

# Masculinity Threat Increases Bias and Negative Emotions Toward Feminine Gay Men

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Although acceptance of gay men has grown in recent years, gay men still regularly experience bias in their social relationships. The bias gay men experience has been theorized to stem from societal expectations regarding adherence to gender roles. Additionally, threats to masculinity have been suggested to promote antigay attitudes and discrimination among men. However, it remains unclear whether the bias gay men experience as a result of threatened masculinity is due to gay men's sexuality, gender role adherence, or the combination. Thus, across two studies ( $N = 564$ ) we examine how threats to masculinity and target adherence to traditional gender roles impact heterosexual men's evaluations and anticipated emotional response toward gay or straight men. In Study 1, 405 heterosexual men completed a "personality test" and received either masculinity-threatening feedback or no feedback before assessing the target. We found that when threatened, heterosexual men evaluated feminine gay men less favorably and expressed greater anticipated negative emotions when thinking about interacting with them. Masculinity threat did not influence evaluations of masculine gay men or either heterosexual target. In Study 2 ( $n = 159$ ), we replicated our findings and demonstrated that self-affirmation of one's personal values can eliminate the negative reactions expressed toward gay feminine men. Anticipated negative emotions were found to mediate the impact of threat on negative evaluation of the feminine gay target in both studies. The current research provides insight into how heterosexual men's experiences with threats to their masculinity, interacts with target sexuality, and expressions of gender influence interpersonal evaluations.

### **Public Significance Statement**

Heterosexual men's experiences of masculinity threat led to bias evaluations of feminine, but not masculine, gay men. In addition, heterosexual men who experienced masculine threat expressed greater anticipated negative emotion when they considered interacting with feminine gay men. Masculinity threat effects were eliminated via a self-affirmation manipulation: Suggesting that the threat driving bias toward feminine gay men is, in part, a threat to heterosexual men's sense of self.

**Keywords:** masculinity threat, gender norms, stereotype congruency, self-affirmation, gay men

Despite shifts in the acceptance and treatment of gay men in the United States, they remain a regular target of discrimination and bias (e.g., Blashill & Powlishta, 2009a; Casey et al., 2019; Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], 2018; Herek & Garnets, 2007; Ofosu et al., 2019). While both heterosexual men and women often hold

biases toward gay men, heterosexual men tend to express more negative attitudes (e.g., Berent et al., 2016; Herek, 2000b; Kite & Whitley, 1996) and desire to avoid contact with gay men than heterosexual women (Buck et al., 2013). Consistent with these findings are government statistics indicating that, in the U.S., gay

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men experience sexual orientation-based hate crimes more than other members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) community, and that the perpetrators of hate crimes against gay men are more often men (Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], 2013; FBI, 2018; Coston, 2020; Harlow, 2005). Given this, researchers have focused on understanding factors that may influence heterosexual men's bias toward gay men. Two factors that have been suggested to partially account for heterosexual men's bias toward gay men are shared cultural expectations about characteristics and behaviors men should possess (e.g., Parrott, 2009; Wellman & McCoy, 2014), and threats to their own masculinity/gender identity (e.g., Bosson et al., 2012). The current research seeks to replicate, build upon, and clarify past research examining the relationship between masculinity threat and bias toward gay men. Specifically, we aim to understand how threats to heterosexual men's masculinity and a target's adherence to gender roles affects bias displayed toward gay men.

### Importance of Male Gender Norm Adherence

Many psychological theorists have suggested that bias and prejudice are rooted in perceiving that the target violates norms, values, and/or beliefs (e.g., Allport, 1954; Kinder & Sears, 1981; Stephan & Stephan, 2000). Prejudice toward gay men is theorized as being linked to gay men's perceived violation of traditional gender norms (Herek, 2000b; Parrott, 2009). Gender norms are defined as culturally shared expectations about the characteristics men and women should and ought to possess (Eagly et al., 2000). Generally, communal characteristics such as being warm, sensitive, and nurturing are ascribed to women, while men are ascribed agentic characteristics like being dominant, assertive, and aggressive (Eagly & Kite, 1987). Although men and women are both ascribed characteristics based on gender, men are expected to adhere to gender norms to a greater extent than women (Kite & Whitley, 1996; Vandello et al., 2008). For example, boys who engage in female-typed behavior are evaluated more negatively than girls who engage in male-type behavior (Feinman, 1981). The gender norms ascribed to men are not strictly about what men should be, they also dictate what men should not be: feminine (e.g., Herek, 2009; Thompson & Pleck, 1986).

Men are admonished for being feminine, possessing characteristics associated with women, and engaging in behaviors which have traditionally been associated with women or femininity. According to Herek (1986) being a man is "not being compliant, dependent, or submissive; not being effeminate (a 'sissy') in physical appearance or mannerisms; not having relationships with men that are sexual or overly intimate." Thus, these gender norms present an issue for gay men who violate them by simply being gay men. In addition to having sexual/intimate relationships with men, gay men have traditionally been stereotyped as acting/being like "women" (Klassen et al., 1989) and possessing feminine characteristics/traits (Kite & Deaux, 1987; Martin, 1990; Taylor, 1983). In fact, when men are depicted as possessing feminine traits, they are assumed to be gay rather than heterosexual (e.g., Blashill & Powlisha, 2009b; Deaux & Lewis, 1984). Gay men are thought to represent a violation of traditional gender norms in terms of both sexuality and presumed personality characteristics/traits (i.e., femininity; Parrott, 2009). It is these violations of gender norms that are often thought to motivate bias toward gay men (Kilianski, 2003; Parrott et al., 2002).

### Masculinity Threat & Bias Against Gay Men

When heterosexual men's masculinity is threatened, gay men may be at particular risk for bias. For men in the United States, masculinity is often defined by others' perceptions. Thus, it involves portraying toughness, invulnerability, and a lack of femininity to others (Eagly & Wood, 1991; Vandello & Bosson, 2013). Since an individual's masculinity relies on how one is perceived in the eyes of others, it is an aspect of one's identity that must be maintained through consistent demonstrations to others, and thus can be easily lost (Gilmore, 1990; Vandello & Bosson, 2013). For example, Vandello et al. (2008) found when individuals were asked to discuss a person losing their manhood, they identified factors related to social causes such as losing their job or being physically weak. Other research has demonstrated that masculinity is often portrayed with and judged by physical attributes (Drummond, 2005) and physical appearance (Woods, 1992). Men (both straight and gay) asked about the concept of masculinity report that men are supposed to be physically tough and should be able to perform masculine tasks (e.g., lifting heavy things) (Drummond, 2005). Moreover, Woods (1992) argues that masculinity is an aspect associated with heterosexuality whereas homosexuality is an aspect of femininity. Gay men can often "counterfeit" a straight identity, to avoid bias from others in the workforce through "acting straight" by embracing and embodying stereotypes about masculinity (Woods, 1992). These studies highlight the importance of masculinity and that there are consequences for gay individuals who violate them. When masculinity is threatened, heterosexual men tend to respond by attempting to reassert or reaffirm their masculinity by embracing or adhering more closely to gender norms placed upon them.

