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Constructing Plus-Size Identities Through Representations of Masculinity and Body Image In
American Media

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For a large majority of American children in the early 2000's, television was an essential part of daily life. The media culture that encompassed my young male peers and I had a definitive effect on how we formed our personal identifications, through perpetuating male role-models that shaped how we should view ourselves, and defining how a desirable man looks and behaves. As an overweight, or plus-size child, I always felt that I was non-desirable, as my appearance and behavior was contradictory to what was displayed on screen in popular youth media. This research will seek to answer the question: How do I construct and experience my identity as a plus-size male through representations of masculinity and body image in American media? The purpose of this research is to analyze how American media culture depicts a desirable male through representations of masculinity and body image, and how these representations shape the identities of young males. Through using a critical lens, I will be describing the processes that culminate in identification formation, and partake in the thorough evaluation of personal narratives which will examine how my exposure to hegemonic messages within popular American youth television influenced my formation of my plus-size identity. This will aid in clarifying how these representations can damage social perceptions of plus-size males, therefore also impacting how plus-size males form their own identities. Through the use of autoethnography, I will be dissecting American media culture, and furthermore exposing the greater experience of plus-size male youth within American culture.

Identification and Media Culture

As individuals mature within a particular culture, the ways in which they make sense of themselves and the world around them are defined by their media culture, as it provides, “the materials out of which people forge their very identities.”ⁱ These identifications are developed through a process that is “never completed,” involving the personal experiences of an individual as well as their exposure to specific representations and ideologies within their media culture.ⁱⁱ Media exposure constructs individual’s understanding of “us” and “them,” defining what qualities and appearances are of greater value within the specific culture, and highlighting what is viewed as undesirable.ⁱⁱⁱ Media offerings, or “texts,” are used by individuals for “finding models of behavior,” as they “come to play a central role in the shaping and arrangement of our everyday lives and social relationships.”^{iv} Identities that individuals exhibit reflect the “successful articulation or ‘chaining’ of the subject into the flow of discourse.”^v These shared discourses that are perpetuated by media culture join subjects into shared “structures of meaning.”^{vi} This process is part of interpellation, “the hailing of the subject by discourse,” leading to identities that are in line with dominant ideology^{vii}.

The usage of autoethnography will be indispensable in recognizing the ways in which identifications are constructed through individual experiences, influenced by media culture. Autoethnography connects “the personal to the cultural, social, and political.”^{viii} It can efficiently be defined as a “research method that foregrounds the researcher’s personal experience (auto) as it is embedded within, and informed by, cultural identities and con/texts (ethno) and as it is expressed through writing, performance, or other creative means (graphy).”^{ix} Autoethnography facilitates the analysis of a specific culture through personal narratives^x. As explained by

Manning and Adams, “personal experience becomes a valid, viable, and vital kind of data from which to make meaning and use in research.^{xi}” This autoethnography will be executed through the analysis of my individual narratives throughout comprehensive journal entries. I will use the process of critical autoethnography to expose potentially harmful hegemonic representations of masculinity and body image, engaging in “laborious, honest, and nuanced self-reflection – often referred to as “reflexivity,” in an effort to provide analysis that is deeply culturally significant.^{xii}

Feeling Like A Sidekick In My Own Story

In the early 2000’s, the way that my adolescent peers and I grew to understand the world was through popular youth media. The characters and stereotypes that were perpetuated throughout various shows created what would be considered to be norms for how my peers and I should construct our individual identities. I grew up watching *Drake and Josh*, an incredibly well known and successful show that resonated with the majority of my peers as well. The central characters were two disparate brothers named Drake and Josh.

An episode from the second season of the show titled, “Pool Shark,” is an excellent resource to convey the brother’s differing characterization. It is known to the audience that Drake and Josh are new to being step brothers, and are still acclimating to each other. The show opens with Drake and Josh parallel on a vertically split screen. Josh is playing solitaire alone at the dining room table. He is donning an unflattering and rumpled button-up shirt tossed over a maroon t-shirt. He has plump, blushing cheeks and bushy hair. He sits with rounded shoulders, joyfully voicing his eagerness to become friends with his new brother. The focus shifts to Drake as he plays a cherry-red electric guitar in his loft bed. He has well-kept hair, and his lean build is noticeable through his flattering polo shirt with the top buttons undone. Drake describes his displeasure and aversion to his brother that he is forced to associate with, “Kill me,” he begs the audience.

