

Background

Men who have sex with men (MSM) increasingly rely on geosocial networking (GSN) smartphone applications ("apps") to form sexual networks (Goedel & Duncan, 2015).

To attract interaction from other users, MSM select textual and photographic elements that convey their identities, a process favoring norms of masculinity and ethnicity (Miller, 2015; Paul, Ayala, & Choi, 2010).

Using social identity theory as a framework (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), the present study employed images to offer a quantitative assessment of bias in favor of masculinity (heteronormative, effeminate) and ethnicity (Asian, Black, Latino, White).

According to social identity theory, a preference for in-group partners or partners adhering to superordinate social categories is expected:

1. racial homophily may shape partner preferences among MSM generally;
2. among ethnic minority MSM, a preference for dominant ethnicities may be observed because identifying with, or selecting a partner who identifies as, a superordinate social category is advantageous (Marques et al., 2001).

Methods

MSM were recruited from emails, online forums, and GSN apps via GPS-spoofing.

Participants (N = 395) completed a survey that simulated the use of GSN apps and measured social identity salience with subscales from two established measures:

- Aspects of Identity Questionnaire (Cheek, Smith, & Tropp, 2002)
- Social and Personal Identities Scale (Nario-Redmond, Biernat, Eidelman, & Palenske, 2004)

Combinations of the masculinity and ethnicity variables created 8 prototypical photos. MSM selected their favorite photos in both forced-choice and free-response tasks.

Table 1. Most Preferred Prototype, Independent of Masculinity, Based on Participant Ethnicity

Ethnicity	Participant Ethnicity			
	Asian (n = 41)	Black (n = 64)	Latino (n = 68)	White (n = 130)
Asian	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)
Asian	1.33 (1.52)	0.94 (1.31)	0.82 (1.28)	0.66 (1.09)
Black	0.74 (1.10)	1.88 (1.60)	1.00 (1.25)	0.83 (1.21)
Latino	1.61 (1.50)	1.92 (1.53)	1.96 (1.65)	1.41 (1.40)
White	2.26 (1.63)	1.75 (1.55)	2.06 (1.70)	1.63 (1.40)

Note. Pairwise comparisons not performed for participants identifying as Other (n = 45). Values represent the mean number of times that participants chose a photo exhibiting a prototypical ethnicity. Most preferred, statistically equivalent ethnicities are represented by boldface values.

Results

Post hoc power analyses indicated sufficient power for all tests.

A Fisher r-to-z transformation revealed no difference between the forced-choice and free-response selection tasks; thus, data from the free-response selection task were used for subsequent analyses.

A mixed-subjects ANOVA revealed a main effect for photographic indicators of ethnicity and masculinity (within-subjects factors).

Participant ethnicity served as a between-subjects factor and the number of times participants chose a level combination served as the dependent variable.

Given the option to freely select their favorite prototypes from a pool of 40 photos, participants preferred images exhibiting heteronormative (M = 1.71, SD = 1.59, 95% CI [1.63, 1.79]) instead of effeminate traits (M = 1.05, SD = 1.29, 95% CI [0.98, 1.11], $p < .001$).

Paired t-tests using the Bonferroni correction demonstrated that White heteronormative photos (M = 2.33, SD = 1.56, 95% CI [2.16, 2.49]) were the most preferred prototypes among all participants ($ps < .001$), regardless of their self-reported ethnicity.

Latino heteronormative prototypes were as popular, a surprising finding given the subordination of Latinx communities in the United States.

Asian effeminate (M = 0.68, SD = 1.10, 95% CI [0.57, 0.80]) was less popular than Asian heteronormative (M = 0.97, SD = 1.34, 95% CI [0.83, 1.12], $p < .001$), challenging the popular notion that effeminacy is desirable in Asian partners.

Self-identified Asian MSM preferred White photos over all other prototypes. Black participants were more equitable in their preferences.

Asian participants scored highest on social identity salience, which was statistically equivalent among other participants.

