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Butch, Femme, or Straight Acting? Partner Preferences of Gay Men and Lesbians

[Interpersonal Relations and Group Processes]

Bailey, J Michael^{1,2}; Kim, Peggy Y.¹; Hills, Alex¹; Linsenmeier, Joan A. W.¹

¹Department of Psychology, Northwestern University.

²Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to J. Michael Bailey, Department of Psychology, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois 60208-2710. Electronic mail may be sent to jm-bailey@nwu.edu.

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Abstract

On average, gay men are somewhat feminine and lesbians somewhat masculine, but there is variation within each group. The authors examined the consequences of this variation for gay men's and lesbians' desirability as romantic partners. In 2 studies the authors analyzed personal advertisements. Homosexual people were more likely than heterosexual people to mention traits related to sex typicality and more likely to request sex-typical than sex-atypical partners. In 2 studies the authors assessed partner preferences directly. On average, gay men preferred men who described themselves as masculine rather than feminine, but this preference was weaker among men who rated themselves as relatively feminine. Lesbians preferred women who described themselves as feminine looking but did not discriminate against women calling themselves masculine acting. The authors discuss implications of the results for theories of sexual orientation and the adjustment of sex-atypical homosexual people.

The stereotypical gay man in contemporary America is feminine in a number of respects, including his mannerisms, interests, and occupation. The stereotypical lesbian is masculine in similar respects, and additionally, she has short hair and masculine clothing. Indirect evidence suggests that these stereotypes have some validity. As children, gay men tend to have been more feminine and lesbians more masculine than same-sex heterosexual people. Retrospective studies have yielded large differences between

homosexual and heterosexual people in their childhood sex-typed behavior ([Bailey & Zucker, 1995](#); in these studies *childhood* is typically defined as ages 6 to 12). Specifically, homosexual people are more likely to recall preferring opposite-sex playmates, feeling like the opposite sex, and preferring activities and career goals more typically associated with the opposite sex. The retrospective findings have been confirmed by prospective studies for boys ([Bailey & Zucker, 1995](#); [Green, 1987](#)); to date, no prospective studies of masculine girls have been conducted. Although the large majority of relevant research has been conducted in the United States since 1950, available cross-cultural research has also found an association between retrospectively measured childhood sex atypicality and adult homosexual orientation ([Whitam & Mathy, 1986, 1991](#)).

It would be surprising if these childhood differences had no parallels in adult behavior. Fewer studies have examined comparable differences in adulthood, but those that have also have found homosexual people to be sex atypical, on average. Studies using unidimensional masculinity–femininity measures, such as the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory Masculinity-Femininity scale, have found gay men to be relatively feminine, and lesbians relatively masculine, compared with same-sex heterosexual people ([Pillard, 1991](#)). A recent study found additional evidence for the sex atypicality of homosexual people. For example, gay men were more domestic than heterosexual men and more interested in stereotypical female occupations. Lesbians were less interested in fashion than heterosexual women and more interested in occupations stereotypically associated with men ([Bailey, Finkel, Blackwelder, & Bailey, 1996](#)). Like the studies of childhood behavior, these studies were done in contemporary America; however, some cross-cultural research suggests that the findings apply to other cultures as well ([Whitam, 1983, in press](#)).

Studies of both children and adults, as well as less systematic observations of gay and lesbian culture, suggest that the stereotypes of gay men and lesbians are true only on average and that there is considerable variability in sex-typed behavior among gay men and lesbians. Gay men's and lesbians' vocabulary includes several words used to distinguish feminine and masculine homosexual people, such as *butch* and *femme* ([Rosenzweig & Lebow, 1992](#); [Tripp, 1975](#)). Similarly, although homosexual and heterosexual people report large average differences in their childhood behavior, a substantial proportion of homosexual people recall sex-typical childhood behavior ([Bailey & Zucker, 1995](#)). The validity of such individual differences in childhood memories has received some support. Mothers' memories of their gay sons' childhood sex-typed behavior correlated moderately well with the sons' memories ([Bailey, Nothnagel, & Wolfe, 1995](#)). Similarly for adult differences, in a study of gay and lesbian couples, partners were able to rate each other's masculinity–femininity quite reliably ([Bailey et al., 1996](#)).

