

# The Impact of Homophobic Labels on the Internalized Homophobia and Body Image of Gay Men: The Moderation Role of Coming-Out

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## Abstract

This study investigates whether homophobic labels and category-neutral terms are differently appraised as a function of levels of coming-out. After reporting their coming-out status, participants were exposed to either homophobic or category labels and reported their semantic associations, level of internalized homophobia, and body perceptions. Results show that labels were more positively evaluated as participants' coming-out increased. High-coming-out individuals reported higher internalized homophobia and body concerns in the homophobic rather than category labels condition. Low-coming-out individuals displayed the reverse pattern.

## Keywords

homophobic labels, internalized homophobia, coming-out, body image, homosexuality

In a recent Italian survey, 80% of those interviewed reported hearing acquaintances using homophobic labels very often (47.4%) or sometimes (32.6%; Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, 2012). Though this example portrays the Italian context as strongly homophobic, sexual prejudice and the use of homophobic labels are also firmly

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entrenched in other European countries and the United States (see Eurobarometer 393, 2012; Herek, 2009).

With few exceptions (e.g., Carnaghi & Maass, 2007), research has addressed the *evaluation* and *consequences* of homophobic and category labels (e.g., faggot and gay, respectively) addressing gays in samples of heterosexual participants (Carnaghi & Maass, 2008, Carnaghi, Maass, & Fasoli, 2011; Fasoli et al., 2016; Fasoli, Maass, & Carnaghi, 2015), leaving the question regarding gay participants' evaluation and consequences of such labels underinvestigated. The present experiment has two goals. First, it addresses whether gays who differ in their levels of coming-out, that is, the public disclosure of one's own sexual orientation, distinctly evaluate category and homophobic labels. Second, it explores the psychological consequences of being exposed to such labels. Specifically, we investigate the interplay between labels and levels of coming-out on internalized homophobia (IH), namely, self-directed prejudice based on society's negative evaluation of homosexuality, and body-image variables, such as the worries about conforming to masculine-body ideal (i.e., drive for muscularity over thinness, Yelland & Tiggemann, 2003) and self-objectification (i.e., focus on physical appearance over competence; Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998).

Quasi-experimental and correlational studies have shown that gays' perceived sexual discrimination is associated with body-image concerns (Kimmel & Mahalik, 2005). For the first time we experimentally address whether language-based induced discrimination affects body-image variables, specifically, masculine-body ideal concerns. In so doing, we intend to advance research on derogatory language extending our understanding of how homophobic labels can lead gay males to experience self-directed prejudice and concerns about one's own body-image.

## **Evaluative Appraisal**

Derogatory labels can be clustered as a function of their common semantics and evaluation (Mullen, Rozell, & Johnson, 2001).

As for the evaluative dimension, heterosexual participants freely associate less positive concepts with the homophobic label (e.g., faggot) than the category label (e.g., gay; Carnaghi et al., 2011, Fasoli et al., 2016). Similarly, at an implicit level of processing, "fag" as a subliminally presented prime decreases the accessibility of positive constructs compared to the prime "gay" (Carnaghi & Maass, 2007).

As for the explicit evaluation, gay participants judge homophobic labels as more offensive than category labels (Carnaghi & Maass, 2008). Hence, we suggest that gays would report a more positive evaluation of the category rather than homophobic labels (Hypothesis 1). Moreover, research rooted in Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) indicates that individuals generally feel positive about their in-group and, consequently, evaluate any labels attached to the in-group in a favorable manner (the label-favoritism hypothesis; Carnaghi & Maass, 2007). However, gays might show different level of in-group positive attitude as a function of their coming out. Indeed, compared with lower levels of coming out (i.e., LLCO), higher levels of coming-out

(i.e., HLCO) correlate with positive attitude toward the in-group (Jellison, McConnell, & Gabriel, 2004), and with lower levels of negative gay identity (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000). These results indirectly suggest that the evaluation of in-group-related labels (i.e., category and homophobic) could depend on the level of coming-out. Specifically, we hypothesize that the evaluation of both the category and homophobic labels would be more positive in those with HLCO than LLCO (Hypothesis 2).

