Chapter Seven: Discussion and Conclusion

The following chapter will present a discussion of the key findings of the present research in light of the arguments developed in the literature review. The results of the correlations will be discussed first, followed by an examination of how combinations of gender identity and ego strength were found to predict body image dissatisfaction. These arguments will then be integrated in a conclusion section, followed by consideration of the limitations of the present research as well as recommendations for future research.

7.1 The Relationship between Gender Identity and Ego Strength

Ego strength in Erikson’s theory is understood as the degree to which one’s sense of self is able to develop from being initially weak and fragile to being stronger and more integrated (Feist & Feist, 1999). The strength of the ego is determined by how well the individual deals with a series of psychosocial conflicts that continue throughout one’s life (Roazen, 1976). It was found in the present research that both masculinity and femininity were significantly related to ego strength. In both instances, the positive correlations suggested that both dimensions of gender identity tended to be associated with higher scores on ego strength. This implies that irrespective of which polarised gender identity one endorses, a greater sense of oneself as either masculine or feminine will lead to higher ego strength. The finding may be explained by the understanding that more clearly defined self-other boundaries leads to greater ego strength.

With regard to masculinity specifically, the positive correlation with ego strength corroborates research by Cameron (2003), Markstrom et al. (1997), and Wells (1980), amongst others, who have also found masculinity to be associated with higher ego strength. The finding also makes intuitive sense in the present research when one examines the kinds of traits that are measured by the new version of the masculinity scale. For example, being self-reliant, assertive, ambitious, adaptable, self-sufficient and having a strong personality, amongst others, seems to tie in well with traits of feeling stable in one’s identity. Moreover, masculinity was associated with additional
positive traits, such as *cheerfulness* and being *happy*, which would again add to the understanding of masculinity as healthy.

However, unlike the supposition of masculinity as an adjustment factor, the literature on femininity and ego strength has typically been less clear, as femininity has at times been viewed as having high levels of ego strength, but on other occasions appears to be less favourable (Markstrom et al., 1997; Schiff and Koopman, 1978). As with the Masculinity scale, however, the BSRI Femininity underwent transition and several positive traits were added to the scale, while less desirable items, such as *gullible*, did not load onto the revised scale. Femininity then included a substantive amount of positive traits that are likely to promote a more positive sense of self, such as *sincere*, *conscientious*, *tactful* and *loyal*, which may further its links to higher ego strength. As such, despite the work of Bem (1974) who held polarised endorsement of traits to be detrimental to health, the findings of the present research appeared contrary to her ideas.

Finally, despite Bem’s (1974) unequivocal assertion that an androgynous orientation was the epitome of health, it was surprising to find that androgyny was not significantly correlated with ego strength. Indeed, the finding appears to contradict Bem’s (1976; 1981) work which suggested that sex typed behaviour can be detrimental or limiting. This is a difficult and curious result to explain, as research has typically found androgyny to be associated with psychological integration and health. While it may imply that androgyny is in fact not associated with higher ego strength, the result may also be attributed to the complexity in calculating androgyny. Indeed, while it is a theoretically useful construct, its operational definition is complex, and so the lack of significant relationships may be an artefact of the way in which androgyny was calculated.

7.2 The Relationship between Gender Identity and Body Image Dissatisfaction
The first result that will be discussed in this grouping is the correlation between masculinity and body image dissatisfaction (measured by the ACQ-R_Image). While it was anticipated that men who scored higher on stereotypical masculine traits would be more likely to show dissatisfaction with their body image, the results showed the antithesis of this to be true. Indeed, a significant negative correlation was found which
implied that stronger endorsement of masculinity was associated with lower body
dissatisfaction. The result suggested that masculine men are less likely to be
anxious about the appearance of their bodies, and that masculinity can serve as a kind
of protective factor against body image concerns. The findings resonated with
Cameron (2003), who found BSRI masculinity scores to be negatively correlated with
various dimensions of the Hopkins Symptoms Checklist, such as somatisation,
obsessive compulsive symptoms, depression and anxiety. The result, however, does
not provide support for Bem (1974) or Pleck (1981) who argued that excessive
commitment to a polarised sex role has a negative impact on psychological health
(seen in higher body image dissatisfaction). Rather, the correlation corroborated
research that has associated the endorsement of masculinity with a strong health or
adjustment factor (Cameron, 2003; Long, 1989; Markstrom et al, 1997; May &
Spangenberg, 1997).

