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## Reported Effects of Masculine Ideals on Gay Men

**Francisco J. Sánchez,**

Center for Gender-Based Biology and the Department of Human Genetics at the David Geffen School of Medicine at the University of California, Los Angeles.

**Stefanie T. Greenberg,**

Division of Psychological and Quantitative Foundations in the College of Education at the University of Iowa.

**William Ming Liu, and**

Division of Psychological and Quantitative Foundations in the College of Education at the University of Iowa.

**Eric Vilain**

Center for Gender-Based Biology and the Department of Human Genetics at the David Geffen School of Medicine at the University of California, Los Angeles.

### Abstract

This exploratory study used consensual qualitative research methodology (Hill et al., 2005) to analyze what gay men associate with masculinity and femininity, how they feel masculine ideals affect their self-image, and how masculine ideals affect their same-sex relationships. Written responses were collected from 547 self-identified gay men in the U.S. via an Internet-based survey. Findings supported previous reports that perceptions of gender roles among gay men appear based on masculine and feminine stereotypes. Additionally, more adverse versus positive effects on self-image and same-sex romantic relationships were reported including difficulty being emotional and affectionate, pressure to be physically attractive, and pressure to appear masculine in order to be accepted by society and to be seen as desirable by other gay men. While research on gay men's experience with masculinity continues, psychologists should consider the possible influence of traditional masculine ideals when conceptualizing their gay male clients.

### Keywords

Gay Men (Homosexuality); Masculinity; Gender Roles; Femininity; Straight-acting

## Reported Effects of Masculine Ideals on Gay Men

Societal conceptions of masculinity affect the self-image and relationships of many gay men in the United States (U.S.). The topic of how and why gay men are affected by this repeatedly appears within the popular gay press (e.g., Alvear, 2004; Cummings, 1999; Rice, 2006) and sparks controversy within the gay community. For instance, Bergling (2001)

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Francisco J. Sánchez, UCLA School of Medicine, 695 Charles Young Dr. S #5524, Los Angeles, CA 90025-7088. Electronic mail may be sent to fjsanchez@mednet.ucla.edu.

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reported on gay men who rigidly enact traditional masculine ideals and experience a “fear” of effeminate gay men. *Frontiers Magazine*—a Southern California gay entertainment magazine—featured a cover story entitled “Butch is Back,” which explored how the repackaging of a Los Angeles leather-themed gay bar was redefining masculine ideals in the local gay community (Cullinane, 2007). StraightActing.com—“A site for [gay] guys that like sports, can change their own car’s oil, or just don’t fit the effeminate stereotype” (text taken from Website’s homepage)—offered an on-line discussion area where many posting revered traditional masculine ideals and expressed hostility towards effeminate gay men (see Clarkson, 2006).

These real-life examples and the suggestion that masculine ideals significantly affect many gay men may surprise people who are not intimately familiar with the gay community—a community that is often perceived as accepting of individual differences. Yet, the reality is that traditional masculine ideals affect how gay men feel about themselves (Szymanski & Carr, 2008) and their same-sex relationships (Wester, Pionke, & Vogel, 2005). While many gay men struggle with these issues, scientific research on the effect of masculine ideals on gay men is lacking. Although many scholars have written about the topic (e.g., Humphries, 1985; Kleinberg, 1978/1989; Levine, 1992; Nardi, 2000) and dissertations have offered tentative results (e.g., Ervin, 2003; Sánchez, 2005; Shepard, 2001), empirical studies published in peer-reviewed journals are hard to find. Thus, this exploratory study sought to appraise what gay men in the U.S. associate with masculinity and femininity among gay men and how they feel masculine ideals affect them.

### Gay Masculinity Ideology

Masculinity and femininity are descriptors commonly used in everyday language. These terms are often associated with physical and biological differences between men and women (e.g., body shape and size; Lippa, 1983, 2005). However, most of the characteristics that are associated with masculinity and femininity are socially constructed. That is, social groups define what is and is not masculine and feminine. More specifically, scholars have noted that the dominant group typically defines what are appropriate behaviors for a given gender, and that subordination and marginalization of those who violate these norms are used to sustain the constructs (Connell, 2005). Furthermore, several scholars have illustrated how these two constructs vary over time and cross-culturally (e.g., Mead, 1949; Roy, 2001).

In the U.S., there is a dominant traditional masculinity ideology rooted in a subjective and dated image of what men should and should not be (Pleck, 1995). In describing this traditional masculinity, David and Brannon (1976) suggested that this ideology is dictated by four main rules: men should not be feminine; men must be respected and admired; men should never show fear; and men should seek out risk and adventure. Similarly, O’Neil (1981a, 1981b, 1982, 2008) posited that traditional gender role socialization leads men to struggle with four main factors of traditional masculinity: men should be successful, achieve power/status, and readily compete against others; men should restrict their emotions; men should restrict their affectionate behavior with other men; and men should be work/career driven.

