

# A Cognitive Look at the “Invisibility” of Older Gay Men Within the Categories ‘Gay Man’ and ‘Elderly Man’

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## Abstract

Two studies analyzed whether, at the cognitive level, ‘Elderly gay man’ is “invisible” both when processing the labels ‘Gay man’ and ‘Elderly man’. We suggest that ‘Gay man’ is conflated with ‘Young man’, and that ‘Elderly man’ is conflated with ‘Heterosexual man’. Contact with elderly gay men did not alter the perception of ‘Gay man’ as prevalently young but weakened the perception of ‘Elderly man’ as heterosexual by default.

## Keywords

category labels, sexual orientation categories, age categories, intersectionality, social invisibility

Research addressing how gay men are perceived by mainstream society and gay culture has acknowledged the overemphasis both place on youthful characteristics in aspects such as physical appearance and sexuality (Bennett & Thompson, 1991; Hajek & Giles, 2002). The conflation of ‘Gay men’ with ‘Young men’ may foster in younger gay men a fear of aging (Warren, 2000), and older gay men might experience an inability to meet these appearance and sexuality standards (Hajek & Giles, 2002). Older gay men run the risk of being “invisible” in the gay community, as they may refrain from participating in gay social life both because it is mainly aimed at young gay men and because of anticipated ageism (Wight et al., 2015). Furthermore, older

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gay men may be “invisible” within the group of older men in general. For instance, healthcare services dedicated to older people tend to presume clients’ heterosexuality, unless otherwise informed (Cronin & King, 2010). The increased social acceptability of diverse sexualities over time may contribute to the fact that younger people are more prone to identify as gay (8%, 16–24 years old) than older people (0.8%, 65 + years old; Office for National Statistics, 2022). Older gay men may refrain from coming out at later stages of their life because of the strong internalized pressure to pass as heterosexual in their early years (Harris & Fiske, 2006). Together, these societal factors contribute to rendering older gay men less visible within both ‘Gay men’ and ‘Elderly men’.

Drawing on the cited works, the current research investigated whether the social-psychological evidence of ‘Gay man’ as prevalently young, and ‘Elderly man’ as prevalently heterosexual, maps onto individual cognition, thus creating a persistent young bias in the perception of ‘Gay man’, and heterosexual bias in the perception of ‘Elderly man’. By shifting the focus from the societal determinants to the cognitive processes involved in the perception of this sexual orientation and age category intersection, we contributed to the literature from two related perspectives.

First, this work provided a cognitive account of the “invisibility” of the category ‘Elderly gay man’ as a result of the selective conceptualizing of its constituent categories, namely ‘Gay man’ as young and ‘Elderly man’ as heterosexual. We recast the “invisibility” of older gay men within the theoretical framework of the *non-prototypicality* of individuals with multiple non-prototypical memberships (Carnaghi et al., 2022; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008; Schug et al., 2015). Categories display a graded structure, with some exemplars being more typical of the category than others (Barsalou, 1985; Mervis & Rosch, 1981). Highly typical members tend to be taken as the category default, thus conflating the general category representation with specific members (Hegarty & Pratto, 2001; Hegarty & Pratto, 2004). Young men and heterosexual men are category defaults (Lick & Johnson, 2016; North & Fiske, 2015). Thus, we predicted that ‘Gay men’ and ‘Elderly men’ would be overlooked when processing age and sexual orientation categories, respectively. Furthermore, we predicted that ‘Elderly gay men’ would be the most overlooked due to having two non-prototypical intersecting categories. This prediction was based on evidence that ‘Gay men’ has an age-graded structure, and ‘Elderly men’ has a sexuality-graded structure. Indeed, the higher representativeness of younger than older male exemplars is more pronounced for gay than heterosexual men, thus making ‘Elderly gay men’ particularly invisible within ‘Gay men’ (Coladonato et al., 2022). The higher representativeness of heterosexual than gay male exemplars is more pronounced with elderly than young men, rendering ‘Elderly gay men’ especially invisible within ‘Elderly men’ (Carnaghi et al., 2022). The “invisibility” of ‘Elderly gay men’ may stem from a perceived higher prevalence of ‘Young men’ within ‘Gay men’, and of ‘Heterosexual men’ within ‘Elderly men’. Also, attributes equally true of two categories may be more central to the concept of one than the other, and youth and heterosexuality seem to be especially central attributes in the conceptualization of gay men and older men, respectively (Carnaghi et al., 2022; Medin & Shoben, 1988).

