

Body Image: Questioning More Than Just Your Looks

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Introduction

- Body image refers to an individual's emotional attitudes, beliefs and perceptions of their own body (Grogran, 2006).
- Body image encompasses *a*) esthetic and attractiveness aspects and *b*) is a reflection of societal pressures, social values, and body-related experiences (Thompson et al., 1999).
- Ecological factors, such as differing from body image standards, may increase youths and young adults' risk of psychological maladjustment (Lanza et al., 2013), such as eating disorders, low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety.
- Sexual orientation disparities in body image concerns may emerge from *a*) different appearance ideals in heterosexual and sexual minority social environments or *b*) level of conformity to masculine or feminine ideals (Calzo et al., 2015).
- Although social influence and comparison are implicated in the development of body image (Schroff & Thompson, 2013), research has yet to address the role of sexual orientation in predicting overall body image in youth and young adults.

Purpose

- Given that sexual orientation is one aspect of identity that may intersect with body image, the purpose of this study was to examine youth and young adults' body image satisfaction within the context of their sexual identities.

Method

Study - Procedures

- This study is part of a larger, ongoing international study with youth and young adults ages 13-25 year-old.
- Data collection for this study took place from 2013 to 2014 via an online survey during two separate phases of data collection.
- Responses were collected from 8,577 participants ranging from 13-25 years old.
- Responses for 3,482 participants were deleted due to missingness as they were randomly assigned to four of the six random measurement blocks of the survey.

Method (cont')

Participants

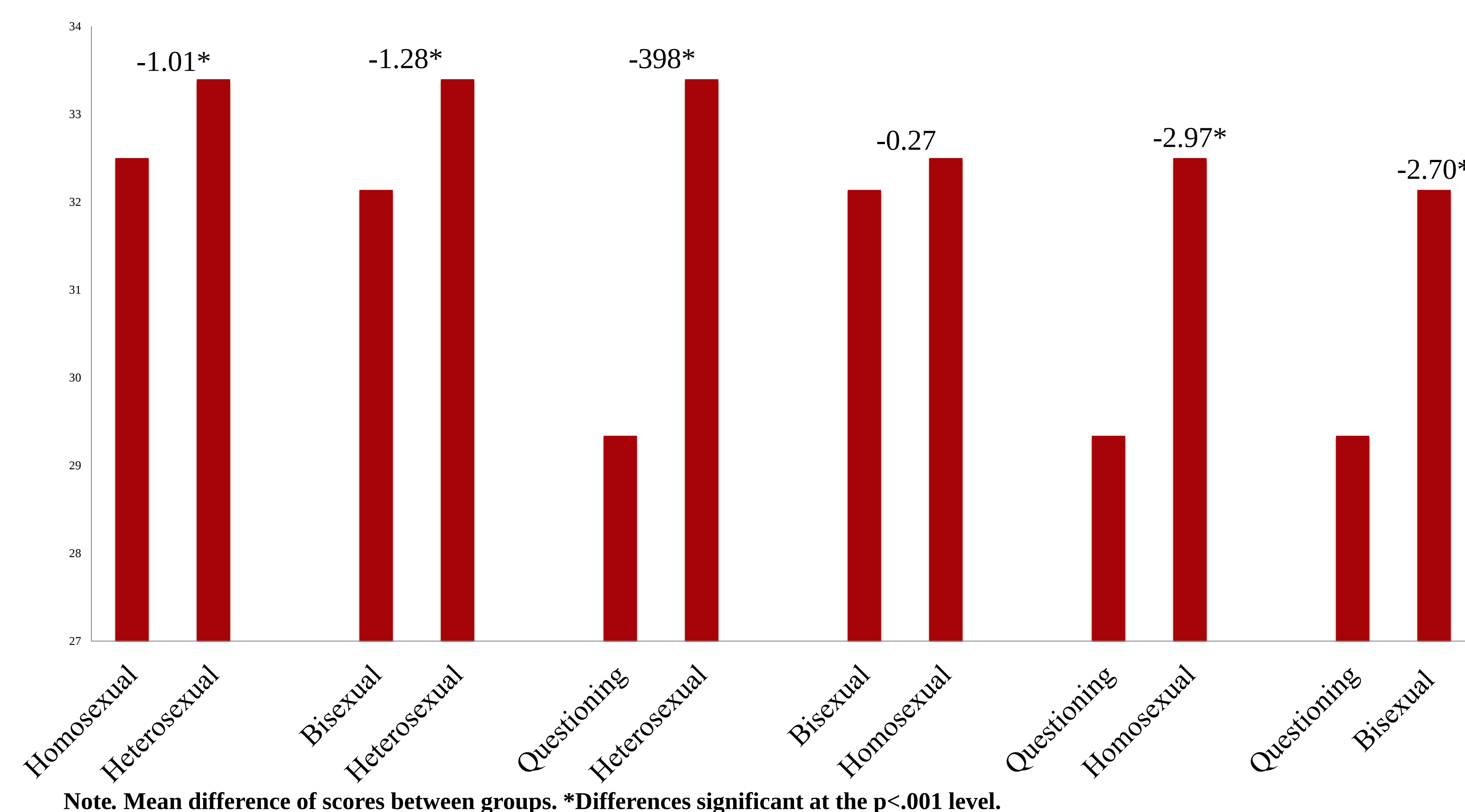
- Assessing gender, 3,345 participants identified as male, 4,680 as female, 338 as transgender, and 214 as other.
- Participants self-identified 37% heterosexual, 30% homosexual, 23% bisexual/queer, 6 % questioning, and 4% "I prefer not to disclose" (which were excluded from analyses).

