

# Masculine Self-Presentation and Distancing From Femininity in Gay Men: An Experimental Examination of the Role of Masculinity Threat

Christopher John Hunt  
University of Sydney

Fabio Fasoli  
Instituto Universitario de Lisboa

Andrea Carnaghi  
Università degli Studi di Trieste

Mara Cadinu  
Università degli Studi di Padova

There is evidence that discrimination directed toward gay men from some heterosexual men is partially driven by heterosexual men attempting to distance themselves from gay men's perceived femininity. There is also evidence that many gay men wish they were more masculine than they currently are and will distance themselves from other gay men perceived as being feminine. This persisting stereotype that gay men are insufficiently masculine was theorized to lead gay men to be vulnerable to threats to their masculinity so that they would react to such threats by distancing themselves from feminine-stereotyped gay men and by attempting to present themselves as more masculine. The current study subjected 58 Italian gay men (mean age of 29.10 years,  $SD = 8.25$ ) to either a threat or an affirmation of their masculinity, and observed reactions to vignettes describing masculine- and feminine-stereotyped gay men. It was hypothesized that those subjected to a threat to their masculinity would report less liking for, less comfort with, and less desire to interact with feminine gay men, while reporting greater similarity to masculine gay men. These hypotheses were partially supported: participants who were threatened in their masculinity reported being more similar to masculine gay men ( $\eta^2 = .09$ ), and showed less interest in interacting with feminine gay men ( $\eta^2 = .09$ ) than participants whose masculinity was affirmed. These findings suggest that, despite the fact that they are often stereotyped as feminine, gay men may still feel pressure to conform to masculine role norms.

*Keywords:* antifemininity, gender conformity, homonegativity, homophobia, threat

There exists a persistent stereotype within Western society that gay men are both more feminine and less masculine than heterosexual men (Blashill & Powlishta, 2009; Kimmel & Mahalik, 2005; Kite & Deaux, 1987; Mitchell & Ellis, 2011). These stereo-

types may have a causal relationship with antigay attitudes exhibited by some heterosexual men, with a fear of associating with femininity implicated in heterosexual men's desire to distance themselves from gay men (Wilkinson, 2004). Indeed, heterosexual men who display excessive concerns with their own masculinity are also more likely to exhibit homophobic attitudes and anger toward gay men (Kilianski, 2003; McCreary, 1994; Parrott, Peterson, Vincent, & Bakeman, 2008). Furthermore, it has been found that when their masculinity is threatened, heterosexual men react by distancing themselves from gay men (Talley & Bettencourt, 2008), particularly from stereotypically feminine gay men (Glick, Gangl, Gibb, Klumpner, & Weinberg, 2007). Thus it appears that this stereotype of gay men as feminine results in a rejection of gay men by those who feel insecure in their masculinity.

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Christopher John Hunt, School of Psychology, University of Sydney; Fabio Fasoli, Centro de Investigacao e Intervencao Social, Instituto Universitario de Lisboa; Andrea Carnaghi, Dipartimento di Scienze della Vita, Università degli Studi di Trieste; Mara Cadinu, Dipartimento di Psicologia Generale, Università degli Studi di Padova.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Christopher John Hunt, School of Psychology, University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia. E-mail: [christopher.hunt@sydney.edu.au](mailto:christopher.hunt@sydney.edu.au)