Masculinity threat can lead men to react defensively or even aggressively (Bosson et al., 2009; Cheryan et al., 2015; Dahl et al., 2015; Maass et al., 2003; Willer, 2005). For example, men who engaged in a typical feminine task (i.e., braiding hair) punched a punching bag harder compared to males who engaged in a more neutral task (i.e., braiding rope). Similarly, individuals who were denied the opportunity to punch a bag, demonstrated more anxiety following the threat manipulation (Bosson et al., 2009). According to Bosson et al. (2009) aggression may be a social display that is aimed at restoring manhood. Defensive reactions of men stemming from threatened masculinity can result in other forms of compensatory behaviors to restore masculine identity and compensate for their perceived deviance from gender norms (Fowler & Geers, 2017).

Due to gay men's perceived violation of masculinity, when heterosexual men experience a threat to their masculinity, heterosexual men may derogate and distance from gay men. Displaying negative attitudes toward gay men may publicly demonstrate to others that one adheres to masculine norms and that they, themselves, are not gay (Herek, 1986; Wilkinson, 2004). Further, heterosexual men's concern with their own masculinity has been found to be positively associated with antigay prejudice and anger toward gay men (Kilianski, 2003; Parrott et al., 2008). Talley and Bettencourt (2008) gave participants false feedback that they were below average in masculinity (vs. average in a control condition) and found that those in the below average (i.e., threat) condition distanced themselves from a gay work partner and behaved more aggressively toward the work partner. Threatening masculinity has been shown to increase antigay prejudice among heterosexual men (Rivera & Dasgupta, 2018). Believing that manhood is precarious (easily threatened) has also been linked to

enjoyment and engagement in antigay humor when masculinity is threatened (O'Connor et al., 2017). Taken together, this research suggests that when masculinity is threatened, heterosexual men may be more likely to express bias toward, distance from, and express negativity toward gay men.

While gay men are generally susceptible to bias, feminine gay men may be particularly at risk of experiencing negative reactions when heterosexual men's masculinity is threatened. Glick et al. (2007), found that when masculinity was threatened in heterosexual men by indicating they scored more feminine than masculine on a personality test, they expressed more negative affect (i.e., fear, hostility, and discomfort) toward feminine gay men compared to masculine gay men. According to Glick et al. (2007) and Govorun et al. (2006), gay feminine men might be at greater risk for being targets of negative attitudes because they possess characteristics and traits heterosexual men may want to deny that they, themselves, possess. There is also evidence that gay men respond to masculinity threats similar to heterosexual men. In an Italian sample of gay men, masculinity threat led to more distancing from feminine gay men, and greater perceived similarity to masculine gay men relative to other gay individuals whose masculinity was affirmed (Hunt et al., 2016). While both of these studies found gay feminine men may experience more bias relative to masculine gay men, neither examined whether similar effects occur when examining heterosexual targets who vary in masculinity versus femininity.

The negative emotions heterosexual men hold about gay men have also been found to be a factor that affects how they treat gay men and their desire for future contact with gay men (Buck et al., 2013; Glick et al., 2007; LaMar & Kite, 1998; Ray and Parkhill, 2021). It has been suggested that the stigma associated with being a gay man, may elicit fear/anxiety among heterosexual men regarding others mislabeling them as gay if they are to support or come in contact with gay men (Salvati et al., 2018; Herek, 1986, 2000a). These negative emotions may lead to avoidance and ultimately derogation of gay men in an effort to avoid being miscategorized or to demonstrate one's own masculinity. Buck et al. (2013) found when men possessed a heightened sense of social contagion (fear of being miscategorized as gay) they reported feeling anxious about past, present, and future interactions with a gay person and would avoid interactions with gay individuals. In addition to anxiety and fear, heterosexual men have reported other negative emotions such as disgust associated with gay men (Embrick et al., 2007; Herek, 1986, 1993; Ray & Parkhill, 2021). Feelings of disgust toward gay men have been associated with greater antigay attitudes (Ray & Parkhill, 2021). Masculinity threat likely heightens the extent to which heterosexual men will anticipate or feel negative emotions when interacting with gay men because it highlights the potential further loss of masculinity via association with a gay man. It is likely that these negative emotions play a role in how heterosexual men evaluate gay men.

To date, no study to our knowledge has examined whether masculinity threat leads to derogation based on femininity of targets, sexuality of target, or if the two have an additive affect. Since past research has focused on manipulating sexuality or masculine/feminine characteristics separately it is unclear what men's bias reactions are driven by. Study 1 aims to isolate the effects of sexuality from masculinity/femininity of the target to test whether masculinity threat leads to derogation of all gay men in general, or only those perceived as feminine. By manipulating masculinity threat, sexuality of the target, and trait masculinity/femininity we

will be able to expand prior literature that have either used only feminine traits, gender of partner, or statements of target sexuality to manipulate sexuality. Previous research has found differences between feminine gay men and masculine gay men, but as they did not examine sexuality (Glick et al., 2007; Hunt et al., 2016), it is unclear if the same might occur among feminine versus masculine heterosexual targets.

### Study 1

We hypothesized that when heterosexual men's masculinity is threatened, they will express more negative evaluations and anticipate negative emotions when imagining interacting with a feminine gay man compared to a masculine straight man, feminine straight man, and masculine gay man. We did not have clear hypotheses for any other conditions as the cues to masculinity (heterosexuality or masculine traits) may negate the benefit of derogating the target as they do not appear to violate masculinity norms to the same degree as feminine gay men. We also hypothesized that heterosexual men's negative emotions would account, in part, for their negative evaluations of the feminine gay male target. Therefore, anticipated negative emotions would mediate the relationship between masculinity threat and negative evaluations toward feminine gay men.

