

**A qualitative exploration into how South African gay men understand the influence of social media on their own and other gay men's desire for muscularity.**

by

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## DECLARATION

I, Keagan Richard Gouws (21612562), hereby declare that this mini-dissertation (A qualitative exploration into how South African gay men understand the influence of social media on their own and other gay men's desire for muscularity) is my own work except where I used or quoted another source, which has been acknowledged and referenced. I further declare that the work that I am submitting has not previously been submitted before another degree or to any other university or tertiary institution for examination.



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Keagan Richard Gouws

On the 31<sup>st</sup> day of August 2022

## **ETHICS STATEMENT**

I, Keagan Richard Gouws (21612562), have obtained the applicable research ethics approval for the research titled A qualitative exploration into how South African gay men understand the influence of social media on their own and other gay men's desire for muscularity on the 26 August 2021 (reference number: HUM024/0721) from Prof Innocent Pikirayi, the Deputy Dean of Postgraduate Studies and Research Ethics, in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Pretoria.

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## ABSTRACT

Previous research exploring body image disturbances has principally focused on heterosexual white females and their desire to control their perceived bodily deficits, reinforcing society's flawed belief that body image issues are exclusively experienced by women. However, existing studies suggest that body dissatisfaction does occur in men where body image concerns appear to be linked to their aspirations to enhance their musculature. Current research advocates that this desire for muscularity in men has occurred in relation to social media's representation of the ideal body. Moreover, research suggests that men with different sexual orientations to that of heterosexuality (i.e., homosexuality and bisexuality) experience elevated rates of psychological disorders which are frequently perpetuated by body image concerns. Whilst some research has focused on men's body image disturbances, which appear to be linked predominantly to their aspirations for a more muscular physique, research regarding social media use and its influence on the desire for muscularity amongst gay men in South Africa has remained largely unexplored. To achieve this, this study aimed to explore the subjective realities and experiences of a sample of South African gay men regarding their understanding of the impact of their social media use on their desire for muscularity as well as other gay men's desire for muscularity in South Africa. Thus, a qualitative research approach, situated within a theoretical framework guided by objectification theory, was utilised. Seven South African gay men were using snowball sampling and semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the participants. The interviews were audio recorded and analysed using thematic analysis (TA). From the data, the following three main themes were identified *the mesomorphic ideal*, *the internalisation of bodily ideals portrayed in social media*, and *body dissatisfaction*. Additionally, an overall integrated theme involving the *need to be perceived as attractive to other men* also became apparent. The findings of the study recognised the multifaceted, nuanced and profoundly meaningful experiences gay men lived regarding their consumption of social media and the influence this has on their desire for muscularity. The explored experiences and identified meaning(s) reflected some gay men's understandings of, and reactions to, the intriguing world of social media use and the desire for muscularity. Overall, the conclusions of this study strive to expand on and bridge the epistemological gap, regarding the dearth of phenomenological research and subjective accounts, of the lived realities of problematic social media use and the desire for muscularity amongst gay South African men, which remains limited in current research.

**Key words:** Body dissatisfaction; body image; social media, desire for muscularity, gay, objectification theory.

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## LIST OF TERMS

For the purposes of clarity, consistency, and transparency a number of terms repeatedly referred to throughout this study are clarified below.

**Social media use/consumption:** There are a numerous understandings and definitions of the term social media, social media thereof in this study has been conceptualized in terms of the use/consumption of “internet-based technology that facilitates the sharing of ideas, pictures, videos, thoughts, and information through a variety of virtual networks and communities” (Social Media Definition, 2020). Thus, social media can be defined as internet-based services that facilitate social contact between users, affording them an opportunity to actively connect and share intimate details of themselves.

**Desire for muscularity:** Again, there exists many varying conceptualisations of this particular concept. However, in the present study, the desire for muscularity is defined as a “state of tension related to the individual’s perceptions that they are not sufficiently muscular, resulting in muscularity-increasing behaviours”, reflects dissatisfaction with one’s current level of muscularity along with a preoccupation with executing behaviours for the purpose of enhancing one’s muscularity (Gomes et al., 2019, p. 287).

**Gay/Homosexuality:** According to Cardoso and Werner (2003, p. 204), homosexuality “involves the sexual relationships between people of the same sex”. For the purposes of this study homosexual men will be used synonymously to refer to gay men (i.e., men who are sexually attracted to other men).

**Objectification:** While there remains many definitions and conceptualisations regarding the concept of objectification, this study has chosen to define the term ‘objectification’ in line with Fredrickson and Roberts (1997, p. 173), who developed objectification theory which is described as a foundation for the interpretation and discernment of how individuals “are typically acculturated to internalize an observer’s perspective as their primary view of their physical selves”. Therefore, objectification in this study involves the peculiar ways in which the body is stylised as gendered in that the body may become a gendered and sexual object, that is, an object of desire which is, also, raced, classed, and commodified.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1.1. Introduction

Globally, men and women face concerns with their physical appearance. Society has recently started to consider the thin and lean female body and the large muscular male body as the ideal physique. As a result, both men and women are experiencing increased pressure to modify their physiques in the quest for what society deems the perfect body (Heider et al., 2015). According to Neagu, (2015, p. 29) “body image is a multidimensional, subjective and dynamic concept that encompasses a person’s perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about his or her body”. Current research suggests that body dissatisfaction, which involves the abhorring and denigrating of one’s own body, may impact negatively on both physical and psychological health (Wilson et al., 2013). According to Heider et al. (2015, p. 1), body dissatisfaction is considered more complex than one’s perception of oneself and one’s body as it is “driven by a perceived discrepancy between the ideal and one’s actual body image”. Previous research exploring body image disturbances has principally focused on heterosexual white females and their desire to control their perceived bodily deficits, reinforcing society’s flawed belief that body image issues are exclusively experienced by women (Dakanalis et al., 2013; Filice et al., 2020). However, prior studies suggest that body dissatisfaction does occur in men and this usually involves an incongruity between the evaluation of their current body and their ideal body (Dakanalis et al., 2013). Unlike women, however, men’s body image appears to be linked to their aspirations to enhance their musculature (Flannery et al., 2020). Previous studies suggest that male sexuality is significantly correlated with men’s body image and forms a major part of the stereotypes associated with masculinity (i.e., that men who are muscular are expected to be independent, assertive, and forceful) (Swami et al., 2014). Thus, the pursuit to attain a more muscular physique may be associated with the male gender role (McCreary et al., 2005).

The drive for muscularity, defined as a “state of tension related to the individual’s perceptions that they are not sufficiently muscular, resulting in muscularity-increasing behaviours”, reflects dissatisfaction with one’s current level of muscularity along with a preoccupation with executing behaviours for the purpose of enhancing one’s muscularity (Gomes et al., 2019, p. 287). According to Franko et al. (2015), majority of men seek a muscular/mesomorphic shape rather than a thin or overweight body shape. In men, existing research indicates a strong correlation between muscular dissatisfaction and various potentially

harmful behaviours. This includes disordered eating habits and other behavioural disturbances to gain muscle mass, such as over-exercising and use of anabolic steroids and performance-enhancing substances (Dakanalis et al., 2013). Consequently, it is this desire to increase muscularity which is believed to be an antecedent to the development of muscle dysmorphia (MD) (Dakanalis et al., 2013). In a study by Tiggemann et al. (2007), it is suggested that the importance of and desire to be thinner and more muscular was greater for gay men when compared to heterosexual men. This desire for muscularity is perpetuated by social media and recent studies show that social media use can significantly affect “users’ perceptions of, and attitudes toward their own body, as well as resultant control behaviours” (Filice et al., 2020, p. 57). According to the findings, more time spent on social media platforms, such as Facebook, may result in increased levels of body dissatisfaction and self-objectification in men (Fox & Rooney, 2015). In South Africa, according to Lama (2020), approximately 40% of South Africa’s population are active social media users, of which 51% are female users and 49% are male users. A substantial portion of the population uses social media which may affect how they perceive their physical appearance.

Bodies of males and females have become increasingly more toned and muscular (Cramblitt & Pritchard, 2013; Daniel & Bridges, 2010). It is noted that with the increase in the media portrayal of the muscular male body, men began to perceive their bodies and those of other men differently, specifically focusing on how their bodies looked and the way they dressed (Grogan, 2016). Consequently, the male muscular body has become eroticized and objectified (Grogan, 2016). It has been suggested that the social constructions of masculinity could result in a greater pursuit and internalisation of societal body ideals for men (Franko et al., 2015). However, this internalisation of societal ideals has been found to differ across cultures (Franko et al., 2015).

According to Daniel and Bridges (2010), the increase in the drive for muscularity amongst men can be explained by the theory of objectification. Although majority of research regarding objectification theory provides explanations for female body image disturbances, current research argues its relevance to the body image disturbances that men experience (Calogero, 2012; Heath et al., 2016; Parent & Moradi, 2011; Wiseman & Moradi, 2010). Objectification theory involves the internalization of societal standards of what is deemed attractive which appears to be related to the frequent exposure to implicit messages portrayed on social media. Consequently, encouraging conformity and identification with these standards (Parent & Moradi, 2011). The person assimilates the observer’s perspective into one’s own body (self-objectification) which results in the persistent examining and comparison of one’s

physique against the “internalized standard of attractiveness”, which is known as body surveillance (Parent & Moradi, 2011, p. 264). Notably, according to Daniel and Bridges (2010), research suggests that relationships between self-objectification, body surveillance, and body inadequacy, as well as body dissatisfaction, were greater and more stable for gay men than for heterosexual men.

Social media could be considered a platform that demonstrates and influences all of the above aspects. Social media’s influence on body dissatisfaction is revealed by its negative impact on self-esteem and an increased desire for muscularity (Cramblitt & Pritchard, 2013). Thus, it appears, for both men and women, that the more a person comes to digest and internalise the ideals portrayed on social media, the more likely they are to experience body dissatisfaction. According to Seidenberg et al. (2017), a larger percentage of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals make use of social media compared to their heterosexual counterparts. Furthermore, existing research indicates that gay and bisexual men are at “increased risk of developing body image disturbances and disorders compared to heterosexual men” (Filice et al., 2020, p. 57). According to Siever (1994), gay men are exposed to pressures involving a need to maintain a high level of physical attractiveness and experience intense pressure to be youthful looking, owing to the gay male subculture they may find themselves in. As a result, they experience a sense of body dissatisfaction (Siever, 1994). Gay men who experience body image disturbances may tend to internalize muscular bodies portrayed on social media in an attempt to respond to and compensate for being demasculinized by a heterosexist society (Lanzieri & Hildebrandt, 2015). However, very few studies have been conducted to explore the influence of social media on men with different sexual orientations. Accordingly, this study aims to explore the influence of social media use on the desire for muscularity amongst gay men in South Africa.

## **1.2. Research problem and objectives**

According to World Wide Worx (2017), with specific focus on the South African population, social media has grown exponentially, with approximately 14-million active Facebook users, 8.74-million YouTube users and approximately 7.7-million Twitter users. Recent studies suggest that social media consumption can have a considerable influence on users’ views of, and feelings toward their own body, resulting in problematic control behaviours, for example, constant weight and mirror checking (Filice et al., 2020). Whilst some research has focused on men’s body image disturbances, which appear to be linked

predominantly to their aspirations for a more muscular physique (Bergeron & Tylka, 2007), research regarding social media use and its influence on the desire for muscularity amongst gay men in South Africa has remained largely unexplored. Therefore, the research questions guiding this study are formulated as follows:

- Main research question: How do gay men understand the influence of their social media use on their own desire for muscularity?
- Secondary research question: How do gay men understand the influence of social media use on other gay men's desire for muscularity?

The aim of this study is to explore the participants understanding of the impact of social media on their desire for muscularity as well as other gay men's desire for muscularity in South Africa.

In order to accomplish this aim, the following objectives were developed:

- to explore how gay men understand muscularity, and
- to explore how social media use guides gay men's desire for muscularity.

### **1.3. Justification**

Previous research indicates that the increases in body dissatisfaction, and desire for muscularity, in both men and women, have occurred in relation to media's representation of the ideal body. According to Griffiths et al. (2018), previous research suggests that men with different sexual orientations to that of heterosexuality (i.e., homosexuality and bisexuality) experience elevated rates of psychological disorders, and body dissatisfaction appears to be a central component in the onset and experience of these conditions. It has been suggested that the desire for muscularity, particularly amongst gay men, has been found to be associated with increased levels of depression, sexual risk taking, and internalized homophobia (Brennan et al., 2012).

The influence of social media consumption on the desire for muscularity amongst gay men is currently limited (Filice et al., 2020). The research focus has predominantly been on body image disturbances and disordered behaviours and attitudes in women and female and male adolescent groups (Caradas, 2001; Mchiza et al., 2015; Motseki & Oyedemi, 2017; Mwaba, & Roman, 2009; Viviani, 2012). Further exploration of body image disturbances amongst men with different sexual orientations is therefore warranted. The present study can

make a valuable contribution owing to a dearth/paucity in research concerning the desire for muscularity and how social media use influences these bodily perceptions and behaviours amongst gay South African men. The findings from the present study can inform the development of interventions to target the psychological conditions that are perpetuated in body image disturbances, which are often experienced by men of sexual minority groups, as suggested by Filice et al. (2020). The findings can also make a valuable contribution to highlighting the significance of gay male population groups, creating awareness, and understanding of its root causes.

#### **1.4. Chapter Outline**

In the inaugural chapter of this study, I have outlined existing information relating to the topic, rationale, and central aims of the research study. **Chapter two** is dedicated to the literature review. Literature pertinent to social media and the desire for muscularity, including a prominent discourse surrounding the influence of social media use on the desire for muscularity amongst gay men is provided. The theoretical framework that informed and underlined this research study (i.e. objectification theory) is also discussed in **Chapter three**. **Chapter four** details the methodology for the study and provides a thorough outline of the research process that was followed. The findings are presented in **Chapter five** in terms of the main themes, subthemes, and integrated theme identified. A consolidated discussion regarding the findings and the associated literature and theory is also included. The integrated analysis explores how the findings of the research support literature and theory in relation to current research. The dissertation concludes with **Chapter Six**, providing a comprehensive integration and conclusion of the findings according to the research question, aim and objectives. This chapter also includes a reflection of the limitations and offers recommendations for future studies.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### 2.1. Introduction

In this chapter the study is situated in extant literature and empirical evidence pertaining to masculinity and social media use amongst gay men. The first section focuses on social media consumption and its impact on body dissatisfaction in general, with particular emphasis on the influence of the following social media platforms; Facebook and Instagram. The next section focuses on masculinity and the drive and desire for a more muscular physique amongst men. A section exploring the drive for muscularity amongst gay men is also provided. Lastly, existing research regarding gay men's social media use and how their usage of social media influences and guides their desire and drive for the mesomorphic ideal is included.

### 2.2. Social media use and body image dissatisfaction

According to Richardson and Locks (2014), “the Greek sculptor Polyclitus was the first artist to devise a canon for the human body with the idea that certain proportions would operate as a model of perfection” (p. 30). The depiction of the human body has contributed to how people view themselves in relation to this prototype of perfection. According to Cash and Smolak (2011), body image is a concept that incorporates one's self-perceptions, outlooks, thoughts, emotions, and behaviours pertaining particularly to bodily appearance and function. Body image is related to body satisfaction and involves beliefs about physical appearance and evaluations of physical appearance and how this aligns with appearance ideals. Thus, within the present study, body image is treated as a personal construction which, although being a highly subjective and individual project, is nonetheless significantly informed and moderated by the socio-cultural values, ideals, norms, and practices of bodily appearance, shape, and build at a given point in time and place. Notably, values around body image are not gender-neutral and in fact help regulate gender by organising gender-specific codes of appearance, shape, and build, with characteristic hierarchies rendering some bodies more valuable and attractive than others.

Regarding the meaning of body dissatisfaction in the present study, as highlighted above, body dissatisfaction is considered more complex than one's perception of oneself and one's body as it is driven by a perceived discrepancy between the ideal and one's actual body image (Heider et al. (2015). According to Halliwell and Dittmar (2003), men and women vary in the way they appraise and discuss their bodies. Men have a tendency to appraise and regard their bodies as functional entities (e.g., focus on how strong I am), whilst women may be

inclined to gage their bodies as a compilation of distinct and separate components (e.g., I dislike the size of my stomach) (Calogero & Thompson, 2010). Overall, it appears that women have a tendency to adopt a disjointed, sectioned view of their bodies, while men take on a more functional and all-inclusive position of their bodies (Calogero & Thompson, 2010). Research suggests that within most Westernized cultures, women tend to overemphasize and misjudge the size of certain parts of their bodies substantially more when compared to men, while men tend to underrate the dimensions of their bodies considerably more than women do (Calogero & Thompson, 2010). Moreover, according to a longitudinal study by Ricciardelli et al. (2006), children between the ages of 8 and 11 exhibited no gender differences in terms of body dissatisfaction. However, some men were found to crave a greater body size, attach a higher value on a muscular physique, employ and engage in muscle enhancing activities, and experience high pressure to enhance their musculature when compared to women (Ricciardelli et al., 2006). Importantly, the socio-cultural aesthetic ideals imposed on women and men highlight the significance of following markedly diverse physical characteristics such as thinness or muscularity (Calogero & Thompson, 2010). The internalization of these standards regarding one's bodily physique suggests that both men and women are cognizant of them and assume that achieving these standards is important.

Research suggests that the thin ideal predominates women's body image concerns (Calogero et al., 2007). However, literature also indicates that a number of women may also desire a more muscular body shape (Gruber, 2007). Other research suggests that certain cultural groups do not subscribe to the pursuit of the thin body shape. Research study findings suggest that Black women adopt adaptable perceptions of attractiveness and repudiate the thin ideals for beauty that permeate throughout most White communities (Schaefer et al., 2018). Regarding men's body image concerns this predominantly involves building a large and muscular physique (Thompson & Cafri, 2007), which is characterised by a muscular torso and flat stomach (Calogero et al., 2007). From the above it becomes evident that body image is socially constructed and while this may happen on an individual level it is nonetheless dependent on gendered socio-cultural norms which are shaped by existing social structures and forces, such as, patriarchy, ablism, and the forces of consumerism. More recently, social media has increasingly been shaping people's perceptions.

Social media appears to be a relatively recent cultural phenomenon. However, since its arrival, it has been linked and representative of broad shifts in Western, Westernised, and Western-influenced culture and patterns of consumerism, namely the rise of visual culture, characterised by the supremacy of image, visuality, and the eye over other senses and mediums

of presentation and representation. Our ability to place and view images on social media platforms, that are accessed by millions of people every day, allow for the superficial appearance of the body to be increasingly commercialised, creating what is known as the “appearance byte” (Grogan, 2016, p. 242). Ultimately, social media has a significant influence on fluctuations in social habits, most considerably amongst generations Y and Z (Nurhandayani et al., 2019). Social media has become a type of mass media that continues to herd public opinion on particular issues as well as influence consumer habits (Nurhandayani et al., 2019). Thus, social media can be considered one of the main avenues of portraying idealized, gender specific body standards throughout westernized cultures (Tiggerman, 2002).

For the purposes of this study, ‘social media’ refers to the use of “internet-based technology that facilitates the sharing of ideas, pictures, videos, thoughts, and information through a variety of virtual networks and communities” (Social Media Definition, 2020). Thus, social media platforms can be defined as internet-based services that facilitate social contact between users, affording them an opportunity to actively connect and share intimate details of themselves. According to Fardouly and Vartanian (2016), previous research suggests that social media consumption is related to body image disturbances. The consequences of social media use on body image have been found to be more harmful when compared to other platforms of media (i.e., television and magazine publications), due to being continually available to the user, having increased ability to reach and interact with groups of people, and live real-time comments of appraisal (i.e., the ‘like’ button on Facebook) (Griffiths et al., 2018). Consequently, it could be argued that the ease of access to social media as well as the speed at which one can upload and be exposed to harmful material may result in many social media users experiencing its detrimental effects. A meta-analysis conducted by Saiphoo and Vahedi (2019) echoed this finding and reported that body image disturbances are associated with increased social media consumption. They found that appearance-focused social media use was associated with larger effect sizes and therefore has a stronger relationship with body image perception. It appears that the more a person makes use of social media platforms, that are particularly focused on appearances, the higher their chances are of experiencing body image concerns and related issues. However, their meta-analysis only consisted of cross-sectional studies which failed to account for variables like sexuality, for example, which may represent an incomplete picture of body image concerns based on social media use. Future research would need to take this into account. According to a study by Budree et al. (2019) and Nyoni and Velempini (2018), South Africans between the ages of 18 and 35 were found to use most social media platforms and used these more frequently compared to older population groups.

Considering the high frequency of social media use among this age group, the participants in the current study were sampled from the 18 – 35-year-old age group.

People use social media for various reasons. This visual consumption refers to the act of visually taking information and at the same time experiencing this and acknowledging the significance of it in the dynamics of social, cultural, and personal contexts (de Burgh-Woodman & Brace-Govan, 2010). According to Whiting and Williams (2013), people make use of social media predominantly for the following reasons: social interaction and companionship, information seeking and self-education, relieve boredom, entertainment and enjoyment, relaxation and relief from stress, facilitate communication and information sharing, and convenience. Numerous studies have focused on the beneficial and detrimental implications of social media use (Bányai et al., 2017; Brooks, 2015; Krause et al., 2019; Vossen & Valkenburg, 2016). The majority of the findings focus on social media and its relation to psychological well-being. The present study intended to emphasise the influence of social media on body image, particularly muscularity.

Studies regarding social media use have discovered that viewing idealized images impact negatively on users' perception of their own body and that these effects are similar amongst both men and women (Grogan, 2016). The idealised bodies represented on social media is often unrealistic and impossible to achieve. It is the pursuit of this ideal that often results in accentuating the contrast between one's own physique and what society deems the ideal body (Piatkowski et al., 2020). Existing literature relating to social media's influence on body dissatisfaction has predominantly focused on women, particularly heterosexual women, with very few studies having been conducted to understand how social media influences other population groups (Aparicio-Martinez, 2019; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015; Filice et al., 2020). Amongst majority of the findings, a significant correlation between exposure to the unrealistic female body presented on social media and body dissatisfaction as well as the pursuit of the thin ideal has been established.

In the South African context, some research related to this topic has been conducted across different racial groups. However, the samples in the majority of these studies include mostly women or girl and boy adolescent groups (Caradas et al., 2001; Mchiza et al., 2015; Motseki & Oyedemi, 2017; Mwaba, & Roman, 2009; Viviani, 2012). Most of these studies have found that abnormal approaches to eating and the pursuit of the thin body shape is frequently experienced by South African schoolgirls from different ethnic backgrounds. Overall, South Africans experience significantly distorted body images and high levels of dissatisfaction related to this (Caradas et al., 2001). It appears that these issues experienced

amongst women in South Africa (i.e., body dissatisfaction and disordered eating habits) transcend the boundaries of ethnicity (Caradas et al., 2001). Research regarding the similar topics amongst South African men remains limited. However, it may be apparent that men experience pressure to conform to what society deems men should look like (i.e., a more muscular physique). Daniel & Bridges (2010) suggested that this muscular ideal is desired more for aesthetic purposes rather than well-being. Consequently, some of these men are inclined to participate in maladaptive activities intended to enhance their muscularity (Dakanalis et al., 2013).

Although research has established a link between body image ideals portrayed on social media and women's body dissatisfaction, little is known about how social media influences men's body dissatisfaction (Cramblitt & Pritchard, 2013; Grogan, 2016), and more specifically the desire to attain muscularity. Therefore, considering the research findings detailed above, the need for additional exploration and understanding of men's body image perceptions and experiences, especially amongst gay men, has become evident.

In the present study the focus was on the following social media platforms: Facebook and Instagram. The researcher chose to include the usage of only these social media platforms as they are amongst the most widely used platforms and their content is predominantly based on images, especially of people. According to Griffiths et al. (2018, p. 150), frequent usage of "image-centric social media platforms" (i.e., those that contain high levels of image-based content, mostly people, relative to other content) is strongly associated with muscularity dissatisfaction when compared to non-image-centric social media platforms. Furthermore, it is suggested that social media users' disproportionately make use of image-centric social media platforms relative to those platforms that are characterised by mostly text or other content (Griffiths et al., 2018).

### **2.2.1. Facebook**

According to Nations and Kormos (2020), Facebook is a social networking application on which users can post content of themselves, others, and other topics that interest them in live and interactive ways. In terms of general Facebook use, a study examining Facebook activity by McAndrew and Jeong (2012, p. 2359) found that women spent more time on Facebook, had more Facebook friends, used their profile pictures for "impression management", and frequently engaged with their family online. In terms of men's general usage of Facebook, relationship status was found to be particularly important amongst men (McAndrew & Jeong, 2012).