Although researchers have focused some attention on the causes of variation in masculinity and femininity among homosexual people (e.g., [Bailey & Pillard, 1991](#); [Bailey, Pillard, Neale, & Agyei, 1993](#); [Bell, Weinberg, & Hammersmith, 1981](#); [Meyer-Bahlburg, 1993](#)), they have otherwise largely ignored it. Such variation may, however, have important social implications for gay and lesbian life. In this article, we examine the effects of homosexual people's masculinity and femininity on their attractiveness to other homosexual people. Both anecdotal and empirical evidence suggest that these effects could be substantial, though they have not been well characterized. Furthermore, the nature of the relation between the masculinity or femininity of homosexual persons and their desirability as partners has implications for the validity of some theories of sexual orientation.

Masculinity–Femininity and Desirability of Homosexual People: Theoretical Considerations

Several patterns of relations between masculinity and femininity, on the one hand, and desirability, on the other, are plausible. First, gay men and lesbians may not have any such preferences. One possible interpretation of the sex atypicality of some prehomosexual children and homosexual adults is that these

individuals have not inculcated social norms that discourage such behavior, especially in males (Martin, 1990). In this case, gay men and lesbians might be expected to be tolerant of sex-atypical behavior in others and not to discriminate against sex-atypical romantic partners.

A second possibility is that gay men may generally prefer masculine partners, and lesbians, feminine ones. This pattern of preferences seems most consistent with the “exotic becomes erotic” (EBE) theory of sexual orientation presented by D. J. Bem (1996). According to this theory, people become erotically attracted to the class of peers from whom they felt most different during childhood. As we have noted, evidence suggests that as children, gay men and lesbians were generally sex atypical when compared with their same-sex peers. In one retrospective study 71% of gay men and 70% of lesbian women recalled having felt different from same-sex peers as children, primarily due to sex-atypical behavior (Bell et al., 1981). According to EBE theory, it is precisely the sex typicality of same-sex peers that prehomosexual children find exotic and that leads to their becoming erotic targets. Thus, according to EBE theory, homosexual people should be most attracted to sex-typical adults: masculine men and feminine women.

Alternatively, gay men might generally prefer feminine partners, and lesbians might generally prefer masculine ones. Although the interests and behavior of homosexual people may, in some ways, be sex atypical, research suggests that this may be less so in the area of mating psychology (Bailey, Gaulin, Agyei, & Gladue, 1994). For example, gay men are more similar to heterosexual men than to heterosexual women in their interest in casual sex, and lesbian women are more similar to heterosexual women than to heterosexual men in this respect. Perhaps they also seek mates similar in personality and behavior to the mates sought by heterosexual people of their sex. Conceivably, then, both gay and heterosexual men might be more inclined to seek partners with feminine characteristics, and lesbians and heterosexual women, to seek partners with masculine characteristics.

A fourth possibility is that the preferences of gay men and lesbians for masculine versus feminine partners are related to their own levels of masculinity or femininity. A large body of research has established that, for a wide range of dimensions, similarity contributes to interpersonal attraction. This includes similarity in attitudes, in demographic characteristics, and in personality (Byrne, 1971; Hill, Rubin, & Peplau, 1976; Newcomb, 1961; Thelen, Fishbein, & Tatten, 1985). One study of heterosexual couples found similarity even in an aspect of masculinity–femininity. Wives' and husbands' levels of feminine expressivity were positively correlated, though their levels of masculine instrumentality were unrelated (Antill, 1983). Gay men and lesbians might also seek similarity in aspects of masculinity–femininity.

Although the evidence that similarity often enhances interpersonal attraction is strong, there has been a continuing debate about the influence of complementarity. The idea that complementarity on certain dimensions enhances attraction is intuitively appealing, but it has received little empirical support (Barry, 1970; Levinger, Senn, & Jorgenson, 1970; Meyer & Pepper, 1977; O'Leary & Smith, 1991). A common stereotype about homosexual couples is that one partner takes the role of husband, and the other, of wife (Peplau & Cochran, 1990). If so, then perhaps masculine homosexual individuals who prefer the role of husbands seek feminine individuals to take the role of wives.