### Participants

Power analysis using G\*Power indicated a sample size of 401 was needed to detect a Cohen's *f* of .15, 85% of the time with a  $\alpha = .05$ . Based on this, 494 men were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk and completed a two-study ruse and paid \$1.50 for their time. Forty-eight participants were excluded from the sample for failing multiple attention checks and 42 participants were excluded because they identified their sexual orientation as something other than heterosexual. This final sample included 405 heterosexual male participants ( $M_{age} = 35.69$ ,  $SD_{age} = 11.04$ , age range = 18–77; race: 79.5% White/European, 7.9% Asian, 6.2% Black, 4.2% Latino/Hispanic, 1% Native American, 1.2% Other).

### Procedure

To examine the interaction between masculinity threat, target sexuality, and target masculinity we employed a 2 Masculinity Threat (threat vs. no threat)  $\times$  2 Target Sexuality (heterosexual vs. gay)  $\times$  2 Target Masculinity (masculine vs. feminine) experimental design. Participants were told they would complete two separate studies: One assessing personality and one assessing judgments of others. The first study served as our manipulation of masculinity threat. Participants were told they would be taking part in the development of a personality instrument. They were given 60 items from the Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1974) survey instrument, which requires participants to rate themselves on how much they agree that certain personality traits accurately depict their own personalities. Participants were then randomly assigned to one of two feedback conditions (Threat or Control). In the *Threat Condition*, participants viewed their "personality test" results on a graph ostensibly containing scores of previous participants color coded by gender. This graph indicated that the participant scored in the typical range for women. In the *Control Condition*, participants did not receive any results from their "personality test," rather they were thanked for their time and told their

answers had been recorded. All participants were then randomly assigned to evaluate one of four men. Participants read a vignette (modified versions of descriptions from Glick et al., 2007) describing a potential coworker who was either a masculine straight man, a masculine gay man, a feminine straight man, or a feminine gay man. Masculinity and femininity were manipulated by describing the target's hobbies (e.g., "restoring cars" for masculine and "taking dance lessons" for feminine), career ambitions<sup>1</sup> (e.g., "CEO of a company" for masculine, and "fashion designer" for feminine), and personality (e.g., "calm, competitive, and independent" for masculine, and "flamboyant, talkative, and expressive" for feminine). The targets' sexual orientation was manipulated by mentioning in his description that he had a boyfriend or a girlfriend.<sup>2</sup> Participants then evaluated their assigned target and indicated their anticipated emotional response (Glick et al., 2007) toward interacting with the target. Finally, participants were debriefed.

## Measure

### Target Evaluation

Eight items measured participants' positive evaluations of the target. For example: "He seems likable," "He would make a good impression," and "He seems to have a strong work ethic." Participants rated their agreement on a scale of 1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 7 = *Strongly Agree* ( $M = 5.27$ ,  $SD = .92$ , range = 1.00–7.00,  $\alpha = .91$ ).

### Anticipated Negative Emotions

Twelve items measured participants' anticipated emotional response if they were to interact with the target (adapted from Glick et al., 2007). For example: "nervous," "anger," and "comfortable" (reverse coded). Participants rated their agreement on a scale of 1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 7 = *Strongly Agree* ( $M = 2.21$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ , range = 1.00–5.73,  $\alpha = .87$ ).

## Analysis Plan

We utilized a 2 (Masculinity Threat: Threat vs. Control)  $\times$  2 (Target Sexuality: Gay vs. Straight)  $\times$  2 (Target Masculinity: Masculinity vs. Femininity) experimental design. ANOVAs were used to examine the main effects, two-way interaction, and the hypothesized three-way interaction. Pairwise comparisons were used to probe significant interactions and examine the effects of masculinity threat on each of the four possible targets (gay feminine target, straight feminine target, gay masculine target, straight masculine target). The highest order interaction was then examined via pairwise comparisons (Table 1 shows full ANOVA output for each dependent variable; DV).

We used ordinary least squares path analysis (PROCESS, Model 12; Hayes, 2013) to test whether anticipated negative emotions mediate the effect of masculinity threat (0 = *Threat Condition*) on evaluations of the target and whether this relationship is moderated by sexuality of the target (0 = *Gay Target*) and masculinity of the target (0 = *Feminine*; See Figure 1 for image of conceptual model). In other words, we examined the mediational paths from masculinity threat to anticipated emotional response to evaluations of the target within each condition. We used a biased-corrected 95% confidence interval as the index for moderated mediation, and examined direct and indirect

effects based on 10,000 bootstrapped samples. A significant effect was indicated by a confidence interval that does not include zero.

## Results

### Target Evaluation

Consistent with hypotheses, there was a significant three-way interaction between masculinity threat, sexuality of the target, and masculinity of the target,  $F(1, 396) = 4.36$ ,  $p = .04$ ;  $\eta_p^2 = .01$  (See Figure 2). Pairwise comparisons revealed that there was a significant effect of masculinity threat on the evaluation of the target such that, when participants' masculinity was threatened ( $M = 4.67$ ,  $SE = .13$ ) they evaluated the gay feminine target more negatively than when they were not threatened ( $M = 5.37$ ,  $SE = .12$ ),  $F(1, 396) = 14.92$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $CI [-1.05, -.34]$ ;  $\eta_p^2 = .04$ . There was no effect of masculinity threat on evaluations of the masculine straight target (threat:  $M = 5.81$ ,  $SE = .12$ , control:  $M = 5.50$ ,  $SE = .11$ ),  $F(1, 396) = 3.33$ ,  $p = .069$ ;  $CI [-.64, .02]$ ;  $\eta_p^2 = .02$ , feminine straight target (threat:  $M = 5.49$ ,  $SE = .12$ , control:  $M = 5.32$ ,  $SE = .12$ ),  $F(1, 396) = 1.08$ ,  $p = .30$ ;  $CI [-.16, .50]$ ;  $\eta_p^2 = .003$ , or masculine gay target (threat:  $M = 5.02$ ,  $SE = .12$ , control:  $M = 4.86$ ,  $SE = .12$ ),  $F(1, 396) = .83$ ,  $p = .36$ ;  $CI [-.18, .50]$ ;  $\eta_p^2 = .002$ .