Even though there may be specific ideals associated with traditional masculinity, Thompson and Pleck (1995) proposed that there is no singular type of masculinity. Rather, many masculinity ideologies exist within the U.S. varying between cultural and ethnic groups. Thus, different groups of individuals may define masculinity differently and hold different standards for men (Connell, 2005; Edwards, 1992; Messner, 1997; Thompson & Pleck, 1995).

One group that may have a distinct masculinity ideology is gay men. Gay men are seen to break from traditional masculinity ideology mainly because of their affectional and sexual orientation. Consequently, the general perception is that gay men are not masculine (Kite & Deaux, 1987; Madon, 1997). While such perceptions regarding gender roles are of little consequence to many gay men (Riggle, Whitman, Olson, Rostosky, & Stron, 2008), there are gay men who do not perceive themselves to be feminine at all and who value traditional masculinity (Harry, 1983; Hennen, 2005; Kurtz, 1999).

The importance of masculinity for this latter group of gay men is particularly evident in the realm of interpersonal relationships. In fact, numerous studies have repeatedly shown that gay men who place personal advertisements tend to stress exhibiting masculine interests and behaviors, and they tend to seek masculine mates (Bailey, Kim, Hills, Linsenmeier, 1997; Laner & Kamel, 1977; Lumby, 1978; Phua, 2002; Taywaditep, 2001). For instance, in a study of 2,729 gay men's personal advertisements, Bailey et al. (1997) found that gay men who chose to use gender specific self-descriptors were significantly biased towards stereotypically masculine traits (e.g., dominant, muscular, and athletic) and labels (e.g., "a masculine man," "straight-acting," and "jock"). Furthermore, most advertisers explicitly requested masculine mates and they expressed that stereotypically feminine traits were undesirable in a potential mate.

These studies do not exclude the possibility that a gay man would find femininity and submissiveness attractive in a mate. Moreover, studies focused on personal advertisements are limited due to the potential selection bias of gay men who choose to advertise. Nevertheless, the published empirical studies on gay men's partner preferences suggest that masculinity is generally a desirable trait and that femininity is not. Yet, how exactly are gay men defining masculinity and femininity?

If we accept Thompson and Pleck's (1995) proposal of multiple masculinity ideologies, then how gay men define masculinity may vary from the dominant notion of masculinity. While scholars have written about gay masculinity (e.g., Connell, 2005; Clatterbaugh, 1997; Nardi, 2000), few empirical studies published in peer-reviewed journals have investigated how gay men define masculinity. In one qualitative study consisting of 15 HIV-positive men in New York City, Halkitis (2001) found that the majority of the participants associated masculinity among gay men with physical appearance and—to a lesser degree—sexual adventurism. Physical appearance included having strong physical features (e.g., a big frame and being muscular) and enhancing one's masculine appearance (e.g., tattoos and body piercing). Sexual adventurism consisted of a high interest in casual sex and multiple sexual encounters. Two subsequent studies supported the previous findings that HIV-positive gay men closely associate muscularity and sexuality with masculine ideals (Halkitis, Green and Wilton, 2004), and that some gay men may use anabolic steroids to increase their muscle mass and appear more "masculine" (Halkitis, Moeller, & DeRaleau, 2008). Thus, the limited scientific literature suggests that particular groups of gay men may associate appearing tough, strong, and sexually adventurous with masculine ideals.

Although we have limited qualitative data on what ideals gay men in the U.S. associate with masculine gay men, we are not sure what may be associated with feminine gay men as no empirical study has asked this question. Thus, one aim of this study was to add to our understanding of how gay men define both these roles.

### **The Effect of Masculine Ideals on Men**

For men, traditional masculine ideals seem to play a significant role in their psychological well-being. In particular, many men experience negative consequences when these ideals are threatened by feelings of insecurity, inadequacy, and inferiority. For instance, men who

experience greater conflict with traditional masculine ideals report more symptoms of psychological distress (Good, Heppner, DeBord, & Fischer, 2004; Liu, Rochlen, & Mohr, 2005; Sharpe & Heppner, 1991), higher degrees of shame (Thompkins & Rando, 2003), and are less likely to seek out help (Good, Dell, & Mintz, 1989; Good & Wood, 1995) than men who experience less conflict. Furthermore, men who are concerned about fulfilling traditional masculine ideals report greater interpersonal problems including engaging in high-risk behaviors (Cohn & Zeichner, 2006; Jakupcak, 2003; Liu & Iwamoto, 2007) and experiencing more difficulties within romantic relationships (Blazina & Watkins, 2000; Burn & Ward, 2006; Jakupcak, Lisak, & Roemer, 2002) than men who are not as concerned.

Why are men so adversely affected by traditional masculine ideals? In reviewing studies on the adverse effects of traditional masculinity, Pleck (1995) believed that men's distress is rooted in one of three types of gender role strain: 1) strain due to beliefs that one has failed to live up to an internalized notion of masculinity; 2) strain due to the tendency to persist in dysfunctional behavior because of traditional masculine ideals (e.g., denying physical pain and neglecting to see a doctor); and 3) strain due to trauma experienced during early gender role socialization (e.g., shaming, bullying, and forced separation from primary caregivers). Overall, the strain due rigid adherence to traditional masculine ideals is detrimental to men's psychological well-being.