Drawing on this evidence, we predicted that ‘Young gay men’ would conceptualize ‘Gay man’, and the young-as-default would be stronger with ‘Gay man’ than ‘Heterosexual man’. Also, we predicted that ‘Elderly heterosexual men’ would conceptualize ‘Elderly man’, and the heteronormative default would be stronger with ‘Elderly man’ than ‘Young man’. Hence, older gay men would be overlooked due to having two non-prototypical intersecting categories, as they are neither typical of ‘Gay man’ (who are prototyped as young) nor of ‘Elderly man’ (who are prototyped as heterosexual).

Second, we provided a baseline measurement of the defaults with sexual orientation and age categories by assessing the defaults with categories that are unrelated to both sexuality and age (i.e., irrelevant categories). We expected the defaults under analyses to shape the representation of these categories: irrelevant categories would be conceptualized as young and heterosexual. Moreover, we expected that the young-as-default with irrelevant categories would resemble that of ‘Heterosexual man’, and be less strong than that with ‘Gay man’. Likewise, we expected that the heteronormative default with irrelevant categories should be more similar to that with ‘Young man’ than with ‘Elderly man’. The inclusion of irrelevant categories as controls provided an additional test of the cognitive underpinnings of ‘Elderly gay men’ being particularly overlooked within ‘Gay men’ and ‘Elderly men’.

## Study I

### Method

*Participants.* One hundred thirty-three Italian participants (Table 1) provided informed consent orally. A sensitivity power analysis ( $\alpha = .05$ ,  $1-\beta = .80$ ) indicated that the smallest effect size ( $f = .10$ ) we could detect with this sample size fell within the small-effect size area (Cohen, 1988).

*Material.* Two sexual orientation category labels, namely ‘Heterosexual’ [*eterosessuale*] and ‘Gay’ [*omosessuale*], and two age category labels, namely ‘Elderly’ [*anziano*] and ‘Young’ [*giovane*], were selected for the study. We used ‘Right-handed’ [*destrimane*] and ‘English’ [*Inglese*] as irrelevant category labels because both labels have been shown to be independent from both sexual orientation and age categories (see Carnaghi et al., 2022, Study 4). Additionally, multiple characteristics might cluster around ‘English’, but likely not ‘Right-handed’. This reflects a natural difference between social groups, in that some may trigger specific “group” characteristics, while others are considered “loose groups”, less likely to be associated with well-defined stereotypes (Lickel et al., 2000).

The sexual orientation, age, and irrelevant category labels have opaque grammatical gender in Italian but are highly likely to be processed as referring to men (Carnaghi et al., 2022). ‘Elderly’ can be declined in both masculine and feminine forms. To be consistent with the other category labels, ‘Elderly’ was grammatically marked as masculine. This likely reinforced the understanding of the labels with opaque grammatical gender as referring to males.

**Table 1.** Age, Gender, Sexual Orientation, Citizenship, and Native Language of Participants as a Function of the Study (Studies 1 and 2).

	STUDY 1	STUDY 2
<b>Age</b>		
Range	18–38	19–75
M	21.97	33.64
SE	0.29	0.92
Not reporting	4	5
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	87	109
Male	39	67
Other		2
Not reporting	7	6
<b>Sexual orientation</b>		
Heterosexual		152
Bisexual		18
Homosexual		4
Other		5
Not reporting		5
<b>Citizenship</b>		
Italian		178
Other than Italian		
Dual		1
Not reporting		5
<b>Native language</b>		
Italian		174
Other than Italian		1
Dual		3
Not reporting		6

Note. Values pertaining to the participants' age are expressed in years.