### Anticipated Negative Emotions

Consistent with hypotheses, there was a significant three-way interaction between masculinity threat, sexuality of the target, and masculinity of the target,  $F(1, 396) = 4.53$ ,  $p = .03$ ;  $\eta_p^2 = .01$  (See Figure 3). Pairwise comparisons revealed a significant effect of masculinity threat on anticipated negative emotions when interacting with a feminine gay target. When participants' masculinity was threatened ( $M = 2.56$ ,  $SE = .16$ ) they anticipated experiencing more negative emotion than when they were not threatened ( $M = 1.99$ ,  $SE = .15$ ),  $F(1, 396) = 7.01$ ,  $p = .008$ ;  $CI [.15, .99]$ ;  $\eta_p^2 = .02$ . There was no effect of masculinity threat on anticipated emotions when anticipating interacting with the feminine straight target (threat:  $M = 2.00$ ,  $SE = .14$ , control:  $M = 2.26$ ,  $SE = .15$ ),  $F(1, 396) = 1.68$ ,  $p = .20$ ;  $CI [-.66, .14]$ ;  $\eta_p^2 = .004$ , masculine gay target (threat:  $M = 2.31$ ,  $SE = .15$ , control:  $M = 2.51$ ,

<sup>1</sup> The career ambition "CEO of a company" was deemed appropriate to portray masculine career ambition based on the notion that individuals prescribe traits based on behaviors expected of a given gender (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Eagly and Karau (2002) argue that leadership roles are male-dominated and associated with agentic characteristics of men. While, Eagly and Karau (2002) also demonstrates that women would be the default of leadership positions in fields associated with the prescribed communal characteristics of women (e.g., healthcare) the other masculine attributes present reinforce a representation of a leadership role as being consistent with masculine ambitions when reading that the target indicated "CEO of a company" as a career aspiration.

<sup>2</sup> Previous literature has indicated that people often use gender of one's current partner to make inferences about their sexual orientation (Brekhus, 1996). Heterosexuality and homosexuality are argued to be the default options for categorization of sexual identities (Firestein, 1996) unless provided knowledge of a person's sexual history/desire for both male and female partners (Flanders & Hatfield, 2014). Therefore, although having a same sex partner does not necessarily indicate someone to be gay (e.g., they could be bisexual), the default assumption that perceivers tend to make is that target is gay when their partner is of the same sex and heterosexual when the partner is of the opposite sex.

**Table 1**  
ANOVA Output—Study 1

Source	Target evaluation		Anticipated negative emotions	
	<i>F</i>	$\eta_p^2$	<i>F</i>	$\eta_p^2$
Threat	$F(1, 396) = .03$	.00	$F(1, 396) = .02$	.00
Masculinity	$F(1, 396) = .99$	.00	$F(1, 396) = .21$	.00
Sexuality	$F(1, 396) = 40.88^{**}$	.09	$F(1, 396) = 5.24^*$	.01
Threat × Masculinity	$F(1, 396) = 6.03^{**}$	.02	$F(1, 396) = 2.70$	.00
Threat × Sexuality	$F(1, 396) = 6.45^{**}$	.02	$F(1, 396) = 3.60$	.01
Masculinity × Sexuality	$F(1, 396) = 3.72^*$	.01	$F(1, 396) = .67$	.00
Threat × Masculinity × Sexuality	$F(1, 396) = 4.36^*$	.01	$F(1, 396) = 4.53^*$	.01

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

$SE = .15$ ,  $F(1, 396) = 1.01$ ,  $p = .32$ ;  $CI [-.62, .20]$ ;  $\eta_p^2 = .003$ , or masculine straight target (threat:  $M = 2.01$ ,  $SE = .15$ , control:  $M = 2.17$ ,  $SE = .14$ ),  $F(1, 396) = .64$ ,  $p = .42$ ;  $CI [-.56, .24]$ ;  $\eta_p^2 = .002$ .

**Do Anticipated Negative Emotions Mediate Evaluations of the Feminine Gay Target?**

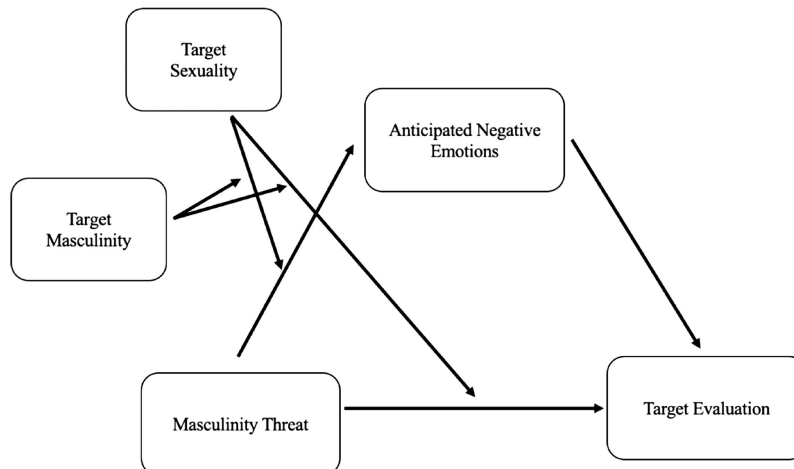
The indirect effect of the highest order product was significant, which suggests that the mediational paths from masculinity threat condition to evaluation of the target via anticipated negative emotions were significantly different based on the sexuality and masculinity of the target,  $b = .28$ , 95%  $CI [.02, .57]$ ; Model:  $F(8, 395) = 17.51$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $R^2 = .26$ . Anticipated negative emotions significantly mediated the relationship between the masculinity threat manipulation and evaluation of the target when the target was a feminine gay man,  $b = .18$ , 95%  $CI [.04, .34]$ . Anticipated negative emotions did not significantly mediate the masculinity threat effect in any other conditions (See full output in Table 2).

**Discussion**

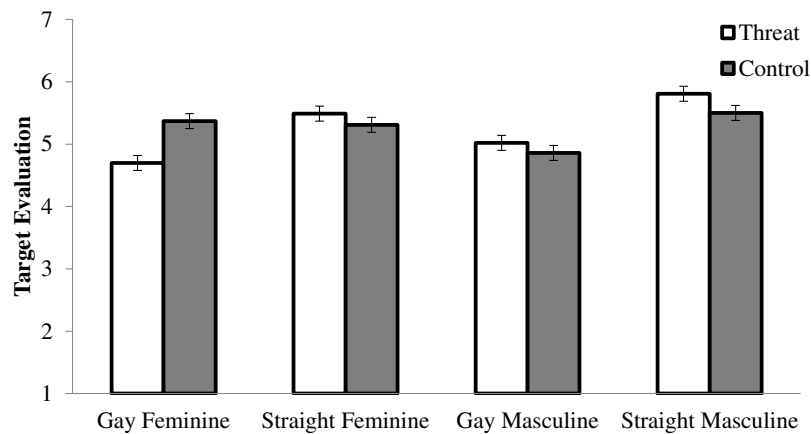
Consistent with our hypotheses, masculinity threat impacted evaluations and anticipated negative emotions toward feminine gay targets. This is consistent with the idea that feminine gay men are the greatest violators of masculinity norms as they violate in terms of both femininity and sexuality. Given this double violation, it is not surprising that when threatened, heterosexual men would derogate and distance from targets, perhaps as a way to alleviate the threat to their own masculinity by upholding gender norms.