## Psychological Consequences

Research on heterosexuals attests that homophobic (vs. category) labels enhance explicit sexual prejudice (Carnaghi & Maass, 2008), gays' dehumanization (Fasoli et al., 2016), intergroup bias (Fasoli et al., 2015), and boost heterosexuals' differentiation from gays (Carnaghi et al., 2011). With few exceptions (Galinsky et al., 2013), little is known about the perspective of a person who is the target of homophobic labels (e.g., gays), and no research has tested the moderating role of coming-out in this respect.

We speculate that homophobic and category labels pose different threats to individuals depending on their level of coming-out. Indeed, the degree of coming-out is predictive of gay individuals' willingness to publically affirm their sexual orientation (Jones & Devos, 2014).

The value of one's own group can be threatened because of unfavorable behavior or information (i.e., discrimination) directed at the in-group (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999). This is the case in which gays, who have disclosed and publically affirmed their sexual orientation (i.e., HLCO), are exposed to a derogatory term addressing their group and devaluating their membership. Specifically, homophobic labels may reinforce the stigmatization of the in-group, in individuals who publically acknowledged their membership. Diversely, being unwillingly categorized as a member of a social group represents a threat to one's own identity (Branscombe et al., 1999). Being included in an undesirable social category can be threatening as individuals do not identify with it and because they experience the categorization as unfit. Individuals with LLCO regularly worry about concealment as they care about being identified as gay (Hebl, Law, & King, 2010). Hence, category labels may pose a threat to the categorization of the self in those individuals who are concerned with concealment (i.e., LLCO). Indeed, category labels refer to a membership LLCO individuals try to publically distance themselves from, while homophobic labels may be understood as an insult to a group to which they do not overtly belong.

To test these hypotheses we assessed the levels of IH in individuals with different levels of coming-out after being exposed to either category or homophobic labels. Indeed, gays internalize the consensually shared negative representation of homosexuality and can hold negative attitudes toward homosexuality, experience emotional discomfort at being part of a devalued in-group, and desire to dismiss this membership (Herek, 1996, 2004; Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 2009).

We suggest that gays with HLCO would experience a stronger sense of discomfort and negative emotions at being homosexual (i.e., IH), when their in-group is defined

in a homophobic manner compared with when their in-group is labeled in a category fashion (Hypothesis 3). Conversely, for LLCO individuals who are concerned about identity concealment, being categorized as gay might pose a threat to the categorization of the self. Consequently, facing category (vs. homophobic) labels could trigger a higher level of discomfort and a higher motivation to dismiss this undesired membership in LLCO gays (i.e., IH; Hypothesis 4).

Finally, we explore whether the impact of homophobic versus category labels on gays' body-image variables could be moderated by levels of coming-out. Some gays are likely to worry about being "masculine" and experience pressure to conform to masculine appearance norm (Hunt, Fasoli, Carnaghi, & Cadinu, 2016; Sánchez & Vilain, 2012). Moreover, the expectation of being discriminated for being gay enhances the distress of not conforming to a masculine-body ideal (Kimmel & Mahalik, 2005). As muscularity is important for appearing masculine (Halkitis, Green, & Wilton, 2004), we herewith operationalized the apprehension about not fitting the masculine-body ideal as the concern regarding muscularity over thinness. We therefore hypothesize that homophobic labels (but not category labels) represent discrimination directed to the in-group for HLCO gays, and could enhance their worries about masculine-body ideal (Hypothesis 5). Furthermore, the need of appearing "masculine" is particularly enhanced in gays concerned about sexual identity concealment, and for those who have a negative-gay identity, as in the case of LLCO gays (Sánchez, Westefeld, Liu, & Vilain, 2010). Since category labels compared with homophobic labels could be considered an undesirable categorization of one's identity in LLCO gays, we hypothesize that LLCO participants could increase their concerns about masculine-body ideal especially when exposed to category labels (Hypothesis 6). In an exploratory fashion, we included a measure of self-objectification as one's emphasis on physical appearance versus competence. However, due to the nonspecific association of this measure with masculinity, no clear-cut hypotheses on this variable are put forward.