While masculinity may have a positive effect on one’s body image, there may be a
particular reason why this was so in the present research. The BSRI Masculinity
underwent revision and while a large proportion of original traits remained, there
were important additions to the scale. In particular, masculinity came to represent a
series of positive traits such as adaptable, cheerful, happy, and likeable. This may
have played into a more positive association of masculinity and hence psychological
health in the present research.

A significant positive correlation was also found between androgyny and body image
dissatisfaction. Given the way in which androgyny was calculated, the correlation
implied that the more androgynous the individual, the less likely they are to be
dissatisfied with their body image. This anticipated result provided contemporary
support for Bem’s (1974) original contention that androgyny was conducive to
psychological health as reflected in a more satisfied body image.

With regard to femininity, it was anticipated that its relationship to body image
dissatisfaction would be negative or not significant because the items on the ACQ-
R_Image were more specific to anxiety concerning the bodies’ muscularity and how
that affects daily life. As these are unlikely feminine concerns, the finding that
femininity was not significantly related to body image dissatisfaction was as
predicted. The result does, however, suggest that one should not swiftly or straightforwardly link femininity to all manifestations of body image concerns, but rather that this traditional association may be more specific to particular manifestations of body image concerns relating to, for example, thinness. As such, one should maintain that different operational definitions of body image dissatisfaction may show gendered differences in manifestations of body image concern.

7.3 The Relationship between Ego Strength and Body Image Dissatisfaction
While the body image concerns measured by the ACQ-R_Image did not measure an eating disorder or BDD specifically, the literature drew on such work to explain how negative feelings toward body shape, appearance, and a distorted body image have been attributed to deficits in ego strength. As predicted then, a significant negative correlation was found between ego strength and body image dissatisfaction, which suggested that individuals with higher ego strength tended to be more satisfied with their body image. This corroborates research which has suggested that ego strength is associated with a strong health or adjustment factor, lower levels of psychological distress, higher self-esteem and lower levels of anxiety and depression (Cameron, 2003; Markstrom, 1997; Waterman, 1992).

7.4 Findings regarding Body Image Disturbance (ACQ-R_Dysmorphia)
Unlike the ACQ-R_Image, the ACQ-R_Dysmorphia was specifically concerned with more severe behaviours and compulsions related to the concerns for masculinity that would potentially give rise to a disturbed body image. While it was anticipated that stronger endorsement of traditional masculinity would encourage a greater focus on the body as a means to assert a masculine identity (Pope et al. 2000), scores on ACQ-R_Dysmorphia were not significantly related to masculinity or any other gender identity variable. Body image disturbance was also not significantly related to ego strength. This result may be linked to the finding that masculinity was negatively, rather than positively, related to body image dissatisfaction, or imply that ego strength does not contribute to body image disturbance. It could also be surmised that the body image disturbance measured by the ACQ-R_Dysmorphia requires a combination of factors to be present before it will manifest. However, the most likely reason for the lack of significant correlations with body image disturbance was the choice of sample
in the present research. Indeed, it was unlikely that this sample would have shown high levels of pathological body image disturbance, as reviewed under the limitations of the research.

While body image disturbance was not associated with gender identity, higher scores on ACQ-R_Dysmorphia were found to be significantly correlated with higher BMI scores. As BMI scores were used to assess whether body image disturbance correlated with extreme BMI scores, there are at least two equally plausible explanations for the result. On the one hand, as the BMI is a measure of weight relative to height, higher BMI scores denote a more overweight person, which may suggest that the more overweight the person, the greater their propensity to body image disturbance. As body image disturbance was understood to involve attempts to combat perceived inadequacies or discontent with the body, an overweight person may feel more self-conscious about their appearance and so be more obsessed with behaviour that could reduce their weight or improve their tone.