We did not find a significant effect of masculinity threat on the treatment of any other targets. These findings are consistent with those of Glick et al. (2007), but clarify that it is the double violation of sexuality and feminine characteristics that are leading to greater anticipated negative emotions and lower evaluations of the gay feminine target. The lack of differentiation in evaluations of masculine gay men and feminine heterosexual men following a masculinity threat suggest it is not merely violations of traits or sexuality, but the combination that matters. Further, we found that anticipated negative emotions mediated the effect of masculinity threat on

**Figure 1**  
Conceptual Model of Mediational Analysis—Study 1



**Figure 2**  
*Target Evaluation as a Function of Masculinity Threat, Target Sexuality, and Target Masculinity—Study 1*



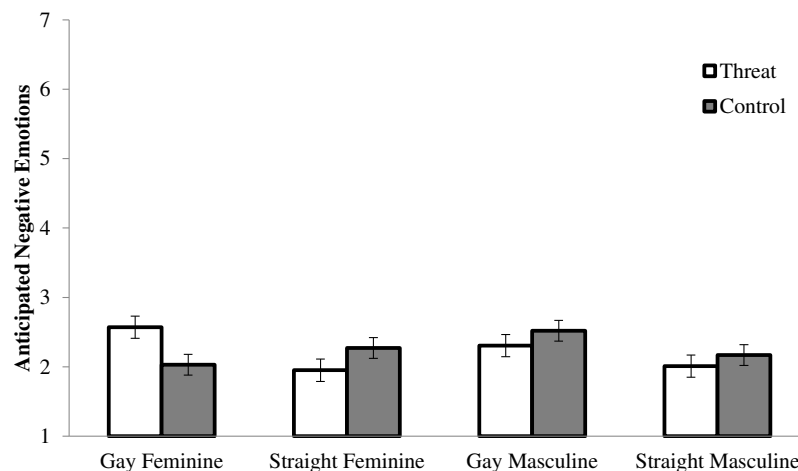
evaluations of feminine gay men. Thus, feminine gay men may experience negative evaluative responses from heterosexual men, not merely because of a threat to a heterosexual man's sense of self, but because experiencing this identity threat may lead heterosexual men to harbor more negative emotions about interacting with feminine gay men. This aligns with previous research by Glick et al. (2007) that heterosexual men experiencing masculinity threat endorse greater negative emotion toward gay men. These findings build on prior work by suggesting that these anticipated negative emotions may influence heterosexual men's negative evaluations of feminine gay men. Our findings are consistent with theorizing regarding heterosexual men's negative emotion toward contact with gay men driving their biases and negative evaluations (e.g., Buck et al., 2013; Herek, 1986; Ray & Parkhill, 2021).

Interestingly, although feminine gay men were evaluated least positively in the threat condition, masculine gay men in the control condition were evaluated least positively among the other groups.

Although surprising given the previous literature on masculinity threat and gay men, this finding that masculine gay men are evaluated less positively is consistent with the other theoretical work indicating that people dislike individuals who are perceived to violate stereotypical expectations (Mendes et al., 2007; Phelan & Rudman, 2010). In the control condition, participants likely focused on sexuality stereotypes and thus see the masculine gay man as violating expectations of gay men (e.g., that they are feminine), while in the threat condition, they focused more on masculinity stereotypes in forming their judgments. Thus, the greatest violator, the feminine gay target, receives more discriminatory treatment under condition of threat as this target is violating expectations of masculinity in both traits and sexuality.

While the current study helps clarify that sexuality and masculinity play an interactive role, the study does not clarify whether the negative consequences of masculinity threat can be mitigated. Masculinity threat is thought to be a threat to one's sense of self, so

**Figure 3**  
*Anticipated Negative Emotions as a Function of Masculinity Threat, Target Sexuality, and Target Masculinity—Study 1*



**Table 2**  
*Conditional Process Model Analyses: Masculinity Threat—Study 1*

Model Summary	Evaluations of the target
	<i>b</i>
<b>Model summary</b>	
Masculinity threat (0 = Threat)	.51**
Anticipated negative emotions	-.32**
Target sexuality (0 = Gay)	.64**
Target masculinity (0 = Feminine)	.26
Threat × Target sexuality	-.60**
Threat × Target masculinity	-.61**
Target sexuality × Target masculinity	.06
Threat × Target sexuality × Masculinity	.44
Model <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.26**
<i>F</i> ( <i>df</i> )	(8,395) = 17.51
<b>Condition indirect effects</b> (Masculinity threat → Anticipated negative emotion → DV)	
Feminine gay target	<b>.18 (.04 to .34)</b>
Feminine straight target	-.07 (-.22 to .07)
Masculine gay target	-.08 (-.21 to .03)
Masculine straight target	-.05 (-.18 to .06)
<b>Condition direct effects</b> (Masculinity threat → DV)	
Feminine gay target	<b>.51 (.18 to .84)</b>
Feminine straight target	-.09 (-.41 to .22)
Masculine gay target	-.09 (-.40 to .21)
Masculine straight target	-.26 (-.56 to .05)

Note. Unstandardized coefficients are reported, bias corrected 95% CI, 10,000 bootstrap samples. Bold text indicates a significant path. DV = dependent variable.

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

could affirming the self via a self-affirmation manipulation eliminate the effect? In examining this possibility, we would offer greater support for our findings (via replication) and demonstrate that the mechanism is the threat to men’s sense of self that drives their derogation of feminine gay men following a masculinity threat.

**Study 2**

Study 2 was designed to replicate our findings regarding masculinity threat and evaluations of gay feminine men. Therefore, we chose to focus solely on the condition where we saw an effect of masculinity threat. Focusing on this one condition in this study not only serves as a replication but also allows us to determine if we can eliminate this effect by using a self-affirmation manipulation.