## Method

### *Participants*

Fifty-six male members of a gay sport association participated in the study ( $M_{age} = 38.91$ ,  $SD = 9.52$ ). Two participants self-defined as bisexual and one participant, who did not provide his sexual orientation, were excluded from the analyses, leaving a sample of 53 self-identified gays.

### *Procedure*

Participants were provided a questionnaire, purportedly on quality of life and self-perception, by a male researcher. They received instruction to complete the questionnaire from beginning to the end, individually, without distraction once started.

Participants completed the Outness Inventory (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000;  $\alpha = .85$ ). This measure assesses the extent to which a participant's sexual orientation is known

by and openly discussed with others in different domains of life (i.e., family, friends and coworkers, and religious community) on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (= *definitively does not know your sexual orientation*) to 7 (= *definitively knows your sexual orientation and it is openly talked about*). Since individuals more open about their sexual orientation, compared with those less open, are highly committed to their gay-identity (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000), we relied on this measure as it might prove sensitive to threat-manipulations. We herewith refer to outness as a proxy of participants' levels of coming-out.

Subsequently, participants were primed by a label using a free association task (i.e., FAT) and fulfilled a first dependent variable block; then a second version of the FAT was administered to keep the primed label activated. Participants then reacted to the last dependent variable block. Depending on the prime label conditions, participants were either primed with category (i.e., gay or homosexual [*omosessuale* in Italian]) or with homophobic labels (i.e., fag or fairy [*frocio* and *checca* in Italian]). Participants read the prime label and freely reported the first three concepts that came to mind (for a similar procedure, see Carnaghi et al., 2011). They then went back and rated the valence of each freely associated concept on a bipolar scale ranging from  $-2$  (= *very negative*) to  $+2$  (= *very positive*). The labels employed in the first version (e.g., gay) and in the second version (e.g., homosexual) of the FAT were counterbalanced across participants.

The first block comprised the Internalized Homophobia Scale (Herek et al., 2009;  $\alpha = .74$ ). Participants rated their agreement to 9 items on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (= *agree strongly*) to 5 (= *disagree strongly*). The second block included body-image measures. First, participants completed 7 items of the Drive for Thinness ( $\alpha = .87$ ) and 7 items of the Drive for Muscularity (Martins, Tiggemann, & Kirkbride, 2007;  $\alpha = .86$ ) using a 6-point scale, ranging from 1 (= *always*) to 6 (= *never*). Second, the Self-Objectification Questionnaire (Fredrickson et al., 1998) was employed. Participants ranked the importance of 5 attributes related to physical appearance (i.e., weight) and 5 pertaining to physical competence (i.e., coordination), with respect to their own physical self-concept.

The first block and second block of dependent variables were counterbalanced across participants.

At the end of the questionnaire participants reported their gender, sexual orientation, age, educational background, relationship status, religious affiliation.<sup>1</sup> Participants' height and weight were collected to calculate a body mass index (BMI), using the ratio of weight (kg) to height (m) squared. Participants were then fully debriefed, thanked, and dismissed.

## Results

Each dependent variable was regressed on the condition ( $-1$  = category labels/ $1$  = homophobic labels), the level of coming-out (mean centered), and their interaction term. The index of general outness ( $M = 3.95$ ,  $SD = 1.53$ ) was recoded with higher scores indicating a higher level of coming-out<sup>2</sup> (see Table 1 for correlations between dependent variables).