Although a large number of empirical studies published in peer-reviewed journals exist on the effect of masculine ideals on men, few of these studies have focused on the experience of gay men. The limited empirical data suggests that greater conflict with certain masculine ideals is associated with lower self-esteem and greater depression and anxiety among gay men (Simonsen, Blazina, & Watkins, 2000; Szymanski & Carr, 2008). Furthermore, gay men who are concerned with conforming to traditional masculine ideals are more likely to experience body dissatisfaction if their bodies do not meet the "physically powerful masculine ideal" as compared to gay men less concerned with adhering to masculine ideals (Kimmel & Mahalik, 2005, p. 1188). Beyond these few empirical studies, the effect of masculine ideals on gay men's self-image and their relationships is less certain.

Given that masculinity seems to be important to many gay men, psychologists may encounter gay men in session whose presenting concerns may be tied to masculine ideals in the U.S. As these concerns are explored with the client, it may be helpful to understand the various traits that gay men associate with masculinity and femininity among gay men and in what ways they feel impacted by traditional masculine ideals. To supplement Halkitis' findings, we offer a preliminary qualitative descriptive analysis of perceptions of masculinity and femininity among gay men based on a large national sample. Furthermore, we offer exploratory themes on how gay men feel they are affected by traditional masculine ideals. The remainder of this article will focus on the three major themes explored in this study: characteristics perceived to be associated with "masculine gay men" and "feminine gay men"; the effect of traditional masculine ideals on gay men's self-image; and the effect of traditional masculine ideals on gay men's relationships.

## Method

### Participants

The participants were 547 men who self-identified as gay. The average age of the participants was 36.89 ( $SD = 10.50$ ), with an age range of 18 to 80 years-old. The average number of years since openly identifying as gay was 15.67 years ( $SD = 10.16$ ; range 0–63 years openly gay). Most of the participants identified as White (Non-Latino; 83.0%), while 6.8% of the participants identified as Hispanic/Latino, 4.4% identified as Asian American,

2.0% identified as African American, and 1.1% identified as Native American. The median individual income bracket was between \$45,000–54,999 per year with 79.0% of the participants having at least a bachelor's degree. All participants identified as U.S. citizens currently living in the U.S.: West (42%), Midwest (28%), South (22%) and Northeast (8%). A majority of the sample (53.4%) reported currently being in a significant romantic relationship with two-thirds of this subset currently living with their same-sex partner.

### The Questions

A set of six open-ended questions was used to elicit responses for this study. These six questions were derived for the current study and came after a series of demographic questions. Participants were asked how they would define a masculine/“butch” and a feminine/“femme” gay man; in what ways they felt gay men's self-images were positively and adversely affected by the ideals of masculinity in U.S. culture; and in what ways they felt gay men's relationships were positively and adversely affected by the ideals of masculinity in U.S. culture. Out of the 547 participants, 70.0% answered all 6 questions, 5.7% answered 5 of the questions, 7.9% answered 4 of the question, 4.2% answered 3 of the questions, 11.9% answered 2 of the questions, and 0.4% answered only 1 of the questions. A comparison was made to determine if the response rate was related to age, years openly gay, race/ethnicity, and educational level. No significant difference was found.

### Procedures

PsychData.com, an Internet based research company, was used to collect the data. The survey design was based on published suggestions (Kraut et al., 2004) and PsychData.com housed the data within their secure data facility. As suggested by Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, and John (2004), IP addresses were monitored to prevent multiple submissions.

Participants were recruited via electronic mailing lists managed by various groups, organizations, university centers, and community agencies related to the gay community. Electronic mailing list managers were contacted and asked to send an e-mail announcement regarding the study to their lists. The e-mail announcement detailed the study and inclusion criteria: Participants had to self-identify as gay, they had to be at least 18 years of age, they had to be U.S. citizens, and they had to reside in the U.S. The announcement also provided a link that would lead them to the survey housed at PsychData.com.

Once at the site, participants were first presented with an informed consent screen. At the bottom of that screen, participants had to click a link to indicate they consented to participate in the survey. At the end of the survey, participants were offered a chance to participate in a drawing for one of three \$35 Amazon.com gift certificates. A separate database was used for the drawing in order to separate participants' identities from their answers.

### Data Analysis

Given that this study was exploratory and descriptive in nature, we chose to apply an adapted version of Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR; Hill, Knox, Thompson, Williams, Hess, & Ladany, 2005; Hill Thompson, & Williams, 1997). CQR is a team-based approach for analyzing qualitative data. This method involves several independent judges who evaluate participants' responses and develop themes through a consensus process.