Spending more time on Facebook has been reliably associated with increased levels of body dissatisfaction in both men and women (Fox & Rooney, 2015; Tiggerman & Slater, 2014). Additionally, increased appearance exposure on Facebook, which includes engaging in activities such as uploading, observing, and remarking on pictures, was related to higher weight disappointment, a pursuit for and internalization of the thin ideal, as well as self-objectification among female high school students (Meier & Gray, 2014). A further study by Fardouly and Vartanian (2015) found that young women who frequently use Facebook may experience body image disturbances as a result of comparing their own appearance to their peers' appearance on Facebook. It appears evident that existing literature regarding Facebook usage and body image disturbances have predominantly focused on women's body image issues (Eckler et al., 2016; Fardouly et al., 2015; Kim & Chock, 2015; Ruckel & Hill, 2016) with limited research available about how this relates to men. Similarly limited research is available about how people with different sexual orientations use Facebook.

### **2.2.2. Instagram**

Instagram is an “easy to operate social media application that allows people to share their daily life activities, lifestyles, habits and interests in picture and video format with others” (Al-Kandari et al., 2016, p, 54). Overall, Instagram is considered the most widely used social media platform in the world (Huang & Su, 2018). In their study, Instagram use was mostly associated with looking at posts, social interaction, and diversion. Furthermore, the findings reveal that Instagram's importance placed on visual communication is extensively acknowledged by the “cyber-psychology” needs of people in their social communication endeavours (p. 08). A further study by Sheldon and Bryant (2016) found a significant association between interpersonal interaction and the use of Instagram for creative purposes and surveillance, whilst an additional finding suggests an association between elevated levels of social activity and using Instagram as a means of documentation.

In terms of social media usage, according to Riehm et al. (2019), individuals who are exposed to social media for more than 3 hours per day are at higher risk of experiencing mental health issues, particularly those that involve the internalizing of problems (i.e., the internalizing of societal ideals). Similarly, a study by Sampasa-Kanyinga and Lewis (2015) found that daily social media use of more than 2 hours was associated with higher levels of psychological distress and suicidal ideation. Furthermore, studies suggest that spending 2 hours or more per day using social media is proposed as an appropriate cut-off time in determining regular social media use (Ryding & Kuss, 2020). Therefore, the researcher considered this aspect when

recruiting research participants to ensure that they meet this threshold in terms of social media use.

Study findings by Cohen et al. (2017, p. 183) suggest that the use of “appearance-focused” social media platforms, rather than general use, was associated with body image disturbances amongst young women. Moreover, the results of their study indicate that users who followed appearance-focused accounts on Instagram experienced higher levels of internalising the thin body shape, body surveillance, and the pursuit of thinness. However, viewing and consuming “appearance-neutral” accounts was not correlated with body image disturbances (p. 183).

Similar to the plethora of literature regarding body image, existent research concerning body image and social media has predominantly involved heterosexual white women. Limitations continue to persist throughout current literature concerning the associations between body image and social media. However, a focus on the gay men population and body images issues defined by muscularity is insufficient.

### **2.3. Muscularity**

Whilst the present study will focus on muscularity, this is only one dimension of corporeality through which men’s bodies have been historically constructed and re-constructed as more or less male/masculine. For example, adiposity, body hair, penis size, physical strength, and body height, etc, have been layered with gendered tropes of masculinity which, in their varied historical iterations and to various degrees, have the cultural and sexual currency of maleness/manhood/manliness/masculinity. However, study findings by Griffiths et al. (2019) found that reduced quality-of-life was associated with muscularity dissatisfaction, body fat concerns, height, and penis size. Their study findings highlight the importance and value research on muscularity concerns and associated precipitants.

Contrasting literature with women that focuses on the internalisation of the thin ideal, the majority of studies involving men has focused on the muscular/mesomorphic ideal (Grogan, 2017). The term “hegemonic masculinity”, a term coined by Connell (1995), suggests that “within any power system, one class of individuals will be held in highest regard and, accordingly, wield power and control” (Filiault & Drummond, 2007, p. 176). Thus, hegemonic masculinity is said to include aspects relating to attitude as well as body type. According to Filiault and Drummond (2007), if a man possesses the right frame of mind, for example passive homophobia, as well as the ‘right’ body (i.e., lean and muscular), he is capable of accessing higher levels of gender, and specifically masculine power and privilege. The inverse of this is

that should a man lack these particular traits, he may be placed in a more subordinate or marginalized position within the gender(ed) body hierarchy of society.

In a study by Drummond and Drummond (2014) exploring the construction of masculinities in contemporary Western culture amongst a group of boys from a school in Adelaide, Australia, aged between early childhood through to 10 years old, their findings suggest that boys considered muscularity, strength, and power as synonymous. Further, they found that a man's body has the potential to influence others as well as have an understanding that a body that is visually appealing bares social capital with the potential to form social relationships based on having a 'socially revered' body. This finding was prominent amongst boys in middle primary school and was ascribed to their increased access and use of computers and the internet where they are exposed to the universal look of the male physique and the stereotypical impression of what a man should look like in contemporary Western society (Drummond & Drummond, 2014). Within Western, Westernized, and Western-influenced societies, there appears to be a relationship between the increased consumption of and exposure to the internet and the internalisation and pursuit of the ideal male body, which is predominantly portrayed as muscular and lean.

According to Martins et al. (2007), the mesomorphic ideal, which is a physique that is lean, muscular, and athletic, developed with the rise in the portrayals of the ideal male physique in media advertisements. Grogan (2016), suggests that men are exposed to societal demands to imitate and attune to the mesomorphic body ideal, consequently resulting in increased levels of body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem in men. Subsequently, as the male muscular physique became more prominent in society, specifically through a variety of mass media related platforms, it slowly became the ideal which most men aspired to achieve. Consequently, this ideal came to be accepted and predominant in modern and western societies (Martins et al., 2007), a standard which many men desire (Edwards et al., 2016). Although only some men desire a muscular physique and others desire other body shapes and types, they are nonetheless positioned in relation to the "hegemonic aesthetic" in an attempt to repudiate femininity and re-enforce and constantly portray their rejection of femininity (Filiault & Drummond, 2007, p. 175).

This is linked to what is known as the "Adonis Complex". According to Geller (2003, p. 256) the Adonis Complex is noted as "a collection of male body image problems that can include compulsive weightlifting and exercising, steroid abuse, eating disorders, and full-blown body dysmorphic disorder". Consequently, the fixation with physicality may be

engendering a harmful obsession with muscle attaining and enhancing activities, resulting in the emerging and escalating bodily neurosis recognized as the Adonis Complex (Hardy, 2014).

More recently, men's bodies and physiques have been treated and portrayed as a commodity or object on social media that has come to be viewed similarly to that of women's bodies – a body which feminist commentary and research has long been occupied in Western hetero-patriarchal culture. The status of a body as an object requiring ongoing work, labour, and modification, such as, making-up, dressing-up, and dieting-down in order to satisfy norms of 'beauty' and 'attractiveness' (Murray, 2008). This has contributed to similar levels of body dissatisfaction as experienced by women (Wykes & Gunter, 2006) and an increased desire for muscularity.

The desire for muscularity can be defined as the “cognitive tension between an individual's perception of their actual body as insufficiently muscular and the external, usually culturally constructed, muscular ideal that they believe they need to attain” (Thornborrow et al., 2020, p. 02). Social media's portrayal of the idealistic male physique has been associated with body dissatisfaction and body-fixing behaviours because of the “positive social capital attached to having a slender and muscular body” (Grogan, 2016, p. 93). It could be argued that the pursuit of the ideal body shape may be held in high regard owing to its association with increased social acceptance and thus, a person may be encouraged to engage in unhealthy body altering behaviours in accordance with what society deems ideal and 'acceptable'.

Lorenzen et al. (2004) found that brief exposure to media images of the unrealistic ideal muscular physique can result in body dissatisfaction amongst men. Moreover, Harvey and Robinson (2003) report that the current abundance of health trends, steroid use, as well as aesthetic procedures reveal men's efforts at chasing the ideal muscular body shape, despite the unattainability of such a body shape for most men. Consequently, the images depicted on social media do not necessarily portray a realistic reality. However, this unrealistic reality, which is propagated in the content represented on social media, becomes the ideal against which the self and others are judged (Franchina & Coco, 2018). Similar research findings by Dakanalis et al. (2013), indicate that the visual depiction of the ideal male body presents a largely unattainable body ideal. Moreover, it is suggested that men's body image disturbances could be affected by societal pressures to adhere to the muscular ideal propagated in most Western societies (Dakanalis et al., 2013).

Although men and women are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with their body image, their concerns differ in terms of what society deems attractive (i.e., the thin ideal for women and the lean and muscular ideal for men) (Kelley et al., 2010). Thus, society appears

to project and perpetuate an ideal for each gender group in terms of what it deems attractive for that group and consequently, members of each group may experience a need to pursue and adopt that particular ideal. Cultural depictions of men and women have changed over the years, and have moved in opposite directions (i.e., men building muscle as women shrink and become thinner) (Boyd & Murnen, 2017). The more intense and pronounced these physiques become in society, the more gendered they are and the better they strengthen and support the physical which predominates the narrative of heterosexual success (Boyd & Murnen, 2017). Consequently, by maintaining gender-specific ideals of attractiveness such as, through distinct prescriptions around muscularity and thinness, society is able to reinforce and reiterate the two-sex system on which heteronormativity is predicated, making it appear ‘natural’, when it is in fact socially constructed and sustained. Thus, each gender comes to learn that conforming to the societal ideal is associated with “heterosexual success” (Boyd & Murnen, 2017, p. 91) The thin standard for women is often linked with being a productive sex object, whilst the muscular ideal in men is likely correlated with the sexual actor role, which consequently impacts the thoughts and beliefs concerning what being a man or a woman means (Boyd & Murnen, 2017).

Further to this, the heterosexual interdependency of women and men implies that these gendered roles are idealized and, thus, heterosexual success is considered to be determined by gendered societal prescriptions (i.e., as women and men socialise with one another in ways that propagate their conventional roles, they encourage the significance of heterosexual relationships) (Boyd & Murnen, 2017). This “heterosexual script” suggests that men are considered leading sexual actors who are enveloped with sexual thoughts which consequently leads to the objectification of women, whilst women take on a more passive role in using their sexualized bodies to attract men (Boyd & Murnen, 2017, p. 130). Therefore, the ideal body for both men and women are exaggerated by the heterosexual script that ultimately supports the relations between women and men in society (Boyd & Murnen, 2017). Overall, gendered body ideals are situated in hetero-patriarchal society and culture which sustains the sexual binary of ‘male’ and ‘female’, by regulating and policing bodily ideals of gender expression, internalisation, and representation.

This unrealistic pursuit and internalization of cultural and societal ideals is often associated with distorted body image perceptions and problematic behaviours, which may include extreme muscle enhancing behaviours amongst men (Thornborrow et al., 2020). According to study findings by Gattario et al. (2015), conformity to masculine norms as well as the endorsement of the male gender role is considerably associated with men’s desire for an ideal muscular body and desire for muscularity. This is perhaps unsurprising given the

longstanding “historical nexus between muscularity, strength, and masculinity” (Drummond, 2007, p. 46).

Recent studies have shown an association between the desire for muscularity and body dissatisfaction in boys and men (de Sousa Fortes et al., 2017). This dissatisfaction in muscularity may result in excessive body checking behaviours such as comparing one’s body with another man’s body, mirror checking, over-exercising, and severe dietary restrictions (de Sousa Fortes et al., 2017; Walker et al., 2009). Consequently, these body checking behaviours may predispose many men to developing Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD), and more specifically, Muscle Dysmorphia (MD) (Didie et al., 2010). MD is considered a subtype of the clinical condition BDD, which is characterised as a “preoccupation with the idea that one’s body is insufficiently lean or muscular” (Pope et al., 2005, p. 01). The individuals who suffer from this particular condition are known to experience higher levels of anxiety and shame owing to the perception they maintain about their body being inadequately muscular (McCreary et al., 2007). Consequently, as a result of this anxiety and shame, these individuals spend more time engaging in muscularity enhancing activities (McCreary et al., 2007). There is limited research regarding this topic. The researcher found only one study that explored MD within the context of South Africa. The study by Hitzeroth et al. (2001), found that in a sample of 28 South African bodybuilders 53.6% presented with MD. The male population may thus also be at risk of experiencing distorted and problematic body image perceptions and, as a result, are vulnerable to developing subsequent psychological and behavioural issues. Notably, MD and BDD are considered to be on the extreme clinical end of body image dissatisfaction and thus, these conditions are very peculiar and specific to those communities and subcultures of men (bodybuilding and weightlifting).

In terms of additional studies engaging in the issue of muscularity and body image within the South African context, a study by Martin and Govender (2011) investigating traditional masculine ideology, body image discrepancy, and the pursuit of muscularity in adolescent males found that a substantial proportion of boys, included in the study, experienced unfavourable perceptions of their body image which was accompanied by a heightened desired for an increased musculature. Further to this, their study found that the 38.6% of the boys wished that they were more muscular, 27.6% of boys believed that self-confidence stemmed from obtaining larger muscle mass, and 41.5% of boys occasionally thought about taking anabolic steroids. Considering, the boys’ negative attitudes towards their muscularity it was expected that they would engage in muscle enhancing behavioural activities, with weightlifting being most popular, followed by the use of protein supplements. Further significant findings

by Martin and Govender (2011) indicate noteworthy positive associations between traditional masculine ideology and certain factors related to body image, specifically body image discrepancy, a more muscular body ideal, and an enhanced muscular physique a means of attracting the opposite sex. A further study by Martin and Govender (2013) investigating the masculine role norms and their relation to body image discrepancy in a sample of South African Indian school-going boys, found that majority of boys, in the sample, thought that attaining a bigger muscular physique was linked with heightened self-worth and were occasionally concerned about their muscular appearance. Particularly, the study found that the traditional masculine role norms of status-seeking, successful heterosexuality, and anti-femininity, were traditional aspects of hegemonic masculinity for Indian boys. Moreover, men's bodies were recognized, appraised, and valued in muscularity related terms. Overall, the above studies demonstrate the importance of subjective and social obedience to, and the depiction of, traditional masculine ideologies which can interfere with the way men/boys observe and describe their bodies, which can negatively influence their sense of self-worth. Having said that, the benefit of the present study is in its qualitative nature as the other studies have been predominantly quantitative. Further to this, the present study focuses specifically on self-identified gay men which brings a different layer to the analysis, largely absent in the local studies mentioned above.

The internalization of the ideal muscular physique has been found to be associated with body dissatisfaction as well as muscular dissatisfaction which contributes to muscularity improvement behaviours and disordered eating behaviours (Brown et al., 2017). According to Frederick and Essayli (2016) and Bergeron and Tylka (2007), men who experience body dissatisfaction are likely to suffer from disordered eating patterns, lower self-esteem, lower proactive coping patterns, and psychological distress. Consequently, one is able to ascertain that those men who are dissatisfied with their muscular appearance may be prone to developing a range of psychological and related problems. It has been suggested that not all men experience similar levels of body dissatisfaction and the consequences suffered therefrom may differ amongst different groups of men.

Although there are limitations to many of the studies mentioned above, the results of these studies provide some understanding regarding men's body image and related disturbances. Moreover, these studies provide some insight for future research regarding this topic. For example, qualitative methodologies could be beneficial in understanding body dissatisfaction amongst men, as research indicates that they experience lower levels of body dissatisfaction when compared to women or may be less likely to report body image issues in

similar ways to women owing to society's expectations regarding masculinity (Oshana, 2021). The recent focus on how body image issues, based on social media use, present amongst male populations has thus contributed to elucidating that men are vulnerable to these experiences as well. A focus on how this relates to men with different sexual orientations is, however, still needed.

#### **2.4. Gay men and the desire for muscularity**

In modern Western culture, the perceptions and views associated with men's bodies are considered stronger than ever before (Drummond, 2005). These perceptions and views of the male body have intensified and have been linked to an increase in media focus, where the male physique is presented in a commercialized and objectified manner to a point where the male physique becomes a commodity that is high in value (Drummond, 2005). Current literature on men's body image presents with limitations as it has predominantly concentrated on heterosexual male bodies and men's health which, again, presents with a culturally embraced heterosexual notion (Drummond, 2005). Thus, the need for future research focusing on body image disturbances amongst men of different sexualities to that of heterosexuality (i.e., homosexuality) would be deemed necessary.

Frederick and Essayli (2016) found that homosexual men experience greater body dissatisfaction, muscularity dissatisfaction, and greater self-objectification relative to their heterosexual counterparts. Furthermore, homosexual men are at increased risk of developing body image disturbances and disorders compared to heterosexual men (Filice et al., 2020). According to Cardoso and Werner (2003, p. 204), homosexuality "involves the sexual relationships between people of the same sex". For the purposes of this study homosexual men will be used synonymously to refer to gay men (i.e., men who are sexually attracted to other men).

Brennan et al. (2012) found that higher levels of internalized homophobia amongst gay and bisexual men were related to an increased desire for muscularity. Thus, by increasing one's muscular physique, one may circumvent the likelihood of being exposed to persecution and/or violence by assimilating into the societal ideal of the male gender expression (Brennan et al., 2012). If gay men are able to demonstrate their manliness through becoming increasingly muscular, they may be able to avoid stigmatization. Similar findings were reported by Kimmel and Mahalik (2005), who maintained that conformity to masculine norms correlated with gay men's distress if their body did not meet society's representation of the masculine ideal. Further evidence suggests that gay male culture may lead to increased risk for body image disturbances

and eating disorders and may be particularly related to gay men's higher exposure to sexual objectification (Levant & Wong, 2017). Moreover, gay men consider physical appearance in prospective partners higher than that of women (Regan et al., 2000). Therefore, owing to gay men wanting to attract other men, they may experience pressure to ensure that their physical appearance is as desirable as possible (Andorka, 2007). Consequently, they pursue the unrealistic mesomorphic ideal and their body becomes only a body to be viewed and sexualised by others (Andorka, 2007). Therefore, masculinity is objectified through the pursuit of a musculature ideal (Brennan et al., 2012).

According to Dillon et al. (1999), gay men are considered vulnerable to developing body dissatisfaction and disordered eating patterns owing to the pressures and significance of physical attractiveness within gay culture. Additionally, a quantitative study by Siever (1994) exploring body dissatisfaction amongst gay men and heterosexual women owing to an emphasis on physical attractiveness, found that gay male subculture often enforces gay men to maintain a certain level of physical attractiveness and consequently experience body dissatisfaction. This is also referred to as the "the toxic effects of the commercial gay scene" (Tate & George, 2001, p. 163).

There appears to be many factors that influence body dissatisfaction amongst gay men, as indicated above. However, present literature predominantly cements these factors in terms of comparing gay men to other groups of individuals (i.e., heterosexual men and women). This, however, is constraining as it does not fully capture the variations and diversity in terms of gay men's body types, preferences thereof, and how the history of gay culture has often shaped bodily ideals in subculturally specific ways (Oshana, 2021). A good example of this can be seen in the gay bear/cub community where peculiar and community-specific norms regarding corpulence and hirsuteness render men's bodies which are less muscular in more attractive and desired forms (Gough & Flanders, 2009).

Among some gay men, there is a desire to be thin and/or muscular which appears to be the result of a number of reasons, including health, fitness, employment, personal attraction, and to attract sexual and romantic partners (Brennan et al., 2012). However, body dissatisfaction appears to be an antecedent to both the desire for thinness as well as the desire for muscularity amongst gay men (Brennan et al., 2012). According to Kimmel and Mahalik (2005), internalised homophobia as well as the stigmatization that gay men experience may result in higher levels of body dissatisfaction and pressure to achieve the mesomorphic body ideal. Consequently, gay men's attempts to increase their muscular physique may be a means

of avoiding the possibility of suffering and scrutiny by “fitting into the required social norm of the male gender expression” (Brennan et al., 2012, p. 4).

According to a study by Yelland and Tiggemann (2003), who explored body image disturbances amongst a sample of Australian participants consisting of 52 gay men, 51 heterosexual men, and 55 heterosexual women, gay men scored the highest on desire for muscularity and experienced more body image concerns than heterosexual men. Similarly, study findings by Levesque and Vichesky (2006), who explored the nature and associations of body image dissatisfaction among 64 gay men, suggests that gay men are at increased risk for experiencing increased body dissatisfaction and concerns related to their weight and are principally focused on building and achieving a muscular physique. Existing research indicates that gay men may thus be pressured to attain a more muscular physique owing to the experience of a cultural expectation related to body consciousness, which is perpetuated internally and externally within the gay community (Grogan, 2016).

The romanticized social media image of the muscular male body has been found to be the principal ideal amongst gay men as most gay men acknowledge this ideal as the most attractive (Levesque & Vichesky, 2006). Further, the higher the tendency of a gay man to compare his own body to the idealized images posted on social media, the higher the likelihood that he may evaluate his own appearance negatively (Levesque & Vichesky, 2006). Thus, the more time a gay man spends viewing gay-oriented social media, the higher the elevation would be in terms of forced self-comparisons with those images. Moreover, findings by Siever (1994), suggests that gay men’s involvement in the gay community was correlated with a higher desire to attain the mesomorphic ideal. Intriguingly, however, if a gay man experienced greater “perceived acceptance within the gay community”, he likely experienced a lower desire for muscularity (Levesque & Vichesky, 2006, p. 48). The above suggests the “assumption that in order for gay men to feel accepted and succeed in portraying their ‘gay identity’ they must look, act, and be perceived in a certain way” (Oshana, 2021, p. 11-12).

Although it is evident from the above literature that the mesomorphic ideal remains prominent within gay male subculture, one must still consider the numerous subcultures within the gay community which may present with varying ideals relative to those groups (Oshana, 2021). The value of understanding the personal experiences of gay men in their desire for muscularity is thus emphasized. According to Ravenhill and de Visser (2017), gay men may construct and maintain a masculine identity as a way to achieve acceptance within a heteronormative culture whilst simultaneously attempting to attain an alternative masculinity that is valued within certain gay subcultures. Centring on these sub-groups of masculine ideals

within gay culture, the most common ideals are (a) the gay ‘lad’ (muscular and lean ideal), (b) ‘twinks’ (the least masculine, slim, and hairless), and (c) ‘bears’ (larger physical form, excessive hairiness, and may be older) (Gough & Flanders, 2009; Oshana, 2021; Ravenhill & de Visser, 2017).

Even when considering the above, there is an understanding that variations of these variations are forever changing, a further splintering of subculturally informed body ideals. The point to consider in regard to these subcultural body ideals is that within contemporary gay culture, the effects of the intersecting evolution and prominence of visual culture, neoliberalism, lifestyle consumerism, and the commodification of ‘beauty’, all of which often come to centre on the body, continually splinter and fracture an ever-proliferating range of often peculiar body ideals, shapes, and forms of appearance. Essentially, these categories or body ideals never stagnate. While some may have greater longevity, e.g., the twink or the bear, they nonetheless evolve and splinter, i.e., the otter or the twunk. Muscularity is one dimension, along with body hair and bodyfat, which become some of the focal corporeal features which distinguish these evolving body ideals from one another.

These masculine ideals within gay culture have changed throughout history and appear to be dependent on the shifting currents of hegemonic forms of masculinity/ies in response to changing societal ideals and situations (Filiault & Drummond, 2007). During the 1960’s and 1970’s, gay men were required to achieve and maintain a certain body type in order to gain access to gay spaces and places, “The Circuit”, a collection of gay bars and clubs (Filiault & Drummond, 2007, p. 178). If they did not meet this ideal standard, they were denied entry. During this period, the ideal gay male physique was referred to as the “Clone”, which was characterised by a V-shaped torso, visible pectoral muscles, well-defined arms, and huge pelvic bulges (Filiault & Drummond, 2007, p. 178). Demonstrating raw sexuality, masculinity, and butch-ness were considered the most appealing traits during this period. Subsequently, during the 1980’s and with the impact of HIV and AIDS on Western gay society, the ‘Clone’ body type fell ill, lost weight, and with it lost its appeal and power in gay society (Filiault & Drummond, 2007).

