's body dissatisfaction not to appearance ideals promoted by children's media, toys or clothing (e.g. Barbie), not to their peers nor fathers, but solely to their mothers. Mothers are regarded as either cruelly body shaming their children, or recklessly, modelling their own body dissatisfaction to their children.

One example of this is provided by Worobey and Worobey (2014). In their study, the researchers explored young girls' play with Barbie dolls. They found that girls preferred to play with a thin version of the doll and attributed negative characteristics to a heavy version of the doll. The researchers did not assess the mother or father's influence in the study let alone comment upon it or indeed offer any explanation for the girls' preference (presumably because this was a brief report). Nonetheless the study was picked up by a journalist who concluded: 'Researchers think the girls were reflecting their mothers' anxiety about weight and desire to be thin' (MacRae, 2014).

This study is not the exception. More broadly, the body dissatisfaction field has a greater tendency to assess mothers' behaviours, and attitudes around food and appearance and the subsequent influence of this on their children than fathers or other family members (McPhie et al., 2011; Rodgers et al., 2013). Specifically, keyword searches in June 2014 of 'mother and body image' in the research database Psych Info returned 510 results. In contrast, only 155 results were returned for the keyword search 'father and body image'.

Researchers justify this greater focus because mothers' influence over their children's eating behaviour may be presumed to be the strongest when children are very young' (Rodgers et al., 2013, p.31). Journalists follow suit: 'The media. The idealisation of thin celebrities. Photoshopped ads. Sure, these elements all have some influence on many young women struggling with negative body image and eating disorders. But one of the most significant factors may be even closer to home: mothers' (Zellinger, 2015). And other

headlines include ‘Experts: Mom has biggest impact on girls’ body image’ (Hunsinger Benbow, 2013). Likewise, Eva Wiseman a popular columnist for British newspaper, The Observer, wrote an article in 2014 entitled: ‘How mothers can shape the body images of their children’ in which she wrote: ‘[the mother’s] chaotic eating becomes their [child’s]. Her attitudes towards bodies, other people’s and her own, become theirs’ (Wiseman, 2014b). Relatedly, psycho-therapist Dr Choate on Psychology Today. com (Choates, 2015) offers the following advice for mothers in order to ensure they do not ‘pass along a [negative] body image legacy to [their] daughters’ (para. 1): ‘Avoid unhealthy dieting behaviors’ (para. 6) and ‘Model a balanced, healthy lifestyle’ (para. 7).

The month previously to the column above, Wiseman wrote about the Mattel doll Barbie: ‘The evidence that shows Barbie’s plastic dimensions can have negative effects on girls’ body image proves that, far more than any toy, it is the mother’s attitude that has the most impact on health’ (Wiseman, 2014a). The evidence Wiseman had linked to in the piece (Dittmar, Halliwell & Ive, 2006, p.291) found that girl’s body dissatisfaction increased after reading a picture book featuring images of the Barbie doll. The study did not assess, or indeed even comment upon, the influence of the girl’s mothers. Indeed the authors criticised not mothers but ‘the unhealthy body ideals relentlessly churned out by toy manufacturers’ (Dittmar et al., 2006, p.291). This never made it into the coverage however.

This discourse might be more justifiable if the assumption was that mothers affected their daughter’s body dissatisfaction and father’s their sons. But this is not the case. There remains a disproportionate focus on mother’s even when it is the son who has body dissatisfaction. For example, it is Glenda, a mother of a young son who dislikes his weight, who is interviewed rather than the father in a post on the body positive blog: Healthy is the New Skinny.com (Willcox, 2017): The post is entitled: ‘Our Sons Struggle to Love Their Bodies Too’. In the post, Glenda, rather than her male partner, is asked in regard to her son’s body dissatisfaction: ‘Looking back, what habits come to mind that your son

might have picked up on?’ and ‘What changes are you making moving forward?’ (Willcox, 2017). Another example where the focus is exclusively on mothers’ influence over their sons comes from Brabaw (2017) writing on the blog Refinery 29. The post concerns a son who recently told his mother he had body dissatisfaction. Brabaw notes: ‘His words broke her heart... and made her realise how much the way she talked about herself affected her son’ (para. 7). Similarly, Porterfield (2017) on a blog revealingly titled: ‘Scary Mummy’, attributes her son’s body dissatisfaction to her own actions: ‘My own demons were haunting my son. Our children are living mirrors, reflecting back the best and worst of ourselves’ (paras. 10–11). She further adds: ‘I know that the way I talk to him and the things I teach him now will become his inner voice and shape his values’ (para. 15).

