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Body Image, Binge Eating, and Bulimia Nervosa in Male Bodybuilders

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Question

The research question to be answered in this study was ‘Are there any similarities in psychological characteristics, eating attitudes and eating behaviors, between competitive and non-competitive male bodybuilders, and men with bulimia nervosa?’

Problem

Male body dissatisfaction has increased drastically over the last three decades, and is now comparable to that found in women. In particular, the exposure to prominent media images of lean and muscular males may increase levels of negative affect, exacerbating levels of dissatisfaction. These types of body issues may be significant drivers in eating disorders, including binge eating and bulimia nervosa. Results from previous research have suggested that male bodybuilders are likely to suffer from high levels of body satisfaction, and that they may also engage in extreme dieting practices to alter their appearance. These findings have however largely been derived from uncontrolled studies, and controlled studies have failed to replicate these results in a consistent manner. This study sought to compare attitudes towards eating, eating behaviors, and various psychological characteristics of competitive male bodybuilders, male bodybuilders and men with bulimia nervosa. The aim was to establish whether there were similarities between these groups, and identify what these were.

Methods

Male bodybuilders were recruited via advertisements in gymnasiums and males with bulimia nervosa were recruited from eating disorder clinics. The sample totaled 22 males with bulimia nervosa, 27 competitive male bodybuilders, and 25 recreational male bodybuilders. All participants were given information about the study and were asked to complete a questionnaire

which included questions related to demographic information and tools to measure psychological characteristics (the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI)) as well as eating attitudes and behaviors (Eating Disorder Inventory (EDI)). The methods used were all developed from a number of tools which had been previously tested and used in similar studies, but with amendments to make them more appropriate for this specific study. Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used to assess for relationships between the different variables. Significant findings were then analyzed with ANOVA and Tukey's post-hoc tests.

Results

There were certain demographic differences between the groups: males with bulimia nervosa were older than the other groups; competitive male bodybuilders had higher body mass index (BMI); bodybuilders had higher levels of education. Males with bulimia nervosa scored significantly higher than bodybuilders on the EDI ($p < .001$) and had higher scores for all psychological factors ($p < .001$) except perfectionism. It was however shown that around 30 percent of competitive bodybuilders met criteria for bulimia nervosa either currently or at some stage in their life. Bodybuilders were more concerned with creating bulk than males with bulimia nervosa ($p < .001$). Eating disorders and a preoccupation with weight and shape were found to be relatively common in bodybuilders. The use of steroids was significantly higher in bodybuilders than in males with bulimia nervosa, and significantly higher in competitive than recreational bodybuilders ($p < .001$).

Discussion

The study overall showed that there were significant differences in psychological characteristics, eating attitudes and eating disorders in bodybuilders and males with bulimia

nervosa. The study did however show that these were all relatively similar between competitive and recreational bodybuilders. This would suggest that there may not be high levels of male bodybuilders with bulimia nervosa, although the results showing that a significant proportion of competitive bodybuilders may be classified as having bulimia nervosa refutes this conclusion, and there are also some overlaps in psychological factors between the two groups. The findings indicate that the eating behaviors exhibited by male bodybuilders may be attributed to more than competitive requirement, and may be due, at least in part, to other psychological factors...

...References

Goldfield, G.S., Blouin, A.G. & Woodside, D.B. (2006). Body Image, Binge Eating, and Bulimia Nervosa in Male Bodybuilders. *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 51: 160-168.