One cannot underestimate the cultural impact of HIV/AIDS on the gay community. This has become a central part of the visual iconography of AIDS and how gay people and AIDS were represented in the media. The gay male body came to be represented as ‘diseased’ and ‘polluted’, withered, emaciated, and ravaged by AIDS. Muscle has long been a signifier of bodily health and class as it represents a particular lifestyle and ability or level of wealth. Consequently, the celebration and pursuit of muscularity has often been linked to the traumatic

and pathologizing iconography of HIV/AIDS. Disability, as represented by HIV/AIDS, was considered an obstacle to sexual viability and normative performances of masculinity (Hrynyk, 2021). Homosexuality has shared a long history with disability. Consequently, HIV/AIDS considerably reshaped the social and sexual fabric of the gay community (Hrynyk, 2021). HIV/AIDS was labelled a ‘gay disease’ and gay men who were diagnosed with HIV/AIDS were condemned and left unsupported and ostracised from the gay community (Hrynyk, 2021).

The AIDS epidemic served as a catalyst in the development of masculinity as a sign of physicality in response to the health of men infected with AIDS who experienced weight loss and muscular wasting (Halkitis, 2001). Today, the muscular wasting consequences of HIV/AIDS has been somewhat ameliorated by advances in treatment options and steroid replacement therapy (Halkitis, 2001). Consequently, these treatment advances and resultant muscle enhancing behaviours have been associated with physicality, virility, and ideologically with masculinity (Halkitis, 2001). Overarchingly, gay men have propagated this subculture that significantly associates masculinity with physicality, strength, virility, and sexual prowess (Halkitis, 2001). Thus, one cannot underestimate the importance of understanding the exemplification of masculinity as a physical sign of health and ‘wealth’ for gay men, which needs to be understood and situated in the context of sociocultural experiences and the impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic on this construction of masculinity amongst gay subculture (Halkitis, 2001).

Following the rise of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, during the 1990’s and 2000’s, came the rise of the “Twink”, which was a youthful, smooth, hairless, slightly muscled, toned gay male (Filiault & Drummond, 2007, p. 180). This type of physique is considered widespread within many Westernised gay social circles, an idealised mesomorphic form that continues to feature a muscular, though not massive, body type. This suggests that hegemonic ideals within the gay community have evolved and that leaner forms of muscularity are perhaps now more idealized. This can be seen in for example the ways that gay men who identify as so-called “Muscle Mary’s” and actively pursue and cultivate muscle-bound physiques are marginalized and enfreaked within gay iconography and discourse (Morgan & Arcelus, 2009, p. 441).

The recuperation of the masculine-muscular ideal by some gay men within contemporary gay culture has often been critiqued as an appropriation of those more dominant and traditional modes of hetero-masculinity. However, the appropriation of the masculine-muscular archetype by some gay men demonstrates the socially constructed and precarious nature of gender and masculinity. Indeed, while this points to the fact that gender has no biological base and that it is made, remade, and unmade through bodily practice (West &

Zimmerman, 1987) and gender performativity (Butler, 1990, 1993), it also highlights how gay men are able to resist, subvert, and queer the performance of hetero-masculinity by developing, desiring, celebrating, and consuming the masculine-muscular aesthetic and body to very non-(hetero)normative, that is, queer, ends.

With that said, when the masculine-muscular bodily aesthetic has been appropriated to foreclose gay culture, community, identity, and spaces to other(ed) queer people and bodies, it is evident that this is in the interests of (re)drawing lines of (homo)normativity and, with this, patterns and relations of dominance, subordination, and marginality. In this sense, aesthetics of muscularity can be recuperated by some gay communities and gay men to reinforce existing social and (often racialized) class structures, patterns of consumerism, hierarchies of worth, and practices of exclusion, such as, ablism, weightism, trans-phobia, and misogyny; becoming both a variation and effect of the more contemporary (and discriminatory) discourse of ‘No Fats, No Fems’ as well as ‘Masc for Masc’ (Chow, 2021). However, study findings by Ravenhill and de Visser (2017) suggest that the twink’s stereotypically feminine appearance may still yield importance and be held in high value within specific subgroups amongst gay subculture even though it is not necessarily considered a source of masculine capital in terms of traditional sense of and understanding of hegemonic masculinity (i.e., muscular ‘macho’ physique). Therefore, twinks and twink-ish body types may be afforded capital in certain contexts even when considering their lack of musculature.

Having considered the influence and pressures gay men may experience in relation to their involvement within certain gay subcultures regarding their desire for muscularity, one cannot negate the presence and influence of gay men’s social media consumption in increasing and perpetuating their desire to enhance their muscularity.

## **2.5. Gay men, social media use, and the desire for muscularity**

According to Gudelunas (2012, p, 360), “gay men have always found ways to communicate with other gay men within a culture that severely restricts talk about sex and specifically polices talk about nonnormative sexual practice”. According to Seidenberg et al. (2017), gay men make use of social media to a greater extent when compared to heterosexual men. Social media platforms today allow gay men to seek out other gay men within a welcoming culture (Gudelunas, 2012). These platforms provide gay men with the opportunity to connect with individuals who are similar to them, who may be experiencing similar struggles, and may provide gay men with a sense of unity and connectedness within the gay community. Therefore, it is indicative that social media can be advantageous for some gay men

owing to its ability to transverse geographical regions with a relatively heightened sense of anonymity (Dhoest & Szulc, 2016). Further to this, social media use may create a space for gay men to disclose their sexual orientation by means of forming relationships and connections that facilitate positive social support amongst gay men (Escobar-Viera et al., 2018). As a result, these virtual connections may lessen the distress experienced by gay men emanating from their sexual orientation and may protect them from the development of psychological distress, like depression, for example (Escobar-Viera et al., 2018).

Social media appears to create a means for gay men to subjugate the stigmatization of homophobia and even promote psychological well-being. Similarly, according to study findings by Owens (2016), gay men recognize the stigma associated with their gay identity and the possibility of negative reactions when they come out to others for the first time. Therefore, gay men may make use of Facebook and other social media platforms to indirectly come out to people as a way of reducing their feelings of shame and to preserve a sense of safety in the coming-out-process (Owens, 2016).

Despite the value social media use holds, it is also linked to negative consequences as detailed in previous sections. Recent studies have found that “self-objectification and appearance-based social comparisons” are indicative of how social media use may also result in body dissatisfaction amongst gay men (Griffiths et al., 2018, p. 150). Body dissatisfaction was found to be associated with greater incidence of image-centric social media use amongst gay and bisexual men (Griffiths et al., 2018). Furthermore, this focus on appearance and images portrayed on social media often results in the internalization of appearance ideals and comparisons amongst gay men, calling attention to the inconsistency between one’s appearance and the unrealistic ideals on social media, engendering body dissatisfaction (Griffiths et al., 2018). It appears that some gay men ascribe a higher importance to social media in defining their sense of self and physical attractiveness when compared to heterosexual men (McArdle & Hill, 2007).

Despite social media’s prevalence and pivotal role within the gay community, little research has been conducted to explore the impact of social media consumption and body image disturbances and other harmful consequences that affect this population relative to other sexualities (Filice et al., 2020). Limited but growing research has centred around social media use and its relationship with HIV-risk behaviours (Hirshfield et al., 2015; Patel et al., 2016), depression (Escobar-Viera et al., 2018), domestic partner abuse, and substance abuse (Duncan et al. 2016) amongst the gay community. The researcher was only able to identify some studies that explored the association between social media consumption and body image disturbances

amongst gay men (Filice et al., 2020; Griffiths et al., 2018; Lanzieri & Hildebrandt, 2015; McArdle & Hill, 2007). These studies present conflicting results, with some indicating internalised media imagery, particularly image centric social media consumption, having the potential to negatively affect gay men's body image, whilst others indicate that social media's influence on gay men's body image may be the consequence of interrelated biological, psychological, social, and cultural determinants. Limitations of the majority of these studies included measuring the frequency of social media use using descriptive terms rather than specific periods of time (Griffiths et al., 2018), which resulted in the inconsistent interpretation on the part of the participants resulting in a probable inaccurate picture of the impact of social media consumption. Furthermore, owing to the researchers not listing or focusing on specific social media platforms, this could have resulted in underestimation of particular social media platform use. Future research may be needed to reveal the link between problematic social media use and body image concerns amongst gay men.

According to Brennan et al. (2012), body dissatisfaction experienced amongst some gay men most often manifests itself in the form of a desire for increased muscularity. Therefore, the pursuit of the masculine ideal amongst gay men may be considered a means of creating and maintaining a sense of self and self-esteem. Consequently, gay men may develop a perception of their body as a vessel through which they are able to fit the mould of what society considers the ideal.

Overall, gay men may be prone to experiencing elevated levels of social pressure in relation to maintaining the ideal body image when compared to heterosexual men, as they become viewed as objects of the male gaze (Atkins 1998 as cited in Grogan, 2016). Consequently, gay men may experience pressure to achieve and maintain an acceptable muscular physique within the gay community, as they are considered to be more "embodied" when compared to heterosexual men within a mainstream cultural context (Grogan, 2016, p. 170). The physiques of many gay men are transformed into a commodity which is representative of gay sexuality, desire, attraction, and sexual currency. Consequently, the body shape of the gay man which reflects the societal and cultural ideal is considered higher in value than the body that does not (Lanzieri & Hildebrandt, 2015). Therefore, in order for gay men to compete with the culturally created idea of attractiveness, which is most often portrayed on social media, they become engrossed in a cycle of repetitive comparisons with individuals that have muscular physiques (Lanzieri & Hildebrandt, 2015), reinforcing their perception of not having reached the ideal which in turn reinforces their engagement in problematic muscle

enhancing behaviours. Consequently, increasing gay male population groups' risk of experiencing psychological distress.

## 2.6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the above chapter illustrates the complexities of gay men's body image, masculinities, and social media usage. In general, majority of current literature suggests that body and muscularity dissatisfaction are associated with increased social media use, particularly the frequent usage of image-centric social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram. Gay men make use of social media to a greater extent when compared to heterosexual men and these platforms provide gay men with a sense of unity and connectedness within the wider gay community. Further in this chapter, the concept of 'hegemonic muscularity' was explored, detailing the influence, strength, and power of the muscular male body within a heteronormative society as well as in certain gay subcultures.

The above literature review proposes that the mesomorphic body type is the predominant ideal to which many heterosexual and gay men ascribe to within contemporary Western society. Consequently, this fixation with physicality, creating a visually appealing body frame, may result in maladaptive obsessions involving excessive muscle attaining and enhancing activities, often referred to as the 'Adonis Complex'.

Overall, the literature suggests that men who are dissatisfied with their muscular appearance may be prone to developing a range of psychological and related problems. Moreover, gay men have been found to experience greater body dissatisfaction and muscularity dissatisfaction relative to their heterosexual counterparts, and are at elevated risk of developing body image disturbances in comparison to heterosexual men. The reasons for this, as indicated in the literature review, are the internalised homophobia, conformity to masculine societal norms, as well as the pressures and importance of physical attractiveness within gay culture that gay men experience. Notably, gay men may attempt to maintain a masculine identity in order to be accepted within a heteronormative culture, but simultaneously attempt to attain alternative masculinity that is valued within certain gay subcultures (gay 'jock', 'twink', and 'bear'). One must remain cognizant that these subcultural categories are sometimes quite contingent and context specific and may not necessarily dominate the South African context. Ultimately, the hegemonic ideal of past generations may not be considered the current hegemonic ideal.

The attainment of the masculine ideal amongst gay men can be considered a means of constructing and preserving a sense of self and self-esteem, thus, their body becomes a

vessel/object of male gaze. Subsequently, the gay male body has become a commodity, the more muscle the more valuable and it loses value when it deviates from this ideal. Therefore, some gay men may be prone to become more masculine and present with a strong desire for muscularity which is often guided by their use of social media.

The following chapter explores the theoretical framework used during the study, Objectification Theory. The chapter briefly discusses the importance and the purpose of the theory. Thereafter, justification in terms of the use of this particular theory and how it relates to the study, is offered.

## **Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework**

### **3.1. Introduction**

This chapter explores the theoretical framework grounding the study, namely, ‘Objectification Theory’. The first section focuses on the value and significance of a theoretical framework in the research process. This is followed by a brief summary of the epistemological and ontological viewpoints underwriting this research. The next section provides principal tenets that form part of the theory as well as its critiques. The section thereafter offers a general overview of objectification theory particularly as it has been applied to understanding body image concerns amongst women. The utility of objectification theory amongst men is also included. The chapter concludes with the use of objectification theory in understanding gay men’s body image issues, with a particular focus on the desire for muscularity.

### **3.2. Value and significance of a theoretical framework**

A theory can be described as the blueprint of the research process. According to Grant and Osanloo (2014), the theoretical framework serves as the foundation for the rationale, problem statement, research questions, and the purpose of the research study. Further, they suggest that it provides the knowledge base for the literature review as well as guides the methodology and analysis of a research study. A research study that is without a theoretical framework may result in an unstructured and unclear study (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). Overall, the theoretical framework provides a common world view from which one can support one’s thinking of the problem and the analysis of the data gathered (Grant & Osanloo, 2014).

### **3.3. Overview of objectification theory and construct definition**

The theoretical framework grounding the present study is objectification theory. According to Fredrickson and Roberts (1997, p. 173), who developed the theory, objectification theory is described as a foundation for the interpretation and discernment of how individuals “are typically acculturated to internalize an observer’s perspective as their primary view of their physical selves”. Objectification involves the peculiar ways in which the body is stylised as gendered in that the body may become a gendered and sexual object, that is, an object of desire which is, also, raced, classed, and commodified. Objectification manifests in three related areas, the first being within interpersonal and social encounters where a person becomes and is viewed as an object for use owing to its beauty and aesthetic (Balraj, 2015). Prior study findings suggest that women are objectified more frequently when compared to

men and men's gaze is regularly associated with sexually loaded commentary (Balraj, 2015). This objectifying gaze involves the viewer becoming aware of him/herself/themself as a subject only when faced with the gaze of the other and thus, develops an awareness of themselves as the object (Balraj, 2015). The second area involves visual media, which has been found to objectify both the bodies of men and women (Moradi, 2011). Although there are differentiating forms of objectification, sexual objectification has become so prominent in people's lives owing to the media's visual depiction of bodies in this way, that it is considered that most significant aspect of objectification (Balraj, 2015). The third area involves the encountering of bodies or parts of bodies that aligns the viewers of visual media with the sexualising gaze, resulting in the reinforcement of viewing women's bodies in sexually objectifying ways (Balraj, 2015). However, it is imperative that one maintains the view that society's predominant narrative results in the subject and object positions becoming significantly gendered (i.e., that men are frequently permitted the subject position, leaving women relentlessly objectified) (Balraj, 2015). Ultimately, this suggests that visual media's sexual objectification of the woman body may originate from more than just images that are viewed in the day-to-day lives of men.

Objectification theory puts forth the concept of "self-objectification" which is the result of being immersed within sexually objectifying contexts and is associated with appraising a body regarding its importance, desirability, and appeal to others, instead of the value and function it serves for the self (Fredrickson et al., 2011, p. 690). Self-objectification is often accompanied by various subjective experiences such as shame and anxiety as well as mental health related conditions such as anxiety, depression, and eating disorders (Fredrickson et al., 2011). Moreover, the negative effects that are associated with self-objectification have extended beyond these consequences and links to the disgust towards practices such as menstruation and childbirth (Andrist, 2008), smoking cigarettes and substance use (Harrell et al., 2006; Carr & Szymanski, 2011), and the use of steroids amongst men (Parent & Moradi, 2011). Further to the concept of self-objectification, are the concepts of body surveillance and body shame (Moradi, 2011). It has been suggested that self-objectification may trigger self-surveillance, which may consequently result in shame, anxiety, diminished cognizance of bodily states, depression, sexual dysfunctions, and eating disorders, for having failed to meet the unrealistic ideals purported in society (Buchanan et al., 2008; Calogero, 2012; Heath et al., 2016; Kozee & Tylka, 2006; Schaefer et al., 2018; Szymanski & Henning, 2007; Tiggemann & Slater, 2001; Tiggemann & Williams, 2011; Tylka & Hill, 2004).

An important contribution of objectification theory is its particularly useful framework which integrates sufficiently-evidenced based aspects of numerous theories and accommodates

the experiences of different gender and cultural populations (Moradi, 2011). Additionally, objectification theory provides for consideration beyond the pressures to pursue the thin ideal and includes socialisation and sexual objectification experiences, as well as the experiences of sexual objectification amongst gender nonconforming and sexual minority men (Wiseman & Moradi, 2010). Furthermore, the notion of body surveillance has been expanded to incorporate skin colour surveillance amongst African American women (Buchanan et al., 2008).

Objectification theory provides an understanding of the important role media plays in influencing people's thoughts regarding how they should or should not be seen in public (Balraj, 2015). Thus, considering the above, objectification theory appears to be a particularly useful theory to utilise within this study. Having said that, this theory is not without its criticisms and pitfalls.

### **3.4. Critique of objectification theory**

One of the most dominant criticisms of objectification theory is the fact that it was developed and validated based on the experiences of White heterosexual, college-educated women (Calegero, 2012; Cheng et al., 2017; Schaefer et al., 2018). Thus, it could significantly limit our understanding of self-objectification amongst racially and culturally diverse populations, different gendered populations, populations over the age of 25 or under the age of 18, and other marginalized groups of women and men (Calegero, 2012). However, over time, objectification theory has steadily received academic legitimacy and consideration regarding its application to more diverse population groups (Andorka, 2007; Buchanan et al., 2008; Comiskey et al., 2020; Daniel & Bridges, 2010; Davids et al., 2018; Engeln-Maddox et al., 2011; Heimerdinger-Edwards et al., 2010; Kozee & Tylka, 2006; Moradi, 2010; Schaefer et al., 2018; Wiseman & Moradi, 2010). Having acknowledged the criticisms of objectification theory, the researcher maintains the view, based on current literature, that this theory provides a vital framework for comprehending, appreciating, and researching with the aim of enhancing the lives of not only women and men, but minority groups as well such as the gay community. Having said that, the researcher acknowledges that although he is attempting to address the lived experiences of men who are gay with the application of objectification theory, this theory has predominantly explored the experiences of cisgendered white gay men.

### **3.5. Objectification theory and women's bodies**

The fundamental notion of this framework for theorizing body image and embodiment is that women's bodies are, as a result of the trans-historical status of women and their bodies

in patriarchal Western culture, sexually objectified. This occurs when a woman's body and parts of their body are detached from her physical person (Roca, 2018). Within most Western societies, cultural practices and standards result in the sexual objectification of the female body where it is publicly portrayed and put on display (Calogero, 2012). This can result in a woman being recognised and accepted only as a result of a particular body type they maintain, particularly one that meets societal ideals of what is considered attractive. Consequently, it is argued that women may come to internalise the observer's perspective which is known as self-objectification (Davids et al., 2018) which is frequently sexualised. Sexual objectification can include giving sexual commentary about women's bodies, exposure to sexualized imagery or pornography involving woman, sexual harassment, sexual violence, and rape (Calogero, 2012). Further to this, it has been suggested that sexual objectification can occur during face-to-face interpersonal encounters and/or media exposure (Calogero, 2012).

When a body is objectified, it is said to become governable or controllable (Calogero, 2012). Consequently, women may come to experience and treat their bodies as objects where the bodies are stylised as gendered (i.e., hair, waistline, make-up, clothing, etc.) and, in most instances, become sexual objects of desire, ultimately becoming evaluators of their own bodies knowing that their bodies are being surveyed and judged by others in society (Calogero, 2012; Tiggemann & Slater, 2001; Tiggemann & Williams, 2011). As a result of adopting this outside perspective on the self, women may experience higher levels of self-consciousness in the form of attentively checking and scrutinising their physical appearance (Calogero, 2012; Davids et al., 2018) as it compares with sociocultural ideals. This persistent body monitoring behaviour is known as "self-surveillance" (Calogero, 2012, p. 575).

To the researcher's knowledge, existing research regarding objectification theory has predominantly concentrated on women (Buchanan et al., 2008; Calogero, 2012; Kozee & Tylka, 2006; Schaefer et al., 2018; Szymanski & Henning, 2007; Tiggemann & Slater, 2001; Tiggemann & Williams, 2011; Tylka & Hill, 2004), whilst one study included a sample of transgender women (Comiskey et al., 2020). The majority of these studies find support for objectification theory, particularly as it relates to self-objectification and how this can result in the development of psychological distress amongst women. Further, these studies recommend that intervention techniques focus on sociocultural objectification methods and educate women so that they can cope better and are able to resist the pressures of these methods that have the potential to result in self-objectification.

Recently, particularly amongst the youth, social media has provided the platform for the facilitation of the body positivity movement, where consumers of social media are

encouraged to resist and challenge the sociocultural construct of beauty, thus promoting body acceptance (Ando, 2021). This movement towards body positivity involved the depiction of a varied array of body types and forms on social media (Andom 2021). It is suggested that exposure to content such as this on social media may promote and support a positive body image (Ando, 2021; Cohen et al., 2019).

Although objectification theory has predominantly focused on the explanation of woman's body image concerns, it has been suggested that the increasing tendency to objectify men's bodies in social media has been associated with body image disturbances and diminished psychological health in men (Rollero, 2013).

### **3.6. Applying objectification theory to men, men's bodies, and men's body image**

Some studies have found that objectification theory can be utilised with men (Davids et al., 2018; Heath et al., 2016; Heimerdinger-Edwards et al., 2010; Oehlhof et al., 2009; Parent & Moradi, 2011). Moreover, research suggests that the objectification of the male body or "maleness" predominantly occurs through exposure to media (Morrison et al. 2003, p. 118). These studies support prior research findings, with both heterosexual men and women, and support the usefulness of objectification theory in comprehending the association between sexual objectification and the internalisation of sociocultural norms regarding physical appearance as well as the desire for muscularity.

Current research contends that men are influenced by the cultural systems they are situated within as well as the restricting body ideals portrayed in media, as similarly experienced by women (Heath et al., 2016; Martins et al., 2007). Daniel and Bridges (2010) indicate that men, who use social media, are inundated by both explicit and implicit messages concerning body image ideals portrayed on social media platforms and are likely to adopt this unrealistic ideal body type as the only type of body to be valued and deemed sexually attractive. Consequently, they may disregard their individuality which would result in self-objectification, as found in similar studies with women. Thus, objectification theory may improve our understanding of the relationship between social media use and the desire for muscularity amongst men by allowing us to explore how muscularity, generally, and different styles of muscularity, in particular, become constructed and perceived as desirable forms of embodiment by (gay) men. According to Baird and Grieve (2006) and Heath et al. (2016), images of men that are depicted in the media have been found to be associated with social communications which portray the benefits of becoming more muscular, and consequently can motivate and increase the desire for men to objectify and appraise themselves in this way. Further to this,

existing research suggests that men who present with high levels of self-objectification have been found to have a higher desire for muscularity, experience greater symptoms of MD, and endorse higher levels of motivation regarding appearance exercise when compared to men who present with lower levels of self-objectification (Heath et al., 2006).

The male physique has been depicted differently in Western media compared to how women's bodies have been depicted, in that they were not necessarily presented as objects or commodities (Davis, 2002; Ricciardelli et al., 2010). However, over time, men's bodies have been put on display more, for example from the rise of the men's fashion industry, cosmetics, and the "muscular heroes of the cinematic action genre, to the sixpacks who grace the covers of Men's Health, and the 'superwaifs' of contemporary style magazines" (Gill et al., 2005, p. 40), leading to the commodification of men's bodies. Consequently, once men's bodies are designated commercial sites, i.e., sites of com/modification, so too do men's bodies and styles of embodiment become increasingly pervasive in Western media. Further to this, the increase in exposure to these muscular heroes and models portrayed in the media, resulted in changes in the culturally normative and leading ideals that are known to dictate and influence hegemonic masculinity (Ricciardelli et al., 2010). Thus, hegemonic masculinity which is embodied by discourses of appearances, sexualities, behaviours, and occupations (Ricciardelli et al., 2010), are considered in constant flux with our changing societal standards. Overall, sociocultural ideals have and continue to change over time. Consequently, it is suggested that these constantly fluctuating body ideals influence a person's experiences with their body (Karazsia et al., 2017). In some ways, men's bodies have long been objectified but societal and cultural ideals/norms concerning male beauty, youth, and attractiveness have shifted with time, much of which has to do with constructions of virility or compulsory sexuality, a key underpinning of hegemonic masculinity. Muscularity was associated with the working-class man, not the metropolitan well educated economically mobile man. However, with time muscularity became a signifier of sexuality, youth, and virility, subsumed under a whole range of styles of consumerism (Filiault & Drummond, 2007).