Later that day, the camera tracks within their local movie theater called “The Premiere,” where Josh works as a candy sales boy. Drake stands beside a pool table, nestled in the spacious theater lobby. A game is taking place between him and three other young men, but is cut short as Drake’s partner must suddenly leave. Drake suggests that the game can continue, and that the opposing team may pick anyone within the theater as his partner. They begin to scan the lobby for contenders, locking their eyes on Josh. He is painstakingly struggling to stack cartons of candy when he trips, knocking over all of the candy on display, including a glass candy machine. Drake and the men laugh as Josh struggles to get up from the ground. Drake beckons Josh to join the game, but he refuses since he is currently working. Drake assertively tells Josh that he will participate, and Josh immediately submits. As he hands Josh the pool cue, Drake describes how to play the game as if Josh is incapable. Remarkably, Josh proves himself to be an incredible pool player, explaining that pool is just “basic geometry and physics.” Drake is stunned that they have won the game, and the scene transitions to him and his brother at home. Josh proclaims his

elation from their victory, until Drake places tape over his mouth and sits him in a chair to shut him up. Drake realizes he can take advantage of Josh's appearance and skill to hustle people at pool in the theater.

The brothers have returned to the theater, where Josh naively believes that Drake wants to spend quality time with him playing pool. Drake deliberately chooses two boys that appear as scrawny nerds, Craig and Eric, as their first challengers. He lies to Josh that Craig's mother is sick, convincing Josh to let the nerds win the game, while onlookers are being deceived into assuming they are bad at pool. His plan is successful. After the nerds win, two young men approach Drake and make fun of him and Josh for losing against two "losers." Drake then secretly bets them twenty dollars that him and Josh could beat them in a game, and they win, with Drake covertly collecting the money. A quick montage shows the audience that Drake has been exploiting Josh the whole afternoon, and hustling everyone in the movie theater. Drake then affectionately hugs Josh, counting the money he has amassed behind his back. Another day, a theater patron scowls at Josh and scolds him for taking people's money. He finally realizes that Drake had been manipulating him, and is disheartened. When Josh confronts Drake, he apologizes for not telling Josh that he was collecting money, but does not apologize for lying to his brother. Josh tries to assert his resentment by scolding Drake, but then trips again and clumsily slams into a bookshelf.

Two seasons later, in a following episode, the show opens again with Drake and Josh on a vertically split screen. Years have passed by now as the brothers have grown into their late teen years. Josh is anxiously studying for an important chemistry test that both he and Drake have the next morning. Drake is laying in his loft bed bouncing a ping-pong ball, and tells the audience that he has not studied at all for the test. He calls Josh on his cellphone, asking him to come upstairs and play ping-pong. Josh at first tries to refuse but then easily submits to Drake's request, insisting that he at least get the good paddle. Drake says that he will get the bad one, and Josh does not argue. It's now the following morning before the test and Josh walks into their shared bedroom, he's drying his hair with a towel in one hand and reading a textbook aloud with the other. Drake throws a ping pong paddle into Josh's crotch and laughs as Josh winces in pain. He then rushes downstairs to answer a phone call from a hot girl from school, and she invites him to makeout before school starts. Drake immediately takes the car that he and Josh share, leaving Josh stranded at the house, and causing him to miss the test he had studied so hard for.

The central issue that these memories bring to light, is how these representations affected the formation of my plus-size identity. On a surface level I identified with Josh. It infuriated me that a character that I felt was a good person would be repeatedly belittled and disrespected. I came to realize that the reason it really angered me was because all of the things that made Josh undesirable were traits that I shared with him. People made fun of him for being