Previous research has argued that individuals react negatively after experiencing a threat as a defense mechanism because individuals are highly motivated to maintain their self-integrity and their perception of being adequate (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988). For instance, after experiencing racism, White men have been found to reaffirm their status in society to maintain their sense of self (Goff et al., 2012). Self-affirmation interventions, such as having an individual reflect on an important value, successfully reduces identity threat, and improves performance in negatively stereotyped individuals (Cohen et al., 2006, 2009; Martens et al., 2006). Value affirmations are theorized to alleviate threat responses because they broaden perspectives on threat and enable other

sources of self-worth and integrity to become salient (Aronson et al., 1999; Burson et al., 2012; Schimel et al., 2004; Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988) thus eliminating the need to reassert or validate the single aspect of the self that is threatened.

Given the effect self-affirmation has on threat responses we chose to examine whether a value affirmation task would eliminate the impact of the masculinity threat manipulation on evaluations of feminine gay male targets. In theory, masculinity threat prompts men to anticipate more negative emotions when interacting with a feminine gay man (e.g., masculine norm violating man) as well as to evaluate the target as less likeable because devaluing (e.g., upholds gender expectations) serves to reassert threatened masculinity. Eliminating the masculinity threat (via affirmation) should also eliminate the derogation of and negative emotion toward the feminine gay target.

We predicted that we would replicate our masculinity threat findings from Study 1 when there was no self-affirmation, but we would see no differences when men were self-affirmed prior to the masculinity threat. Further, we anticipated that we would replicate our previous finding that anticipated negative emotions mediate the relationship between threat and evaluations of the target however we only predict this in the absence of affirmation. We did not expect to see a mediational effect for participants who completed the self-affirmation.

**Participants**

Power analysis using G\*Power indicated a sample size of 146 was needed to detect a Cohen’s *f* of .25, 85% of the time with a  $\alpha = .05$ . Participants were 189 adult males recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk. Ten participants were excluded from the sample for failing attention checks and 20 participants were excluded because they identified their sexual orientation as something other than heterosexual. This final sample included 159 heterosexual male participants ( $M_{age} = 34.46$ ,  $SD_{age} = 9.88$ , age range = 18–65; Race: 76.1% White/European, 10.1% Asian, 5.7% Latino/Hispanic, 5.0% Black, 1.9% Native American, 1.3% Other).

**Procedure**

Participants were told they would complete two separate studies: One assessing personality and one assessing judgments of others. In the first study, participants completed an established affirmation task where they sorted values in order on importance to themselves. Participants were then randomly assigned to write about their most important value (*Affirmation Condition*) or how their least important value might be important to someone else (*No Affirmation Condition*; Fein & Spencer, 1997; Martens et al., 2006; Shapiro et al., 2013). Participants then completed the masculinity threat manipulation (*Threat vs. Control*) from Study 1. Finally, participants evaluated the feminine gay male target from Study 1. Participants then completed dependent measures and were debriefed.

**Measure**

Participants completed the same measures of *Target Evaluation* ( $M = 5.09$ ,  $SD = .98$ , range = 2.88–7.00,  $\alpha = .91$ ) and *Anticipated Negative Emotions* ( $M = 2.24$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ , range = 1.00–5.75,  $\alpha = .92$ ) from Study 1.

**Table 3**  
ANOVA Output—Study 2

Source	Target evaluation		Anticipated negative emotions	
	<i>F</i>	$\eta_p^2$	<i>F</i>	$\eta_p^2$
Threat	$F(1, 155) = .71$	.00	$F(1, 155) = .70$	.00
Affirmation	$F(1, 155) = 5.66^{**}$	.04	$F(1, 155) = 9.60^{**}$	.06
Threat $\times$ Affirmation	$F(1, 155) = 9.11^{**}$	.06	$F(1, 155) = 8.39^{**}$	.05

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

### Analysis Plan

We utilized a 2 (Affirmation: Affirmation vs. No Affirmation)  $\times$  2 (Masculinity Threat: Threat vs. Control) experimental design. ANOVAs were used to examine the interaction between affirmation and masculinity threat. Pairwise comparisons were used to probe significant interactions to examine the effects of masculinity threat on evaluations of the gay feminine target within affirmation condition. Table 3 shows the full ANOVA output for each DV.

Moderated mediation hypotheses were examined using PROCESS (Model 8; Hayes, 2013; See Figure 4 for image of conceptual model). We used a biased-corrected 95% confidence interval as the index for moderated mediation, and examined direct and indirect effects based on 10,000 bootstrapped samples. A significant effect is indicated by a confidence interval that does not include zero.

### Results

#### Target Evaluation

Consistent with hypotheses, there was a significant interaction between the affirmation and masculinity threat  $F(1, 155) = 9.11$ ,  $p = .003$ ;  $\eta_p^2 = .06$  (See Figure 5). Pairwise comparisons revealed there was a significant effect of masculinity threat in the *no affirmation condition* replicating our findings from Study 1. Participants in the *threat condition* ( $M = 4.64$ ,  $SE = .14$ ) evaluated the gay feminine target more negatively than those in the *control condition* ( $M = 5.23$ ,  $SE = .15$ ),  $F(1, 155) = 7.93$ ,  $p = .005$ ;

CI  $[-.99, -.17]$ ;  $\eta_p^2 = .05$ . There was no effect of masculinity threat on evaluations of the target in the *affirmation condition* (*threat*:  $M = 5.46$ ,  $SE = .17$ , *control*:  $M = 5.13$ ,  $SE = .14$ ),  $F(1, 155) = 2.23$ ,  $p = .14$ ; CI  $[-.11, .77]$ ;  $\eta_p^2 = .01$ . This suggests that affirmation eliminated the impact of the masculinity threat.