**Table 1.** Correlations (Pearson's *r*) Between Dependent Variables.

Measure	1	2	3	4	5
1. Internalized Homophobia					
2. Drive for Thinness	-.031				
3. Drive for Muscularity	-.065	.341*			
4. Appearance	.072	.131	-.073		
5. Competence	-.072	-.131	.073	-1.000	
6. Body mass index	-.098	-.113	.120	-.051	.051

\* $p < .05$ .

### Body Mass Index

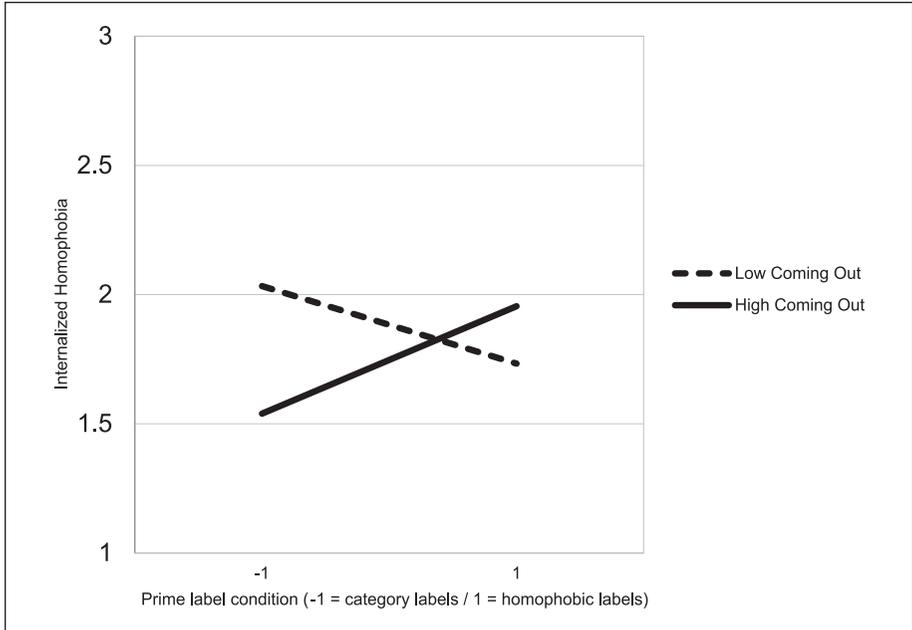
Controlling for BMI is a common practice in studies addressing body-image (Martins et al., 2007). BMI ( $M = 23.61$ ,  $SD = 2.33$ ) did not vary as a function of condition, coming-out, or their interaction ( $ts < 1.27$ ,  $ps > .211$ ).

### Free Association Task

An index of evaluative reactions to the stimulus words was computed averaging participants' evaluative reactions to the prime label of the two versions of the FAt. A higher evaluative reaction score indicated more positive valence-based associations. The analysis revealed a significant effect of condition ( $\beta = -.54$ ,  $t = -4.86$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $rt = -.54$ ). Confirming Hypothesis 1, participants reported more positive valence-based associations when exposed to category ( $M = 0.69$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ) than to homophobic labels ( $M = -0.74$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ). Moreover, and confirming Hypothesis 2, the higher the level of coming-out, the more positive the valence-based associations were ( $\beta = .27$ ,  $t = 2.43$ ,  $p = .019$ ,  $rt = .27$ ). Importantly, the interaction was not significant ( $\beta = -.05$ ,  $t = -.44$ ,  $p = .663$ ,  $rt = -.05$ ).