Likewise, some gay men express negative attitudes toward stereotypically effeminate behavior exhibited by other men (Taywaditep, 2002). For instance, several studies focused on personals advertisement have found that the majority of gay men who post advertisements describe themselves in stereotypically masculine ways and/or overtly state not wanting effeminate partners (e.g., Bailey, Kim, Hills, & Linsenmeier, 1997). Furthermore, qualita-

tive studies of online communities have reported frequent hostility toward “queens” (a slang term for effeminate gay men; see [Clarkson, 2006](#); and [Taywaditep, 2002](#)). Survey work has echoed these findings, with a majority of gay men reporting a preference for stereotypically masculine partners ([Sanchez & Vilain, 2012](#)), and displaying negative attitudes toward nongender conforming gay men ([Skidmore, Linsenmeier, & Bailey, 2006](#)). There is also evidence that most gay men wish to be more masculine and less feminine than they perceive themselves to be ([Sanchez & Vilain, 2012](#); [Sanchez, Westefeld, Liu, & Vilain, 2010](#)). This rejection of perceived femininity and desire for masculine self-presentation has clear links to the concept of internalized homophobia, which occurs when gay men direct the negative attitudes that society holds regarding gay men inward ([Meyer, 1995](#); [Allen & Oleson, 1999](#)).

Taking these findings together, it can be theorized that the persisting stereotype that gay men are insufficiently masculine may result in gay men being vulnerable to threats to their masculinity, and that they would react to such threats by distancing themselves from feminine gay men and by attempting to present themselves as more masculine. The current study aims to examine this hypothesis experimentally by exposing gay men to either a threat or an affirmation of their masculinity, and then examining reactions to both feminine- and masculine-stereotyped peers. Based on previous work, four specific hypotheses were developed. It was hypothesized that, relative to an affirmation, a threat to masculinity would lead gay men to report the following:

1. More similarity with masculine gay men;
2. Less liking for feminine gay men;
3. Less desire to interact with feminine gay men; and
4. Less comfort with feminine gay men.

The study was conducted online with a sample of Italian gay men.

## Method

### Participants

To recruit men for this study, we circulated an advertisement that specified the study was for self-identified gay men over the age of 18. The advertisement was circulated via social media, via the webpages of gay organizations, and on the campus of a North-Eastern Italian University. Seventy-five men volunteered to participate. A single self-report item was used to assess sexual orientation; 58 participants ( $M_{\text{age}} = 29.10$ ,  $SD = 8.25$ , Range = 18–55) identified as gay and were retained for analyses.

### Materials and Procedure

Participants were recruited as part of a larger study on psychosocial functioning in Italian gay men. They were informed that the study was about how individuals perceive themselves in relation to various social groups. After accessing the online survey, participants read a brief description of the study before being asked to

consent to the study. Participants then completed a basic demographic questionnaire.

**Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory (CMNI).** Participants completed an Italian translation ([Tager & Good, 2005](#)) of the CMNI ([Mahalik et al., 2003](#)), which they were told was a “personality test” that they would receive feedback on. The CMNI is a 94-item inventory that examines the degree to which participants attempt to conform to the masculine norms that are dominant in many contemporary Western cultures (e.g., dominance, emotional control, heterosexual self-presentation). Each item is scored on a 4-point scale (0 = *strongly disagree* to 3 = *strongly agree*). These scores are then summed to obtain a total score, with a higher score indicating greater conformity to the dominant masculine norms ( $M = 112.25$ ,  $SD = 20.24$ ,  $\alpha = .86$  in the current sample).

**Experimental manipulation.** After completing the CMNI, participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions: “masculinity threatened” or “masculinity affirmed.” Based on previously used masculinity threat paradigms ([Hunt & Gonsalkorale, 2014](#); [Hunt, Gonsalkorale, & Murray, 2013](#)), participants were told that they would be given the results to the survey along three personality dimensions. All participants were told that they fell within the average range on the “extraversion” dimension and the “openness to experience” dimension. For the third dimension of “masculinity,” however, the two groups were either informed that they scored noticeably below the average range (“masculinity threatened”) or within the high-average range (“masculinity affirmed”). This third dimension was described as “a collection of thoughts, behaviors and emotions that are more commonly associated with men than with women.” Screenshots of the feedback shown to participants can be found in Appendix S1 of the online supplemental material.