While current research findings provide initial support regarding the practicality of using objectification theory in understanding men's body image, these studies are not without their limitations. One such limitation is the need to distinguish between the use of objectification theory with heterosexual men and gay men. Furthermore, several studies fail to establish a significant association between objectification theory concepts (i.e., self-objectification, body surveillance, etc.) and outcome variables (i.e., eating disorders, depression, body shame, etc) amongst men (Heath et al., 2006). A probable explanation for this

is that the Self Objectification Questionnaire, as proposed by Fredrickson et al. (1997), was formally developed for and used with women. Consequently, existing research findings may not entirely depict men's experience of self-objectification owing to the presence of distinct and separate body ideals across genders as well as amongst different groups of men (Heath et al., 2006).

Studies by Daniel and Bridges (2010) and Parent and Moradi (2011) suggest that body shame neglected to facilitate the relationship between the aspects of objectification theory and the desire for muscularity amongst a sample of male North American college students. Moreover, these studies emphasize that body shame is in fact more associated with a desire for a thin body image and may not entirely encapsulate the "emotional experiences that can trigger muscularity-related body image concerns" (Heath et al., 2006, p. 300). Thus, certain variables related to and influenced by objectification theory mitigate the desire for muscularity.

### **3.7. Applying objectification theory to gay men**

The "male gaze" was a concept put forth by Mulvey (1985, p. 837) and is used to describe the "pleasure of looking" which has been separated into the "active/male and passive/female" participants (Mulvey, 1985, p. 837). Thus, men are said to gaze upon the female body, projecting its phantasy on the female physique which is consequently gendered and styled accordingly (Mulvey, 1985). Women are displayed and continually viewed and demonstrate a visual and erotic ideal in an attempt to create the impression that all women want to be viewed as a sexual and erotic object. Essentially, the male gaze could be considered a dedicated gaze at a sexualised body, which ultimately objectifies women and situates men as the subject of the gaze.

Just as women, gay men are often considered objects of the male gaze (Engeln-Maddox et al., 2011), a sexualised gaze which may result in gay men being sexually objectified. Thus, objectification theory may offer a valuable justification for understanding gay men's higher rates of disordered eating behaviour and other psychological disturbances that are perpetuated in body image (Engeln-Maddox et al., 2011).

Objectification theory may be considered one standpoint that provides an explanation to the process by which gay men view images and internalize the social messages within these images, that may consequently result in the experience of body dissatisfaction and the engagement in behaviours that promote and influence the desire for muscularity (Lanzieri & Hildebrandt, 2015). Internalizing the images and the body ideals depicted and portrayed in these images in an appraising manner not only leads to gay men's objectification of the self

but it can also prompt the act of comparison, viewing one's own body in comparison to another (Lanzieri & Hildebrandt, 2015). Essentially, gay men may come to view their own body as a physical object to be judged and evaluated against social ideals. Having said this, not every gay man desires the ideal bodily physique that is considered the perfect standard. However, it has been suggested that gay men who have a tendency to experience body image disturbances and whose body types do not resemble the ideal they have internalized, have been found to develop dissatisfaction with a particular part of their body (Lanzieri & Hildebrandt, 2015).

Present research does propose that this particular theory functions comparably well with gay men as with heterosexual women (Andorka, 2007; Lanzieri & Hildebrandt, 2015; Martins et al., 2007; Wiseman & Moradi, 2010). A probable explanation for this may be gay men's vulnerability to experience homophobia, which is the predominant expression within the present heterosexist culture (Davids et al., 2018). A study by Engeln-Maddox et al. (2011), involving 92 heterosexual women, 102 heterosexual men, 87 gay men, and 99 lesbian women, who completed self-report measures measuring sexual objectification, body surveillance, body shame, and eating disordered behaviour found that group differences in experiences of sexual objectification and body surveillance may partially explain gender and sexual orientation-based differences in eating disordered behaviour. Study findings by Martins et al. (2007) found that gay men may be prone to experiencing heightened objectification, when compared to heterosexual men, due to the great importance and role that physical attractiveness plays within the contemporary iterations of the subcultures within the gay cultures of the West. Some gay men who are presented with sexually objectified images in social media may be prone to experiencing self-objectification (Martins et al., 2007). Consequently, some gay men may become preoccupied with their appearance and attractiveness in their attempts to achieve the ideal muscular physique. Therefore, it could be argued that gay men, relative to heterosexual men, may be at greater risk for experiencing body inadequacy and body dissatisfaction (Martins et al., 2007).

Social media's proliferation of unrealistic images and its impact on self-objectification can be considered to permeate gay men's mental representations of desirability. Furthermore, the gay community, and certain subcultures therein, may propagate muscular body types as a means of attracting attention from other gay men (Bridel & Rail 2007; Yelland & Tiggemann 2003). Overall, the gay man's body is packaged into a socially and commercially consumable com/modifiable object or site that is characteristic of what a contemporary, class-based gay sexuality is. Consequently, the body type that echoes the romanticized sociocultural ideal is considered higher in value than the body that does not. This is usually based on what they can

attract and obtain from others (Lanzieri & Hildebrandt, 2015) (i.e., a gay man with a more muscular physique may become more desirable in certain gay subcultures and afford him more opportunity to attract potential partners).

### **3.8. Conclusion**

From the above, it appears that most existing research regarding objectification theory focuses on its utility in understanding body image disturbances amongst women. Fundamental findings suggest that women's bodies are susceptible to sexual objectification and are often only recognised and accepted if they have a body image that society deems attractive which then ultimately leads her to self-objectify. Ultimately, objectification theory has proven useful in understanding these acts of internalising the observer's view and the constant scrutiny women face in needing to uphold and meet the standards of what society deems attractive and desirable, which may make them susceptible to developing psychological distress and body image disturbances.

Although objectification theory has predominantly focused on woman's body image concerns, the increasing propensity to objectify men's bodies in social media has been associated with body image disturbances amongst men, with the main concern being a desire for a more muscular physique. Current research regarding the application of objectification theory with men suggests that the objectification of the male physique primarily occurs through exposure to media. Studies support the utility of objectification theory in understanding the association concerning sexual objectification and the internalization of sociocultural norms regarding physical appearance as well as the desire for muscularity amongst men. However, present research findings may not wholly represent men's experience of self-objectification owing to the presence of distinct and separate body ideals across genders as well as amongst groups of men (i.e., gay men).

Overall, objectification theory may provide some explanation to the process by which gay men view and internalize images and the implicit messages in social media, which may subsequently encourage the pursuit of and desire for muscularity amongst some gay men. Thus, the researcher contends that using objectification theory in the present study could be valuable in understanding the process by which social media imagery can be internalized by gay men and influence their pursuit and desire for muscularity.

## **Chapter 4: Research Methodology**

### **4.1. Introduction and overview**

This chapter outlines how the researcher methodologically implemented the research. Firstly, a concise outline of the research question, aim and objectives of the current study is provided. Subsequent to this, descriptions of the research design and research process; involving the sampling, data collection and method of analysis is outlined. Lastly, the chapter explores and highlights the ethical and qualitative guidelines that were applied during the course of the research study.

### **4.2. Research questions, aim and objectives**

The present study aimed to explore gay men's understanding regarding the impact of their social media use on the desire for muscularity in South Africa. Henceforth, a general aim of this research study was to contribute to the paucity of research exploring the desire for muscularity and how social media use influences these bodily perceptions and behaviours amongst gay South African men, particularly research which is qualitative in nature. The present study endeavoured to explore a sample of 7 South African gay men's lived realities and understandings of the impact of their social media use on their desire for muscularity. This study pursued to explore and recognise the meaning(s) this sample of gay men attributed to the phenomenon of social media use and its influence on their desire for muscularity. The research questions that this study aimed to answer was as follows:

1. Main research question: How do gay men understand the influence of their social media use on their own desire for muscularity?
2. Secondary research question: How do gay men understand the influence of social media use on other gay men's desire for muscularity?

### **4.3. Aim and objectives**

The aim of this study was to explore the participants understanding of the impact of social media on their desire for muscularity as well as on other gay men's desire for muscularity in South Africa.

In order to accomplish this aim, the following objectives were developed:

- To explore how gay men understand muscularity

- To explore how social media use guides gay men's desire for muscularity

#### **4.4. Epistemological, ontological and theoretical points of departure**

The current study follows qualitative research design that is positioned within a phenomenological paradigm, particularly descriptive phenomenology. This approach may allow the researcher to produce satisfying, idiosyncratic, and complex personal data of gay men's subjective realities, understanding(s), and insights regarding social media use and the impact this may have on their desire for muscularity. Therefore, the researcher decided that this topic would best be explored through understanding the way the research participants make sense of their experiences and their world. It is assumed that people construct meaning in different ways to each other, even in relation to a particular phenomenon (Hughes, 2012). Human behaviour is considered the result of how individuals interpret their environment thus, in making use of a phenomenological approach the researcher was able to understand how the participants come to interpret their own and others' actions (Hughes, 2012). This philosophical approach allowed the researcher to engage with the phenomena in order to make sense of it (Hughes, 2012). As such, a descriptive paradigm guiding the thematic analysis (TA) methodology allowed the researcher to qualitatively obtain entry into, analyse, and discover social constructions and realities that gay men in South Africa subscribe to in relation to their use of social media. Recognising general themes and analysing them will provide for a thorough and perceptive discovery of how gay men in South Africa understand their drive for muscularity and how this is influenced by their use of social media (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Thompson, 2020).

#### **4.5. Research design**

The present study implemented a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research is designed to explore and understand the understandings individuals attribute to issues that exist within the societies they find themselves situated within (Creswell, 2014). The researcher's intention to explore and understand the intricacies of individual experiences guided his decision in choosing this specific research approach, particularly concerning the significance and desire for muscularity amongst this sample of gay men and how it is informed by their use of social media (Thompson, 2020). The research design and process are aimed at generating experiential data reflecting the subjective understandings and perceptions of the research participants.

A descriptive phenomenological design and a TA method of analysis was deemed appropriate for exploring and interpreting the subjective experiences. A descriptive

phenomenological design would generate comprehensive and complex conceptions and explanations of participants' experiences, insights, and meaning(s) behind the impact social media use has on gay men's desire for muscularity.

According to Creswell (2012, p. 76) a "phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon". Phenomenology allows the researcher the potential to make sense of the participants' subjective experiences and to attempt to understand their meaning, thus providing an insider perspective (Creswell, 2013). Thus, the researcher explored how gay men understand the influence of social media use on their own and other gay men's desire for muscularity through a number of accounts given by the research participants. This implies that the phenomenon is best explored through understanding the way that research participants make meaning(s) from their experiences and their subjective realities.

To accomplish this aim, I, as the researcher, attempted to suspend my own attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions in order to focus on the participants' subjective experience of the phenomenon (Neubauer et al., 2019). Phenomenological research can largely be divided into two approaches, i.e., descriptive, and interpretative phenomenology (Sundler et al., 2019). This study utilised a descriptive approach to develop a better awareness and interpretation of the phenomenon.

According to Gill (2020), Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenological philosophy, sought to define the meaning(s) of experiences. He suggested that our subjective realities, and as such, the phenomenon under exploration, is only achieved by adopting a stance of "transcendental subjectivity" (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007, p. 173). This implies the position in which the researcher successfully abandons their own subjective experiences in the hopes of describing the phenomenon in its universal sense (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). Thus, descriptive phenomenology, also referred to as transcendental phenomenology, is based on the researcher's constant awareness of his/her own biases and preconceptions so as to not influence the participants' descriptions of their subjective experiences (Neubauer et al., 2019). Further to this, Smith et al. (2009) suggested that the research process may be comprised by the researcher and, thus, the researcher is expected to be aware of and suspend their personal preconceptions, preferences, and opinions to come to a point of pure transcendental neutrality. Essentially, this would allow the phenomena explored, to develop on its own (Smith et al., 2009). Overarchingly, a descriptive phenomenological design goes beyond the fundamental notions of the phenomenon and seeks to explain the 'real meaning(s)' of the phenomena as wholly and completely as it introduces itself into awareness and realisation.

However, the researcher acknowledges that ‘pure’ and ‘real’ realities/meanings can never really be achieved considering the socially constructed nature of reality (i.e., that the researcher and participant co-construct reality). Therefore, the researcher’s awareness of his own preferences, attitudes, values, and opinions would be considered more important in the exploration of the phenomenon rather than the pursuit of a ‘pure’ and ‘real’ reality.

#### **4.6. Research process**

In this section the research process is outlined. Firstly, the sampling method is discussed. Secondly, this section stipulates the selection process and sampling criteria used to recruit the research participants.

##### ***4.6.1. Sampling and sampling method***

In the present study, the researcher made use of non-probability sampling, conducted by means of snowball sampling. A snowball sampling technique is one of the most widely used methods of sampling in qualitative research which involves networking and referral (Naderifar et al., 2017). This sampling method involved existing participants recruiting future participants amongst their associates (Naderifar et al., 2017). According to Noy (2008, p. 330), snowball sampling is a useful and effective tool when attempting to obtain information on and access to “hidden populations”. Thus, considering that the present study included a sample of gay South African men, who may be reluctant to participate in the research study out of fear of being marginalised or stigmatised, one could consider the sample part of a ‘hidden population’. The research participants were selected based on the researcher’s access to participants through contact information that is provided by other participants (Noy, 2008), who meet the inclusion criteria. Consequently, the participants are particularly recruited with the purpose of accessing the ‘hidden population’ and providing insight into individual experiences. Hence, initial participants were sampled and selected to take part in the study and subsequently, these research participants were requested to recruit other research participants who meet the inclusion criteria. The target sample was a group of gay South African men.

##### ***4.6.2. Sampling criteria***

Sampling appears to be comparable across various forms of descriptive phenomenological methodologies and, specifically, with a consensus that a researcher should obtain no less than three participants as “a sufficient number of variations are needed in order to come up with a typical essence” (Giorgi, 2008, p. 37), provided that one still considers and

analyses the quality of the data collected. Moreover, according to Bartholomew et al. (2021) a smaller sample size provides the researcher with the opportunity to voice the participant's expressed consciousness as well as engage with comprehensive and detailed data, in the attempt to provide an enriched understanding of each participants' experience as it relates to the particular phenomenon. Further to this, a large sample with too much data may jeopardise phenomenological research as it has the potential to "suffocate or blur" the expressions of the participants (Bartholomew et al., 2021, p. 03). Therefore, the participant's experiences can be interpreted in richer detail without losing focus and becoming overwhelmed with excessive data. The present study included a small sample of seven participants and the following inclusion criteria was applied:

#### ***4.6.3. Inclusion criteria:***

Participants must be a) men, b) be 18- 35 years of age, c) have a sufficient understanding of English, d) use one or more of the following social media platforms: Facebook and/or Instagram, for at least two hours per day and, e) self-identify as gay.

#### ***4.6.4. Selection of participants***

The above-mentioned inclusion criteria were decided based on their relevance in facilitating the present study's aims. Moreover, the researcher believed that the inclusion criteria take into account the multiplicity of meanings amongst a sample of gay South African men around their use of social media and its influence on their desire for muscularity. Incorporating the inclusion criteria with the process of selecting the initial potential participants, the researcher advertised the study on the following social media platforms a) Instagram and b) Facebook, using the researchers' personal accounts, which are open and available to the public. Furthermore, the researcher obtained permission to post the advertisement on the 'I Love Randburg' Facebook group, which has a following of approximately 62K members. The researcher obtained permission from the manager of the group, Ms Landy Yeatman. The evidence of this can be found in Appendix A. The researcher made use of an advertisement, located under Appendix D, to advertise the study for the purposes of recruiting the first two initial research participants. These research participants were then asked to recruit other research participants who meet the inclusion criteria. The invitation to take part in the study was included in the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix B), which details the aim and objectives of the study. The Participant Information Sheet and Written Consent Form (Appendix C) was sent via email to the two initial participants only after

they indicated their interest in participating in the study, as per the advert. Those participants then forwarded the information to the other participants. This provided the participants the time and space to become acquainted with the objectives and expectations of the study. Thus, allowing each participant the opportunity to ask any questions they may have had, ensuring that each participant made an informed decision to take part in the study. A date and time was scheduled between the researcher and each participant for data collection. Subsequently, those who agreed to and were willing to take part in the study were requested to complete the consent form before data collection commenced.

#### 4.7. Participant demographics

**Table 1**

*Background Information About the Participants*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Average time spent consuming social media per day</b>
Participant 1	John	30	White	±2.5 hours
Participant 2	Andrew	27	White	±2 hours
Participant 3	Calvin	22	White	±4 hours
Participant 4	Harry	18	White	±3.5 hours
Participant 5	Neo	19	Black	±4.5 hours
Participant 6	Sean	28	White	±5 hours
Participant 7	Sandro	33	White	±2 hours

#### 4.8. Participant Description

John appeared relaxed in the interview and willingly shared detailed information regarding his personal views about his desire for muscularity. Andrew was friendly and neatly dressed. He freely shared his personal experiences relating to social media, gym, and his pursuit of building muscle. Calvin seemed somewhat anxious. However, after building some rapport with him, the researcher was able to engage with Calvin, who enthusiastically communicated his history of the pressures he experienced in relation to needing a more muscular physique.

Harry appeared quite anxious and guarded at first. However, after the researcher normalised this for Harry, he appeared to settle and gave a rich history relating to the difficulties associated with his current physical appearance and the need to become more muscular based on what he consumes on social media. Neo was the only black participant in the sample. Initially, he seemed anxious but slowly settled as the interview progressed. Neo openly shared the negative impact his social media consumption has had on his self-esteem, particularly as it relates to the need to be accepted and perceived as attractive within the gay community. Sean appeared enthusiastic and confident throughout the interview. He was neatly dressed and openly reported his experiences and desires and continued pursuit for a more muscular physique. Lastly, Sandro, who was the eldest participant in the sample, seemed confident and knowledgeable about the topic. He shared in depth experiences of his desire for muscularity, what this means for him, as well as how he perceives his current pursuit of the mesomorphic ideal.

The researcher having included six white men and only one black man in the study may have been the outcome and influence of his racial identity (i.e., white) and geographical context. The limitation in relation to the impact this has on the present study is explored in Section 6.2. Limitations and Contribution.

#### **4.9. Data collection procedure**

A common method for data-collection is semi-structured interviews (Terry et al., 2017). The researcher was of the view that semi-structured interviews were appropriate for the present study, as this granted the researcher an opportunity to elicit the experiences of gay men regarding the phenomenon being studied. Moreover, by conducting semi-structured interviews, the researcher was able to further explore each participant's opinions and perceptions in rich detail. The researcher chose to use semi-structured interviews to focus the conversation and solicit the views of the participants that relate to the research question (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Moreover, the strength of semi-structured interviews allows for following up on whatever point of view is expressed by the participant, and the interviewer/researcher has a greater chance of becoming a participant in the process itself, rather than operate from a pre-set interview guide (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017).

The interviews were conducted over a period of four months (April to July) using a virtual platform (i.e. Google Meets), or physically, using a digital voice recorder, depending on the participant's accessibility to virtual internet based platforms. During in-person interviews, all requisite COVID-19 safety protocols were implemented and adhered to (i.e., the wearing of face masks, adequate ventilation, and suitable social distancing). All necessary steps

were taken to ensure that confidentiality and privacy were maintained. After participants signed the informed consent form, the interview process began with easy questions progressing towards more complex questions, as a means of establishing rapport with each participant (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017). Thus, by making use of the above-mentioned interview process, the researcher obtained meaningful and in-depth data from each respective participant. Although the interviews were semi-structured, a central theme focused and guided the interview discussion to ensure the interviews remained aligned to the research questions and, moreover, that the research objectives were achieved.

The interview guide is available in Appendix E. Each interview was conducted in English and lasted approximately 30 – 35 minutes. If in person interviews needed to take place, the researcher scheduled the interview to take place either at the participant’s residence or at the researcher’s residence or at a public location agreed upon. Permission was requested and obtained from the participants to audio record all interviews. For both virtual and physical interviews, audio recordings were made. In addition to the recordings, the participant responses were transcribed by the researcher.

#### **4.10. Data analysis**

The data was analysed using TA. TA is suitable for exploring data gathered from thorough and extensive semi-structured interviews. The assumption in this study is that the desire for muscularity is collectively created within society, thus there likely exists numerous and varied perceptions and meanings that gay men in South Africa subscribe to in relation to their use of social media and the influence this may have on their desire for muscularity. There are numerous strengths associated with using TA in the present study. This included flexibility, its relatively easy and quick use, and it allowed for the summation of the large data set and a thicker description of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Recognizing general themes and exploring and dissecting them created space for a thorough discovery of how gay men in South Africa understand their desire for muscularity and how this is influenced by their use of social media. According to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 79) “TA is a method used for identifying, analysing, and reporting themes within the collected data”. Thus, it is a useful method as it allows the researcher to adopt a flexible approach in generating insight into the world of social media and its influence on the desire to attain muscularity amongst gay men. This allowed the researcher to acquire in-depth, extensive, and well-rounded information from the participants. The method and process of analysis and interpretation followed the six phases provided by Braun and Clarke (2006) which include:

1. Familiarising oneself with the data:

During this phase the researcher firstly audio-recorded semi-structured and transcribed each interview. This was done verbatim by the researcher. As this process was conducted by the researcher, it assisted the researcher in familiarising himself with the participants experiences. Further to this, Braun and Clark (2006) indicate that the transcription of verbal and non-verbal information (gestures, expressions, and pauses) is beneficial as it can aid in the interpretation of the participants' experiences at deeper and more enriched levels. The researcher included all noticeable non-verbal behaviours in the transcriptions and this was taken into considerations during the interpretation of the discussions. It was important for the researcher to immerse himself in the data to ensure that he became acquainted with the complexity and range of the participant data. The researcher immersed himself in the data by repeatedly reading the data and searching for and identifying meanings and patterns. Thus, the researcher became acquainted with the entire data set.

2. Generating initial codes:

After having familiarised himself with the data, the researcher produced an preliminary list of thoughts and concepts regarding what the data contains and what is relevant to the present study objectives. This phase involved the researcher generating primary codes from the data. The codes were used to distinguish between particular features within the data that appeared interesting to the researcher in line with the aims and objectives of the present study. This process involved organising the data into meaningful groups. The researcher worked systematically through the entire data set, identifying aspects of interest as a basis of forming recurring patterns (themes) within the data set. The researcher coded the data by writing notes on the transcriptions he analysed which indicated the potential patterns in the data. The researcher ensured that all data extracts from individual transcripts were coded, and subsequently gathered together within a particular code.

3. Searching for themes:

During this phase, the researcher sorted the several codes into prospective themes, and collated the data excerpts within appropriate themes. Codes were analysed and combined to form central themes. The researcher collated the main themes and sub-themes to gain an awareness of the noteworthy individual themes which were considered relevant to the research questions.

4. Reviewing themes:

Once the main themes and sub-themes were discovered, the researcher examined, develop, and refined the themes as some of the themes were not necessarily themes or collapsed in on one another or needed to be broken down further. As a result, the themes could cohere significantly with one another whilst remaining identifiably distinctive. In order to achieve this, the researcher re-read the complete data set to determine whether or not the themes identified coincided with the entire data set. Overall, the researcher was able to develop a “thematic map” consisting of the different individual themes (p. 96).

5. Defining and naming themes:

At this point in the process of analysis, the researcher further defined and refined the themes, essentially identifying the principle meaning and aspect of the data each theme presented. The researcher conducted a comprehensive analysis by identifying the narrative each theme captures, how it is positioned within the broader narrative of the data, and how this is associated with the research questions. Subsequently, each theme was assigned a name.

6. Producing the report:

In order to produce a succinct, logical, and intriguing description of the data situated within the themes, the researcher produced a report to provide adequate proof of the themes located and contained within the data. The researcher extracted and provided vivid data examples/extracts which depict the phenomenon he is attempting to demonstrate. The extracts are situated within an investigative story that goes further than an explanation of the data and attempts to provide an argument relative to the research questions of the present study.

#### **4.11. Quality of research:**

In contrast to quantitative research, qualitative research involves no assessments protocols with determined and standardised properties of validity and reliability. In an attempt to counter being biased, the researcher of the present study attempted to establish trustworthiness by increasing the transferability, confirmability, and dependability of the research study’s findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Strydom, 2011; Treharne & Riggs, 2015).

##### ***4.11.1. Transferability***

Transferability is concerned with whether the findings are applicable in other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Treharne & Riggs, 2015). Providing a rich description of each participants' responses allows transferability to be evaluated and achieved (Treharne & Riggs, 2015). Therefore, it was important that the researcher obtained and recorded a sufficiently rich account of individual participant responses to grant the readers the opportunity to develop a comprehensive interpretation of it, by this means allowing the readers to juxtapose the illustrations of the findings defined and explored in the research study with those that have emerged in their respective contexts of research (Strydom, 2011).