*Procedure.* Participants were informed that “*This research aims to study how people use words, and what people refer to when using these words. We are not interested in the linguistic correctness, namely how people should use these words, but we seek to understand how these words are actually used in everyday life.*” Participants were then presented with the age and the sexual orientation inference task, in a counterbalanced order. In the age inference task, participants were presented with the two sexual orientation category labels and the two irrelevant category labels. Participants rated each category label on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*very elderly*) to 7 (*very young*; see Supplementary Material online). In the sexual orientation inference task, participants were presented with the two age category labels and the two irrelevant category labels. Participants rated each category label on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*very gay*) to 7 (*very heterosexual*).

Irrelevant category labels were always presented as the first and the third labels. To estimate the defaults in irrelevant categories in general, participants' ratings of 'English man' and 'Right-handed man' were averaged together, separately in the two tasks. Within each task, the presentation order of the category labels relating to sexual orientation and age were counterbalanced across participants. Due to a material error, 104 participants were presented with the 'English man' label first. We subsequently collected an additional 32 participants that were presented with 'Right-handed man' as the first label. The results were not affected by which type of label participants were presented with first (see Supplementary Material online).

## Results

In the age inference task (Table 2), participants' ratings were analyzed by means of ANOVA 3(labels: Gay man vs. Heterosexual man vs. Irrelevant labels) repeated measures. Higher ratings indicated that the labels were thought of as referred to 'young man'. A significant effect of labels was found,  $F(2, 264) = 80.40$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .38$ . Post-hoc comparisons (Bonferroni correction) showed that 'Gay man' was

**Table 2.** Participants' Ratings as a Function of the Task and Labels, Separately for Study 1 and Study 2.

		Labels		
<b>Study 1</b>				
Task				
Sexual orientation estimation	Irrelevant labels	Young man	Elderly man	
	4.25* (0.07)	4.22* (0.09)	5.57* (0.07)	
Age estimation	Irrelevant labels	Heterosexual man	Gay man	
	4.29* (0.06)	4.05 (0.11)	5.44* (0.09)	
<b>Study 2</b>				
Task				
Sexual orientation estimation	Irrelevant labels	Young man	Elderly man	
	4.55* (0.08)	4.67* (0.10)	5.63* (0.10)	
Age estimation	Irrelevant labels	Heterosexual man	Gay man	
	4.15* (0.06)	4.17 (0.10)	5.23* (0.09)	

Note. Standard errors are displayed between brackets. In the sexual orientation inference task, higher scores indicated that the labels point to 'heterosexual men'; in the age inference task, higher scores indicated that the labels point to 'young men'. Mean values marked with \* significantly differed from the midpoint of the scale,  $p < .05$ .

thought of as referring to 'young man' to a greater extent than was 'Heterosexual man' ( $t(132) = 10.41, p < .001$ ), and 'Irrelevant labels' ( $t(132) = 12.12, p < .001$ ), while no difference occurred between 'Heterosexual man' and 'Irrelevant labels',  $t(132) = 1.97, p = .151$ .

In the sexual orientation inference task (Table 2), participants' ratings were analyzed by means of ANOVA 3(labels: Elderly man vs. Young man vs. Irrelevant labels) repeated measures. Higher ratings indicated that the labels were thought of as referred to 'heterosexual man'. A significant effect of labels was found,  $F(2, 264) = 97.94, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .43$ . Post-hoc comparisons showed that 'Elderly man' was considered to be referring to 'heterosexual man' to a greater extent than was 'Young man' ( $t(132) = 10.11, p < .001$ ), and 'Irrelevant labels',  $t(132) = 12.40, p < .001$ , while no difference occurred between 'Young man' and 'Irrelevant labels'  $t(132) = 0.35, p = 1.000$ .

## Discussion

These results indicated that participants made different age assumptions concerning the sexual orientation categories: 'Gay man' was considered as referring to young to a greater extent than 'Heterosexual man'. The young-as-default with irrelevant categories was similar to that with 'Heterosexual man'. Furthermore, participants differently made heteronormative assumptions depending on the age categories: 'Elderly man' was considered as referring to heterosexual to a greater extent than 'Young man'. Also, the heteronormative bias in the irrelevant categories resembled that with 'Young man'.