**Vignettes.** After receiving the false feedback, participants were given four vignettes describing gay men, which were presented in a randomized order. Two of the vignettes were written to describe stereotypically “feminine” gay men, and two of the vignettes were written to describe stereotypically “masculine” gay men, based on descriptions of feminine and masculine gay men that were used by [Glick and colleagues \(2007\)](#). The original Italian versions and English translations of the vignettes can be found in Appendix S2 of the online supplemental material.

After each vignettes, participants were asked a series of questions about their feelings about each of the described individuals, all of which were scored on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *a lot*). First, participants were asked how similar they thought they were to them (“similarity”), how much they thought they would like the described individual (“likability”), and how much they would want to meet them (“interaction”). Responses across the two “feminine” vignettes and across the two “masculine” vignettes were averaged. Participants then completed a 6-item situation-specific emotional valence measure for each of the vignettes, where they were asked to report the extent to which they would be comfortable being the described individuals’ (a) roommate, (b) coworker or classmate, (c) teammate, (d) friend, (e) relative, or (f) neighbor. Responses to these 6-items were then averaged to give an emotional valence score, which were again averaged across “feminine” and “masculine” vignettes (for “feminine” vignettes,  $\alpha = .94$ ; for “masculine” vignettes,  $\alpha = .94$  in the current sample). Correlation between variables can be found in [Table 1](#), and Italian

Table 1

Correlations (Spearman's  $\rho$ ) Between Variables Based on Responses to Stereotypically-Feminine and Stereotypically-Masculine Vignettes

Variable	1. Likability–feminine	2. Likability–masculine	3. Similarity–feminine	4. Similarity–masculine	5. Interaction–feminine	6. Interaction–masculine	7. Emotional valence–feminine	8. Emotional valence–masculine
1	—	<b>.30</b>	<b>.64**</b>	<b>.23</b>	<b>.74**</b>	<b>.40*</b>	<b>.61**</b>	<b>.26</b>
2	.40*	—	<b>.10</b>	<b>.48**</b>	<b>.14</b>	<b>.54**</b>	<b>.17</b>	<b>.45**</b>
3	.62**	.23	—	<b>.19</b>	<b>.65**</b>	<b>.28</b>	<b>.31</b>	<b>.10</b>
4	.16	.65**	.15	—	–.11	<b>.32</b>	<b>.07</b>	<b>.25</b>
5	.44*	.20	.11	–.03	—	<b>.51**</b>	<b>.42*</b>	<b>.26</b>
6	.28	.61**	.13	.39*	.50**	—	<b>.18</b>	<b>.32</b>
7	.25	.06	–.11	.03	.38	.52**	—	<b>.63**</b>
8	.03	.44*	–.37	.26	.40*	.62**	.69**	—

Note. Statistics above the mid-line and highlighted bold are from the “masculinity threatened” condition, and statistics below the mid-line are from the “masculinity affirmed” condition. Likability–feminine/Likability–masculine = likeability of stereotypically feminine/masculine gay men described in the given vignettes; Similarity–feminine/Similarity–masculine = reported similarity to stereotypically feminine/masculine gay men described in the given vignettes; Interaction–feminine/Interaction–masculine = reported desire to meet stereotypically feminine/masculine gay men described in the given vignettes; Emotional valence–feminine/Emotional valence–masculine = reported level of comfort with stereotypically feminine/masculine gay men described in the given vignettes.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

wording of questions can be found in Appendix S3 in the online supplemental materials.

Finally, participants were given a full written debrief about the true aims of the study and the false nature of the feedback. They were also asked to complete a second consent form, indicating that they still gave permission for data to be used in analyses after becoming aware of the deceit.

## Results

Reported analyses are based on ANCOVAs, with experimental condition (“masculinity threatened” vs. “masculinity affirmed”) entered as a fixed factor, and age and CMNI scores entered as covariates, given the large age range of the sample, and the likelihood that those higher on the CMNI would be more motivated to distance from feminine gay men and present themselves as more masculine. There were no significant differences between

experimental groups on age,  $t(58) = 1.26, p = .213, d = 0.33$ , or on CMNI scores,  $t(58) = 0.59, p = .558, d = 0.15$ . Interactions between the experimental condition and both covariates for each DV were also examined for and not found. Means on dependent variables by experimental group are presented in Table 2. Note that because not all participants completed all measures, there exist differences in the sample sizes used in each analysis.