#### ***4.11.2. Confirmability***

Confirmability refers to whether the findings are representative of the participant's responses and do not reflect the researcher's biases, interests, or perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Treharne & Riggs, 2015). The confirmability of the present study was improved through personal reflexivity on the part of the researcher, which involved reflecting on how the researcher may have influenced or informed the research findings (Treharne & Riggs, 2015). According to Rodríguez-Dorans (2018), sharing background information, especially my sexual orientation as the researcher, was considered paramount as I worked with gay research participants. Thus, when interviewing the participants, I introduced myself as both the researcher and as a fellow gay man, which I believed allowed for better dialogue and stronger rapport. A probable explanation for this may be that I may have been perceived as empathic in listening to their stories, having an insider's perspective on some of the common circumstances that gay men face (Rodríguez-Dorans, 2018). Additionally, I presumed that by revealing my sexual orientation, I would assist the participants in recognising the research relationship in more balanced terms regarding the power dynamic between me and them (Rodríguez-Dorans, 2018). Overall, the researcher aimed to be cognizant of his own prejudices, perceptions, and anticipations about the research to allow for the findings to remain as objective and impartial as possible. A section dedicated to the personal reflection of the researcher is provided in chapter 6, section 6.4. In addition, the researcher made sure that the participants true voices were captured by sharing the transcriptions and interpretations with them in line with credibility.

#### ***4.11.3. Dependability***

Lastly, dependability is concerned with whether similar findings would be produced if another researcher undertook the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Treharne & Riggs, 2015).

Therefore, the procedures within the present study were reported in comprehensive detail, creating what is known as an audit trail (Treharne & Riggs, 2015), and by this means will allow a future researcher to repeat the work (Shenton, 2004). The researcher endeavoured to ensure that important details regarding the present study were explicitly recorded in an attempt to achieve maximum transparency.

#### **4.12. Ethical considerations:**

Considering the confidential and sensitive nature of the subjective lived experiences of the participants in the present study, the subsequent ethical considerations were essential to protect the confidential nature of the research. Geared towards the safeguarding and protection of the prospective research participants as well as the public, this study obtained ethical clearance (ethical approval number: HUM024/0721) from the University of Pretoria (Appendix F), before continuing with the research and data collection processes (Eisenhauer et al., 2001). The University of Pretoria's ethical guidelines were considered to make certain that all ethical factors were adhered to.

This study did not necessarily focus on matters/issues that invoke 'trauma' or distress. Therefore, it was not expected that participants would require any post-interview counselling. However, individual participants were informed from the outset of the study, that should they experience any negative consequences arising from their participation in the study, they are free to contact the researcher or the researcher's supervisor, and co-supervisor, for further assistance and referral, if need be. If needed, a referral may be made to the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) for counselling, which is free of charge. Should the participants have required further and additional therapeutic services, the researcher obtained permission from Mr Shelley Heusser, a registered Clinical Psychologist (Independent Practice), to refer those participants who require private psychotherapy, which would be charged at Mr Heusser's personal rate (see Appendix G).

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, before interviews commenced. The participants only took part in the interview after they completed the informed consent form. No intentional deceptive techniques were used during the study and participants were provided with an information sheet detailing the study synopsis and objectives as well as informing them of the purpose of the study. Participants were informed that they would receive no reimbursement for their participation in the study as participation was voluntary. The voluntary nature of participation was emphasised throughout the course of the study, and participants were free to withdraw their participation without any negative consequences at any

stage. Further, they were informed that they are free to refuse responding to any questions they were uncomfortable answering (Kiliñç & Firat, 2017).

Confidentiality and privacy were ensured as no personal information was connected to the final results of the study (Kaiser, 2009). Pseudonyms were used when the transcriptions were reported. Codes were used to label and store the participant data. The electronic data was password-protected, and hardcopy data was stored in secure file storage in the Department of Psychology's archive. The participants were informed that the data will only be accessed by the researcher and supervisors. The research data will be stored at the University for 15 years and will be available for future research as detailed in the informed consent document. Regarding feedback of the results from the study, participants were informed that they have the right to the results of the study and that feedback will be provided, whilst maintaining confidentiality, if requested.

The initial participants as well as referred participants were contacted and selected deliberately according to the following inclusion criteria: a) participants must be men, b) be 18- 35 years of age, c) have a sufficient understanding of English, d) use one or more of the following social media platforms: Facebook and/or Instagram, for at least two hours per day and, e) self-identify as gay.

#### **4.13. Reflexivity**

Reflexivity involves the researcher recognising their personal values, expectations, biographical effects (including race, age, gender, and sexual orientation) as well as their experiences throughout the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Treharne & Riggs, 2015). This is paramount within a TA guided research study. The position of the researcher is critical and essential within phenomenological research, owing to the researcher having to delve into the world of the participants to understand how they come to interpret their own and others' actions (Hughes, 2012). However, according to Wojnar and Swanson (2007, p. 173), this can only be achieved by adopting a stance of "transcendental subjectivity", which implies that the researcher successfully abandons their own subjective experiences in the hopes of describing the phenomenon in its universal sense. Thus, descriptive phenomenology, also referred to as transcendental phenomenology, is based on the researcher's constant awareness of his/her own biases and preconceptions so as to not influence the participants' descriptions of their subjective experiences (Neubauer et al., 2019).

Hence, it was crucial that I developed an awareness of my own emotions, thoughts, beliefs, and realities regarding my own experiences of being a gay man and being an avid social

media consumer. As a gay South African man who uses social media and having previously engaged in the pursuit of a more muscular physique, I believed this could improve my understanding of the participants' responses having had relatable experiences as a gay man. Consequently, I believed my personal understandings occasionally blended into the responses of the participants. Holding in mind the importance of self-reflexivity in my research study, it was imperative that I remained cognizant of my position not as a fellow gay man, but as researcher. Engaging in continued reflexivity proved difficult and challenging. However, I believe that having been involved in my own therapeutic process, this assisted me with analysing and separating my personal feelings, beliefs, and understandings from the participants' meaning(s) and responses and allowing for a reflection of the participants' accounts.

Considering the abstract, nuanced, intricate, and multifaceted essence of the topic under exploration, most of the themes discovered have a particular reference to gender and sexuality within the broader realm of psychology. Stemming from my own biographical background as a gay man, who has a significant proclivity towards understanding the intricacies within genders and sexualities, the reliance on being in my own therapeutic process was considered a methodological instrument I made use of in illustrating and underpinning this study's findings. As I attended to what was unfolding in the study, I attempted to remain aware of my own assumptions and biases that might be projecting onto the participant accounts, "like an eye that sees itself" (Probst, 2015, p. 38).

Being a researcher in training and intern clinical psychologist in the process of executing the present study resulted in numerous challenges experienced throughout. Initially, when I selected this topic, I did so based on my personal and subjective experience relating to it. However, as I progressed through this research study and became aware of the importance of self-reflexive practice and the influence this has on the outcome of the study, I felt overwhelmed by the thought of having my own unresolved 'stuff' protrude into the study and contaminate the participants' accounts and experiences. However, my own therapeutic experience assisted me in being aware of and holding onto my occasional unexpected and powerful reactions to the participant responses, to ensure that these do not contaminate the findings to a significant degree. There were moments where I experienced shock and anxiety in terms of what some of the participants shared, particularly as it related to suicidality. This triggered memories of my past in relation to myself and circle of friends who have experienced similar difficulties. As a result, I occasionally found myself avoiding a 'deeper' exploration into the participant's accounts which could have impacted negatively on the research process.

Some of my anxiety in this regard was ameliorated by acknowledging and recognizing that reflexive practice in qualitative research is of a “messy” nature (Probst, 2015, p. 38).

Additionally, during the study, I became overwhelmed by the quantity and depth of ideographical data of this study which was descriptive significantly personal. This further complicated the process of data analysis, adding extra levels of intricacy and complexity to the development of the research study. This was evident when I engaged with the participant accounts during the process of analysing the data. I frequently noticed that I became gradually more concerned and fixated with both my own and participants’ meaning-making practices. In this regard, my intersubjective enmeshment with the data could be considered a reflection of the extent to which I immersed myself within the experiences and understandings of the participants and their subjective realities.

The seven interviews accompanied by the TA methodology were difficult to execute. I often found myself feeling uncertain about the process of analysing the participant data. I questioned if I had successfully unpacked the ideographic richness from the participants accounts regarding how they assign meaning(s) and understandings to their social media use and the influence this has on their desire for muscularity. Furthermore, although each individual interview was semi-structured in nature, offering some structure to the process and alleviating some of the anxiety I experienced regarding whether or not I remained focused on the topic, each interview was distinctive. Each interview flowed differently, felt independent and unique, which I believe illuminates the subjective, distinctive, and personal nature of the phenomenon being explored, as well as each participant’s own meaning-making processes.

Throughout the research process, I realised that my journey as a gay man and intern psychologist granted me insight into and enhanced access to the phenomenon under exploration. Additionally, these experiences have influenced some of the interpretations regarding the participants’ lived experiences of using social media and the influence this has had on their desire for muscularity. This provided me the opportunity to enhance my understanding, recognition, and appreciation for the participant’s subjective experiences regarding the influence their social media use has on their desire for muscularity, and without exception, enriched their experiences for me. Although immersing myself into the participant’s accounts and meaning-making processes allowed for the development of enriched interpretations and understandings of the participant data, it also made it significantly difficult and emotionally fatiguing for me to distance myself from this same process.

Throughout this research study, by engaging in self-reflectivity, I started to notice what motivated me and maintained my curiosity and desire to discover what lies beneath the question

that originally guided me on this research journey, which I believe was the question of meaning; the meaning in muscularity, masculinity, and the influence social media consumption has on these two constructs; for gay South African men; for the participants; and for myself. Exploring the meaning behind muscularity as to how gay South African men understand muscularity? Why do some gay men desire muscularity? What is it about social media use that influences gay men to desire and enhance their muscularity, if at all anything? What is the meaning of muscularity to a gay South African man within the wider gay community? The researcher acknowledges that although the above illustrates complicated and intricate questions with countless answers involving several aspects, this research study and its findings attempted to offer a glance at the phenomenon under exploration. Having acknowledged the above, the researcher recognises that his apparent openness and reflexivity does not guarantee that the voices of participants have been ‘truly’ represented.

In its entirety, I believe that this research study represents and reveals an enormously subjective and meaningfully profound journey for me. This voyage has been characterised by personal growth, development and has shifted my own understandings of the intertwined intricacies of gender, sexuality, body image, and corporality. Overall, this study has allowed me the opportunity to discover, delve into, and confront my own wonder regarding the meaning(s) of muscularity and the influence social media use has on the desire for this not only for gay South African men, but, in the end, for myself.

#### **4.14. Conclusion**

This chapter presented an outline of the research methodology that was implemented in relation to the objectives of the study. The chapter provided a comprehensive explanation of the methodological approach of the present study and the research questions. Thereafter, the research design was described as well as the sampling procedure, which included the inclusion criteria, and the selection process. Further, this chapter detailed the data collection method and the process followed in analysing the data using TA, as outlined by Braun and Clark (2006). This chapter also provided an explanation on how the researcher upheld the trustworthiness and quality of the research by means of increasing the credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability of the research study’s findings as proposed by Lincoln & Guba (1985), Treharne & Riggs (2015), and Strydom (2011). Lastly, the ethical considerations that were adhered to when conducting the study was discussed. The next chapter presents the findings of the study as it relates to the subjective lived experiences and understandings of gay

South African men relating to the use of social media and the influence this has on the desire for muscularity.

## **Chapter 5: Findings and Discussion**

### **4.10. Introduction**

This research study was aimed at exploring and understanding the lived experiences of seven gay South African men in relation to their understanding of the impact of social media on their desire for muscularity as well as on other gay men's desire of for muscularity. As per the aims and research questions of the research study, this chapter discusses the research findings, main themes, and subthemes. This chapter offers an overview of the gay participant's subjective realities and understandings of how social media's impacts their desire for muscularity. The chapter will conclude with an integration of existent literature and theory in relation to the themes identified.

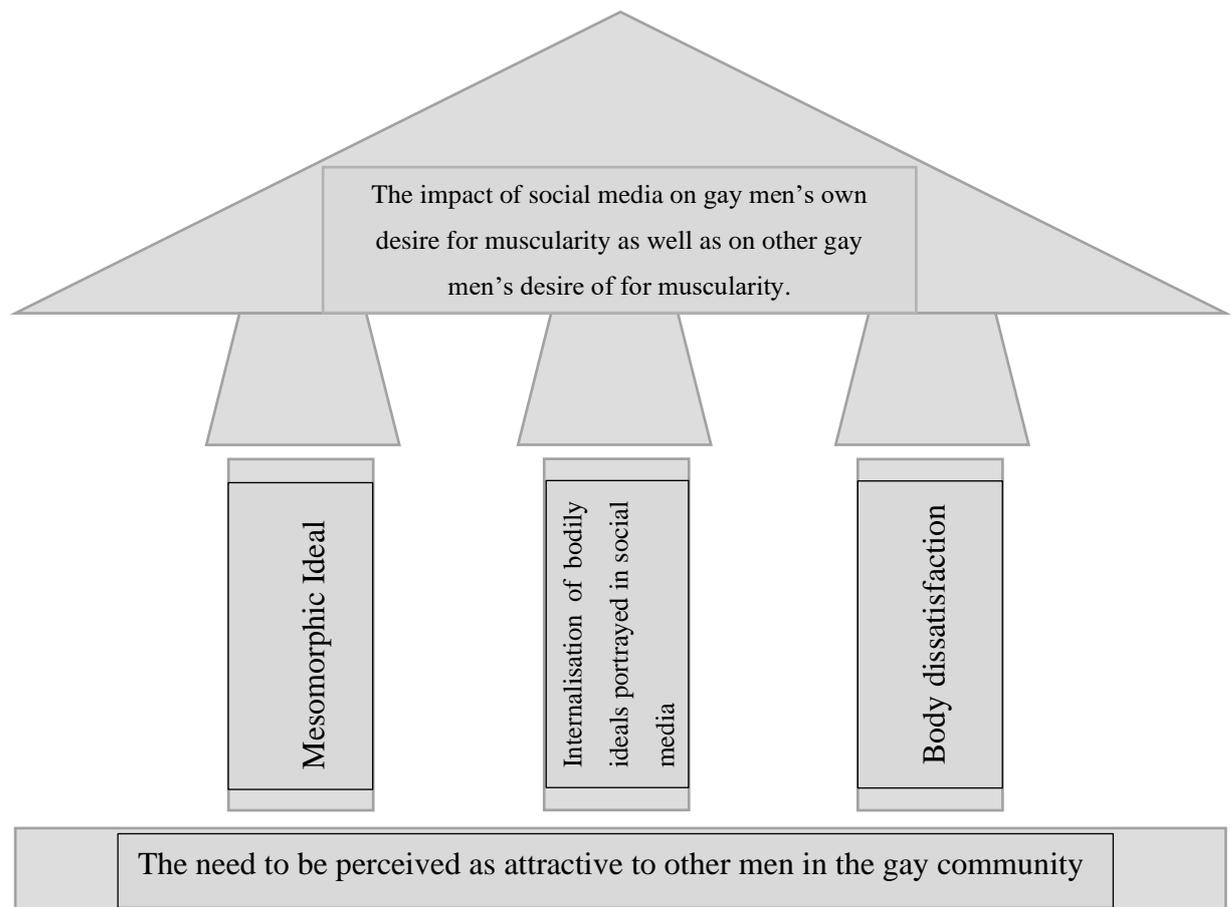
The following discussion explores the main themes, which include: (1) the mesomorphic ideal; (2) internalisation of bodily ideals portrayed in social media; and (3) body dissatisfaction. Overarchingly, one integrated theme will be emphasised and explored. The integrated theme was the need to be perceived as attractive to other men in the gay community. In line with the TA methodology, an exploration of current research and theory corroborating the findings is discussed.

### **5.2. Themes and Discussion**

This section provides a discussion of the three main themes identified accompanied by the related subthemes as well as the integrated them. Considering the density and intricacy and of the following exploration, the traditional depiction of four pillars supporting the roof of a building was utilised to depict a consolidation of the main themes and integrated theme. Figure 1 portrays the symbolic framework regarding the process in which this discussion will be organised. The three pillars represents each one of the main themes which support and constitute the participants experiences of social media's impact on gay men's desire for muscularity.

#### **Figure 1**

*A Visual Summary in the Form of a Graphic Depiction of the Three Main Themes and Integrated Theme that were Drawn from the Analysis.*



The table below summarizes the main themes accompanied by each related subtheme.

**Table 2**

*A Summary of All the Main Themes and Their Associated Subthemes and Overarching Theme Identified Within This Research Study.*

Main Themes	Subthemes
1. Mesomorphic ideal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Muscular physique</li> <li>b. Being a 'Man'</li> <li>c. Social media as an agent of acculturation</li> </ul>
2. Internalisation of bodily ideals portrayed in social media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Appearance-based social comparisons</li> <li>b. Unrealistic body ideals portrayed in social media</li> </ul>
3. Body dissatisfaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Depression</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>b. Self-conscious, unattractive, and unappealing</li> <li>c. Frequent social media use may pressure gay men in needing to become more muscular</li> <li>d. Muscle-enhancing behaviours</li> </ul>
<b>Overarching Integrated Theme</b>	<b>Subthemes</b>
1. Need to be perceived as attractive to other men	a. Muscular body is sexualised in the gay community

### 5.3. Theme 1: Mesomorphic ideal

According to Martins et al. (2007), the mesomorphic ideal, which is a physique that is lean, muscular, and athletic, developed with the increase in the portrayals of the ideal male body in media advertisements. Responding to questions regarding their definition of muscularity in general and more specific within the gay community, majority of the participants highlighted how muscularity is defined as a physique characterised as muscular, with bigger ‘bulking’ muscles and a prominent and defined upper torso (i.e., abdominal muscles (abs), biceps, and pectorals). At its centre, this theme exemplifies the interpretation that muscularity involves a physique that is lean, defined, and muscular and that it is an ideal that has come to be desired within the wider gay community. The mesomorphic ideal as per the understandings and attitudes of the participants is characterised by (1) muscular physique, (2) being a ‘Man’, and (3) social media as an agent of acculturation.

#### 5.3.1. Muscular physique

Considering the physique as embodying a muscular shape, this subtheme was recognised as prominent amid the majority of the participants’ definitions and understandings of muscularity in general and within the wider gay community. Majority of the participants held in mind their subjective experiences and meanings of muscularity, by accentuating that it involves a physique that is particularly muscular. This portrayed the fundamental attitude and perception of muscularity as having muscles.

In this light, participants spoke of desiring or maintaining a muscular body type which was strongly influenced by their social media use. Participants mentioned that they had been exposed to images on social media consistent with the notion of hegemonic masculinity as most of the participants eluded to conventional masculine qualities in their accounts,

illustrating their understanding of muscularity as pertaining to certain physical features. Illustrating this, John reflected on the definition of muscularity as:

*Muscularity is looking good...being muscular looks strong and strong is like seeing muscles and well-built and in shape and looking after yourself and your body.*

Similarly, some of the participants shared their perspectives by further expanding the definition of muscularity characterised by defined and bulking muscle-mass and essentially having your muscles be seen and admired by those around you:

*Andrew: Muscularity means you look fit and you look the part...you can actually see your muscles. You can see your biceps bulking, your forearms, the bulkiness of your sixpack, your chest, the muscles at the back of your body. That is how you see someone is muscular, it is actually defining your muscles.*

*Calvin: Muscularity means to me having a high amount of muscle mass, being defined and 'body-builder-like'.*

*Harry: Like probably that exact image of this man with this huge, like big muscles, you know, like really tall, you know, everything is well defined, like that's attractive. It is the essence of like muscularity...The muscular body is what I would define as the perfect body. The one that everyone would like to have.*

*Neo: ...big shoulders, like big muscles and all that. The idea of what muscularity should look like. So, after viewing social media one is obviously going to seek that sense of muscularity. The big strong six packs, abs, like masculine and masc-for-masc type thing.*

Neo's reflection, particularly relating to his 'masc-for-masc' reference, situates muscularity in terms of masculinity but also sexuality and sex. This could refer to hierarchies of value and desire within the wider gay community, i.e., the ways in which certain bodies (muscular ones) become layered with other meanings and values and, in turn, attain dominance within a broader community of bodies. This finding is congruent with the findings in a study by Cascalheira & Smith (2020), who provide a quantitative assessment of bias in favour of masculinity and ethnicity amongst men who have sex with other men. They found that in-demand identities are more masculine and lighter-appearing, with European features, even amongst Black and Asian

men who have sex with men. Overall, some gay men experiment with their bodies to find one (muscular body) that obtains the most attention.

The excerpts shown above illustrates the perceptions of muscularity amongst this group of gay men and depicts an inherent understanding regarding the existent discourse of muscularity as a mesomorphic ideal, a physique that is lean, muscular, and athletic (Martins et al., 2007). Having said that, some of the participants appear to overlap and interchange muscularity with a particular orientation towards the body as well as self-care or 'healthism'. Here, muscularity becomes a signifier of attraction and aesthetic as well as health, i.e., in shape and looking after yourself. This illustrates the very nuanced and foundational ways in which muscularity is defined and perceived which is fundamentally intertwined with constructions of 'health'. Furthermore, in many ways the participants reflect that the value of muscularity is aesthetic and not functional. The muscles do not have to be able to lift weights, they just have to look like they can. This is illustrated in the participants use of the phrase 'look/looking'. Thus, it is about what the appearance of the muscle means.

Additionally, the muscular body type is desired by many gay men within contemporary Western society. However, having said that, Sean and Harry went on to say:

*Sean: ...It doesn't necessarily mean you have to be extremely big but the way you define your muscles will make you look more muscular.*

Similarly, Harry added:

*Like, you know, like not the skinny, not the overweight, you know, that perfect body. Like, probably someone that goes to gym, you know, someone that like looks after their body.*

This excerpt from Sean and Harry provides a more nuanced picture of muscularity amongst individuals within the gay community. In that, participants describe a physique which continues to feature a muscular shape. However, it is not a massive body type, as possibly eluded to by Calvin "body-builder like". This excerpt supports findings from current research that the dominant ideals of personal body image and desires within the gay community have evolved and that leaner forms of muscularity are perhaps now more idealized (Gough & Flanders, 2009; Oshana, 2021; Ravenhill & de Visser, 2017).

Moreover, one must keep in mind how 'class' or socioeconomic status also informs approaches to the body, i.e., a preoccupation with health and wellness. Gay men do not live single identity lives. Their identities are intersected through and with other societal and community-specific meta narratives around 'caring for the body' as part of middle class values. The researcher believes that this sample of gay men display a particularly Western, white, and

cisgendered discourse in relation to the meaning they attach to muscularity and what this looks like. Hammack et al. (2017), report that considerable diversity is present amongst gay men as a result of the intersections of their identities such as race, class, gender and social identities. The historical experiences (i.e., Apartheid) that may affect and influence the “generational consciousness” of a multiplicity of gay men are not experienced in a similar way to one another as a result of these intersections (Hammack et al., 2017, p. 02). Thus, this could explain the occurrences of variance and nuance amongst the experiences and understandings of gay men in this sample in the present study owing to the presence of intersecting identities. These findings support current research suggesting that social media’s influence on gay men’s body image may result from a “complex array of interrelated biological, psychological, social, and cultural determinants” (Filice et al., 2020, p. 92).