The use of CQR for this study may seem unusual given the modality of data collection and the sample size. While most of the published studies employing CQR have used either telephone or face-to-face interviews to collect data (Hill et al., 2005), several studies have analyzed written responses that were collected through paper-and-pencil questionnaires

(e.g., Dillon et al., 2004; Kempainen, Bartels, & Veach, 2007; Schultheiss, Palma, & Manzi, 2005) and via email (e.g., Kim, Brenner, Liang & Assay, 2003). In regards to sample size, published studies using CQR have typically consisted of 7–19 participants (Hill et al., 2005); however, some large scale studies have used CQR (e.g., Robertson et al., 2002). Thus, as use of this method has grown, researchers have adapted CQR to address different research needs.

The team of judges for this study consisted of one doctoral student in counseling psychology and two undergraduate students of psychology. These three judges were European American, heterosexual females. The internal auditor for the team was an Asian American, heterosexual, male faculty member in counseling psychology; he reviewed the categories and coding to ensure that they adequately captured the essence of the data. The external auditor was a Latino, gay identified postdoctoral research fellow at a different institution; he provided feedback to the primary team and helped to contextualize the findings within the existing peer-reviewed literature.

The three judges independently evaluated responses for each participant. While the total possible responses was 3,282 (547 participants responding to each of the six questions), only a total of 2,859 responses were evaluated given that some participants did not answer all six questions. The raters then convened as a team to present their suggestions for categorizing the data. Using a consensus approach, they created core categories and labels that emerged directly from the data. Only when all three raters agreed on a category would it be included.

For each category under each question, the raters agreed on an exemplar response to illustrate the category. For instance, for the question “How would you define a masculine/“butch” gay man?” the majority of responses fell in the category of “Stereotypically masculine personality and physical traits” and an exemplar response was “*A man whose personality traits and mannerisms follow what society has defined as manly: little emotion, lots of control, in charge, does well under pressure, strong.*” Every answer that was assigned to each category was then compared to the exemplar responses. If all the raters agreed, the statement was then counted within that specific category. Disagreements were discussed until consensus was achieved and each of the 2,859 statements was placed into the most appropriate category. The raters continually re-evaluated each category and individual response (i.e., constant comparison) to account for any possible drift in the content of the categories.

Once all the data had been categorized, the judges then counted the number of responses assigned to each category in order to create a frequency count. Hill et al. (2005) had suggested that frequency labels (i.e., general, typical, variant, and rare) be used instead of a frequency count. However, given the large amount of data, we chose to assign percentages. This method of characterizing the data has also been done by other large scales studies (e.g., Robertson et al., 2002).

## Results

Table 1 shows the frequency of cases for the categories generated from the six questions. For each question in the table, the responses are reported in decreasing frequency.

### Characteristics of Masculine and Feminine Gay Men

Participants responded to two separate questions in which they were asked how they would define a masculine/“butch” gay man and a feminine/“femme” gay man. For both of these questions, participants mostly indicated personality and physical traits that were stereotypically masculine (e.g., restrictive emotionality, competitive, and muscular body)

and feminine (e.g., affective/emotional, passive, and small framed). For instance, one individual wrote that “[a masculine gay man] is tough looking, wears plaid and no colors, doesn’t act demonstrative in public” while “[a feminine gay man] is really fashion conscious and appearance conscious, over-done facial maintenance, hugs and kisses a lot, talks with a lot of gesturing.” The second most described theme for both questions related to the ability for a gay man to be “straight-acting” or to be able to pass as a heterosexual man in public. For example, one individual wrote that masculine gay men are able “not to arouse the assumption of ‘gayness’ from strangers,” and subsequently wrote that feminine gay men exhibit “characteristics that are easily noticed [as gay] by many people who do not know the person intimately.”

### The Impact of Masculine Ideals on Gay Men’s Self-Image

Participants were asked in what ways they felt gay men’s self-images were *positively* and *adversely* affected by the ideals of masculinity in U.S. culture. Many participants (24%) were unable to list how masculine ideals *positively* impacted their self-image. A typical response was “I am not sure there are any positive effects” and “I can’t think of any.” Of those who did identify positive impacts, the most cited benefit was that masculine ideals promote physical fitness and athleticism (15%). Consequently, many gay men exercise regularly and remain physically active throughout adulthood. Masculine ideals were also cited as helping gay men succeed—especially in their careers (13%). Some also suggested that traditional notions of masculinity are expanding to include more diverse representations including gay men and “metrosexuals” (12%).

The question on the *adverse* impact of masculinity on gay men’s self-image elicited a relatively larger amount of varied responses. The most cited theme was that masculine ideals make many gay men feel compelled to adhere to traditional enactments of masculinity even if it is not who they truly are. In other words, some gay men may feel pressured to behave “super-masculine” or to “butch it up” in order to be accepted. Yet, other gay men suggested that trying to be masculine may be a futile attempt as simply being gay negates one’s masculinity (10%) and makes achieving “true” masculinity unattainable (13%).

