Body Dysmorphic Disorder: This is a man’s world

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Introduction

Body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) is a distressing and often disabling condition, with increased risk of co-morbid eating disorders, social anxiety, substance misuse and depression. It is characterised by a preoccupation with imagined or mild physical defects in appearance. The prevalence of BDD is uncertain but estimated at 1.7% and equal between genders, although it is often missed by psychiatrists. More data is available for eating disorders, where the number of cases in men has increased by 24% over the last decade. Studies have shown that men feel a lean and muscular shape represents the ideal male body type; exposure to media images may contribute to body dissatisfaction and BDD. Numerous studies have shown that most men feel a lean and muscular shape represents the ideal male body type, with exposure to these somewhat unattainable images contributing to male body dissatisfaction and muscle dysmorphia.

Aims & Objectives

To identify the amount of exposure to men of the ideal male body type and negative body image by analysing the contents of articles in the bestselling UK “Men’s Lifestyle” magazines.

By exploring the popularity of these magazines and the content of them – it may aid psychiatrists to understand a potential cause of Body Dysmorphic Disorder.

Method

The bestselling “Men’s Lifestyle” magazines in the UK were identified from the Audit Bureau of Circulation data of digital magazine editions in the period of July-December 2015 (11). “Men’s Health”, “GQ”, “Esquire”, and “Men’s Fitness” (12). The March 2017 edition of each magazine was then reviewed and data collected on the number of articles about the following categories: building muscle, the ideal body, diet, supplements, exercise/fitness, grooming and cosmetic surgery. The digital version of each magazine was then searched using Adobe Reader Software to identify the use of words associated with achieving the “ideal” male body type.

Results

The bestselling Men’s Lifestyle magazine was “Men’s Health” with a total of 194 682, followed by “GQ” (120 011), “Esquire” (58 678) and “Men’s Fitness” (30 998). “GQ” magazine contained the most number of pages (298).

All four magazines contained articles on diet, supplements, exercise/fitness and grooming and none contained any articles on cosmetic surgery (including adverts). The best-selling magazine, Men’s Health, contained the most number of pages with articles on the “perfect” body (12.8%) and diet (17.4%), whilst “GQ” contained no articles on building muscle of the “perfect” body. Almost 20% of pages in “Men’s Fitness” referenced supplements.

The most commonly used words in all four magazines include strength/strong and muscle in the top 3. Both “Men’s Health” and “Men’s Fitness” also contained the word “fat” in their most commonly used words, with “GQ” and “Esquire” using the words “improve” and “big” (respectively).

Discussion

The high density exposure of the ideal body image in these magazines could account for body dissatisfaction amongst men. “Men’s Health”, being the best-selling magazine, reveals that fitness and health are a concern for men. Even fashion-oriented magazines frequently contained the words “strong” and “muscle” supporting the perceived expectation that men should be strong and muscular. This extensive exposure could contribute to the rise in the number of men diagnosed with eating disorders and body dysmorphic disorder. It also raises the question of the validity of commonly used eating disorder symptom and diagnostic scales used in males and whether specific scales need to be designed specifically for males to include aspects on muscularity. In conclusion further research is required to look at the prevalence of body dysmorphism, its aetiology and its relationship with other mental health disorders.

References

12. Men’s Health, GQ, Esquire and Men’s Fitness UK March 2017 Editions