## Similarity Scores

There was a significant differences between experimental groups on participant's ratings of how similar they considered themselves to the individuals described in “masculine” vignettes, with those in the assigned to the “masculinity threatened” condition reporting more similarity to masculine gay men than those assigned to the “masculinity affirmed” condition,  $F(1, 47) = 4.84, p = .033, \eta^2 = .09$ . There were no significant differences between experimental groups on rat-

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations of Variables Based on Responses to Stereotypically-Feminine and Stereotypically-Masculine Vignettes by Experimental Condition

Variable	Masculinity threatened condition ( $n = 29$ )	Masculinity affirmed condition ( $n = 29$ )	$F^a$ ( $df$ )	$\eta^2$
Similarity–feminine	3.07 (1.22)	3.07 (1.26)	0.00 (1,47)	.00
Similarity–masculine	3.36 (1.03)	2.97 (1.43)	4.84* (1,47)	.09
Likability–feminine	4.09 (1.12)	4.40 (1.29)	0.82 (1,47)	.02
Likability–masculine	4.36 (0.91)	4.40 (1.62)	0.29 (1,47)	.01
Interaction–feminine	3.95 (1.23)	4.64 (1.25)	4.71* (1,47)	.09
Interaction–masculine	4.53 (0.69)	4.63 (1.28)	0.02 (1,46)	.00
Emotional valence–feminine	5.23 (1.19)	5.56 (0.98)	0.29 (1,45)	.01
Emotional valence–masculine	5.32 (1.07)	5.45 (1.30)	0.00 (1,47)	.00

Note. Similarity–feminine/Similarity–masculine = reported similarity to stereotypically feminine/masculine gay men described in the given vignettes; Likability–feminine/Likability–masculine = likeability of stereotypically feminine/masculine gay men described in the given vignettes; Interaction–feminine/Interaction–masculine = reported desire to meet stereotypically feminine/masculine gay men described in the given vignettes; Emotional valence–feminine/Emotional valence–masculine = reported level of comfort with stereotypically feminine/masculine gay men described in the given vignettes.

<sup>a</sup>  $F$  value from ANCOVA with age and CMNI score entered as covariates.

\*  $p < .05$ .

ings of how similar they considered themselves to be to the feminine gay men,  $F(1, 47) < 0.01, p = .991, \eta^2 < .001$ .

### Likability Scores

No differences were found between the two experimental conditions on participants' ratings of how much they liked the individuals described in the vignettes, either for the "feminine" vignettes,  $F(1, 47) = 0.82, p = .369, \eta^2 = .02$ , or for the "masculine" vignettes,  $F(1, 47) = 0.29, p = .591, \eta^2 = .01$ .

### Interaction Scores

There was a significant difference between experimental groups on participant's ratings of how much they would want to meet the individuals described in "feminine" vignettes, with those in the assigned to the "masculinity threatened" condition reporting that they were less willing to meet the feminine gay men than those assigned to the "masculinity affirmed" condition,  $F(1, 47) = 4.71, p = .035, \eta^2 = .09$ . There were no significant differences between experimental groups on ratings of how much they would want to meet the masculine gay men,  $F(1, 46) = 0.02, p = .883, \eta^2 < .001$ .

### Situational Emotional Valance Scores

No differences were found between the two experimental conditions on participants' ratings of how comfortable they would be with social interactions with the individuals described in the vignettes, either for the "feminine" vignettes,  $F(1, 45) = 0.29, p = .595, \eta^2 = .01$ , or for the "masculine" vignettes,  $F(1, 47) = 0.003, p = .956, \eta^2 < .001$ .