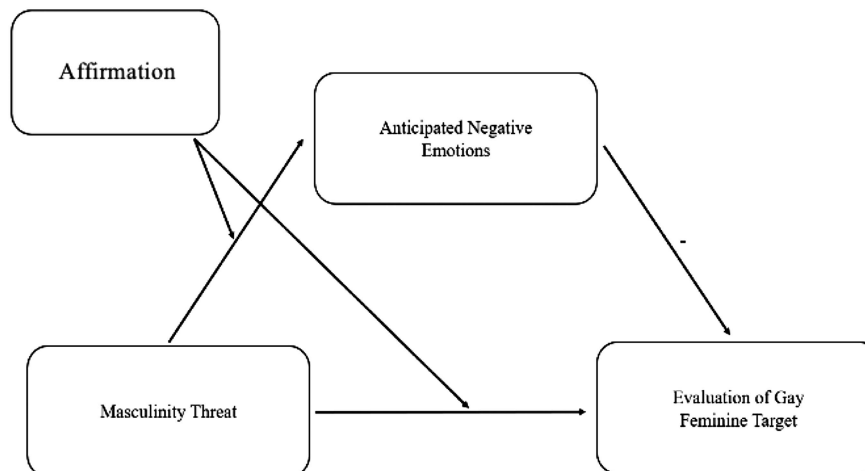
#### Anticipated Negative Emotion

Consistent with hypotheses, there was a significant interaction between the affirmation and masculinity threat  $F(1, 155) = 8.39$ ,  $p = .004$ ;  $\eta_p^2 = .05$  (See Figure 6). Pairwise comparisons revealed that there was a significant effect of masculinity threat in the *no affirmation condition* replicating our findings from Study 1. Participants in the *threat condition* ( $M = 2.83$ ,  $SE = .17$ ) anticipated greater negative emotion in response to the gay feminine target than those in the *control condition* ( $M = 2.15$ ,  $SE = .18$ ),  $F(1, 155) = 7.41$ ,  $p = .007$ ; CI  $[.19, 1.18]$ ;  $\eta_p^2 = .04$ . There was no effect of masculinity threat on anticipated negative emotion in the *affirmation condition* (*threat*:  $M = 1.74$ ,  $SE = .20$ , *control*:  $M = 2.11$ ,  $SE = .17$ ),  $F(1, 155) = 2.00$ ,  $p = .16$ ; CI  $[-.90, .15]$ ;  $\eta_p^2 = .01$ . This suggests that affirming the self, may have eliminated the impact of the masculinity threat.

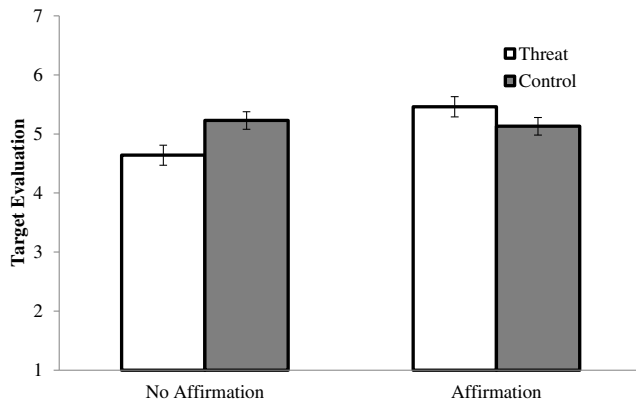
#### Do Anticipated Negative Emotions Mediate Evaluation of the Feminine Gay Target?

We used ordinary least squares path analysis (PROCESS, Model 8; Hayes, 2013) to test our hypothesis that anticipated

**Figure 4**  
Conceptual Model of Moderated Mediation Analysis—Study 2



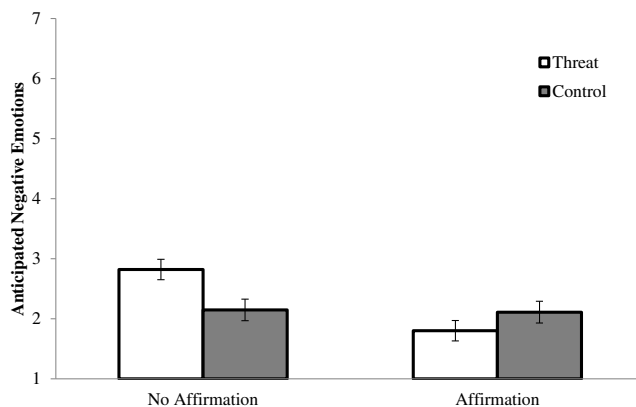
**Figure 5**  
Target Evaluation as a Function of Masculinity Threat and Affirmation Condition—Study 2



negative emotions mediate the effect of masculinity threat (0 = *Threat Condition*) on evaluations of the target and that this relationship is moderated by affirmation condition (0 = *Affirmation Condition*). In other words, we examine the mediational paths from masculinity threat to anticipated emotional response to evaluations of the target within the affirmation and no affirmation condition.

The index of moderated mediation was significant suggesting that the mediational paths from *masculinity threat condition* to evaluation of the target via anticipated negative emotions were significantly different based on the affirmation manipulation,  $b = -.45$ , 95% CI  $[-.85, -.15]$ ; Model:  $F(4, 154) = 19.35$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $R^2 = .33$ . Anticipated negative emotions significantly mediated the relationship between the masculinity threat manipulation and evaluation of the target in the *no affirmation condition*,  $b = .29$ , 95% CI  $[.06, .58]$ . Anticipated negative emotions did not significantly mediate the masculinity threat effect in the *affirmation condition* (See full output in Table 4).

**Figure 6**  
Anticipated Negative Emotions as a Function of Masculinity Threat and Affirmation Condition—Study 2



**Discussion**

Study 2 replicated our findings that masculinity threat decreases positive evaluations of feminine gay men and increases negative anticipated emotions toward them. Moreover, we offer evidence that this decrease in positive evaluations and increase in negative emotions is driven by masculinity threats to heterosexual men’s sense of self. When participants completed a self-affirmation task there were no effects of masculinity threat. This demonstrates that experiencing a threat to heterosexual men’s sense of self may drive their negative anticipated emotions and evaluations of the target. Here we extend upon and provide support aligned with previous work demonstrating affirmation can play a role in how individuals evaluate others after experiencing a threat to their self. Specifically, that individuals evaluate others less negatively after aspects of their own identity are affirmed or heightened (Fein & Spencer, 1997). Further, we replicated our mediational model suggesting that anticipated negative emotions mediate the relationship between masculinity threat and target evaluations.

**General Discussion**

Converging evidence demonstrates that heterosexual men target gay men because the latter are perceived to violate personality and sexuality gender norms (Parrott, 2009; Wellman & McCoy, 2014) and because of threats to heterosexual men’s masculinity (e.g., Herek, 1986). Although previous research has examined the influence of gender role deviations and threats to masculinity on heterosexual men’s prejudice toward gay men, we provide the first research (to our knowledge) to examine the combined influence of target sexuality and masculinity.