There are numerous problems with this discourse. First, it ignores the extensive appearance pressures mothers’ themselves face. As outlined already, appearance pressures are particularly strict and unremitting for women. As are they around motherhood. Specifically, before motherhood, there are pressures for women around appearance (e.g. to be slim and young) in order to acceptably bear children (Lindhardt et al., 2013; Tyler, 2008). During pregnancy, mother’s bodies and diet are also typically scrutinised under the guise of caring for the unborn child (for example, pregnant women report anxiety over the shape and size of their bump and also at the natural changes that occur to their bodies during pregnancy; Deighton-Smith et al., 2014). Finally, after childbirth, mothers face a particular pressure to ‘snap back’ to their pre pregnancy weight and appearance (Deighton-Smith et al., 2014; Orbach & Rubin, 2014). This intense scrutiny is unaccounted for in the discourse.

Even if the appearance pressures mothers face are recognised and greater support for them recommended (as some researchers have done; Rodgers et al., 2013) unfortunately it is likely to be just that: a lone recommendation. As mentioned already, support for body dissatisfaction is severely lacking

generally but has been found to be particularly lacking for women and mothers (e.g. Orbach & Rubin 2014). Demonstrably, nuanced recommendations that mothers need support for body dissatisfaction themselves are not reflected in the media or even state health departments when the research is read. Instead mothers are chastised for influencing their children. For example, on its website in 2014, the US Office on Women's Health had a section on body dissatisfaction with the second subsection titled: '*Body image and your kids*' (Office on Women's Health US, 2011a). This outlines six specific '*things [that] can spark weight concerns for... children*'. The first two listed are '*having mothers concerned about their own weight*' and '*having mothers who are overly concerned about their daughters' weight and health*'.

A second problem with this discourse is that mothers are pressured not to damage their children for whom they (and not society or anyone else) are not only responsible for, but accountable to. Ultimately this places an additional burden on mothers, not only to care for their child, to battle the extensive appearance pressures they already face, but to do so quietly so as not to displace them onto their children. This is despite the lack of scrutiny on the other person typically responsible for the child: the father. For example, the US Office for Women's Health website had a section on men's body dissatisfaction that made no mention of the role fathers can have on their children (Office on Women's Health US, 2011b). At the time of writing (16th January 2019) it still did not. Rather than parents, broader drivers of body dissatisfaction such as companies or state governments are not held to account.

Discourse 5: *Feminism forces muscles on men*

The fifth discourse is 'Feminism forces muscles on men.' It builds upon the previous discourses, by blaming others (women, mothers) for men's body dissatisfaction accounts, in this case feminists. An example is provided in *The Adonis Complex* (Pope Jr. et al., 2000). A central argument to the book, is encapsulated by a timeline on page 52 which juxtaposes feminist milestones

with supposed evidence of a consequent rise in men's body dissatisfaction. Specifically, milestones such as 'Roe v. Wade court decision: 1973' and 'Harvard University becomes coeducational: 1977' are depicted as coinciding with, and by implication causing, a rise in male body dissatisfaction. This rise is evidenced by examples such as: 'Cosmopolitan editorial policy shifts to open discussion of sex with men: 1965' and 'First penile widening surgery introduced: Late 1980s'. Throughout the entire book, Pope and colleagues argue that men are no longer able to distinguish themselves from women due to feminist gains in equality: 'Today's woman can do practically anything a man can do' (2000; pg.50). Subsequently, men are forced to resort to distinguishing themselves in the only way they still can: through becoming highly muscular. This is an argument that Pope and colleagues have echoed elsewhere in other publications (Leit et al., 2001; Pope Jr. et al., 2001).

Beyond The Adonis Complex, others also reproduce this discourse through applications of 'Threatened Masculinity Theory' (Silberstein et al., 1989). For example, Mills and D'Alfonso (2007) told one group of American male participants that they had failed an anagram test to a female confederate and another that they had failed to a male confederate. The authors reported that men in the former group had more muscularity dissatisfaction. This led the authors to conclude: 'that there is a relation between growing social equality between men and women and men's desire for a highly 'androgenised' body type' (2007, p. 507). Similarly, Mescher and Rudman (2014) reported when their male participants were romantically rejected by a woman because of his appearance (experiment 1) or his perceived homosexuality (experiment 2) he reported greater body shame and subsequently higher 'rape proclivity'. The authors concluded that 'such men may be under chronic masculinity threat, making them more sensitive to acute instances' (pg.10) and further added that future research is needed to assess 'what *makes* men hostile toward women [and].... whether sexual aggression serves an *adaptive* or *maladaptive* function for men under masculinity threat, whether they are high on body shame or not' (emphasis in italics added; pg.10).