### Internalized Homophobia

Participants' ratings on this scale were averaged in an index of IH ( $M = 1.78$ ,  $SD = 0.73$ ). We recoded the items so that higher scores indicated higher levels of IH. A significant interaction between the condition (category vs. homophobic labels) and the level of coming-out was found,  $\beta = .37$ ,  $t = 2.87$ ,  $p = .006$ ,  $rt = .35$ .<sup>3</sup> To test Hypotheses 3 and 4, simple slope analyses (see Figure 1) showed that HLCO participants (+1  $SD$ ) reported higher levels of IH when exposed to homophobic versus category labels ( $\beta = .42$ ,  $t = 2.25$ ,  $p = .029$ ,  $rt = .29$ ). On the contrary, LLCO participants (-1  $SD$ ) tended to report higher levels of IH when exposed to category versus homophobic labels ( $\beta = -.34$ ,  $t = 1.82$ ,  $p = .074$ ,  $rt = -.24$ ).



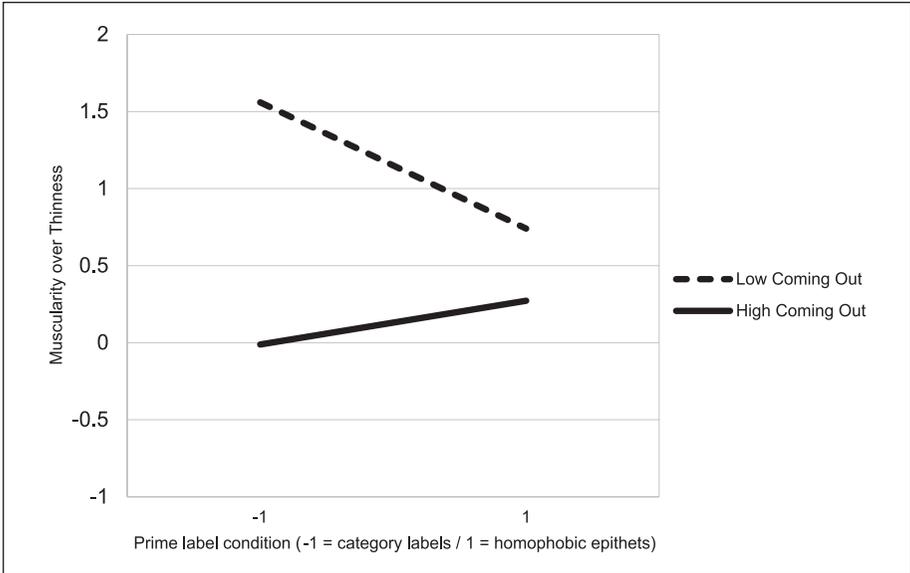
**Figure 1.** Interaction effects of type of label and level of coming-out on participants' internalized homophobia.

### *Masculine-Body Ideal*

Participants' ratings on the drive for thinness ( $M = 4.22$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ) and muscularity ( $M = 3.64$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ) scales were averaged. Lower scores indicate a higher desire for thinness/muscularity. We subtracted the scores of the drive for muscularity from the score of the drive for thinness ( $M = 0.59$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ). The higher the difference, the higher the drive for muscularity over thinness. The interaction between the condition and the level of coming-out was significant,  $\beta = .32$ ,  $t = 2.35$ ,  $p = .023$ ,  $rt = .32$ .<sup>4</sup> To test Hypotheses 5 and 6, simple slope analyses (see Figure 2) revealed that although nonsignificant, HLCO participants (+1  $SD$ ) reported higher levels of drive for muscularity over thinness when exposed to homophobic versus category labels ( $\beta = .22$ ,  $t = 1.14$ ,  $p = .261$ ,  $rt = .15$ ); LLCO participants (-1  $SD$ ) reported higher levels of drive for muscularity over thinness when exposed to category versus homophobic labels ( $\beta = -.42$ ,  $t = -2.20$ ,  $p = .032$ ,  $rt = -.30$ ).

### *Self-Objectification*

We computed an index of self-objectification subtracting the sum of physical competence ranks from the sum of physical appearance ranks ( $M = -1.60$ ,  $SD = 2.04$ ). Higher



**Figure 2.** Interaction effects of type of label and level of coming out on participants' drive for muscularity over thinness.

scores indicated a greater emphasis on physical appearance over physical competence. Regression analysis showed nonsignificant results ( $\beta < .21, ps > .145$ ).