Study 2 aimed to replicate these findings, and explored the role of contact with the sexual orientation and age category intersections in the defaults. Frequent encounters with specific category members enhance the accessibility of those members from memory, leading them to be judged as more typical of the category (Barsalou, 1985; Kahneman & Miller, 1986). Hence, contact with 'Elderly gay men' could attenuate the young bias in 'Gay man', and the heterosexual bias in 'Elderly man'. However, enhanced contact with 'Young gay men' and/or 'Elderly heterosexual men' could further strengthen 'Gay men' being assumed young, and 'Elderly men' being assumed heterosexual.

## Study 2

### Method

*Participants.* One hundred eighty-four Italian participants (Table 1) provided written informed consent prior to their participation in the study. A sensitivity power analysis ( $\alpha = .05, 1-\beta = .80$ ) suggested that, with the current  $N$ , the smallest detectable effect size (MDE) (Cohen's  $f = .09$ ) falls within the small-effect size area (Cohen, 1988).

*Procedure.* The material and the procedures were the same as those in Study 1. Category labels were presented in a random order within each inference task.

Participants' direct and indirect contact with 'Elderly heterosexual men', 'Elderly gay men', 'Young heterosexual men', and 'Young gay men' were assessed after the inference tasks (Pagotto et al., 2010; Shamloo et al., 2018; see Supplementary Material online).

Participants reported their age, gender, sexual orientation, citizenship, and native language (see Supplementary Material online).

## Results and Discussion

Participants' ratings in the age and sexual orientation inference task (Table 2) were analyzed as in Study 1. In the age inference task, results indicated a significant effect of labels,  $F(2, 366) = 62.69, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .26$ . Post-hoc comparisons showed that 'Gay man' was thought of as referring to 'young man' to a greater extent than was 'Heterosexual man' ( $t(183) = 8.87, p < .001$ ), and 'Irrelevant labels' ( $t(183) = 10.71, p < .001$ ), while 'Heterosexual man' and 'Irrelevant labels' did not differ from each other,  $t(183) = 0.20, p = 1.000$ .

In the sexual orientation inference task, results indicated a significant effect of labels,  $F(2, 366) = 77.01, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .30$ . Post-hoc comparisons showed that 'Elderly man' was considered to be referring to 'heterosexual man' to a greater extent than 'Young man' ( $t(183) = 9.14, p < .001$ ), and 'Irrelevant labels' ( $t(183) = 10.90, p < .001$ ), while 'Young man' and 'Irrelevant labels' did not differ from each other,  $t(183) = 1.50, p = .404$ .

*Analyses of amount of contact.* Direct and indirect contact were averaged into a single index of *amount of contact* for each target group (reliability: 'Elderly gay men':  $\omega = .77$ ; 'Elderly heterosexual men':  $\omega = .75$ ; 'Young gay men':  $\omega = .69$ ; and 'Young heterosexual men':  $\omega = .63$ ).

In the sexual orientation inference task, participants' ratings of 'Elderly man' and 'Young man' were regressed on participants' amount of contact with 'Elderly gay men' and 'Elderly heterosexual men', 'Young gay men' and 'Young heterosexual men', separately (Table 3). Results indicated that higher levels of contact with 'Elderly gay men' were associated with a lower pointing of 'Elderly man' to 'heterosexual man',  $\beta = -0.44; t = 2.76, p = .007$  (see Figure 1 and Table 4), and that higher levels of contact with 'Young gay men' were associated with a lower pointing of 'Young man' to 'heterosexual man',  $\beta = -0.37; t = 2.63, p = .009$  (see Figure 2 and Table 4).

In the age inference task, participants' ratings of 'Heterosexual man' and 'Gay man' were regressed on participants' amount of contact with 'Elderly heterosexual men' and 'Young heterosexual men', and 'Elderly gay men' and 'Young gay men', separately (Table 3). No significant result was found.