Further themes pertained to the negative impact of masculine ideals on gay men’s well-being. For instance, because men typically focus on the physical attractiveness of mates, gay men may exhibit “obsessive gym/diet regimes,” use illegal substances (e.g., anabolic steroids and Clenbuterol), and experience body distortions (9%) as they strive to be and remain attractive. One participant wrote

I think gay men have difficulty with body image—with the six-pack abdomen, big muscle ideal of the ‘man’s man’—and with an obsession with the size of the male penis...Many average gay men may feel shame if their own bodies and ‘members’ don’t match the ideal.

Masculine ideals were also implicated in restricting gay men’s emotional expression (7%) and in making gay men concerned about appearing feminine and feeling uncomfortable with effeminate gay men (7%):

Many gay men are hypervigilant about every gesture, movement, or sound that comes out of their mouths, for fear of somehow falling below the ‘ideal’ that has been set by this culture. For those gay men that are not bothered by this, and live freely as a gay man, other gay men may try to force the ‘ideals of masculinity’ upon them by ridicule or even violence.

## The Impact of Masculine Ideals on Gay Men's Relationships

The final set of questions asked participants in what ways they felt gay men's relationships were *positively* and *adversely* affected by the ideals of masculinity in U.S. culture. As with the previous question on self-image, most of the responding participants (30%) could not identify any *positive* effect of masculine ideals on gay men's relationships. Of the positive themes identified, some masculine characteristics reportedly helped gay men's relationships including being a provider for one another (12%), allowing them to understand each other's style of communication better (4%), and respecting the need for personal and sexual autonomy (3%).

On the other hand, the participants identified several *negative* effects. In particular, gay men reported that masculine ideals restricted the degree to which they could openly communicate and express themselves with one another (15%). Traditional heterosexual gender roles within a relationship were cited (13%) as influencing the roles gay men assume in their relationships (e.g., the husband vs. "wife" and the breadwinner vs. homemaker). It seems that for some gay men, the social expectations of traditional marriage roles between heterosexual men and heterosexual women affected how labor was divided in gay households and the degree to which gay relationships were egalitarian.

The premium placed on masculinity was a source of concern in relationships as well (10%), which included the idea that many gay men only seek out "masculine" partners and that they will lose interest in partners if the partner begins to exhibit "feminine" qualities:

I am a victim of this masculine/fem mystique...Go online and check out how many men in gay chat rooms aspire to be perceived as only masculine or straight acting or butch. And I challenge you to find any of those self-described he-men willing to meet a man who doesn't define himself as such.

Participants also reported that men's general interest in casual sex and physical attractiveness negatively affected their relationships (7%). Since sexual assertiveness and aggressiveness tend to be associated with masculinity, some felt that this made "sexual promiscuity normative within the gay community" and contributed to open/non-monogamous relationships. Furthermore, because men generally place a large emphasis on physical attractiveness, some gay men felt a constant pressure to maintain their looks in order to remain attractive to their partners.

## Discussion

This exploratory study illustrates what some gay men may believe are commonly accepted descriptors of masculinity and femininity among gay men and how masculine ideals in the U.S. may affect gay men's self-image and their relationships. Although not all gay men may feel restricted by traditional masculine ideals, many gay men in this study indicated that portraying a masculine image is important to them. Furthermore, the current analysis suggests that there may be a variety of ways in which gay men are affected by traditional masculine ideals.

These exploratory findings seem to reflect previous studies that have looked at how people assess masculinity and femininity in others (e.g., Lippa, 1983, 2005). Similar to past findings, the gay men in the current study associated stereotypical interests, attitudes and behaviors as descriptors for masculine and feminine gay men. Thus, gay men who self-describe as masculine in particular situations (e.g., on-line personal advertisements and chat rooms) may in fact be suggesting an overt exhibition of stereotypical traits that are typically associated with traditional masculinity ideology (Pleck, 1995). Although this seems rather obvious, the current study adds support to the small-scale studies that have attempted to



measure what gay men mean by “a masculine gay man” (Halkitis, 2001; Halkitis, Green, & Wilton, 2004). Furthermore, this exploratory study offers some initial data on what gay men associate with femininity in gay men.

The more informative part of the analysis came from the responses related to the effects of traditional masculine ideals. Although some positive effects were listed, far more negative effects were given—many which have been previously associated with adverse effects among heterosexual men. For instance, one characteristic that has traditionally been associated with masculinity in heterosexual men is the restriction of emotions and affection (David & Brannon, 1976; O’Neil, 1981a, 1981b; Pleck, 1981). In the current analysis, some gay men noted that masculine ideals restrict the expression of emotions and affection between gay men as well.

It has also been demonstrated that heterosexual men who feel they do not meet some internal ideal of masculinity experience significant psychological distress (Liu, Rochlen, & Mohr, 2005). Likewise, some gay men in the current study suggested that if a gay man cannot meet the “masculine ideal,” he is likely to question his self-worth.