The rival explanation, however, is that the higher BMI was not created by higher fat content, but rather by more muscle tone. Indeed, it is possible to be classified as overweight even if body fat percentage is low, given that athletics and sports will develop large muscles, consequently adding more weight (Rosser, 2001). In this view, it could be argued that individuals more obsessed with their appearance and who exercise vigorously (hence creating a higher BMI) may do so in an attempt to cope with a body image disturbance. Both explanations can sensibly predict the relationship between body image disturbance and higher BMI scores. However, without a calculation to discern the person’s weight due to muscularity compared to being overweight due to excess fat, it is unclear which conclusion to draw.

Finally, a surprising finding was that BMI scores were significantly negatively correlated with Femininity. This implied that higher scores on Femininity were associated with lower BMI scores. It is unclear why this occurred or what this link could mean, as the present research did not hypothesise around this relationship. However, it is possible that factors such as a feminine body type being associated with physical weakness, thinness or typically lower weight could account for this, though more definitive reasons need to be taken up in later research.
7.5 Findings regarding Sexual Orientation

It was noted in the literature review that gay men are often argued to be more dissatisfied with their bodies and are more prone to develop eating disorders (Russell & Keel, 2002). This is often attributed to the belief that gay men identify more strongly with femininity, which in turn is believed to be associated with greater emphasis on appearance, and hence more body image concerns (Andersen, 1990; 1999; Silberstein et al, 1989). While it is difficult to contribute to this debate in the present research given that the sample of gay and bisexual men was small, it can be noted that these forms of sexuality were fairly evenly spread amongst all four gender identity categories as seen in Table 5.1, and so gay men are not necessarily feminine. Secondly, while research that has cast doubt on the association between homosexuality and body image concerns was highlighted, the results of the present study seemed to confirm the more commonplace assumption that gay / bisexual men are more likely to show concerns with their body image than heterosexual men, as seen in their higher scores on body image dissatisfaction (the ACQ-R Image). No differences were found on the measure of body image disturbance.

7.6 Findings of the Multiple Regression

From the discussion of the first three questions in the present research, it was seen that higher levels of masculinity, androgyny and ego strength tended to be associated with lower levels of body image dissatisfaction. However, a multiple regression was used to infer whether body image dissatisfaction could be predicted when combining gender identity and ego strength. The results that will now be discussed present an intriguing picture of how the variables could work together to either increase or decrease body image dissatisfaction, and in some instances seemed to contradict the afore-mentioned results.

7.6.1 The combination of cross typed or sex typed and ego strength

On the one hand, while femininity did not significantly correlate with body image dissatisfaction in the first question, using the multiple regression it appeared that endorsement of femininity may actually predict higher body image dissatisfaction. This result seemed to corroborate much research which has held that femininity is more strongly associated with body image dissatisfaction (Meyer, Blisset, & Oldfield, 2001). While this result may contradict the earlier finding, a second dimension
revealed from the regression appeared to highlight an interesting qualification to this. A feminine individual who also had high ego strength was predicted to have fairly low levels of body image dissatisfaction. In contrast, high endorsement of femininity combined with low ego strength predicted the highest level of body image dissatisfaction. This implied that femininity on its own may be detrimental to body image dissatisfaction, but that higher ego strength has a moderating effect on this relationship. As such, the result provided partial support for Bem’s (1974) contention that the endorsement of a polarised gender identity could be potentially negative to psychological health (here implying body image dissatisfaction), but that a greater sense of one’s identity (hence higher ego strength) can act as a buffer to personal distress. It should, however, be kept in mind that while this overall pattern was plausible, caution needs to be taken in extrapolating this result.