Despite stereotypes associating ethnicity with sexual position (i.e., Blacks are tops), no association was found.



Figure 1. The top six, most preferred in-group prototypes ranked by the number of participants who chose these photos. From left to right, the first two images in the top row appeared in the top four for both the forced-choice and free-response photo selection tasks. Five of the six men have facial hair and are shirtless, half exhibit hirsute abdomens, and only one (the fifth) appears boyish (i.e., coded as effeminate). Half of the men present as White, half as Latino.

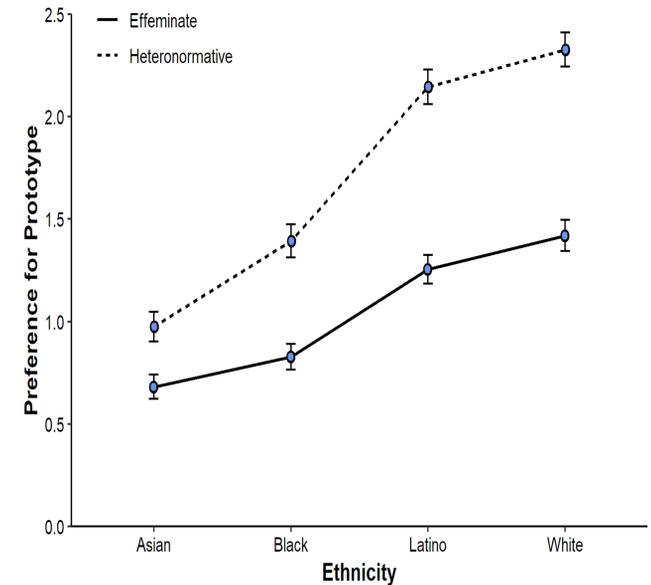


Figure 3. Mean number of times that participants preferred in-group prototypes. Error bars represent standard errors of the mean.

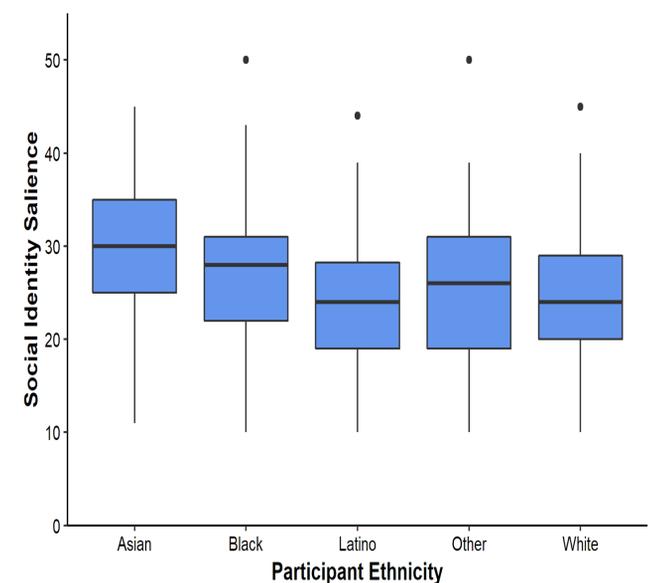


Figure 4. Social identity salience is the summation of scores from ten items. Participant ethnicity exerted an effect on social identity scores, $F(4, 343) = 4.68, p < .001$.

Conclusions

The interaction between masculinity and ethnicity was small, suggesting that MSM appraise each variable independently.

Although Black and Asian MSM do not define their sexual positions in terms of stereotypes, their ability to interact with lovers may hinge on these expectations.

Minority groups evaluate in-group members for their adherence to societal norms (Marques et al., 2001) which may explain the preference for superordinate categories among MSM of color.

The colonization of desire favors individuals with European features and lighter skin—possibly explaining the Latino preference—a finding consistent with previous work on the influence of sexual racism on desirability.

Our measure of social identity salience included items about masculinity; we cannot determine which construct contributed more to the variance.

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Reproducibility



References

- Full set of references are available upon request.
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