In Study 1, we found that when participant masculinity was threatened feminine gay targets were evaluated more negatively than masculine gay men and heterosexual men who were either masculine or feminine. Heterosexual men rated a feminine gay man more negatively and expressed more anticipated negative emotions toward a future interaction with him when their masculinity was threatened compared to when masculinity was not threatened. Additionally, we found that anticipated negative emotions mediated the relationship between masculinity threat and evaluation of target, but only for feminine gay men. These results are consistent with previous literature that demonstrates heterosexual men tend to express more prejudice toward effeminate gay men versus masculine gay men after experiencing a threat to masculinity (Glick et al., 2007). However, our results demonstrated that these negative reactions from heterosexual men may be the result of an additive effect for feminine gay men as the feminine gay target was viewed more negatively than any other condition. Thus, feminine gay men may experience worse punishments or evaluations from heterosexual men because they violate both sexuality (i.e., gay) and gender norms (i.e., feminine). Interestingly, the gay feminine target was not evaluated the most negatively in the absence of masculinity threat, rather the gay masculine target was. Although this finding was not entirely expected, it is consistent with prior research that we dislike those who violate the stereotype expectations (Phelan & Rudman, 2010) as masculine gay men violate the stereotype expectations that gay men are less masculine/more feminine. This also may suggest that the stereotypes being focused on

**Table 4**  
*Conditional Process Model Analyses: Masculinity Threat—Study 2*

Model Summary	Positive evaluations
	<i>b</i>
Model summary	
Masculinity threat (0 = Threat)	.29
Anticipated negative emotion	-.43**
Affirmation condition (0 = Affirmation)	.81
Masculinity threat × Affirmation condition	-.46
Model $R^2$	
$F(df)$	.33** (4, 154) = 19.35
Index of moderated mediation (CI)	
Condition Indirect effects (Masculinity threat → Anticipated negative emotion → DV)	
No affirmation	.29 (-.07 to .65)
Affirmation	-.17 (-.54 to .21)
Condition direct effects (Masculinity threat → DV)	
No affirmation	<b>.29 (.06 to .58)</b>
Affirmation	-.16 (-.38 to .03)

Note. Unstandardized coefficients are reported, bias-corrected 95% CI, 10,000 bootstrap samples. Bold text indicates a significant path. DV = dependent variable.

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

when heterosexual men are evaluating these targets may be different. It is plausible that in the absence of masculinity threat the salient norms are those of sexuality but when masculinity is threatened the focus shifts to masculinity norms/violations.

Consistent with hypotheses Study 2 replicated Study 1 and identified a way to eliminate heterosexual men's negative responses toward feminine gay men when they experience threat. When heterosexual men self-affirmed before experiencing a threat to masculinity, they evaluated feminine gay targets as positive than heterosexual men who did not experience masculinity threat. We found that self-affirmation eliminated the effect that an individual's anticipated negative emotions toward a future interaction with the target had on the relationship between masculinity threat and target evaluations. Results of Study 2 are consistent with previous research that suggested heterosexual men may express bias toward gay men by distancing themselves and behaving aggressively toward gay men as a reaction to threatened masculinity (Glick et al., 2007; Talley & Bettencourt, 2008). However, we further demonstrate that self-affirmation negated the bias toward feminine gay men under masculinity threat; which is similar to previous research that used self-affirmation as a tool to negate other forms of identity threats (Burson et al., 2012; Goff et al., 2012; Martens et al., 2006; Steele, 1988). Thus, our research suggests that masculinity threat is likely a threat to heterosexual men's sense of self, further illuminating the mechanism behind the bias response we observed. Masculinity is perceived to be easily lost, hard to earn; thus, heterosexual men may engage in behaviors to regain their masculine status when lost (Vandello & Bosson, 2013). Insecurity about perceptions of one's own masculinity may be a driving factor contributing to sexual prejudice toward individuals perceived as violating masculinity. Not only do these studies suggest that masculinity threat threatens heterosexual men's self but they provide further support

that the derogation of feminine gay men may be a strategy to reaffirm one's masculinity/sense of self.

We believe the current set of studies highlight the importance of studying the intricate relationship between gender norms and sexuality in regard to the masculinity threat literature. Here we provide a theoretical explanation regarding possible mechanisms to explain and understand underlying factors that result in the negative treatment of gay men. Our mediational findings, while correlational, also highlight the importance of examining the role of anticipatory negative emotions in evaluations of gay men. These findings are consistent with prior theorizing regarding the motivational role emotion plays in evaluation and bias toward gay men (e.g., Buck et al., 2013; Herek, 1986; Ray & Parkhill, 2021).

### Future Directions and Limitations

Although our findings clarify previous research, there are still limitations and issues of generalizability that should be addressed in future research. Our samples are convenience samples collected online and thus may not be truly representative. In addition, we rely on self-reported responses in an anonymous environment, it is unclear if the negative evaluations and anticipated emotions would replicate in face-to-face interactions. Greater examination of masculinity threat and bias toward gay men is needed to understand the full impact in a variety of contexts (e.g., work, social settings). We also only focus here on the impact of masculinity threat on perceptions of gay men; future researchers could examine if these trends or similar trends hold for other members of the LGBT community such as lesbian and transgender individuals. In addition, examination of how masculinity threats affect feminine gay men and/or gay men who may differ in race/ethnicity. Studying the effects of masculinity threat on gay men of different racial groups may be interesting because recent research has found that gay Black men in the presence of no threat were evaluated more positively than gay white men or straight Black men (Remedios et al., 2011). Thus, it may be interesting to see how these results might be influenced by masculinity threat. Additionally, future research may want to examine what evaluation standards or norms (e.g., sexuality or gender) are used to evaluate gay men spontaneously as this may provide greater clarity into differences we saw in the evaluation of feminine gay men.

### Conclusion

In highlighting the nuances of how masculinity threat interacts with sexuality and gender expression we take an intersectional approach to offer greater understanding of both what maybe driving bias. We highlight the need to examine more closely not only the impact of target sexuality but gender expression as well. Not all gay men have the same experience as demonstrated with the previous literature and the current study. For instance, in the current set of studies, we see the masculinity threat impacts gay men differently based on not only their sexual orientation, but also the combination of their gender expression and sexuality. Thus illuminating, that as we move forward in trying to understand and address bias against gay men it is important to consider the conditions that bring about masculinity threat, its consequences and how it might be mitigated.

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