One final parallel example relates to men’s sexual attitudes and behaviors. Regardless of sexual orientation, men are more interested in casual sex, have a stronger preference for youthful looking partners, and place a greater importance on the physical attractiveness of a mate when compared to women (Bailey, Gauin, Agyei, & Gladue, 1994; Bailey, Kirk, Zhu, Dunne, & Martin, 2000; Hamann, Herman, Nolan, & Wallen, 2004; Kenrick, Keefe, Bryan, Barr, & Brown, 1995; Lippa, 2007; Meston & Buss, 2007; Schmitt, 2003, 2005). Many gay men in the current study noted these patterns among gay men and some felt that these sexual tendencies may interfere with gay men’s ability to intimately connect with one another. Consequently, even though gay men may defy society’s traditional masculine ideals in a considerable way—by being romantically attracted to other men—it seems that they may nevertheless be affected by the same rigid rules that affect heterosexual men.

These preliminary findings fit with theories regarding the effects of traditional gender role socialization. Like their heterosexual counterparts, gay men have been socialized in a culture that pressures boys—and subsequently men—to adhere to rigid masculine ideals (Harry, 1982, 1983; Martin, 1990; Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993). Sometimes this socialization process consists of extensive shaming and bullying of individuals who violate society’s unwritten gender rules (Kimmel, 1997; Pascoe, 2005). Consequently, traditional masculine ideals become central to boys’ developing identity, and these ideals affect how they view others (Krugman, 1995; Pleck, 1981).

During this socialization process, many gay men may have been particularly targeted. As children, gay men typically exhibited more gender atypical behaviors and interests (e.g., avoiding rough-and-tumble play, playing house and kitchen, and playing with girls versus boys) as compared to heterosexual men (Bailey & Zucker, 1995; Green, 1987). Researchers have repeatedly found that gender atypical boys elicit strong negative reactions and behaviors from both peers and adults (Blakemore, 2003; Carter & McCloskey, 1984; Lamb, Easterbrooks, & Holden, 1980; Martin, 1990; Young & Sweeting, 2004). Furthermore, gay men recall having been bullied and abused to a greater degree than heterosexual men (Corliss, Cochran, & Mays, 2002; Harry, 1989; Tjaden, Thoennes, & Allison, 1999; Wyss, 2004). It may be no surprise, then, that many gay men adopted traditional masculine ideals during childhood, which continues to guide their everyday lives as adults (Harry, 1983).

At the same time that gay men may be confronting internalized traditional masculine ideals, they may also be confronting some of the consequences of gender oppression that women face. For instance, many heterosexual women report feeling sexually objectified by men and

subsequently feeling pressured to have an “ideal” body figure in order to be attractive (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Likewise, some of the gay men in this analysis suggested that masculine norms pressure them to have an “ideal” body as well in order to feel attractive to other men. While there is evidence that heterosexual men also experience body image concerns (e.g., Frederick et al., 2007), gay men report more body dissatisfaction than heterosexual men (Kaminski, Chapman, Haynes, & Own, 2005; Morrison, Morrison, & Sager, 2004; Tiggemann, Martins, & Kirkbride, 2007). Furthermore, similar to heterosexual women, gay men feel more pressure to maintain an “ideal” body for others when compared to heterosexual men (Yelland & Tiggerman, 2003) given that men generally place a greater importance on physical attractiveness when compared to women (Bailey et al., 1994).

Altogether, traditional masculine ideals may to some degree amplify the adverse effect that some gay men experience when compared to heterosexual men. In other words, gay men may feel pressured to live by the same expectations and restrictions that heterosexual men—whether it be as a defensive reaction or because it genuinely reflects their personality—while simultaneously experiencing some of the adverse effects of misogyny and sexual objectification that heterosexual women feel.

While scientific research continues to reveal how traditional masculinity ideology affects gay men, psychologists should consider how masculine ideals impact their gay male clients. For instance, it has been hypothesized that gay men who overcompensate by being hyper-masculine and who voice a strong discomfort with effeminate gay men may have internalized shame regarding their sexuality and may consequently “project...their own fears of female identification” on to other gay men whom they demean (Schwartzberg & Rosenberg, 1998, p. 270). Furthermore, it has been suggested that as a result of traditional masculine gender role socialization, many gay men did not develop the skills necessary to intimately connect with other men (e.g., openly expressing emotions and affection with romantic partners). Consequently, some gay men may use sex as a substitute for intimacy (Haldeman, 2001). Haldeman (2006) also proposed that because many gay men were victimized by heterosexual men for violating traditional masculinity ideology while growing up, some gay men may experience a form of heterophobia—or a fear of interacting with heterosexual men and a degradation of heterosexuality.

Thus, while scientific research tests these and other hypotheses generated by practitioners, psychologists should remain aware of the possible role that masculine ideals and gender role socialization play in the presenting issues and concerns of their gay clients. If masculinity is an important construct for a client, then it may be helpful to explore how this may be affecting his psychological well-being. For instance, Pleck (1995) proposed that one source of masculine gender role strain is rooted in the perception that one is failing to fulfill some internalized notion of masculinity. Traditional masculinity ideology excludes gay men because they violate fundamental criteria for being masculine: they are being “sissies” (David & Brannon, 1976) and they are affectionate with other men (O’Neil, 1981a, 1981b). Consequently, gay men who value traditional masculinity ideology may experience stress, shame, or guilt because being truly “masculine” is unattainable due to their same-sex romantic attractions.