### 5.3.2. *Being a ‘Man’*

The next depiction of muscularity that became apparent from participants’ responses was the experience of being a ‘man’ within gay culture as well as that of general society. Participants reflected on how muscularity allowed them to distance themselves from femininity and re-enforce and constantly portray their rejection of femininity, by embodying muscularity, by becoming more of a ‘man’. In so doing, the mesomorphic ideal becomes a visible signifier of not being feminine/effeminate/‘femme’. Sandro reflected the following:

*Muscularity encompasses nuances of masculinity...some gay men can be terribly misogynistic, so they don’t associate that (muscularity) with being feminine...gay men crave muscularity because it makes them feel more “like a man”. In their definition of what masculinity is, muscles falls directly under that...masculinity offers a lot for a gay man.*

Similarly, Harry shared the following:

*Researcher: Do you want to tell me more about that? The manliness of muscularity?*  
*Harry: I don't understand the whole image of this. So people normally like from, especially from school, the bigger the person, the more manly he was known as, but me being skinny and I'm not the manliest person. I was known as feminine and then all the other bigger guys were known as more manly... So, like with the whole body image as well and the behaviour, I try to become more like a man. I know I'm not the manliest person and I am classified as feminine...like a man of that size can't be considered manly.*

Correspondingly, Neo reflected how a more muscular physique allows one to rid oneself of feminine qualities which are negatively perceived within the gay community:

*I think I've always viewed it as the more muscular you become the more masculine you become, if that makes sense. Like you gain muscle means like you're losing femininity and like gaining masculinity*

He later added:

*I've always like, in my head, there's always been like this voice that tells me like, my femininity is bad. I've always regarded femininity as bad and seeing myself as not leaning into the more masculine look, like I'm deemed as less attractive. So, I think now being gay and you hear those people that say Masc-for-Masc and all that, I feel like that kind of tarnishes your self-confidence. Maybe just because I'm a little feminine, I'm never going to find love. It's that type of thing. So, like in the gay community the more masculine people are seen as attractive, the more feminine are bashed.*

The above shown extracts illustrate that muscularity extends beyond the body shape and is filtered by sociocultural dynamics that gay men often find themselves having to navigate when negotiating their (embodied) sense of self. These reflections offered by the participants in this study support findings from current research, that if a man possesses the 'right' body (i.e., lean and muscular), he is capable of accessing power and privilege in society, whilst disavowing femininity (Filiault and Drummond, 2007). Moreover, a desire for muscularity amongst gay men could be seen as an attempt to be 'straight-acting', an imitation of heteronormative masculinity and, arguably, being seen as a man, to avoid being discriminated against for gender non-conformity (Thepsourinthone et al., 2020).

### **5.3.3. Social media as an agent of acculturation**

Bartlett et al. (2008) hypothesised that media could be considered a significant factor in gender socialization. Furthermore, media was found to play a crucial role in the internalisation of appearance ideals amongst different genders (Vandenbosch, & Eggermont, 2013). Participants reflected how they were largely exposed to mesomorphic forms of muscularity on social media, particularly on Instagram. This is illustrated by some of the participant's responses below:

*John: ...following fitness pages, healthy eating pages...people are so well built and in shape...bigger muscles, more defined, seeing a six pack on somebody...this draws attention, people give you compliments...you feel more confident like this.*

Here, again, John makes reference to 'health' which is reproduced and interpreted very narrowly in terms of muscularity. Calvin expands on this, suggesting that his social media consumption creates and perpetuates the impression that his physicality is held in a higher regard when compared to his internal attributes.

*Calvin: The stereotypical ideal that gay men want a rock hard body and rock hard abs because they feel that this will get them the most amount of men... on social media that is what people want them for and we focus on our physicality of our appearance rather than our personality...I don't meet these images I see and I feel like that is what everyone aspires to be within the gay community.*

*Harry: It has because obviously when you go on social media, then you see all pictures of like the perfect body and then like you obviously like, "that looks great", "I wish I could have that". You've got that idea that everyone wants that so that you want it for yourself. So, everyone will want that.*

Similarly, Neo expanded on the influence of social media regarding the exposure to and the internalisation of appearance ideals and shared that media, in general, may also mediate these effects:

*I would see like passing through the underwear section at the shop. The way the bodies of those guys look, and then you'll look at yourself and you won't see that type of representation. Like on TV, gay people are also masculine, beefy and it's always just like been there and like chipping away at my self-esteem.*

Considering the participants' responses, it is evident that mesomorphic ideals dominate social media and perhaps media in general and are perceived as aspirational examples of muscularity. Some of the participants have internalised these appearance ideals to the extent that they wish to personally achieve the muscular body shape portrayed in social media, which is often defined as the attractive ideal. Social media platforms, particularly Instagram, explicitly depict social praise for the portrayal of these ideals, through 'likes. Thus, it could be argued that some of the participants have, to a certain extent, internalised the prevailing societal expectation regarding appearance for gay men by viewing and consuming the social praise that particular portrayals of muscularity receive on social media (Barlett et al., 2008). Ultimately, social media could be considered an agency of socialisation (Barlett et al., 2008; Vandenbosch, & Eggermont, 2013) which promotes, influences, and instructs gender and appearance norms.

Summatively, the theme of muscularity has sought to illuminate the fundamental characterisation of gay men's' understanding of the impact of social media on their desire for

muscularity within the South African context. The findings here focus on the mesomorphic ideal (Franko et al., 2015 & Martins et al., 2007), which majority of men seek to achieve. An ideal that has developed with the increase in the portrayals of the ideal male body on social media (Martins et al., 2007). Thus, muscularity is constituted as a predominant part of the lived experiences of men, and in particular gay men, suggesting that men experience pressure emanating from society to conform to the mesomorphic body ideal, and as it dominates a variety of social media platforms, it slowly has become the ideal which most men aspired to achieve in modern and western societies (Edwards et al., 2016 & Martins et al., 2007). Included in this discussion, three significant subthemes promoting this main theme were discovered and consisted of the mesomorphic ideal as being characterised by: a muscular physique, being a ‘Man’, and social media as an agent of acculturation.

#### **5.4. Theme 2: Internalisation of bodily ideals portrayed in social media**

Building onto the lived experiences of participants regarding the impact of their social media use on their desire for muscularity, a second main theme was identified as the internalisation of body ideals portrayed in social media. This particular main theme was principally discovered from participants’ experiences and responses to the questions of ‘Has using social media affected your views on body image, or your personal body, in any way?’ and ‘Can you describe a time you have felt self-conscious due to portrayals of men’s body image on social media?’. Thus, this theme follows participants’ subjective experiences of consuming the muscular ideals portrayed in social media and their frequent and demotivating efforts to achieve these unrealistic ideals. The discussion that follows includes participants’ responses and an analysis of their personal experiences, exploring the following subthemes of (1) appearance-based social comparisons and (2) the unrealistic body ideals portrayed on social media

##### ***5.4.1. Appearance-based social comparisons***

It was found that participants adopted a self-objectifying gaze towards their own body. This ties in with the theoretical framework grounding the present research study i.e., Objectification Theory. Some of the participants appear to describe their bodies as objects, focusing on physical features, rather than their internal states of being. Furthermore, some of the participants reported that they frequently think about their own body’s physical appearance and how others may perceive this. Additionally, some of the participants reported what could be considered a drive to compare their bodies to those portrayed on social media, depicting

mostly hegemonic representations of muscularity, and have come to internalise these as aspiring appearance ideals which they desire to obtain. Moreover, some participants reported monitoring their own bodies (i.e., body surveillance) particularly from an external perspective (i.e., self-objectification) in an attempt to imitate these internalised body shapes that are considered a higher commodity on social media and within certain gay subcultures in general. The above is illustrated by the response from John:

*...going on a hike, or a pool party, or taking a picture without a shirt like with a couple of friends around some friends who gym every single day and I am not and then comparing my body with what I see...comparing it to a fit person makes me definitely feel self-conscious...seeing a six pack or standing next to someone with a six pack just makes everything worse.*

John's reflection reveals that comparing one's body shape does occur within the context of direct, offline contact and amongst friends. It is apparent that some of the participants appeared to perceive their own body as substandard when compared to others in their daily interactions, such as in their friendship circles. This is further expanded by the following excerpt from Sean and Neo's interviews, which illustrates the comparison that occurs on social media:

*Sean: ...maybe looking at things like on Instagram, you see people on Facebook, then you would want to go back to being the way that you were, or maybe to use that image that you saw on social media to try and be that person you saw as well...*

*Neo: Definitely. I feel like spending so much time on social media, like it's definitely burned a sense of what looks right and isn't like deemed attractive. So, I do find myself looking around and being like, 'Hey, I don't look like that'. So, like what's the problem?. I think it has definitely affected the way I view myself.*

Similarly, Andrew elaborated that physical appearance, particularly a muscular physique, is frequently considered a higher commodity than the internal features of a person (i.e., personality). Thus, demonstrating how the male body is treated as an object to be viewed and sexualised whilst initially negating the presence and importance of internal states of being. His response is detailed below:

*So, you can find this person so attractive and so beautiful, but that's only on the outside of them. So, there is that attraction to that person because of the way they look...So when you look at someone that looks after themselves that's something that attracts you to them and obviously afterwards, then you will only find out if they are actually a nice person or not and is this person someone that is worth it.*

Harry's reflection expands on Andrew's thought:

*I would say, you are known for your body and nothing else and then if you're known for your body, that is all that you try and keep, and it obviously causes other problems, like you said, mental illness and all that.*

Neo added that:

*Researcher: Can you describe a time when you felt self-conscious due to the portrayals of men's body image on social media?*

*Neo: I think that it has been a recurring type of thing. Like it's never a distinct type of moment in life. It's just like dragged out like my entire life. I would see like passing through the underwear section at the shop. The way the bodies of those guys look, and then you'll look at yourself and you won't see that type of representation. Like on TV, gay people are also masculine, beefy and it's always just like been there and like chipping away at my self-esteem.*

Drawing on the participant's reflections above, it appears that they have idealized social media posts. Comparing their own physical features to both online and offline images depicting hegemonic muscularity which they have come to internalise, which is known as self-objectification. The participants have likely come to adopt the ideal mesomorphic body type and consequently neglect their own and others individuality. Thus, these experiences could provide support for the use of Objectification Theory in improving our understanding of the relationship between social media use and the desire for muscularity amongst gay men.

(Davis, 2002; Ricciardelli et al., 2010). Internalizing the images and the body ideals depicted and portrayed in the images on social media in an appraising manner not only leads to gay men's objectification of the self but it promotes comparisons with other bodies (Lanzieri & Hildebrandt, 2015). Thus, the comparison of body types that exists between gay men both online and offline is central to understand how social media influences gay men's desire for muscularity.

Having said that, majority of the participants initially did not express concerns relating to their own body image. This is reflected in the following interview excerpts:

*Sandro: So, at this current moment, I won't say that I'm unhappy with my body.*

*Sean: For 90% of the time, I am happy with my current body image.*

*Harry: Personally, I don't feel the need. I'm content with what I am now. Obviously, it could get better, but right now I'm happy. I don't have any problems*

*Neo: I think recently, like I've grown to love my body, but way back then I didn't really, but now I think I've grown comfortable in the way I look and I've began to love myself. I do think that like I'm attractive. I see myself as attractive, so yeah.*

A likely explanation for this finding could be related to the internalisation of the hegemonic masculine behavioural norms of not expressing concerns related to one's personal struggles (i.e., body dissatisfaction) in needing to portray a more confident self-presentation (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Following further probing questions, most of the participants did report that they were not completely satisfied with some of their bodily features, particularly relating to muscularity:

*John: I would say feeling like I'm not too happy with my body, like the shape that I'm in or the stuff that I eat on a daily basis. It's always the people exercising and people are so well built and in shape and healthy eating and it makes me feel self-conscious about what I look like currently.*

*Andrew: ...I am working towards getting myself into a more muscular body shape then obviously looking like these figures that I see on social media.*

*Calvin: I am happy with my body image because I realize the work I put in and the, um, time and energy I have in order to make it look good. Um, but it is the other 10% where you kind of fall into, I could be doing better.*

*Harry: I wouldn't say I'm happy. I obviously can always improve because I know I'm not the best at looking after my body, but I'm not like unhappy with it. It's fine but there is room for improvement.*

*Neo: Like maybe I will look in the mirror and think maybe if I didn't have that, I would like be more attractive, but it's not as bad as it used to be.*

Overall, these findings acknowledge the predominant images on social media that depict and augment the objectified and unrealistic mesomorphic ideal of physicality endorsed by gay men,

which appears to be considered a high commodity amongst the gay community. Some of the participants did report that their peer environment also greatly influences their perceptions and insecurities about themselves. Ultimately, it appears that social media does reinforce the exposure to objectified unrealistic hegemonic masculine representations (Martins et al., 2007), and the emergence of harmful consequences on gay men's body image.

#### ***5.4.2. Unrealistic bodily ideals portrayed in social media***

Social media platforms, particularly Instagram, provide prospects for consumers to share and view images that reflect and augment appearance ideals (Vuong et al., 2021). Thus, considering the visual nature of social media platforms, consumers are continually subjected to unrealistic appearance ideals, which may intensify the experience of body dissatisfaction. Internalisation of appearance ideals involves the support of and aspiration to achieve appearance standards which can result in body dissatisfaction (Vuong et al., 2021). Consequently, consumers of social media who come to internalise these appearance ideals are more likely to experience body dissatisfaction as they struggle to accomplish the characteristically unrealistic appearance ideals augmented on these platforms. The above is illustrated in the below excerpt from John's interview, which echoes the thoughts of Sean, Sandro, and Neo:

*I think that getting the perfect body doesn't just happen overnight...I have to start somewhere and that takes time...the effort comes in having to get dressed after work, getting into the car, going to the gym, and starting.*

With further probing, in addition to the effort in simply getting to the gym and the time it would take to develop a more muscular physique, John reflected the following:

*...I mean, that is definitely impossible to get the bodies that they show on Instagram in six weeks. That is impossible. It may be possible in 10 years... Maybe it's possible if you're obviously using a lot of stuff like supplements and steroids and stuff...you struggle and you get you demotivated, then you give up.*

Similarly, Adrew and Harry mirrored the following:

*Andrew: The thing is you never know what that person went through to get there. I mean, there's so much medical enhancements or products that you can use to get yourself to that point... You don't know what the person used, how he got there, so now you've seen this image and you want to become that, but you don't know what it's going to take to get there.*

*Harry: Personally, I don't want that whole thing (muscular body)...That takes lots because I feel like those people that you see with the perfect bodies, they really put in the work and the heart, like the effort, like they go to gym every day. They take care of themselves. They have all these routines to like improve their body and it takes like dedication and routine and you've got to keep that up. It's a lot of work.*

Most of the participants acknowledged that achieving and looking like the ideals portrayed in social media are unrealistic for most men, in general, and can only be achieved with time, through hard work, and possible muscle enhancing substance use. Calvin added the following:

*So I'll go to gym for like a week and then I'll be like, nothing's happened, nothing's grown, nothing's changed and then like there's no immediate muscles for me...It's a difficult path for your mind to walk because you end up walking in circles and nothing is happening to my body. So you either hurt your muscles because you go too hard and end up not going to gym for the next week...It just feels so unattainable...Like I've been trying so hard. I take protein. I eat right and like virtually nothing is changing.*

All participants included in the study found that the idealised bodies represented on social media, particularly those depicting the mesomorphic ideal, were often unrealistic and impossible to achieve. Ultimately, it is the pursuit of this ideal that frequently highlights the contrast between one's own physique and what society deems the ideal body (Piatkowski et al., 2020). These findings corroborate findings from prior research studies suggesting the prominent presence of unrealistic portrayals of men's body types on social media (Dakanalis et al., 2013; Franchina & Coco, 2018; Robinson, 2003). It is this unrealistic reality, which is propagated in the content represented on social media, which becomes the ideal against which the self and others are judged.

### **5.5. Theme 3: Body dissatisfaction**

The exposure to these idealised and objectified muscular physiques portrayed in social media has been found to be associated with self-objectification as well as body dissatisfaction among men, and particularly gay men (Daniel & Bridges, 2010; Fox & Rooney, 2015). According to Griffiths et al. (2018), gay men may experience elevated rates of body dissatisfaction. Furthermore, it is suggested that gay men experience a heightened desire for muscularity, which has been found to be associated with increased levels of depression, anxiety, and psychological distress (Brennan et al., 2012; Fredrickson et al., 2011). The

following discussion follows participants' experiences of body dissatisfaction, exploring the following subthemes of (1) depression, (2) feeling self-conscious and unattractive, (3) Frequent social media use may pressure gay men in needing to become more muscular, and (4) muscle-enhancing behaviours.

### **5.5.1. Depression**

Research suggests that self-objectification, which may be perpetuated by the consumption of social media, may result in body shame, appearance anxiety, diminished awareness of internal bodily states, depression, sexual dysfunctions, and eating disorders, for having failed to meet the unrealistic ideals purported in society (Buchanan et al., 2008; Calogero, 2012; Filice et al., 2020; Heath et al., 2016; Kozee & Tylka, 2006; Schaefer et al., 2018; Szymanski & Henning, 2007; Tiggemann & Slater, 2001; Tiggemann & Williams, 2011; Tylka & Hill, 2004). Sandro's words below, which resemble the thoughts shared by Calvin and Sean, highlight the impact of social media on his desire for muscularity and resultant feelings associated with body dissatisfaction:

*...looking at myself in the mirror, looking at other men, what I eat, um, how I perceive myself...it has created a lot spells of depression because I feel I don't meet these images that I see on social media.*

Similarly, John added his experience of depression emerging from him not being able to achieve the muscular ideal portrayed in the images he views on social media, which is also often accompanied by feelings of anxiety:

*John: I think the more you look at it, I think to a point it's going make you a bit depressed if you don't get to that point where you see that person is at already...it will make you depressed and anxious because you need to spend so much time in the gym and so many years to look that way... I think the longer it takes, the more depressed you're going to get, seeing these people with these beautiful bodies.*

Neo expanded on his experience of depression and anxiety stemming from a severely diminished self-esteem associated with how he perceived himself in relation to the individuals he views on social media, ultimately considering his body as unworthy of love and acceptance:

*Neo: Like rock bottom was definitely like depression and I think anxiety as well. I was hospitalized at a point. That definitely was like rock bottom for me. I think it was definitely my self-esteem. I don't feel good about myself. I hated myself that much. I would put myself in harm's way. I would hurt myself. There was a lot of self-hatred.*

While most participants reflected on the depression in relation to the experience of body dissatisfaction, Calvin also reported the experience of body dysmorphia:

*...looking at myself in the mirror, looking at other men, what I eat, um, how I perceive myself. It has created a lot of body dysmorphia...I feel I don't meet these images I see on social media...I do feel like that's where most of the body dysmorphia comes from.*

Most participants identified with a feeling of depression stemming from an experience of being dissatisfied with their own bodies in comparison to what they view on social media. Thus, these findings agree with findings from the limited research conducted regarding the association between body dissatisfaction, particularly muscular dissatisfaction, and the presence of depressive symptoms amongst gay men (Blashill, 2010; Brennan et al., 2012). Ultimately, these findings provide initial confirmation that body dissatisfaction may be considered a risk factor in the development of depression among gay men.

#### ***5.5.2. Self-conscious and unattractive***

Present research suggests that gay men hold to a high regard their own bodily appearance and have a tendency to integrate their physical appearance into their self-concepts (McArdle & Hill, 2007). Consequently, this leaves them vulnerable to experience feelings associated with body dissatisfaction, such as feeling self-conscious about certain parts of their body and ultimately feeling unattractive within the gay community. According to Brennan et al. (2012), some gay men have been found to experience body dissatisfaction which often manifests itself in the form of a desire for increased muscularity. Thus, they may develop a perception of their body as an object through which they are able to fit the mould of what society considers the ideal. Overall, gay men are often considered objects of the male gaze (Engeln-Maddox et al., 2011). Objectification theory provides some explanation to this process by which gay men view and internalize the social messages within images depicted on social media which promotes and influences their desire for muscularity (Lanzieri & Hildebrandt, 2015). Gay men's objectification of the self and comparing their own body with other bodies could be considered a means of establishing and maintaining a sense of self and self-esteem for gay men. John's words described below also echo Sandro's and Neo's feelings, feeling self-conscious emanating from their experience with body dissatisfaction:

*As a man, in your own head, you have this picture, obviously as a gay man, what is attractive and what body type is attractive and stuff and not matching that makes me*

*feel more self-conscious and unhappy...people are so well built and in shape and healthy eating and it makes me feel self-conscious about what I look like currently.*

Sean reflected the following and expanded on the idea of needing to maintain a positive, attractive impression amongst the gay community in an attempt to avoid feeling rejected:

*...So, you want to look your best and you're very impressionable in the sense of getting rejected.*

This also includes the experience of feeling unattractive within the gay community for most of the participants included in the study:

*Andrew: I wouldn't say for myself that I am disgusted with my body, but I want to be more attractive. So, I mean, to get another type of body shape will definitely help me to get that attraction that I need...seeing these people with these beautiful bodies and you want to feel that attraction too.*

*Calvin: ...also that kind of self-acceptance...Cause it's like, I'd like to look a little bit better because I feel like it would make me more attractive.*

Harry had shared an experience specifically in regard to a relational experience, being interested in another gay man but not being “masculine enough”:

*I was obviously interested in them and then they were interested in this other person, but yet that other person was more masculine so then obviously, for some reason I was telling myself, they would choose the other person because of the masculinity. So, then I was like maybe I should then improve so that I could get the attention.*

Gay men frequently experience a bombardment of sexualized and objectifying imagery portrayed on social media and was expressed as making the participants in the study to become hesitant about their own physical attractiveness and appeal, feeling more self-conscious, and ultimately developing a low self-esteem. These findings are congruent with and support findings from previous studies (Bergeron & Tylka, 2007; Brennan et al., 2012; Frederick & Essayli, 2016; Oshana, 2021). Ultimately, some gay men may come to experience a sense of failure, which is attached to their sense of self, for not having achieved the hegemonic mesomorphic appearance ideal. According to Oshana (2021, p. 82), this may signify “masculine reflexive embodiment and the misalignment between the idealized self, the real self, and the idealized other, as both idealized bodies become understood as achievable and normative”.

### **5.5.3. Frequent social media use may pressure gay men in needing to become more muscular**

The internalization of societal standards of what is deemed attractive has been found to be associated with frequent exposure to inherent messages portrayed on social media, encouraging conformity to and identification with these standards (Parent & Moradi, 2011). Furthermore, another study found that frequent usage of image-centric social media platforms is strongly associated with muscularity dissatisfaction when compared to non-image-centric social media platforms (Griffiths et al., 2018). Thus, it is suggested that the more an individual consumes images on social media, the more likely they are to internalise the ideal portrayed, and the higher the likelihood that they may develop a pressured need to conform to or achieve this ideal. This subtheme was explored through participant's responses to the following question 'Tell me how do you think your use of social media impacts the level of muscularity you aspire to achieve?'. John reflected a "love-hate relationship" regarding social media's impact on his desire for a more muscular physique:

*I'm going to say it's up and down but it does have an effect following all these healthy food pages. It inspires me to make healthy food...I joined the gym again, getting back into it...I would say it's good and bad. It's like this love, hate relationship because the same time, social media also demotivates me because it's a lot of effort that needs to go into and expenses living a healthy lifestyle, going to the gym, and putting all that time after a long day at work and getting your body back into it, for me now where it was a lot of hard work. So, it is good. It is motivating. It definitely had an influence on me, a good one, but at the same time, sometimes just demotivates me as well.*

Similarly, Sean's words reflect the experience of an increased need and desire for a more muscular physique with a higher consumption of social media. However, the consumption of which is demotivating and results in feelings of depression:

*I think it increases to a point, but I think the more you look at it and the more you wrap your head around it, I mean, I think to a point it's going make you a bit depressed if you don't get to that point where you see that person is at already, and you don't know how many years that person has spent to become that way. So, I think to a point it can increase your desire to become that way, to increase your activity level, going to the gym.*

Similarly, Andrew offered the following reflection:

*Researcher: Do you think if you use social media more, this desire to be more muscular is sort of increased?*

*Andrew: ...So, I think to a point it can increase our desire to become that way, to increase your activity level, going to the gym, but also it will make you depressed and anxious because you need to spend so much time in the gym and so many years to look that way.*

Somewhat echoing this experience, Harry, Sandro, and Calvin reportedly experience little pressure to pursue and conform to the muscular ideal in relation to their usage of social media as a result of demotivation owing to a lack of ‘gains’ after continued effort. Calvin thoughts below reflect this, reflecting that when he did use social media more, consuming more images of the mesomorphic ideal had resulted in him actively and dangerously pursuing the ideal to the point of injuring himself:

*Currently, it does not affect me at all but during the phase in which I went to gym religiously if I did see like a body type I envy or something I found attractive, it would cause me to try and perform harder in the gym and kind of put more weight on, do more reps or anything that might have been positive to my performance at gym... Obviously pushing harder, pushing more than you should can cause a lot of like muscle injuries. So yes, I did try and put myself at that risk just in order so that I can grow more... especially with the use of Grindr, and Instagram really kind of pushes that... that is the main thing for me that made me go to gym quite often, or spend more time in the gym and stuff like that because I'm like, okay, I'm getting this attention from men.*

Although the use of Grindr and its influence on the desire for muscularity amongst gay men was not explored during this present study, it is evident from Calvin’s reflection that the use of this social media platform may amplify the pressures gay men experience in needing to conform to achieve the muscular ideal in an attempt to attract other gay men. A study by Oshana (2021), explored the relationship between Grindr use, body image, and MSM’s (men who have sex with men) (dis)embodiment owing to the platform being predominantly appearance focused. Nine participants were included in the study and the findings suggested that Grindr acted as a catalyst for maladaptive behaviours, “including excessive exercise, self-objectification, and disembodiment pertaining to their genuine self-identity” (p. 02).