This interpretation of Threatened Masculinity Theory (Mishkind et al., 1986) is problematic in two ways. First, the notion that men believe muscularity is the ultimate distinction from women is dubious, despite Pope Jr. et al.'s (2000) assertion that 'one of the few grounds on which women can never match men, is muscularity' (p.50) and that women 'will never, ever, be able to bench-press 350 pounds' (p.24). This is dubious not least because because Becca Swanson, Nataliya Kuznetsova, Dayana Cadeau, Iris Kyle, Debi Laszewski and Yaxeni Oriquen-Garcia are all women who have bench pressed 350 pounds or more (Patel, 2018). In addition, if men were driven to emphasise their secondary sex distinctions, they could grow their beards or have their jaws radically squared. These are distinctions that are arguably less available to women than muscularity. Second, and more importantly, the depiction of growing gender equality (itself debateable) as the problem, rather than men's poor adaptation to it, is flawed.

A further example of this discourse ('Feminists force muscles on men') is provided by a Reddit thread titled 'Feminist writes piece decrying 300 movie for 'unrealistic male body standards' actual men show up in the comments to lambast her as the weak and projecting woman she truly is' (Carrotplanter, 2014). A commentator on this thread wrote: 'If [the author] truly had the kind of 'respect' for men that feminists claim they want for women, she would ... stop replacing black iron gyms (where men lift heavy things and grunt) with 'fitness centres' (where women and metrosexuals jog on treadmills, and men get thrown out for grunting)... [and] stop breaking up families. It is from their fathers that little boys learn to play sports' (Whisper, 2014). Popular memes depict feminists as fighting body dissatisfaction for women alone. Feminists are depicted as either wilfully ignoring men's body dissatisfaction, or worse causing it (for examples and critique of these see: DIGN, 2014).

A final example of this discourse is provided by a comment on the Hairlosstalk forum: 'After the women's movement in the 1960s, women realised that they can become empowered too... Having their own source of income, women felt

that it was ok to choose men based solely on their looks' (Tourde-Force24, 2005).

This discourse refers to feminism as if it has already succeeded, with, for example, Pope Jr. and colleagues claiming feminism has passed laws 'to ensure equality between the sexes' and created other 'triumphs', 'crowning achievements' (p.24) and 'seismic changes' (p.51). Regardless of how much legal gender equality has been achieved (which is to say nothing about how these can be eroded), legal change is not the same as actual emancipation (Zerilli, 2004) The hyperbolic language of this discourse obscures the vast task feminism still has to do. Specifically, the need to combat female infanticide (Sudha & Rajan, 1999), the miseducation of girls (United Institute for Statistics, 2018) , prevalent sexual and domestic violence (Watts & Zimmerman, 2002; White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault, 2014) and economic inequality (Bastos et al., 2009; O'Reilly et al., 2015). As Peace (2003, p.167) notes this 'premature celebration of the arrival of equality conceals, absents and makes less urgent the continuing need for change'. Similarly, the discourse may give license to men, at least in my focus groups, to be sexist. If women are to blame for men's body dissatisfaction, then any anger directed at women (however sexist) can be seen as righteous. Finally, this discourse erases feminism's benefits to men themselves whether through highlighting the commodification of appearances in general or more broadly feminism's work for men to have better relationships, better paternity rights, less strict gender roles, etc.

The context to these discourses

These five discourses discussed above, demonstrate how accounts of men's body dissatisfaction sustain sexism. The discourses place women's and men's body dissatisfaction on a binary; with men's being widespread, significant and requiring urgent action whilst women's is minimal, inevitable and self-caused.

Insidiously, men's body dissatisfaction is then blamed on women: caused by superficial women, reckless mothers and callous feminists.

These are not isolated ideas. They are part of cultural post-feminism where feminism is seen not only as a 'spent force', of having surpassed gender equality, (McRobbie, 2004, p.59) but also as a threat to men; where women's gains are regarded as men's losses (Eakin, 2000). Sometimes these discourses are produced from men's rights activist groups; a political movement that propa-gates a 'men are victims, women are victors' agenda (Bordo, 2003; Connell, 1995). This movement downplays the structural advan-tages men have (e.g. economic, educational, political) instead arguing that men are the real victims of oppression from women and feminists. As men are victims their anger (towards women) is seen as justified and righteous; women are not disparaged then only within these discourses but wider cultural, political and social life (such as within men's rights activist groups). Further-more, some of these discourses, particu-larly when on the internet sites, are part of 'trolling' and could be argued to be 'for show'; unrepresentative of what real men think. But nonetheless they exist and are available to be deployed by all.

As mentioned, these discourses pit women against men, mothers against children, femi-nists against others; essentially people against people. The broader drivers of men's body dissatisfaction are omitted. For example, researchers either briefly mention the role of media in men's body dissatisfaction but fail to assess its influence (Mescher & Rudman, 2014) or in the case of Leit et al. (2001), argue that an increase in male appearance pressures across advertising proves women are to blame for men's body dissatisfaction: 'Since advertising lives or dies on the basis of its commercial success, the increase... may be a testimony to this shift in women's ranking of men's various assets' (p.190).