## General Discussion

This research investigates the processes that can account for the invisibility of 'Elderly gay men' at the cognitive level. Confirming our predictions based on category default

**Table 3.** Regressions of Association Between Participants' Ratings of Each Label and the Amount of Contact with the Target Groups in Study 2.

Predictors	$\beta$	SE	t	p	95% CI
<i>Elderly man</i>					
Amount of contact					
<i>Elderly heterosexual men</i>	-0.13	0.12	1.07	.287	[-0.23, 0.07]
<i>Elderly gay men</i>	-0.44	0.16	2.76	.007	[-0.36, -0.06]
<i>Young man</i>					
Amount of contact					
<i>Young heterosexual men</i>	0.17	0.22	0.81	.417	[-0.09, 0.22]
<i>Young gay men</i>	-0.37	0.14	2.63	.009	[-0.36, -0.05]
<i>Heterosexual man</i>					
Amount of contact					
<i>Elderly heterosexual men</i>	0.06	0.12	0.45	.654	[-0.12, 0.20]
<i>Young heterosexual men</i>	0.14	0.21	0.65	.5151	[-0.11, 0.21]
<i>Gay man</i>					
Amount of contact					
<i>Elderly gay men</i>	0.19	0.15	1.24	.215	[-0.06, 0.27]
<i>Young gay men</i>	-0.17	0.13	1.35	.178	[-0.28, 0.05]

Note. CI = confidence interval.

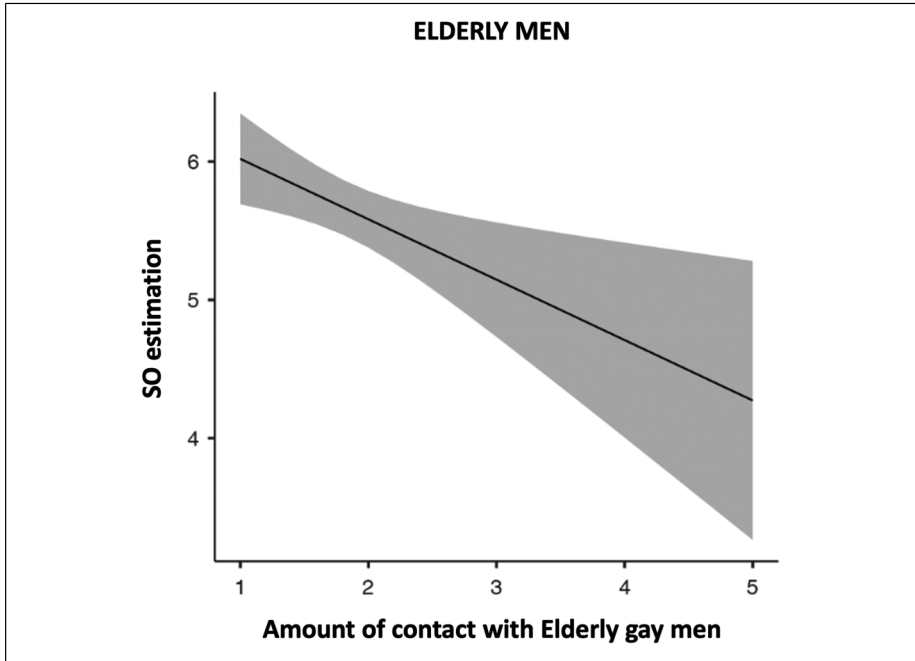
**Table 4.** Participants' Ratings (i.e., Marginal Mean) of Elderly man (Upper side of the Table) and of Young man (Lower side of the Table) as a Function of the Amount of Contact with Elderly gay men and Young gay men, Respectively.