## Discussion

This study analyses the evaluative appraisal of category and homophobic labels and the psychological consequences of being exposed to such labels in a sample of gays. Similar to heterosexual samples (Carnaghi et al., 2011), gay participants self-generated more positive associations in reaction to category rather than homophobic labels. Individuals learn several derogatory-group labels without necessarily being the target of such insults. Since gays and heterosexuals are both exposed to offensive labels in a given society, the evaluative distinction between these two classes of labels ends up being largely similar in both groups. In line with the label-favoritism hypothesis, our findings indicate that coming-out is positively related to the evaluation of both types of labels. Indeed, individuals who have disclosed their sexual orientation may have a more positive social identity than those who have not, as the disclosure of one's sexual identity increases both positive intragroup interactions and support within the homosexual community (Cass, 1979; Minton & McDonald, 1984; Shidlo, 1994). Therefore, participants who felt more positive about their group (as can be the case for HLCO gays) appraise in-group-directed labels in a positive fashion.

Moreover, HLCO participants reported higher levels of IH but not higher concerns regarding a masculine-body ideal when exposed to homophobic versus category labels.

In contrast, category labels (vs. homophobic labels) tend to increase IH, and concerns regarding a masculine-body ideal in LLCO participants. Hence, coming-out may have psychological benefits mitigating the detrimental effects of homophobic labels on body representation, but not on IH. LLCO instead may lead to stronger concerns about appearing more masculine and dismissing the undesirable gay membership when facing category labels. Importantly, the experimental labels do not increase participants' general concerns about physical appearance over physical competence as a function of coming-out, but only impact on the desire to adhere to the masculine-body ideal in individuals with LLCO when dealing with an undesirable self-directed category label. Given the important role of muscularity for appearing masculine, a threat to the categorization of the self selectively affects the body-image variable that is primarily connected to masculinity (i.e., drive for muscularity over thinness) and does not affect gays' self-objectification, as not directly linked to masculinity concerns.

Fasoli et al. (2016) found that slurs (e.g., asshole) and homophobic labels trigger equally negative associations, but only the latter elicits gay dehumanization by virtue of their homophobic content. These results suggest that the evaluative appraisal of category/homophobic labels and the consequence of being exposed to such labels are, at least in part, distinct processes. Our results confirm this dissociation: the impact of labels on IH as well as on body representation is not linearly associated with the level of coming out, as is the case for the evaluative appraisal.

Caution should be exercised regarding the generalizability of these results due to the small sample size and context. As participants were members of a skiing association, our results might pertain to gays who participate in sports activities. Moreover, this association is not openly advertised as gay and allows gays who are not necessarily out in their public life to meet others outside their hometowns. Finally, although we argue that different labels might pose specific types of threat to individuals varying in levels of coming-out, no direct measure of threat has been included in this study. Further research may address these issues employing different types of gay samples or contexts and including perceived threat and self-acceptance measures thus better testing the rationale backed in this work.

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## Notes

1. Participants' educational levels (34% high school or lower), relationship status (57% had a stable relationship), and religious affiliation (41% participants were religious) did not differ between conditions ( $t[51] = -.02, p = .69$ ;  $\chi^2[1] = 0.16, p = .69$ ;  $\chi^2[1] = 2.42, p = .12$ ; respectively).
2. Coming-out was normally distributed, with skewness of .09 ( $SE = .33$ ) and kurtosis of  $-1.04$  ( $SE = .64$ ),  $Mdn = 3.89$ , Minimum = 1.40; Maximum = 7.00.
3. There were no other significant effects ( $ts < 1.07, ps > .29$ ).
4. There were no other significant effects ( $ts < .75, ps > .45$ ).

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