Yet, even if a gay man is not concerned with traditional notions of masculinity, he may nevertheless feel the oppressive effects of this dominant ideology. For instance, one proposed component of traditional masculinity ideology is that men should be hypersexual and sexually objectify others (Mahalik et al., 2003). Sexual objectification of people—be it by a person or through media images—negatively affects the self-esteem and self-image of those who are objectified (Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998; Martins, Tiggemann, & Kirkbride, 2007). Gay men and advertising targeted to gay men have been

found to sexually objectify other men (Siever, 1994). Consequently, gay men who present in a clinical setting with disordered eating or dissatisfaction with their body may have internalized this objectified perspective that is perpetuated by other men and traditional masculine ideals.

### Limitations

This study was exploratory in nature and any conclusions taken from this should be done with caution. Although there are advantages to conducting research over the Internet (Gosling et al., 2004) including fewer concerns on the part of the participant with disclosing sensitive information (Locke & Gilbert, 1995; Richman, Kiesler, Weisband, & Drasgow, 1999; Tourangeau & Smith, 1996), the convenience sampling likely contributed to the high representation of White, middle-class, middle-aged gay men, which limits the generalizability of the results. While the current sample demographics closely mirror other on-line studies focused on gay men (e.g., Halkitis, Green, & Wilton, 2004; Szymanski & Carr, 2008; Wester, Pionke, & Vogel, 2005), different sampling techniques should be employed in the future to draw a more diverse sample. The use of the Internet may have accessed individuals who would not have presented in-person for an interview; however, participants may not have provided full responses because they had to type their responses. Finally, the six questions used to solicit these answers may have been too “academic” and too restrictive in nature. For instance, the pairing of the words “butch” and “femme” with masculine and feminine may have influenced the patterns of responses. Thus, this may account for some of the individuals who did not respond to particular questions and affected the types of responses.

### Future Research

Many intriguing themes arose from this exploratory analysis that warrant further study using different research methods. For instance, more traditional qualitative research methods similar to Halkitis’ (2001) approach could be used to explicate the adverse impact of masculinity on gay men. Additionally, quantitative methods could be employed to investigate the relationship between many of the variables that emerged in this study. For instance, the relationship between concerns over masculinity and gay men’s difficulty in expressing emotions could be studied with measures such as the Gender Role Conflict Scale (O’Neil, Helms, Gable, David, & Wrightsman, 1986) and the Toronto Alexithymia Scale (Bagby, Taylor, & Parker, 1994). Finally, future research should extend beyond the adverse affects of traditional masculinity and explore what aspects of masculinity are beneficial for gay men and their relationships. For instance, does male camaraderie feed into life-long companionate love within gay men’s romantic relationships?

In the end, we may never fully understand the degree to which gay men are affected by traditional masculine ideals. However, empirical evidence is beginning to shed light on how gay men enact masculinity and how it does and does not affect them. As one participant wrote

I have a personal vendetta against the concepts of ‘straight-acting’ and ‘masculine only’ in the gay community. My personal feeling is that masculinity, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder; and I refuse to let someone else dictate to me what is and is not masculine.

Nevertheless, traditional masculine ideals continue to play a prominent role within the gay community. This article offers a hint at some of the ways in which gay men are affected by traditional notions of masculinity in the U.S. and provides possible themes to pursue in the therapy room and in future research.