overweight, academically successful, and for seeming “soft.” I realized that just as much as he is viewed as the “other,” I am as well. Media exposure constructs individual’s understanding of “us” and “them,” defining what qualities and appearances are of greater value within the specific culture, and highlighting what is viewed as undesirable.^{xiii} Josh did not fulfill the dominant masculine role and he was always treated poorly for it. I consistently struggled with my plus-size identity, as I never felt properly masculine. Rather than be aggressive I was calm and empathetic, and rather than be sporty I was creative and artistic. While I grew up people attempted to regularly reprimand me into displaying dominant masculine characteristics. I faced a lot of adversity, and often felt belittled. The television shows like *Drake and Josh* provided “models of behavior,” that essentially taught my peers that I was not acting like the norm.^{xiv} These models of behavior, “play a central role in the shaping and arrangement of our everyday lives and social relationships.^{xv}” When I would try to avoid confrontation, my peers would label me a pushover. Since I was comfortable with being affectionate with people, my peers would say that I was acting like a girl. They believed me to be soft, “one of the worst things a man can suffer in this culture.^{xvi}” While these things enraged me, I somewhat brushed them off because I was too stubborn to change myself. However, as I got older and my identity as a man became more scrutinized, I began to feel more pressured by society to conform. As I grew into a man, certain qualities became expected from me. I faced pressure from my family to act more assertive, as they wanted me to be more aggressive with people, and also to become more physically fit. According to the *International Journal of Men's Health*, “there are new cultural, social, financial, and physical pressures for appearance to match cultural perceptions of authority.^{xvii}” As I faced more pressure my identity as a plus-size male became more salient, because I was having trouble conforming to dominant masculinity. I began to be more aggressively ‘chained’ into the flow of discourse, and was being pushed to into an identity more in line with dominant ideology.^{xviii} I began to feel more guilty than scrutinized, I felt that somehow my version of masculinity was letting others down and holding me back from being the best man I could be for those close to me. Even though I attempted to resist these expectations of masculinity, the representations that were shown to me and my peers within our media culture made me feel inadequate. The man I wanted to be is not the man that I am expected to be.

A Nerd’s Whimsical Realm

As I came to the last classroom in the hallway I arched my head up high, finally meeting eyes with my new fifth grade teacher. He greeted me with a warm smile and escorted me to a desk next to my soon-to-be life-long best friend Jack. The year flew by, and as summer was closing in, Jack suggested that we attend the same summer camp. I walked into Liberty Lake Day Camp at the end of June unsure of what to expect, but hopeful that I would make some new friends and enjoy my time off before the start of middle school. Every Sunday, campers would pick five activities that they would do for the upcoming week. The camp had a lot of options ranging from competitive sports like Ga-ga, to more artistic ventures like canvas painting, and even environmental endeavors like beekeeping. At camp I had a much easier time making friends. Besides Jack and I, almost no one from our town went there, so I had a clean slate. There

was also much more diversity, so aside from my assigned camp group, I was able to find cliques that I could better acclimate into. However, at that age campers spent a lot of time with their assigned groups, so it was important to me that I became friends with the other boys. Every group at the camp was named after a college, mine being named Ramapo.

In Ramapo there was mostly sporty boys that played baseball during the year, and a few kids who liked playing card games and Dungeons and Dragons (D&D). They were branded as “nerdy,” ostracized by the more athletic boys in our group. They were perceived as immature, and a lot of the girls my age agreed as well. Sometimes, my peers would mockingly compare them to oddball characters on TV like Milhouse from *The Simpsons* or Carl Wheezer from *Jimmy Neutron*. I would never make fun of them, instead refraining from making an effort to befriend them. I was scared of being disliked, I experienced that enough during the school year.

At lunch the “nerdy” kids would sit off to the side and talk about their adventures in the D&D elective earlier in the day. I would overhear them discussing their tales of glory and mystery, how they had vanquished the army of orcs and conquered the treacherous wizard’s dungeon. They would convey their tales with such fervor and thrill as if they were indeed taking place in real life. They were so eager to continue their exploits each day, relishing in their own whimsical realm. Their tales captivated me, I would much rather experience their stories than hear Brad chat about his home run in dodgeball. I began expressing my curiosity to the “nerds” when we were away from the other boys, trying to comprehend how a few parcels of paper and plastic pieces could construct such an enamoring experience. Eventually, they had mentioned this to the counselor running the activity, and he decided to reach out to me and propose that I join them. To his surprise, I respectfully declined. I didn’t even have a good reason to reject his offer, in fact I felt bad about it. The only reason I hesitated from playing was because I did not want to be associated with the “nerds.” I did not want to be perceived as immature and childish to my male peers and to the cute girls. I was already a fat kid, so the less I had working against me, the better. I wanted to be understood as a normal boy, not as anything less, especially a nerd. As I grew older, I continued a private fascination with Dungeons and Dragons, hiding my “nerdy” hobby even to this day.