While the result discussed previously predicted that cross-typed (feminine) men would have lower dissatisfaction with higher ego strength, the results regarding masculinity were more peculiar. On the one hand, masculinity on its own appeared to predict lower body image dissatisfaction, which resonated with the earlier correlation analyses, and reiterated the notion that masculinity is associated with a strong health factor. However, masculinity combined with ego strength ran in opposition to the pattern with femininity. Indeed, masculinity combined with low ego strength predicted moderate body image dissatisfaction, but high masculinity and high ego strength predicted high body image dissatisfaction. As such, the moderating effect of ego strength did not exist when combined with masculinity. This result was surprising and contradicts the findings in the earlier part of the research where masculinity was associated with lower body image dissatisfaction. While the combination seemed to suggest that high ego strength and high endorsement of masculinity predicted higher body image dissatisfaction, the result could also be artificial given the small sample size in the regression. Indeed, masculinity and ego strength were originally strongly correlated, and so there are unlikely to be many men with high masculinity and low ego strength. The result may then be a parameter that entered the equation as a corrective for low masculinity. In low masculinity, ego strength does produce a moderating effect on body image dissatisfaction.
7.6.2 The undifferentiated and androgynous combined with ego strength

Research has suggested that an individual with a less well defined sense of their gender identity (hence undifferentiated) has a lower ego strength and poorer psychological well-being. While it was anticipated that body image dissatisfaction would be predicted to be high in such individuals, the findings showed that undifferentiated individuals would have moderate levels of body image dissatisfaction when combined with low ego strength and a lower level of body image dissatisfaction when combined with high ego strength. As with femininity then, ego strength appears to moderate the effects of gender identity on body image dissatisfaction. However, ego strength did not further contribute to the individual’s body image satisfaction with regard to androgynous individuals. Rather, body image dissatisfaction was predicted to be low whether or not the androgynous person had high or low ego strength. This latter result provides support for Bem’s (1974) theory that the androgynous are the most psychologically healthy and adjusted. The result may also link to the earlier finding that ego strength and androgyny are unrelated, though this again could be explained by the difficulty in calculating androgyny.

7.7 Integration and Conclusion

While much interest has been shown in the study of masculinity, the present research attempted to contribute a further dimension to this work by engaging with the relationships between varying dimensions of gender identity, a particular interpretation of body image and levels of ego strength as understood in Erikson’s theory. This conclusion section will integrate the findings discussed previously in view of the aims of the research.

The first aim of the study was to explore the relationships between gender identity, ego strength and body image dissatisfaction and disturbance. With regard to the findings of the relationships between gender identity and ego strength, this research concludes that it appears more conducive to psychological health (as seen in higher ego strength) to adopt a polarised gender identity, but that it does not matter whether it is feminine or masculine. The complexity of calculating androgyny may, however, have proved a limitation to inferring whether this variable was associated with ego strength, and further research could follow on this result.
Secondly, the results of the relationship between ego strength and body image showed that ego strength had a positive effect on one’s body image satisfaction, which resonates with Erikson (1964) and Bruch (1973) whose work implies that greater ego strength is associated with psychological health. Finally, in view of the results of the correlation between gender identity and body image, this research concluded that one’s endorsement of either masculinity or androgyny has a positive effect on one’s body image satisfaction. This partially corroborates Bem’s (1974) work as androgyny remains associated with health, but also corroborates later research which has shown that masculinity is also associated with a strong health or adjustment factor (e.g. Cameron, 2003). The finding does not, however, support the work of Pope et al. (2000) who maintained that body image dissatisfaction was intricately linked to threats to masculine identity.

Given the more disappointing finding that body image disturbance did not correlate with any form of gender identity or ego strength, this research concludes that such disturbances need to be researched in more particular samples. This does not necessarily invalidate the suggestions made in the literature review that the body can be used to assert (or reject) a particular gender identity, but that the links may be more specific to certain populations, or that they require an interplay of factors to be present before they emerge.

The second aim of the research was to assess whether particular combinations of gender identity and ego strength could predict higher scores on the measure of body image dissatisfaction. It was found that there is indeed a core interrelationship between gender role orientation, ego strength and predicted level of body image dissatisfaction. For example, while femininity was predicted to have a negative impact on body image satisfaction in the regression, ego strength has a powerful moderating effect on the relationship, where the positive, adaptive aspects of the ego appear to lessen body image dissatisfaction. However, such a straightforward conclusion cannot be drawn with respect to masculinity, as ego strength does not appear to have the same moderating effect on body image dissatisfaction. Rather, it seems to actually contribute to higher dissatisfaction in tandem with endorsement of masculinity. This research can then only conclude that there is something peculiar about the workings of these latter variables and requires further investigation. One
can, however, conclude that androgyny still appears to be consistently associated with a strong positive and health factor as seen in its potential to predict lower body image dissatisfaction with or without high ego strength.