## Discussion

The current study aimed to examine whether threats to gay men's masculinity would result in greater masculine self-presentation and a distancing from feminine gay men. Results provided partial support for this assertion. Although moderate-sized effects demonstrated that gay men who received a threat to their masculinity reporting being more similar to "masculine" gay men and reported less desire to interact with "feminine" gay men than those whose masculinity was affirmed, the predicted results of lower liking of and greater discomfort with feminine gay men following a masculinity threat were not found. The significant findings are consistent with work that shows majority heterosexual male samples rejecting feminine gay men (Glick et al., 2007) and engaging in hypermasculine-typed behaviors (Bosson & Vandello, 2011; Hunt et al., 2013; Maass, Cadinu, Guarnieri, & Grasselli, 2003; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004) in reaction to a masculinity threat. These findings thus provide partial support for the suggestion that, despite the ongoing stereotype that they are not masculine (Blashill & Powlisha, 2009; Mitchell & Ellis, 2011), gay men still experience pressure to conform to masculine stereotypes and to distance themselves from femininity when their masculinity is called into question.

However, contrary to hypotheses, no change was seen on the likability or emotional valence measures. Although these null findings do make tentative the overall conclusion of the study, they also may suggest that the results on the interaction variable are not

driven by an overt dislike of or by revulsion directed toward feminine gay men. One possibility for this finding could be that the results are driven more by an attempt to outwardly confirm to masculine norms through not wanting to be *seen* to associate with feminine gay men, rather than by negative attitudes toward such individuals. This suggestion is consistent with previous work with gender role conformity, which highlights that it is public demonstration of conformity that is important in reactions to masculinity threats (Bosson, Taylor, & Prewitt-Freilino, 2006; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004; Vandello, Bosson, Cohen, Burnaford, & Weaver, 2008), an interpretation that could be examined in future research on this area.

One limitation of the current study is that when asking about a desire to meet the individuals described in the vignettes, the purpose of the meeting was not specified. Discrepancies may exist between gay men's desire to meet other gay men for dating or for other social purposes. Previous work on gay men distancing themselves from feminine gay men has focused on partner preference rather than broader social groupings (Bailey et al., 1997; Clarkson, 2006; Sanchez & Vilain, 2012). Indeed, the current finding of an effect of masculinity threat on desire to meet the feminine gay man (which may have been interpreted in terms of romantic meetings), but not on the broader emotional valence score (which included reference to a variety of social relationships but not romantic relationships), suggests that participants' reaction may differ depending on the nature of the interaction, although this suggestion is only tentative at this point. Further work may benefit from explicitly examining any differences between romantic interactions, friendships, and other social interactions.

Furthermore, the conclusions of the study were also limited by the relatively small sample size, making any findings preliminary. It is also important to note that the results of the study may be affected by cultural context, given that differences in masculine norms have been noted between countries (see Tager & Good, 2005). Future work should examine these variables in a range of different cultural settings.

The results of this study have important implications. Given that gay men battle with the stereotype that they are not masculine, they may chronically distance themselves from feminine gay men. This may result in some gay men rejecting the wider gay community based on the stereotype that most gay men are feminine, thereby cutting off what is an important source of positive social support (McLaren, Jude, & McLachlan, 2007, 2008), particularly given the stress that can result from gay men's minority status (Meyer, 1995). Furthermore, this may also have potentially damaging impacts on feminine gay men who feel rejected by their peers. Future research may benefit from examining the degree to which various subgroups of gay men feel accepted or rejected by their peers, and the impact that this has on their psychosocial functioning.

In conclusion, this study provides partial experimental evidence that links a preference for "masculine" behavior and the rejection of "feminine" gay men to threats to gay men's masculinity. In this, this research highlights how gay men, despite the persisting stereotype that they are not masculine, still experience pressure to conform to majority group values regarding gender norms when their masculinity is threatened.

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