Having said that, Neo shared a reflection that differs from the other participants, reflecting that his social media use has reduced his pursuit for muscularity:

*I think recently, like the social media that I've been using, it's sort of diminished the need for me to seek out like muscularity. I don't feel I need to go out to the gym every day and like gain a hundred kilograms in muscle to prove myself. I feel like now the social media that I consume it's more based off of self-love and empowerment and growing as a person, loving the way I am. I don't go to work out every day just to gain muscle every day. I do it because I enjoy it and it's healthy for me and it's good for me.*

Although, this finding is different to the overall reflections of the other participants, it is likely that Neo's shared response in this regard reflects the internalisation of the hegemonic masculine behavioural norms of not expressing concerns related to one's personal struggle in needing to portray a more confident self-presentation. Additionally, it must be noted that Neo mentions that his 'pursuit' of muscularity has been diminished by his use of social media. However, his 'desire' for muscularity remains. Overall, this highlights the subjective nature of social media use and the interpretation of such content can thus be different.

The findings from the participants' responses in regard to the influence of their use of social media consumption on their desire for muscularity is for the most part congruent with findings from previous studies, suggesting that higher exposure to images of the mesomorphic ideal, objectified and/or sexualised, depicted on social media is associated with higher body image concerns, particularly muscularity dissatisfaction amongst gay men (Griffiths et al., 2018) and an increased desire for muscularity.

#### **5.5.4. Muscle-enhancing behaviours**

Current research suggests that majority of men seek a muscular/mesomorphic shape rather than a thin or fat body shape, indicating a strong correlation between muscular dissatisfaction and various potentially harmful behaviours, such as those intended to improve muscle mass (i.e., over-exercising, eating disorders, and the use of anabolic steroids and performance-enhancing substances (Dakanalis et al., 2013; Franko et al., 2015). Moreover, men were more likely than women to desire a greater body size, place a higher value on muscles, employ and engage in muscle enhancing strategies, and perceive a greater pressure to increase their muscles (Ricciardelli et al., 2006). Consequently, the fixation with physicality may be engendering a harmful obsession with muscle attaining and enhancing activities, resulting in the emerging and escalating bodily neurosis recognized as the Adonis Complex (Hardy, 2014), which is detailed in Chapter 2, section 2.3 Muscularity. This obsession and preoccupation in pursuing the mesomorphic ideal may predispose many men to developing

Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD), and more specifically, Muscle Dysmorphia (MD) (Didie et al., 2010). The discussion that follows explores the participants' responses and reflections in relation to the following question 'Have you made any behavioural changes to attain your view of muscularity or that viewed on social media? For example, do you engage more in physical exercise, healthy eating?'

Reflecting on the need to increase and enhance his physicality, Sean mentioned the need to engage in regular exercise in an attempt to achieve the mesomorphic ideal he had once attained, which echoes the John's feelings:

*I know I've been there in the past, in the gym every day, defined, well-built, comfortable, like obviously comfortable in my own skin and I think that's (feeling self-conscious) where it comes from because I'm completely out of it currently...I joined the gym again, getting back into it...it's a lot of effort that needs to go into and expenses living a healthy lifestyle, going to the gym, and putting all that time after a long day at work and getting your body back into it, for me now where it was a lot of hard work.*

Similarly, Sandro and Neo shared:

*Sandro: So I'm not like a very healthy person. If I could start going to gym more often and you know, actually like eating more healthier, I guess it could make little bit of an influence, then I could be, you know, contempt with my body.*

*Neo: I feel like I was very unhealthy, like during high school, my peak error, seeking out like masculinity because like I used to have like these crushes on like very masculine men. So, I assumed that the only time they would have crushes on me was if I was masculine. So, I'd always be going to the gym, taking pre-workout, drinking pre-workout before I go to bed. It was like extremely unhealthy.*

John later elaborated on how demotivating his gym routine became owing to a lack of progress in developing a more muscular physique, adding that friends engage in steroid use to promote and accelerate their muscle growth:

*But I mean, getting into the gym sometimes with friends, they use steroids and you can just see them getting more defined and built, in a shorter period of time and you struggle and you get you demotivated, then you give up.*

It appears that the process of improving one's physical appearance in an attempt to achieve the mesomorphic representations of muscularity portrayed in social media can be significantly

difficult to achieve and maintain, which the researcher believes speaks to the unrealistic ideals. Ultimately, the unattainability of the perfect mesomorphic ideal is significantly out of reach for most men. However, societal pressures may severely influence men, and in particular gay men, so much so that they are willing to jeopardise their health by engaging in dangerous substance use intended to improve their muscle mass.

Probing further the necessity of needing to improve one's musculature by adopting various muscle enhancing behavioural strategies, another participant, Calvin reported:

*So, in grade nine, when I started experimenting with men and guys my age, I felt like it would increase my chances of getting a man or whatever, if I look better. So, I started going to the gym at the age of 15 and had been going to gym.*

Calvin further shared the following thought:

*During the phase in which I went to gym religiously, if I did see like a body type I envy or something I found attractive, it would cause me to try and perform hard in the gym and kind of put more weight on, do more reps or anything that might have been negative to my progress because pushing more than you should can cause a lot of like muscle injuries. So yes, I did try and put myself at that risk. Maybe if I push me, I can grow more, and actually achieve the ideal if I just push and push more.*

Later, Calvin shared a similar thought as John and Sean, reflecting on his significant and demotivating gym efforts to achieve and maintain a muscular body shape:

*I just realized that it was negatively impacting on mental health because I tend to want a rush things. So I'll go to gym for like a week and then I'll be like, nothing's happened, nothing's grown, nothing's changed and there's no immediate muscles for me.*

Subsequently, Calvin added that:

*You end up walking in circles. Nothing's happening to my body. So you either hurt your muscles because then you go too hard or you fall into bout of body dysmorphia or depression and you don't end up going to gym for the next week and then you're right back where you started.*

The above excerpts from the participant's interviews suggest that social media consumption is often saturated with the mesomorphic ideal which appears to propagate gay men's appearance standard and is internalised by them. However, although this desire and pursuit for muscularity is associated with social media exposure (Daniel & Bridges, 2010; Cramblitt & Pritchard,

2013), findings from these studies have suggested that internalization predicted men's desire for muscularity. However, associations with media exposure were less significant. Pritchard and Cramblitt (2013) propose that this could be the result of additional causes of societal pressure that men, in general, may experience. This is evident on John's reflection, indicating the prevalence of idealised body shapes amongst his peer group influences his pursuit to enhance his muscular physique. This finding is echoed in the study by Karazsia and Crowther (2009), who suggested that the body shapes that men idealise could be considered more dominant amongst their peers when compared to media.

The reflections and responses of the participants included in this study suggest that gay men's desire for muscularity appears to be strongly linked to physical attributes and could be associated with negative psychological outcomes such as low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, and possible body dysmorphia. This finding is consistent with findings of existent research (Brennan et al., 2012; Buchanan et al., 2008; Calogero, 2012; Heath et al., 2016; Kozee & Tylka, 2006; Schaefer et al., 2018; Szymanski & Henning, 2007; Tiggemann & Slater, 2001; Tiggemann & Williams, 2011; Tylka & Hill, 2004). Overall, gay men's desire for muscularity and the internalisation of the mesomorphic ideal has been found to be associated with potentially harmful muscle enhancing behavioural strategies, including excessive weight training and steroid use (Edwards et al., 2014; Filice et al., 2020).

Having said that, the researcher acknowledges that in some instances there are certainly muscle-enhancing behaviours amongst the gay men in the sample. However, some of the extracts spoke to enhancing the appearance of muscle and not so much the muscle itself. This may speak to gay men's pressure to maintain a particular elevated appearance (Hamshaw & Gavin, 2021) rather than functionality. Current research suggests that gay men are situated as objects of gaze in social media (Hamshaw & Gavin, 2021). Thus, appearance improving strategies appear to be more readily conducted by gay men to preserve, control, and boost their status within the wider gay community, in attempts to secure social and/or sexual partners. According to Scheibling and Lafrance (2019), working on one's body is not merely about building muscle, it also integrates personal practices such as grooming in an attempt to uphold physical appearance standards.

## **5.6. Integrated theme: The need to be perceived as attractive to other gay men**

Thus far, the analysis and discoveries have concentrated predominantly on explaining the subjective essence and extensive phenomenological insight into a sample South African gay

men regarding the impact of social media on their desire for muscularity as well as other gay men's desire of muscularity. This research approach has mainly been informed by a descriptive approach involving the subjective accounts of the lived realities of a sample of South African gay men regarding their use of social media and the impact this has on their desire for muscularity. While the researcher identified main themes and subthemes, which have been detailed above, the following section brings to life a theme that was discovered across all participant accounts. This integrated theme was encountered across the other themes and provides a consolidative understanding regarding the other themes. Substantially shaping and facilitating participants' understandings of their social media use and the impact this has on their desire for muscularity, *the need to be perceived as attractive to other gay men* provides a consolidated viewpoint to each of the above-mentioned themes.

The need to be perceived as attractive to other gay men' forms the essential integrative pillar that frames and supports the metaphorical scaffolding whereby the main themes and subthemes could be consolidated, understood, and analysed. This integrated theme describes largely gay men's need to be perceived as attractive to other gay men in the hopes of finding social and/or sexual partners. This theme was explored along one subtheme consisting of the muscular body as being sexualised in the gay community, offering gay men who possess more muscular or muscular-appearing bodies sexual currency within the wider gay community. Overall, this integrated theme attempts to traverse the profoundly personal interpretations, beliefs, and emotions the participants had of their need to increase their muscularity in an attempt to be seen as attractive within the gay community.

#### ***5.6.1. The muscular body is sexualised within the gay community***

It is evident from the participant's responses that almost all participants view the mesomorphic ideal as the most attractive body shape within the gay community. According to Siever (1994), gay men may experience pressure to maintain a high level of physical attractiveness owing to the gay male subculture they may find themselves in and consider physical appearance in prospective partners higher than that of women (Regan et al., 2000).

The findings of the present study are congruent with similar research indicating that gay men within certain gay male subcultures maintain conformity to masculine norms and as a result experience distress and body dissatisfaction which could be associated with their (gay men) increased exposure to sexual objectification (Kimmel & Mahalik, 2005; Levant & Wong, 2017). Ultimately, gay men want to attract other men and experience pressure to achieve and

maintain a physical appearance which is desirable and attractive. Moreover, gay men may believe that their interaction and exposure to more attractive gay men, in the hopes of finding a sexual partner, would be negatively impacted if their physical appearance did not meet the idealistic standards of appearance which are prevalent within gay male culture and are aimed at attracting and connecting with preferred sexual partners (Oshana, 2021).

The above illustrates that a substantial quantity of existing research has established and expanded on this aspect. The present study was concerned with exploring participants subjective realities and experiences involving muscularity. Moreover, the present study endeavoured obtain a glimpse of gay men's subjective realities and understandings of their social media use influencing their desire for muscularity. Reflecting on how the muscular body is sexualised in the gay community, many of the participants shared their agreement:

*John: I would say muscularity is looking and feeling attractive and confident and living a healthy lifestyle. Looking good makes you feel good. Healthy body, healthy mind. So, I would say that it's muscular, looking strong and strong is likely seeing muscles being in shape and looking after yourself and your body.*

He later elaborated:

*Like from the past experience, I was just happier when I was built and more masculine and I felt more attractive. I looked better in my own skin. It means that if I look good, I feel good.*

Similarly, Andrew highlighted the following, which was echoed by Sean and Sandro:

*Andrew: It is definitely still the muscular body because that's the one that's seen as most attractive...It (muscular body) will definitely be a bit more attractive to other men as well, so that you look a part in a way, and it obviously attracts other men as well, so yeah, that's definitely a good thing to do, well, it's one thing I'm looking at specifically.*

Expanding on the thoughts and reflections of most participants, Neo shared his experience of muscularity, which he associates with masculinity, as being the most attractive and desirable body type:

*I used to think that I need to become like more masculine to be seen as attractive, like I would dress masculine. I would try and speak masculine. I would definitely try and like alter like a lot of characteristics about me to seem more masculine because I think that was what I thought was attractive at the time...there's always been like this voice*

*that tells me like, my femininity is bad. I've always regarded femininity as bad and seeing myself as not leaning into the more masculine look, like I'm deemed as less attractive. So, I think now being gay and you hear those people that say Masc-for-Masc and all that, I feel like that kind of tarnishes your self-confidence. Maybe just because I'm a little feminine, I'm never going to find love. It's that type of thing. So, like in the gay community the more masculine people are seen as attractive, the more feminine are bashed.*

Calvin offered the following reflection:

*So that's (muscular body type) generally like what everyone wants and I only met gay men who, the first thing, when you ask them, what is their type, out of all of them that I've met, what they fetishize is a muscular body type.*

Calvin later expanded on this reflection, indicating the influence of social media consumption on gay men's desire for muscularity as the muscular body type is considered a higher commodity within the gay community:

*Seeing those men online, a lot of gay people are attracted to that (muscular body) along with women. But I do feel like gay men go a little bit overboard with being attracted to a man at times. I do feel like it's just everyone's idea of what is attractive. That's the first thing their mind will go to. That's what we all kind of strive for and that's what we all kind of want. Maybe I'll be wanted if my body looks like that and the reason I'm not wanted right now is because my body does not look like that.*

He further shared:

*Researcher: Grindr is a dating site for gay men and as you say, the idea is to be as attractive as possible on that dating site and to do that is to become more muscular as that's sort of seen to be the attractive physique type on Grindr. So you say that Grindr influences you a lot more than Instagram and Facebook, this need to pursue a really muscular physique.*

*Calvin: Yes. This can be seen a lot from like the profile photos you see on Grindr because a lot of the time you never just see faces. 80% of the profiles are like bodies. So that that's really how gay men sell themselves.*

Harry added:

*So, for me what I've perceived is that people would much prefer and are much more attracted to that kind of body type (muscular body) because it's more for them attractive and that's what they'd want, that's what they'd want to be involved with.*

These reflections suggest that gay men place a significant amount of focus on their physical bodies which is often times reinforced within gay male culture. Gay men could be said to dynamically participate in self-comparisons, such as upward comparisons (idealising others) or downward comparisons (feeling as if their body is congruent with the idealised standard). Considering that most participants view the mesomorphic ideal as the most appealing and attractive within the gay community, it could be said that the participants maintain the assumption that if they do not attain this particular idealized physical standard that they may fail to obtain admittance to certain social circles that they consider attractive, obtain compliments, and are able to engage with potential social and sexual partners. Having said that, although some gay men consider the mesomorphic ideal as the highest in commodity within gay male culture, some of the participants make reference to other body types with the gay community that may be considered higher in value in other gay male subcultures:

*John: Everybody has got their own preferences but there are different body shapes, that's attractive to other people or different gay men. So I would say it's yes and no. Like for me, myself as a gay man, I would find it more attractive if somebody is in shape than somebody that's not but then there are other gay men that find it attractive if somebody is not in shape and not ripped because then maybe they feel better about themselves or the partners or whatever. As an example, there's a new thing that, well, I wouldn't say a new thing, but the thing that is actually like coming up now is being attractive to people that's a bit more, I would say not overweight, but like as an example, like a guy with a stomach, like a belly, some gay men are attractive to like the dad-bod look.*

*Harry: Like, you can get like a twink. I don't know all the names. The really big guys. You get like the muscular guys. It's not just one thing that you have to be this for that person...I would say it honestly depends on the person because like someone might find a twink attractive, someone might find a bear attractive but honestly it depends on the person, but yet there still is that muscular body. So, if you are into that, then that's obviously what you find the most attractive.*

*Neo: I feel like once I've like shifted my gaze from the muscular people are seen as attractive. I think I started to appreciate other body types as well, like me and like larger people. I think it's definitely helped me to see that it's not just them that's attractive. We're all attractive.*

These reflections echo the findings within existent research suggesting that different body shapes are found within and are considered more attractive and appealing within certain gay male subcultures (i.e., twink, lad, bear, etc). (Gough & Flanders, 2009; Oshana, 2021; Ravenhill & de Visser, 2017). This further reflects the changing masculine ideals within gay culture which have changed throughout history (Filiault & Drummond, 2007). However, even though this is held in mind, as mentioned above, most of the participants in this study indicated that they continue to view the mesomorphic ideal as the highest in value within gay male culture. It must be noted that although only some men desire a muscular physique and others desire other body shapes and types, they are likely positioned in relation to the “hegemonic aesthetic”, repudiating femininity (Filiault & Drummond, 2007, p. 175) and in essence create the impression that gay men are still ‘men’. This creates a link to one of the main themes discussed above of ‘Being a Man’.

The realisation of this masculine ideal amongst gay men could be said to construct and maintain a sense of self-esteem. Thus, echoing the findings of previous literature that gay men’s bodies become objects of the male gaze (Atkins 1998 as cited in Grogan, 2016). Ultimately, the muscular gay male body is considered highly valuable and diminishes in value when it strays from this idealistic standard. In addition, gay men’s increased desire to become more muscular in an attempt be perceived as attractive within the gay community is often guided by their use of social media.

Gay men’s self-comparisons could be considered an attempt for the participants to recognise where they could classify themselves within gay male culture as well as how successful they would be in being perceived as attractive to other gay men in the hopes of finding partners. The ideas of not being muscular enough and ultimately attractive enough are considered intertwined with the consumption of and exposure to the idealistic standards of physical appearance as depicted in social media. The participant’s reflections and experiences is congruent with the existing research regarding gay men’s body image troubles when using social media platforms (Filice et al., 2020; Griffiths et al., 2018; Lanzieri & Hildebrandt, 2015;

McArdle & Hill, 2007). In congruence with majority of the findings within these studies identifying the prevalence of social comparisons, internalisation of appearance ideals, and muscularity dissatisfaction, this study attempted to expand on the dearth of research exploring the association between problematic social media consumption and a desire for muscularity amongst South African gay men.

However, the process of attributing meaning to muscularity amongst gay South African men must be considered within the context of a nuanced gay community characterised by varying subcultures, a masculine-heterosexual controlling narrative, and the comparison and internalisation of societal appearance ideals which could all be considered to influence the development of body dissatisfaction amongst gay men. Ultimately, the purpose of pursuing and maintaining muscularity is considered essential to most South African gay men for social and sexual survival within the gay community. An important finding from the findings of this study suggests that the gay men in this sample adopted masculine behavioural norms regarding the hesitancy of expressing concerns related to one's personal struggles. Thus, portraying a more confident self-presentation could be considered a protective factor for gay men, as it may mediate the development of psychological distress emanating from the experience of body dissatisfaction.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion, Recommendations, and Limitations**

### **6.1. Introduction**

To conclude the present study, this chapter consolidates the study's findings. This synopsis involves an integrated exploration regarding the contributions, limitations, reflections, and recommendations of this research study. This chapter attempts to summarise in what way the study addressed the research questions, objectives, and aims, highlighting several of the shortcomings and recommendations of the present study.

### **6.2. Integration and summary of key findings**

The purpose of the current study was to offer a qualitative understanding of how a sample of South African gay men recognise and make meaning of their idiosyncratic realities of using social media and the influence that this may have on their desire for muscularity, through the interpretive lens of objectification theory. The primary aim of the present study was to explore the participants understanding of the impact of social media on their desire for muscularity as well as on other gay men's desire for muscularity. The research was guided by two research questions: (1) how gay men recognize the impact of their social media use on their own desire for muscularity and, (2) how gay men understand the influence of social media use on other gay men's desire for muscularity. Focusing on the personal understandings and idiographic realities of seven gay South African men, a TA methodology uncovered the subsequent main themes: the mesomorphic ideal, internalisation of bodily ideals portrayed in social media; and body dissatisfaction. In addition to the main themes, one integrated theme was discovered which was the need to be perceived as attractive to other men in the gay community.

The above-mentioned themes offered vivid personal understandings and meaning(s) of the subjective experiences of gay men have regarding their understanding of how their social media consumption may influence their desire for muscularity. However, as explored throughout this study, gay men's understandings are often mediated by wider discourses and narratives within the society. The findings revealed that gay men understand that their use of social media fundamentally mediates their desire for a more muscular body shape. Furthermore, the findings suggest that gay men demonstrate an understanding of how masculinity and the desire for muscularity are inextricably interwoven and indivisible within the wider gay community. The participants disclosed that some of their personal experiences

of using social media often resulted in body image disturbances and concerns which further increased their desire for muscularity and often resulted in psychological distress (i.e., depression). The findings from this study point to the way (some) gay men may feel pressured to desire muscularity in an effort to increase their ‘attractiveness’ within the gay community. This is frequently derived from what is depicted on the social media platforms that they use, propagating idealistic appearance standards. Notably, the findings of the present study suggest that some of the participants described their awareness of how social media may impact their self-perception with regard to their physical appearance but this did not necessarily translate to wanting to change their appearance/enhance their muscularity. The discussion that follows explores and summarises the individual main themes consolidates this within the appropriate and significant body of current research.

The theme of the *mesomorphic ideal* reflected participants’ understandings, attitudes and experiences regarding muscularity which involves a physique that is lean, defined, and muscular. For participants, muscularity involved achieving and maintaining a muscular body shape that is considered the idealistic standard of physicality within the wider gay community. The mesomorphic ideal emphasised experiences and understandings of the *muscular physique*, *being a ‘man’*, and *social media as an agent of acculturation*, that speak to the fundamental attitude and perception of muscularity as having muscles which allows gay men to maintain a sense of masculinity by distancing themselves from the femininity which is frequently associated with homosexuality. Some gay men may feel pressured to depict themselves on social media platforms and dating applications as possessing ‘masculine-related traits’ (i.e., self-confidence, self-assurance, and muscularity), as any conception of self-doubt and neediness, which are often associated with femininity, are frequently shunned and considered undesirable amongst certain gay subcultures. This is known as femmephobia, or the socio-cultural devaluation of femininity and is frequently found within contemporary/Western gay men’s spaces (García-Gómez, 2020). The mesomorphic ideal is suggested to be strongly associated with the increase in the portrayals of this body shape on social media (Martins et al., 2007). Overall, the mesomorphic ideal could be considered a dominant part of the lived experiences of some gay men. This suggests that some gay men may experience significant societal pressure to conform to this idealistic standard of physical attractiveness. Considering that this is frequently propagated on some of the social media platforms used amongst gay men, it is likely that this is considered the idealistic standard amongst some gay men which allows them to both, fit the ‘mould’ of the gendered socio-cultural norm of being a ‘man’, as well as maintain a desired and attractive body shape within certain gay subcultures.

The theme of the *internalisation of bodily ideals portrayed in social media* recognised some participants' problematic and arduous experiences of consuming the muscular ideals portrayed in social media and some gay men's frequent and demotivating efforts to achieve these unrealistic ideals within the South African context. These included experiences related to *appearance-based social comparisons* and the *unrealistic bodily ideals portrayed in social media* which acknowledges the objectified and unrealistic mesomorphic ideal of physical attractiveness propagated on various social media platforms, particularly Instagram. These unrealistic ideals are then often endorsed by some gay men. Overall, gay men's social media consumption could be said to reinforce their contact with objectified and unrealistic hegemonic masculine representations (Martins et al., 2007), increasing the probability of internalising these appearance ideals, and ultimately triggering potentially harmful consequences on gay men's body image. The findings discussed in this theme put forward relevant aspects regarding the consumption of social media amongst gay men and the particularly associated difficulties some gay men face as a result of their social media use and the influence this has on their desire and pursuit for muscularity. The lived experiences of the participants in this study closely mirrored the identified literature regarding gay men's social media use and the internalisation of the idealistic standards of physical attractiveness depicted on the social media platforms they use (Dakanalis et al., 2013; Davis, 2002; Franchina & Coco, 2018; Lanzieri & Hildebrandt, 2015; Piatkowski et al., 2020; Ricciardelli et al., 2010; Robinson, 2003; Vuong et al., 2021).