What is sorely missed by these discourses are the businesses that have concrete, vested interests in engendering body dissatisfac-tion (e.g. fashion, fitness and

beauty industries). There is nothing inherent about a woman or any individual that means they are destined to have body dissatisfaction (let alone promote it in others). Instead any individual's body dissatisfaction is not 'an expression of individual psychopathology [but] rather a characteristic expression of that culture... [indeed it is] the crystallisation of much that is wrong with it' (Bordo, 2003, p.260). Individuals do not gain from body dissatisfaction. Businesses do, however. Pharmaceutical company Merck which also sells such hair loss ointments create websites that depict hair loss as an illness that has various side effects including extreme isolation and even suicide (Harvey, 2013). Predictably this can only be alleviated by their pharmaceutical product (or 'treatment' as Merck brands it). In 2014, Merck reported annual revenue of 44 billion US dollars (Merck, 2014). Similarly, in 2010, Renaxil released a series of adverts featuring their hair loss product 'talking down' a suicidal andromorphic hair follicle from a cliff or building edge. The message could not be clearer: buy our product or face death.

Merck also funds research that concludes hair loss leads to suicide (Jankowski, 2014). There is also reason to suspect that Merck has suppressed research that has found otherwise (i.e. that hair loss often has no medical implications and is something that many come to terms with). This is not an unreasonable suspicion given Merck are on record as seeking to 'destroy, discredit and neutralise' researchers who have produced findings that did not support their product sales (Edwards, 2009, para.1).

Relatedly, the term cellulite first appeared in *Vogue*, one of the most popular magazines in the world, that fervently promotes businesses clothes, make up and accessories using typically thin adolescent female models. So, when a man loses their hair and feels ashamed Merck can sell them a product. When a woman comes to see her cellulite not as a benign bodily occurrence but as something to be ashamed of and covered over, *Vogue*, and the anti cellulite creams it advertises, may profit. It is *Vogue*, Merck and other businesses, not women, that stand to profit when engendering body dissatisfaction.

Thus, researchers should hold these broader drivers of body dissatisfaction to account. Specifically, we must not let businesses off the metaphorical 'hook'. Perhaps there are myriad causes of body dissatisfaction including those specific to individuals (the genetic, biological or hormonal). But as Bordo (2003) has argued, these are surely less mutable and less powerful causes than business and sexist commodification of the body in consumer culture. The influence of media, toy and fashion companies in engendering body dissatisfaction will be greater than individuals given companies may be multinational, will have expensive marketing budgets, and thus often have a much greater reach than individuals. Researchers should thus explore the extent to which Merck have influenced current hair loss knowledge, research and support, how unrealistic the body proportions are of girls' toys, why *Vogue* invented the term cellulite, how cosmetic surgeons are covertly advertising through news media platforms such as the *Huffington Post* with little regulation etc.

Another broad driver of body dissatisfaction are oppressions. A key way in which women are disadvantaged relative to men is through the intense regulation of women's appearances and bodies. As Wollstonecraft (1792) identified over 200 years ago: 'Taught from infancy that beauty is woman's sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison'. More specifically, appearance pressures are harsher and more ubiquitous for women than they are for men (Buote et al., 2011; Conley & Ramsey, 2011; Jankowski et al., 2014, 2016). Researchers could explore (and challenge) why this is, how the above business practices have all been directed at women and, only now, with the rise of male cellulite creams and penile cosmetic surgery, are exploiting men.

Sexism does not operate alone. Racism and its overlap have also been implicated in driving body dissatisfaction. For example, Niva Piran has documented the racist, sexist and class fuelled experiences of micro aggressions that characterises young Aboriginal Canadian girl's embodiment (Piran,

2014). In simpler terms, women of colour face all of the appearance pressures white women in general do (to have a flat stomach, to be young, etc.) in addition to racist ones (such as to have lighter skin, straightened hair; Jankowski et al., 2017). The final recommendation then is for researchers to appraise body dissatisfaction as driven by a system of intersecting oppressions interlocked by a consumer society that ‘mine the bodies of individuals for profit’ (Orbach, 2014).

Conclusion

In this commentary I have critically reflected on the field of men’s body dissatisfaction. I have described five discourses I have observed whilst working in the men’s body dissatisfaction field between 2011 and 2018: ‘Men are the real beauty victims’, ‘women should stop obsessing’, ‘superficial women and innocent men’, ‘mothers body shame’ and ‘feminism forces muscles on men’. Together these sexist discourses place the blame and responsibility of men’s body dissatisfaction not only at the individual’s feet but at women’s in particular; leaving broader drivers unaccounted for. I finish by advocating for an alternative approach to men’s body dissatisfaction that is not sexist.

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