	Amount of contact	Marginal mean	SE	95% CI
<i>Elderly gay men</i>				
-1 SD	1.18	5.94	0.14	[5.65, 6.22]
Mean	1.84	5.65	0.10	[5.46, 5.85]
+1 SD	2.49	5.37	0.14	[5.08, 5.65]
<i>Young gay men</i>				
-1 SD	2.69	5.00	0.15	[4.70, 5.30]
Mean	3.46	4.71	0.10	[4.51, 4.92]
+1 SD	4.23	4.43	0.15	[4.13, 4.73]

Note. CI = confidence interval. SE = Standard error. -1 SD/+1 SD indicate the amount of contact at 1 Standard Deviation below/above the mean.

theories, 'Gay man' was thought of being young, and to a greater extent than 'Heterosexual man'. Likewise, 'Elderly man' was perceived as heterosexual, and to a greater extent than 'Young man'. As expected, irrelevant categories were processed as young and heterosexual by default, and were processed more similarly to normative



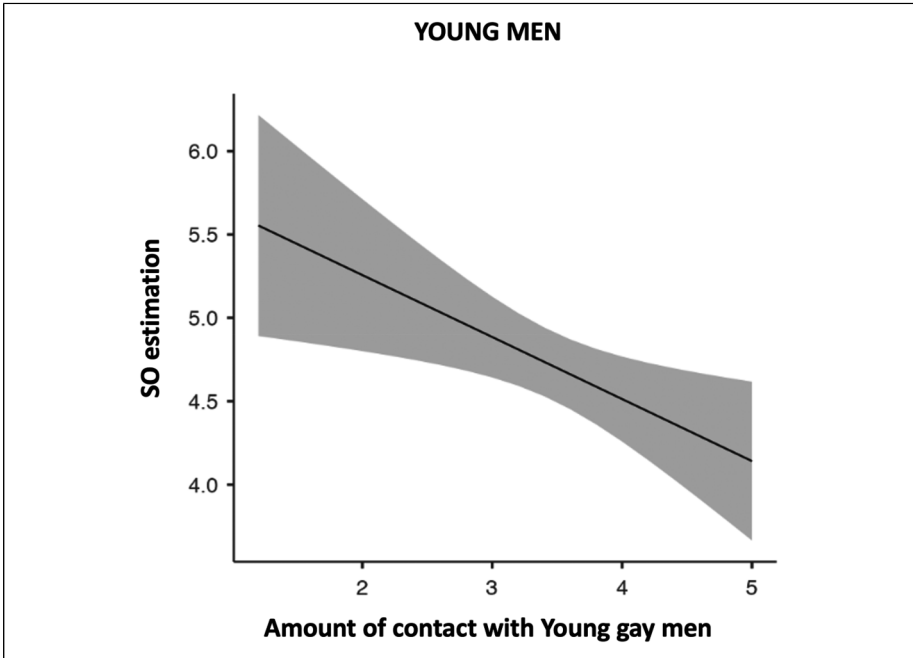


**Figure 1.** Participants' ratings of 'elderly man' in the sexual orientation inference task (i.e., SO estimation) as a function of the amount of contact with 'Elderly gay men' in Study 2.

Note. Sexual orientation estimation (i.e., SO estimation), ranging from 1 = very gay to 7 = very heterosexual. The shaded gray area represents the 95% confidence level for the regression line.

categories (i.e., 'Heterosexual men' and 'Young men') than non-normative categories (i.e., 'Gay men' and 'Elderly men'). Both studies confirmed that participants made distinct age assumptions concerning the two sexual-orientation categories, and distinct sexual-orientation assumptions about the two age categories. In line with the theoretical framework of the *non-prototypicality*, the cognitive "invisibility" of 'Elderly gay men' is a byproduct of the narrow and non-inclusive conceptualization of 'Gay man' (prototyped as young) and 'Elderly man' (prototyped as heterosexual). These findings are consistent with studies suggesting that the stereotypes about older gay men (Bennett & Thompson, 1991) do not match the stereotypes of either of their constituent categories and older gay men are relegated to an atypical subtype within both the categories gay men and older men (Coladonato et al., 2022). The intersection of contrasting discrete categories (e.g., 'Gay man' and 'Elderly man') can be represented by a "compound category," whose emergent attributes cannot be reduced to the sum of their constituent category attributes (Kunda et al., 1990; Roccas & Brewer, 2002).