This childhood recollection unearths the questions of not only why the D&D players were emasculated as “nerds,” but also how this experience effected the formation of my identity. Dungeons and Dragons, while it is beginning to become more accepted into mainstream culture recently, was previously regarded as a “nerdy” and undesirable subculture. Viewed similarly as fans of *Star Trek* and members of other fandoms, the “nerds” dedication to D&D caused others to understand them as “social misfits,” allocating their time to “worthless knowledge,” and were assumed to be “emotionally and intellectually immature.”^{xix} These perceptions restricted their social experiences and “feminized and/or desexualized” them.^{xx} The stereotypes of nerds portrayed in American media culture categorize them as non-masculine individuals. They are envisioned as having “bulging stomachs,” “glasses,” unathletic and unattractive traits, and an unsuccessful future living in their “parent’s basement.”^{xxi}

For example, in the children's show *Jimmy Neutron* and the long-running comedy *The Simpsons*, Carl Wheezer and Milhouse (respectively) practically fit this description in its entirety. In American media it is depicted that an interest and talent in sports and physical activities is a more masculine and desirable trait among boys and men. A qualitative study done by Jason Tocci in 2009 found that many youth that are viewed as "nerds" or "geeks" in elementary and middle school failed to partake in specifically sports.^{xxii} Inversely, it was also found that a majority of the participants in the study who had a more active passion for sports were much less "labeled and picked on as children."^{xxiii}

During that summer as I was just about to enter middle school, I rejected "nerdy" traits to attempt to categorize myself as a more acceptable and masculine boy. As I was already overweight, wore glasses, and was hopeless when it came to sports; I was worried that any association with a demeaned fandom would solidify my social standing as a feminized misfit. I refused to reveal my true self worried that I would face social scorn, and I internalized and concealed my discontent with the normalized notion of masculinity. Whether or not I realized it at the time, this process later played a part in me rejecting traits of hypermasculinity and developing a "softer" masculinity. I grew to not only conceal my own passions to protect myself from social ridicule, but became more empathetic and nurturing to defend others as well. Even as an adult, the continued perpetuation of the "nerdy" stereotype in American media subconsciously provokes me to conceal certain attributes of my personality, defining my identity.

Conclusion

This autoethnography articulates how I have constructed and experienced my identity as a plus-size male through representations of masculinity and body image in American media. While my narratives and analysis investigate only my personal lived experiences, I believe that they convey greater cultural connotations for the countless more plus-size American males. The media culture that surrounds young men in the United States has a conclusive impact on how they form their personal identifications, and the traits they develop as they mature into manhood. Further examination and engagement regarding these issues would be advantageous. An awareness and concern regarding the male role-models that are perpetuated within youth media must be developed to ensure a beneficial future for American youth.

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Notes

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- ⁱ Kellner, 1994
ⁱⁱ Hall, 1996
ⁱⁱⁱ Kellner, 1994
^{iv} Downing, Mohammadi & Sreberny, 1990
^v Hall, 1996
^{vi} Hall, 1996
^{vii} Hall, 1996
^{viii} Boylorn & Orbe, 2014
^{ix} Manning & Adams, 2015
^x Boylorn & Orbe, 2014
^{xi} Manning & Adams, 2015
^{xii} Manning & Adams, 2015
^{xiii} Kellner, 1994
^{xiv} Downing, Mohammadi & Sreberny, 1990
^{xv} Downing, Mohammadi & Sreberny, 1990
^{xvi} Weber, 2006
^{xvii} Weber, 2006
^{xviii} Hall, 1996
^{xix} Jenkins, 2013
^{xx} Jenkins, 2013
^{xxi} Jenkins, 2013
^{xxii} Tocci, 2009
^{xxiii} Tocci, 2009