Measures

Self Description Questionnaire III (SDQ-III): Provides a global measure of self-concept, as well as 12 subscales (Marsh, 1992).

- For this study, the Physical Appearance subscale (10 items; $\alpha = .83$) was used to assess body image satisfaction.
Example items for the subscale include:
 - *There are lots of things about the way I look that I would like to change.*
 - *My body weight is about right (neither too fat or too skinny).*

Results



- The analysis of variance revealed that the effect of sexual orientation was significant ($F = 19.202, p < .001$).
- Post hoc analyses using Tukey's HSD indicated that the following pairs of groups were found to be significantly different ($p < .05$): questioning ($M = 29.33, SD = 9.17$) and heterosexual ($M = 33.39, SD = 9.60$); questioning and homosexual ($M = 32.44, SD = 9.41$); and questioning and bisexual/queer ($M = 32.13, SD = 9.77$).
- Participants who identified as questioning had lower body image satisfaction scores than participants who identified as heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual/queer; particularly when compared to heterosexual participants whose scores were, on average, 3.98 points lower.

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Discussion

- Body image positivity is an emerging trend among youth that emphasize the importance of looking like themselves (Holmqvist & Frisén, 2012). However, society often only targets heterosexual youth with a body positive message and often conforms to stereotypical gender roles.
- Societal pressures seem to have a higher impact on the LGBTQ population as they feel forced from hetero- and homosexual populations to look like one or the other (Chabot, 2005). Coming to terms with one own's body image sexual orientation is of extreme importance in order to reduce the gap between body image dissatisfaction and acceptance of oneself.
- There is a need to address body image differently in school settings (Diedrichs et. al., 2015) as this has the potential to reach most children and youth. However, it is imperative school personnel are aware of the body image message being portrayed as it could further marginalize a minority population which could contribute to adverse mental health outcomes (i.e., anxiety, depression) in an already vulnerable group.

Limitations

- This study utilized a Physical Appearance subscale to measure body image; however, further studies should be done with more comprehensive measures of body image.
- Likert scale for the measure was altered to a 6-point scale versus an 8-point scale to ensure youths' understanding.

Conclusion

- While several factors impact body image dissatisfaction, this research suggests that sexual orientation, particularly for individuals identifying as questioning, has significant and often unrecognized influence.
- The quality of self-image has been found to be related to a young person's general level of success in life. It is suggested that body image dissatisfaction is the cause of many mental and physical disorders in youth, and increases in social and sexual problems (Ventegodt, 2015).
- Although research and theory have mostly focused on the negative aspects of body image, research has to shift towards positive body image as it is linked to individual and societal well being (Tiggemann, 2015); particularly for sexual minority youth.
- Research has shown that sense of belongingness to a lesbian community is a protective factor in regards to adverse mental health outcomes (Hanley, 2015). Individuals who identify as questioning may benefit from an increased sense of belonging to the broader gay community to reduce the impact of body image dissatisfaction.