Moreover, the results suggested that the non-normative category (e.g., 'Elderly men') was particularly likely to be combined with the normative intersecting category (e.g., 'Heterosexual men') rather than the non-normative category (e.g., 'Gay men').



**Figure 2.** Participants' ratings of 'young man' in the sexual orientation inference task (i.e., SO estimation) as a function of the amount of contact with 'Young gay men' in Study 2.

Note. Sexual orientation estimation (i.e., SO estimation), ranging from 1 = *very gay* to 7 = *very heterosexual*. The shaded gray area represents the 95% confidence level for the regression line.

This conjecture is in line with evidence suggesting that, for instance, 'Black people' are more likely to be processed as 'Men' rather than 'Women' (Galinsky et al., 2013).

Participants' amount of contact with both 'Elderly gay men' and 'Young gay men' reduced the heteronormative defaults in both age categories. By contrast, contact with 'Elderly gay men' and 'Elderly heterosexual men' did not weaken the young-as-default in the construal of either 'Gay man' or 'Heterosexual man'. Conjecturally, age categories might be more likely to be represented by exemplars perceivers encountered, while sexual orientation categories, and 'Gay man' in particular, more by abstract knowledge, alias, by prototype. Unusual encounters, such as those with 'Elderly gay men', may be isolated as atypical instances, and not generalize the age information to the category 'Gay man' (Carnaghi & Yzerbyt, 2007). Future studies can experimentally vary the frequency of encounters with elderly gay and young gay individuals and test their effects on the young-as-default of 'Gay man' as well as on the heteronormativity of 'Elderly man'.

This research presents several limitations. First, the studies' samples mainly comprised young individuals. Previous research has shown that the appraisal of category labels might change over time (Pennebaker & Stone, 2003). Future research could

rely on a more varied age sample to test whether the use of specific category labels referring to male sexual orientation connects with specific labels referring to age, and vice versa, across ages. Also, the sample was largely comprised of heterosexual female participants. Given that heterosexual women, compared to heterosexual men, report less stereotypical and more positive attitudes towards gay men, a more gender-balanced sample would have allowed for a more accurate estimate of the general population's young bias in the representation of gay men and heterosexual bias in the representation of older men (Sakalli & Ugurlu, 2003). Second, as noted in the procedure section, all category labels, except 'Elderly', have an opaque grammatical gender in Italian, and are highly likely to have been processed as referring to men (see Carnaghi et al., 2022, Study 4). Future studies conducted in gender-marked linguistic contexts might explicitly mention the male gender category (e.g., 'homme' in French). Third, hypotheses were tested by relying only on the category interpretation paradigm (Rosch et al., 1976). Although this paradigm has been largely employed to ascertain preferential representation (e.g., plastic vs. glass) of a given category (e.g., bottles), future studies may test the current hypotheses by comparing the attributes associated with discrete categories (e.g., 'Gay men') to those associated with intersectional categories (i.e., 'Young gay men', 'Elderly gay men'; Kunda et al., 1990; Preddie & Biernat, 2021). Finally, future studies may try to replicate the present findings using alternative irrelevant categories.

These studies warn that labels such as 'Gay men' and 'Elderly men' convey non-inclusive representations, even unintentionally. Because such labels are considered neutral and non-offensive, their use may incidentally normalize the cognitive invisibility of older gay men (Ng, 2007). Institutions may adopt two strategies to counteract the defaults. At the linguist level, more intersectional age- and sexuality-diverse language should be routinized in public communication. At the social level, broader age representation of gay men (e.g., through the media; Avila-Saavedra, 2009; Fejes, 2000) should be increased to weaken the heteronormativity of age categories (Rosenfeld, 2009). Together, these initiatives may strengthen the diversity perceived within both gay and older men.

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## Data Availability Statement

Data and materials are available at [https://osf.io/ex5z4/?view\\_only=175f6723ec1b4f6d8b2ce0bc bdeec643](https://osf.io/ex5z4/?view_only=175f6723ec1b4f6d8b2ce0bc bdeec643). All the studies received ethical approval from the University of Trieste Ethical Committee. This article does not contain any studies with animals performed by any of the authors.


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## Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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