The last main theme highlighted the experiences of *body dissatisfaction* amongst gay men which emphasised how some gay South African men's exposure to the idealised and objectified muscular physiques portrayed in social media could result in the experience of body dissatisfaction. This finding supports similar findings in current research (Daniel & Bridges, 2010; Fox & Rooney, 2015; Griffiths et al., 2018). This theme of body dissatisfaction explored gay men's experiences of *depression, feeling self-conscious and unattractive, frequent social media use resulting in a higher need to become more muscular, and muscle-enhancing behaviours* in relation to their desire for muscularity. The findings from the current study suggest that gay men's desire for muscularity, seems to be associated with negative psychological outcomes such as low self-esteem, depression, and possibly body dysmorphia regardless of their pursuit to enhance their muscularity. The findings further suggest that some gay men may engage in harmful muscle enhancing behavioural strategies which appears to be influenced by their use of social media. These findings support similar findings in existing research (Brennan et al., 2012; Buchanan et al., 2008; Calogero, 2012; Edwards et al., 2014; Filice et al., 2020; Heath et al., 2016; Kozee & Tylka, 2006; Schaefer et al., 2018; Szymanski

& Henning, 2007; Tiggemann & Slater, 2001; Tiggemann & Williams, 2011; Tylka & Hill, 2004). The findings from the study suggest that gay men's desire for muscularity appears to be influenced more by what they consume on social media which has the potential to translate into body dissatisfaction and distress amongst some gay men. The lived experiences of this sample of gay South African men support the value of developing interventions to target the psychological conditions that are perpetuated in body image disturbances, specifically as experienced by men of sexual minority groups, as suggested by Filice et al. (2020).

Finally, an integrated theme was created of gay men's *need to be perceived as attractive to other gay men*. This theme endeavoured to consolidate the subjective and distinctive understandings and explanation(s) participants have of themselves and their inner personal experiences regarding their desire for muscularity which is often influenced by their consumption of social media. This integrated theme explored gay men's need to be perceived as attractive to other gay men in an attempt to find social and/or sexual partners. This theme explored gay men's experiences of the *muscular body as being sexualised in the gay community*, as the muscular or muscular-appearing body was perceived as having a higher sexual currency within the wider gay community when compared to other body shapes. The findings in the study suggest that some gay men place paramount focus on their physicality, with significant emphasis on appearance, as opposed to functionality. Although most of the participants viewed the mesomorphic ideal as the body shape which possesses the highest sexual currency and is highly desired within the gay community, some of the participants made reference to other body types that may be considered higher in value in other gay male subcultures (twink and bear). Therefore, some gay men attempt to classify themselves within gay male culture to establish their level of attractiveness in the hopes of finding sexual and social partners. The level of muscularity they are able to achieve is intertwined with this and frequently associated with their consumption of and exposure to the idealistic standards of physical attractiveness as depicted in social media. This finding echoes findings in current research (Filice et al., 2020; Griffiths et al., 2018; Lanzieri & Hildebrandt, 2015; McArdle & Hill, 2007). For example, Griffiths et al. (2018, p. 154) found "strong associations between social media consumption and muscularity dissatisfaction and eating disorder symptoms" amongst sexual minority men (i.e., gay men). McArdle and Hill (2007) found that gay men have a strong desire to attract other men within a gay subculture that emphasizes physical appearance and their consumption of images depicted in social media leave them vulnerable to the development of body dissatisfaction. Overall, this integrated theme attempted to delve into the individual and idiosyncratic perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes some gay men have of their

need to enhance their muscularity to be perceived as attractive within the gay community based on their exposure and use of social media.

The findings are consistent with current literature that have recognised, in general, the relationship between social media consumption and body dissatisfaction amongst gay men (Filice et al., 2020; Griffiths et al., 2018; Lanzieri & Hildebrandt, 2015; McArdle & Hill, 2007) and, more specifically related to the present study, the relationship between social media and muscularity dissatisfaction amongst gay men (Daniel & Bridges, 2010; Lanzieri & Hildebrandt, 2015). The exploration of this sample of South African gay men's understanding of the impact of their own social media use on their desire for muscularity has revealed that although there are numerous, complex, and personal experiences related to social media's impact on gay men's body image and sense of self, gay men experience their social media consumption as a fundamental mediator in their desire and pursuit for muscularity.

Additionally, the findings from the present study support the application of objectification theory amongst gay men, particularly gay men's objectification of the self, viewing their own body in relation to the other stemming from their exposure to social messages depicted on social media. Consequently, this can evolve into experiences of body (image) dissatisfaction and the engagement in behaviours that promote and influence the desire for muscularity. Ultimately, the most of the gay men included in this sample desire muscularity which appears to be mediated by their consumption of social media in an attempt to maintain attraction, desire, and sexuality within the wider gay community.

Collectively, the findings from the current study revealed that some gay men experience their use of social media as a fundamental mediator of their desire and pursuit of muscularity. Muscularity and the understanding(s) thereof were experienced as nuanced and complex, demonstrating the subjective impact of social media use on gay men's perception of themselves and their desires.

## **6.2. Limitations and contributions**

Delving into the subjective realities of some gay men and their use of social media and how they understand how this influences their desire for muscularity, a TA methodology embedded in descriptive phenomenology was implemented within the present study. The theoretical framework (objectification theory) and methodology (TA) permitted the researcher to expand on and enrich the participants' responses and understandings of their subjective

realities of using social media and how this may influence their desire for muscularity, but particular shortcomings persist.

Although the researcher acknowledged that objectification theory may limit our understanding of gender-diverse populations, the researcher did not explore the particular gender identities of the sample included in the study (i.e., cisgender, transgender, genderfluid, etc.) as well as their class. Thus, not acknowledging that these identities are socially, politically and economically constructed and therefore may further influence their use of social media and the impact this may have on their desire for muscularity.

Unpacking the idiosyncratic experiences of the participants depicts the researcher's efforts at establishing how participants make sense of their own interpretations, as such TA usually reflects the subjective social constructions and realities particular to a certain sample and may not inevitably echo the experiences of others. Consequently, the findings may not essentially be generalizable or represent a fundamental 'truth'. Thus, the findings may not be typical and characteristic of all South African gay men's personal realities regarding the consumption of social media and the influence this has on their desire for muscularity.

Furthermore, the present study focused on a precise sample from a particular population. Thus, the researcher depended on snowball sampling which limited the transferability of the study findings to the general population (Naderifar et al., 2017). This study also only focused on the lived experiences of seven gay men of which six were white and only one black participant which further limits the generalisability of the findings, particularly within a significantly heterogenous society such as South Africa. Moreover, this may have been an influence of the researcher's own race and geographical context and therefore, this research study may not be considered neutral.

The TA methodology implemented within this study also presents with certain limitations. This type of methodology provides an overarching codification of the data. Therefore, it may (but not always) lack the analytical depth of some other qualitative approaches such as discourse analysis. Thus, future research using a discourse analysis could better explore and unpack the gendered discourses amongst gay men which are at work in encoding muscularity/masculinity as well as how these then become reflected in discourses around bodily desire and attraction.

Further regarding the methodology in this study, this focuses on the researchers' interpretations and understandings of the participants' idiosyncratic realities and thus, may misinterpret the meaning(s) and expressions of the participants' subjective beliefs, insights, and perceptions (Terry et al., 2017). Consequently, researchers may feel compelled to

accentuate their own attitudes and feelings regarding the phenomenon as opposed to describing the participants' lived experiences. To reduce these limitations, TA researchers focus on emphasising the importance of enhancing the quality of the research (i.e., confirmability), which refers to whether the findings are representative of the participant's responses and do not reflect the researcher's biases, interests, or perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Treharne & Riggs, 2015). A limitation in this regard relates to the researcher not obtaining feedback from each participant regarding the accurateness of his reporting on and interpretation of their experiences which may have influenced the credibility of the research findings and may not reflect the exact meaning(s) of their lived experiences. The researcher attempted to account for this limitation through the research process by engaging in integrated reflexivity to enhance the quality of the present study.

Finally, the present study only focused on muscularity. Future research would need to consider a more holistic approach to embodiment, attraction, and desire, for example, how other aspects and dimensions of body image and corporeality inform objectification (i.e., body hair, baldness, grooming, clothing etc.).

The above-mentioned limitations may be juxtaposed by what this research study endeavoured to contribute. The paucity of qualitative research regarding South African gay men's understanding regarding their social media use on their desire for muscularity is evident as explored within in Chapter 2. Therefore, the research study attempted to contribute to the dearth of global and local qualitative research concerning the lived experiences of South African gay men and their desire for muscularity. Thus, this study provides a phenomenological account of a sample of South African gay men's experiences, feelings, and perceptions regarding their use of social media and their desire for muscularity.

Moreover, the conclusions of the present study propose several consequences relating to body image disturbances amongst gay men, particularly in the South African context. While current research continues to establish the body image concerns amongst women and heterosexual men, the exploration of body image disturbances experienced amongst gay men have been limited. This study emphasised the psychological distress experienced by some gay men and may inform future research and understandings of body related concerns. Moreover, this study highlighted the association between problematic social media use and body dissatisfaction amongst gay men, which remains limited in current research. These findings may be useful for the development of interventions to target the psychological conditions that perpetuate body image disturbances, often experienced by men of sexual minority groups (Filice et al., 2020).

### 6.3. Recommendations

The core focal point of this study was restricted regarding its generalised process in the descriptive discovery of a certain occurrence which is inherently extensive and unrestricted. Therefore, prospective research could probably add to our understandings of social media's influence of gay men's desire for muscularity, by looking at specific and preferred sex roles and muscularity (i.e., top or bottom), as 'tops' could be considered and constructed as more muscular and, as such, this could point to some kind of 'bottom erasure'.

Furthermore, it is suggested that the study be replicated with a larger population as this would be beneficial in revealing a better understanding of the experiences of gay men, particularly within a South African context, as the sample would be more representative of this sexual minority population. Moreover, repeating studies similar to this one and including gay men from different ethnic backgrounds would improve the generalisability of the results or assist in identifying variances or parallels between ethnicities and racial contexts within the realm sexuality, muscularity, and social media more broadly.

Although only one participant in this study made mention of Grindr, a gay dating social media application, it is worth mentioning and recommending that future research consider the influence of using gay 'dating applications', i.e., sex, on gay men's desire for muscularity. In a study by Oshana (2021, p.3) it was found that Grindr use facilitated and "curated ideal-self presentation that focused on self-objectification for the pleasure of other gay men as a way of being perceived as desirable". Thus, Grindr use could be considered a catalyst for harmful behaviours, including excessive exercise, self-objectification, and (dis)embodiment pertaining to gay men's authentic self-identity (Oshana, 2021). The researcher could not locate a study that has explored this association within the South African context.

Generally, research falls short of recognizing that gay bodies are complex and multidimensional and must be contextualized within gay subculture(s), not just the dominant 'straight' hetero-narratives. Gay men employ different discourses to situate and interpret gay masculinities, gendered subjectivities, and bodies, not in terms of desire to attain masculinities that are deemed acceptable within a heteronormative culture, but rather masculinities that are appraised within the various subgroups that gay men may find themselves part of (Ravenhill & de Visser, 2017). Overall, there is a necessity in terms of future research regarding understanding gay men's body image, which should be able to "convey the complexity, plurality, and diversity of gay masculinity" (Ravenhill & de Visser, 2017, p. 111). Further qualitative research in this regard may thus prove beneficial in understanding the complexities

surrounding gay masculinity(ties) and how muscularity is interwoven within the different subcultures that gay men may find themselves emersed within.

#### **6.4. Concluding note**

Ultimately gay men are frequently exposed to environments that proliferate harmful and damaging body image experiences as well as repress “reflexive embodiment experiences” due to the exceedingly sexualized communities/subcultures that may be situated within the wider gay community (Oshana, 2021, p. 128). The findings and interpretations revealed throughout this research process reflect the findings of other studies and are strongly related to the underlying components of interrelatedness and individuality that essentially accentuate collective ‘gay humanity’. These experiences and meaning(s) explored demonstrate the need for continued and ongoing qualitative methodologies regarding men’s bodies in general but more specifically gay men’s bodies, masculinities, and muscularity.

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## Appendix A: Email granting permission to post on the “I Love Randburg” Facebook group



 **Keagan Gouws** <keagan.r.gouws@gmail.com>

to landy ▾

Dear Landy

I hope you are well.

I am currently completing my Master's Degree in Clinical Psychology at the University of Pretoria, and as part of the program, I am required to conduct research in the form of a mini-dissertation.

My research study involves "A qualitative exploration into how South African gay men understand the influence of social media on their own and other gay men's drive for muscularity".

As part of my research, I have to reach and recruit suitable research participants. Thus, I would like to enquire about whether or not I would be able to post an advertisement on the "I Love Randburg" Facebook group to recruit participants?

Please could you let me know if this is possible?

Kind Regards,  
Keagan Gouws  
(Student Clinical Psychologist)

 **landy@mstarr.co.za** via [my.com](mailto:my.com)

to me ▾

Hi Keagan,

Thank you for your mail.

I see no reason why you can't post an ad. Please go ahead and I will approve it.

Regards,  
Landy

## Appendix B - Participation Information Sheet



### **PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET**

#### **TITLE OF THE STUDY**

**A qualitative exploration into how South African gay men understand the influence of social media on their own and other gay men's desire for muscularity.**

Hello, my name is Keagan Gouws, I am currently a Clinical Psychology Masters student in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Pretoria. You are being invited to take part in my research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take some time to read the following information carefully, which will explain the details of this research project. Please feel free to ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.

#### **WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?**

The purpose of this research study is to explore the influence of social media on the desire for muscularity amongst gay men in South Africa. This desire for muscularity can be defined as a "desire to achieve a muscular body" that is neither to thin nor to fat (Morrison et al., 2004). These findings can inform the development of interventions to target the psychological conditions that are perpetuated in body image disturbances, particularly those that are related to muscularity, which are often experienced by men of sexual minority groups, as prior research suggests (Griffiths et al., 2018). More importantly, the study can contribute to creating awareness of body image concerns amongst male population groups.

#### **WHY HAVE YOU BEEN INVITED TO PARTICIPATE?**

You have been invited to participate in the research study because you: self-identify as a gay man, are 18- 35 years of age, have a sufficient understanding of English, use Facebook and/or Instagram for at least 3 hours every day. In order to understand how social media use influences the desire for muscularity, you are invited to participate in order to share your experiences, knowledge, and understanding of this research topic.

### **WHAT IS THE NATURE OF MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?**

You will be expected to participate in an interview with me. The interview may be conducted in-person at a time and place that is convenient for you or by means of an online virtual platform. In-person interviews will be conducted in accordance with COVID-19 safety protocols. During this interview, I will ask you questions about your experience regarding your social media use as well as your understanding, feelings and desire for muscularity. In this time, you will be provided with the opportunity to be open and honest about your experiences. This interview will take approximately 45 to 60 minutes of your time. Permission to audio-record your responses to the questions will be requested. You will also be provided with the opportunity to ask any questions regarding uncertainties or to express your feelings resulting from the interview.

### **CAN I WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY EVEN AFTER HAVING AGREED TO PARTICIPATE?**

Participating in this study is voluntary and you are under no obligation to consent to participation. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a written consent form. You are free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason or negative consequences. You are also free to decline to answer any question that you are not comfortable answering, during the interview.

### **WILL THE INFORMATION THAT I CONVEY TO THE RESEARCHER BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?**

Confidentiality will be ensured by keeping your identity private. Your identity will not be associated with any data. Confidentiality will further be ensured by ensuring that the participant's names will not be revealed. Furthermore, collected data will not be disclosed to any unauthorised persons. Code names/numbers will be assigned to each participant, and these will be used in all research notes and documents. Although the findings from this study will be disseminated through conferences and publications, this reporting will not make use of

participant names or identifying information. Only the researcher and supervisors of this study will have access to the anonymised and participant data.

Please note participant information will be kept confidential, except in cases where the researcher is legally obliged to report incidents such as abuse and suicide risk.

### **WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

Direct benefits for you as a participant will be insight into your subjective experiences as a gay male. The study will therefore provide you with the opportunity to share your experiences. The indirect benefits will be insight into the influence of social media on the desire for muscularity amongst gay men in South Africa.

### **WHAT ARE THE ANTICIPATED RISKS FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

The risks in this study are minimal and no physical risks are anticipated. However, sharing personal experiences of may result in unwanted and uncomfortable emotions or feelings. Measures to minimize these risks include a referral to the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) for counselling, which is free of charge. Should the participant require additional therapeutic services, the researcher has obtained permission from Mr Shelley Heusser, a registered Clinical Psychologist (Independent Practice), to whom he will refer the participants for private psychotherapy, which will be charged at Mr Heusser's personal rate.

### **WHAT WILL HAPPEN IN THE UNLIKELY EVENT THAT SOME FORM OF DISCOMFORT OCCUR AS A RESULT OF TAKING PART IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY?**

Should you require debriefing or have the need for further discussions after the interviews, an opportunity for you to do so will be arranged and a referral to SADAG will be made if need be. Should the participant require additional therapeutic services, the researcher has obtained permission from Mr Shelley Heusser, a registered Clinical Psychologist (Independent Practice), to whom he will refer the participants for private psychotherapy, which will be charged at Mr Heusser's personal rate.

### **HOW WILL THE RESEARCHER(S) PROTECT THE SECURITY OF DATA?**

Data from this study will be stored in electronic format at the University of Pretoria for period of 15 years. The data may, during this time, be used for future research purposes subject to

further ethics approval. Participant information and raw data in hard copy format will be securely stored in a locked cabinet and electronic data will be kept in a file that is password protected in the Department of Psychology at the University of Pretoria.

### **WHAT WILL THE RESEARCH DATA BE USED FOR?**

Data gathered from the participant would be used for the following;

- Master's dissertation, journal article publication, national and international conference presentations
- For administration purpose or policy briefs
- For further research in the form of secondary data analysis.

### **WILL I BE PAID TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?**

No, you will not be paid to take part in this study. You will incur no travel expenses should you choose to have the researcher travel to your residence to conduct the interview, However, should you not choose to have the interview conducted at your residence, the interview will take place at the researcher's residence and you will be responsible for your own travel expense. Note, there is the option of having the interview take place via videoconferencing.

### **HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICS APPROVAL?**

This study has received written approval from the Research Ethics Committee of Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria. Ethical approval number is (...). A copy of the approval letter can be provided to you on request.

### **HOW WILL I BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS/RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH?**

The findings of the research study will be shared with you by **Keagan Gouws** after completion of the study.

### **WHO SHOULD I CONTACT IF I HAVE CONCERN, COMPLAINT OR ANYTHING I SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE STUDY?**

If you have questions about this study or you have experienced adverse effects as a result of participating in this study, you may contact the researcher whose contact information is provided below. If you have questions regarding the rights as a research participant, or if

problems arise which you do not feel you can discuss with the researcher, please contact the supervisor, and contact details are below

Thank you for taking time to read this information sheet and in advance for participating in this study.

**Researcher**

Name Surname: Keagan Gouws

Contact number: 083 658 1612

Email address: Keagan.r.gouws@gmail.com

**Supervisor**

Name: Sonja Mostert

Contact number: 012 420 4904

Email address: Sonja.Mostert@up.ac.za

**Co-Supervisor**

Name: Dr. Jarred Martin

Contact Number: 012 420 2830

Email address: jarred.martin@up.ac.za

## Appendix C – Written Consent Form



### Written Consent Form

A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION INTO HOW SOUTH AFRICAN GAY MEN  
 UNDERSTAND THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON THEIR OWN AND OTHER  
 GAY MEN’S DESIRE FOR MUSCULARITY.

{HUM024/0721}

#### WRITTEN CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (participant name), confirm that the person asking my consent to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

STATEMENT	AGREE	DISAGREE	NOT APPLICABLE
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason, and without any consequences or penalties.			
I understand that information collected during the study will not be linked to my identity and I give permission to the researchers of this study to access the information.			

STATEMENT	AGREE	DISAGREE	NOT APPLICABLE
I understand that this study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance from Research Ethics Committee Faculty of Humanities of the University of Pretoria, as well as for my responses to be used for future research purposes.			
I understand who will have access to personal information and how the information will be stored with a clear understanding that, I will not be linked to the information in any way.			
I give consent that data gathered may be used for dissertation, article publication, conference presentations and writing policy briefs.			
I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.			
I consent to being audio recorded.			
I consent to have my audio recordings be used in research outputs such as publication of articles, thesis and conferences as long as my identity is protected.			
I give permission to be quoted directly in the research publication whilst remaining anonymous.			
I have sufficient opportunity to ask questions and I agree to take part in the above study.			

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of person taking consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

## Appendix D: Participant Recruitment Advert for Social Media

### A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION INTO HOW SOUTH AFRICAN GAY MEN UNDERSTAND THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON THEIR OWN AND OTHER GAY MEN'S DRIVE FOR MUSCULARITY.

Hello, my name is Keagan Gouws, I am currently a Clinical Psychology Masters student in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Pretoria. I am on the look out for gay South African men between the ages of 18 and 35 years, who are frequent social media users (at least 3 hours per day), and who have a good understanding of English, to take part in my study.

# GayFitness

# InstaFitness

YOU WILL BE EXPECTED TO PARTICIPATE IN AN INTERVIEW WITH ME, EITHER IN PERSON OR ONLINE. PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY IS VOLUNTARY AND YOU ARE UNDER NO OBLIGATION TO CONSENT TO PARTICIPATION.

# GYM LIFE

# GAINS

# Shredded

# Muscles

# Fitness

# GayMan

*Should you be interested in taking part in this study, please reply to the following email address indicating your interest. Thereafter, I will send you a detailed information sheet about the study as well as a consent form. \* Note, that your participation and details will **remain confidential**.*

*Email address: keagan.r.gouwse@gmail.com*

## Appendix E: Interview Schedule



The researcher will attempt to build rapport with each participant by asking how they are feeling at the time and about their participation in the interview. I will reiterate that all information will remain confidential and that they are able to withdraw from the study at any point, should they feel uncomfortable. I will ask each participant whether or not they have any questions regarding the study before the commencement of the interview.

### Demographic information

1. Age
2. Ethnicity
3. Frequency of social media use and platforms used (i.e., *Facebook & Instagram*)

### Potential interview questions

1. How often do you use the following social media platforms (Facebook and/or Instagram)?
2. How has social media affected your views on body image, or your personal body?
3. Can you describe a time you have felt self-conscious due to portrayals of men's body image on social media?
4. How do you feel about your own body image and where do you think this stems from?
5. What do you understand of muscularity? What does it mean to you? How would you define it?
6. Do you think because of social media there is a specific definition of 'muscularity' that most gay men want to achieve? Why do you think this is?
7. How do you think your use of social media impacts the level of muscularity you aspire to achieve?
8. Do you feel the need to become more muscular because of what you see on social media? Why do you think this is?

9. What behavioural changes, if any, have you made to attain your view of muscularity or that you viewed on social media? For example, do you engage more in physical exercise, healthy eating, etc?

## Appendix F: Ethics Approval Letter



Dear Mr KR Gouws

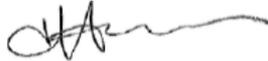
**Project Title:** A qualitative exploration into how South African gay men understand the influence of social media on their own and other gay men's drive for muscularity  
**Researcher:** Mr KR Gouws  
**Supervisor(s):** Dr JH Martin  
Miss SN Mostert  
**Department:** Psychology  
**Reference number:** 21612562 (HUM024/0721)  
**Degree:** Masters

I have pleasure in informing you that the above application was **approved** by the Research Ethics Committee on 26 August 2021. Data collection may therefore commence.

Please note that this approval is based on the assumption that the research will be carried out along the lines laid out in the proposal. Should the actual research depart significantly from the proposed research, it will be necessary to apply for a new research approval and ethical clearance.

We wish you success with the project.

Sincerely,



**Prof Karen Harris**  
**Chair: Research Ethics Committee**  
**Faculty of Humanities**  
**UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA**  
**e-mail: tracey.andrew@up.ac.za**

## Appendix G: Participant Referral Permission Letter



Researcher: Keagan Richard Gouws

Student Number 21612562

Participant Referral Contact

**Name:** Shelley Heusser

**Registration Category:** Clinical Psychology (Independent Practice)

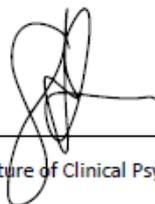
**HPCSA Registration Number:** PS 0112860

**Practice Number:** 0445800

**Contact:** 082 330 4850

**Email:** psychology@shelleyheusser.co.za

I, Mr Shelley Heusser, give permission to the researcher, Mr Keagan Richard Gouws, to refer his research participants to me for private psychotherapy consultations, should they experience any negative consequences as a result of their involvement in Mr Gouws' study. These consultations will be charged at my full rate.



\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Clinical Psychologist

04 June 2021

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date