7.8 Limitations of the Study
The findings above need to be considered in light of the particular limitations in the present research, which include the research design and sample used. This is followed by recommendations for further research.

7.8.1 Limitations in the design
This was a non-experimental correlational research design, which was deemed appropriate as the aim of the research was to provide an account of the relationships between the variables of interest. However, while some tentative conclusions were explored, it must be remembered that this type of design does not allow for conclusive, directional links to be made between the variables (Niele & Liebert, 1986). The research may, however, serve as a pre-cursor for further experimental inquiry or be used to stimulate further debate as to why the particular results occurred.

7.8.2 Limitations in the sample
While various reasons were cited as to why the particular sample was advantageous to the present research, the fact that the sample was fairly homogenous, with little diversity in level of education, type of career being studied, and personal characteristics, cannot be ignored. One could, with care, generalise the findings to other university students, but could not simply extrapolate them to a more diverse population of men. While these factors do not invalidate the findings for the present research, generalisations could only be done with much caution. Future research could, however, explore the findings in a different context to provide additional validity for the results, such as assessing body image satisfaction in older individuals who are, for example, in a different stage of development and who also may have formulated an even more crystallised sense of identity. Finally, the general nature of the sample used in the present research may have proved a limitation to inferring more disordered patterns of body image. Indeed, body image disturbance as defined in the present research may require particular samples to be used, such as body builders.
7.9 The Measurement of Gender Identity: Limitations and Recommendations

The literature review presented an overview of the different ways in which issues of gender have been researched, and in so doing, highlighted the complexity of engaging with the notion of gender identity. While drawing on the sex role paradigm and psychoanalysis, this research could not ignore the work of social constructionists who have argued convincingly of the need to engage with a multiplicity of gendered experiences and changing perceptions of masculinity. However, despite the implications of this work for a measurement-based approach to studying gender, the present research attempted to quantify understandings of masculinity and femininity. This proved a challenging aspect of the research as scales of masculinity and femininity have been criticised for focusing too strongly on stereotypical conceptualisations of masculinity and femininity. While the development of the BSRI was noted to be progressive in this respect due to its emphasis on social desirability, the present research attempted to reaffirm whether the scale was still a measure of these characteristics. The results suggested that some revision of the scale was required, though only few changes were necessary for the Masculinity scale. If, however, a fundamental issue for psychometrics is to ensure that a scale is a reliable and valid measure of a construct, then it is concerning that different samples could potentially be continually reworking the definition of masculinity and femininity and provide very little consistency to the measurement. Moreover, the positive correlation between what was intended to be polarised, independent traits was concerning, and so it is recommended that the psychometric properties of the BSRI be investigated further.

7.10 Recommendations regarding Body Image

Body image dissatisfaction and disturbance in men has been increasingly researched over the past decade, particularly in the United States. However, while masculinity broadly has been researched with great interest in South Africa, more work focusing on body image in men is needed. For example, despite compelling arguments about the links between masculinity and striving toward muscularity (Pope et al., 2000), scores on ACQ-R_Dysmorphia were not significantly correlated with masculinity, nor were scores on ego strength. Body image disturbance was consequently not a significant part of this research, and so arguments about the use of the body as a means of coping with an identity crisis cannot be corroborated. Future research could,
however, engage with these concerns using a different sample, or could attempt a more depth orientated approach to understanding the themes and discourses that link body image and gender identity.

Finally, it necessary to further validate the ACQ-R_Image and ACQ-R_Dysmorphia not only to boost their psychometric properties, but also to include a measure of the respondent’s actual body shape and muscularity in the study. The present research found it difficult to conclusively link the correlations of the BMI as they were open to much plausible interpretation. While an attempt could be made to employ the FFMI created by Pope et al. (2000) as an estimate of the person’s degree of muscularity, and thus develop the capacity to understand why BMI scores were related to body image disturbance, the recommendation may not be feasible as there are several practical and ethical considerations that could hamper its implementation.