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Table 1

## Categories Generated by Questions

Response Category	n	%
<b>How would you define a masculine/“butch” gay man?</b>		
Stereotypically masculine personality and physical traits <i>“Personality traits and mannerisms follow what society defines as manly: little emotion, lots of control, in charge, does well under pressure, strong.”</i>	315	58
“Straight-acting” or passing for a heterosexual man <i>“A man who is not obviously gay. Someone that straight people would not immediately assume was gay.”</i>	118	22
Stereotypically masculine activities/interests <i>“Interested in sports, cars, outdoors (i.e. stereotypically masculine things), uninterested in fashion, theater (i.e. stereotypically feminine things)”</i>	31	6
Comfortable and secure with his sexuality and masculinity as a gay man <i>“A masculine gay man is comfortable being openly gay and is equally comfortable in traditional male roles, i.e. he can talk about his partner at work and dresses like a typical heterosexual man.”</i>	24	4
Miscellaneous responses (e.g., <i>“I don’t like these terms”</i> )	48	9
No response	11	2
<b>How would you define a feminine/“femme” gay man?</b>		
Stereotypically feminine personality and physical traits <i>“limp wrists, high voice, flamboyant dress, and a swishy walk”</i>	399	73
Unable to hide sexual orientation or “pass” as heterosexual <i>“the kind of guy that couldn’t hide his sexuality even if he wanted to”</i>	71	13
Stereotypically feminine activities/interests <i>“Interested in things like interior design/hair dressing/fashion”</i>	37	7
Miscellaneous responses (e.g., <i>“I would avoid making such a definition”</i> )	33	6
No response	7	1
<b>In what ways do you feel that gay men’s self-images are positively affected by the ideals of masculinity in U.S. culture?</b>		
There are no positive effects	134	24
It promotes physical fitness and athleticism <i>“Many gay men I know are athletic and in great shape which is congruent to the ideals of masculinity.”</i>	81	15
Traditional ideals (e.g., independence, self-reliance, and confidence) have led to greater individual success <i>“builds confidence, others respect you, and can get ahead in career better”</i>	70	13
It has expanded the ideals of masculinity <i>“The changing idea of what a ‘real man’ is in our culture has opened up the room a bit to allow a greater expression of masculine identity.”</i>	68	12
It only positively affects masculine looking gay men <i>“the only positive in my life is that I don’t stand out as ‘queer’ in a crowd and it makes daily living much easier than if I were femme”</i>	22	4
The media has broadened its representation of gay men <i>“By having a greater variety of gay men portrayed in the media.”</i>	17	3
Miscellaneous responses (e.g., <i>“see last response”</i> )	68	12
No response	85	16
<b>In what ways do you feel that gay men’s self-images are adversely affected by the ideals of masculinity in U.S. culture?</b>		

Response Category	n	%
Gay men feel they must overcompensate, even if it's not really who they are <i>"We try to overcompensate and adopt masculinity to a cartoonish degree."</i>	90	16
It affects self-esteem because being "truly" masculine is unattainable <i>"Gay men struggle to live up to the 'unattainable' masculine image which deeply affects gay men's self-worth and self-esteem."</i>	71	13
By being gay, you are not "a real man" <i>"Our culture assume that if you're gay, you're not masculine...you're less of a man simply because you don't sleep with women."</i>	57	10
The emphasis on physical attractiveness leads to a focus on being physically fit and body image concerns <i>"Everyone wants a perfect body in a sex partner or boyfriend. This causes low self esteem if people are not comfortable with their looks."</i>	47	9
It restricts ones expression of emotions <i>"It limits men to explore the full range of their emotions"</i>	39	7
Fear of appearing feminine and an aversion towards effeminate gay men <i>"Many gay men discriminate against gay men they perceive to be feminine"</i>	37	7
Media typically depict gay men as not masculine <i>"The portrayal of gay stereotypes in television and movies."</i>	30	5
Miscellaneous responses (e.g., "same as above" and "not sure")	100	18
No response	76	14
<b>In what ways do you feel that gay men's relationships are positively affected by the ideals of masculinity in U.S. culture?</b>		
There are no positive effect	165	30
Traditional ideals (e.g., being loyal, providers, and buddies) benefit relationship <i>"The notion that men are supposed to be caretakers often leads to relationships in which two men support each other."</i>	66	12
"Masculine" partners challenge stereotypes and achieve greater acceptance <i>"Men who are thought of as masculine receive less consternation by society even though they may openly be a couple."</i>	54	10
It allows them to communicate with each other better and more honestly <i>"We can be forthright with one another and are free to be ourselves."</i>	18	4
It allows them to understand their need for autonomy and sexual adventurousness <i>"More open to explore non-traditional sexual boundaries within relationship"</i>	16	3
Miscellaneous responses (e.g., "see above")	103	19
No response	125	23
<b>In what ways do you feel that gay men's relationships are adversely affected by the ideals of masculinity in U.S. culture?</b>		
It restricts open expression and communication <i>"It is difficult to express emotions, to show affection, to be caring in public."</i>	83	15
Expectations of assuming a specific role (e.g., top/bottom or husband/wife) <i>"The most plaguing question is 'who assumes the role of the man and the role of the woman?' as if to say that two men are incompatible."</i>	71	13
Concerns over masculinity places stress on potential and existing relationships <i>"Most gay men seek out the butch type men for partners and minimize their chance for romance by excluding those that don't fall into that category."</i>	57	10
It leads to discrimination and invalidates their relationships <i>"Inherent in gay relationships is a failure of masculinity. Both men are belittled—neither could possibly be masculine."</i>	45	8
Emphasis on physical attractiveness, sex, and promiscuity	41	7

Response Category	n	%
<i>“the concept that men are ‘hounds’ and expected to always want sex with anything that breathes, seems to make it OK for men to have open relationships, to avoid monogamy.”</i>		
There is no effect	23	4
Media typically ignores or belittles gay men’s relationships <i>“Media doesn’t seriously address gay relationships.”</i>	15	3
Miscellaneous responses (e.g., <i>“see above”</i> )	93	17
No response	119	22

Note: Responses have *not* been corrected for grammatical errors. Total percentage for each question may exceed 100 due to rounding error.