Patterns more complex than the five listed above are also possible. For example, relations between masculinity–femininity and desirability for lesbians may be either stronger or weaker than corresponding relations for gay men. Combinations of the effects we have described may also occur. For example, even if EBE theory is true, a general preference for similarity could still hold with respect to masculinity–femininity. In this case, for example, gay men would generally prefer masculine partners, but this preference would be strongest among those who are most masculine themselves. Furthermore, gay men and lesbians might typically prefer partners who are masculine (or feminine) in some ways but not in others. Consistent with

the idea that gay men and lesbians may be more sex typical in their mating psychology than in other areas, they may show differing preferences for the sexual and nonsexual aspects of their partners' behavior.

Masculinity–Femininity and Desirability of Homosexual People: Empirical Evidence [†]

When asked about his dating success, Jaye Davidson, the actor who played the homosexual transsexual in the film *The Crying Game*, explained, “My looks are not attractive to the gay community. To be homosexual is to like the ideal of sex. Homosexual men love very masculine men. And I'm not a very masculine person” (Giles, 1993). Similarly one lesbian told us, “I like feminine women. If I wanted a dyke [i.e., a masculine lesbian], I could have a man.” These anecdotes are most supportive of the idea that homosexual people are most sexually attracted to sex-typical partners. The few studies that have addressed the role of masculinity and femininity in gay men's and lesbians' mating preferences have generally supported this possibility.

Laner and colleagues examined the content of gay and lesbian personal advertisements (Laner, 1978; Laner & Kamel, 1977) and found that gay men were very likely to claim or request masculine characteristics. In contrast, lesbians advertised and requested androgynous characteristics. Lumby (1978) also noted gay male advertisers' tendency to describe themselves as masculine and to reject feminine partners. Bell and Weinberg (1978) asked gay men and lesbians about “physical characteristics preferred in sexual partners” (p. 312) and found that 27% of gay men preferred “masculine” characteristics, compared with 1% who preferred “feminine” characteristics. The respective figures for lesbians were 6% and 13%.

The studies mentioned so far have focused on usage of the terms *masculine* and *feminine*, or close synonyms such as *butch* and *femme*. Two other studies examined gay and lesbian preferences using measures of masculinity and femininity based on S. L. Bem's (1974) two-factor conception. In a study of heterosexual and homosexual personal advertisements, Gonzales and Meyers (1993) found that women solicited more feminine, expressive traits and offered more masculine, instrumental traits compared with men, regardless of sexual orientation. There were, however, no differences between homosexual and heterosexual advertisements with respect to these traits. In a second study (Boyden, Carroll, & Maier, 1984), gay men completed the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) as well as a questionnaire regarding characteristics of their ideal partner. On average, men high in masculine instrumentality desired logical partners, and men high in feminine expressiveness desired expressive partners; the authors concluded that gay men desire partners whose masculinity and femininity are similar to their own. Results of these studies were less consistent and had smaller magnitudes than those examining more explicit descriptors in personal advertisements. We suspect that this is because expressiveness and instrumentality are not closely related to the meanings of *masculine* and *feminine* as the latter terms are used by most people, heterosexual or homosexual (Bailey et al., 1996; Lippa, 1991; Pedhazur & Teitelbaum, 1979).

In the research reported here, we extend this prior research on whether homosexual people's preferences are affected by potential mates' masculinity and femininity. We report the results of four studies, which attempted to clarify both the existence and the meaning of such preferences. In Study 1 we analyzed personal advertisements from gay and lesbian publications. We used a much larger sample than Laner (1978; Laner & Kamel, 1977) or Lumby (1978), and we also distinguished between sexual and nonsexual characteristics. In Study 2 we examined heterosexual advertisements in order to place the results for homosexual participants in a broader context. In Study 3 we used a different approach and a different population than that used in prior studies. Instead of examining personal ads, we asked gay and lesbian participants to rate targets who differed in their degree of physical attractiveness and in their self description as masculine or feminine. Furthermore, we investigated whether certain participant characteristics

heightened or diminished the importance placed on a target's sex typicality. In Study 4 we attempted to resolve apparently inconsistent results from the other studies regarding lesbian preferences, by disentangling lesbian preferences for sex typicality in appearance versus behavior.

Study 1 [↑](#)

People place personal advertisements in order to find desirable mates. In these ads they describe both their ideal partners and themselves. Some partner traits are valued by almost everyone—for example, physical attractiveness, intelligence, and kindness ([Buss, 1989](#); [Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986](#)). Thus, virtually everyone who mentions the physical appearance of a desired mate asks for someone who is physically attractive. Some partner characteristics, though, are valued more by certain individuals than by others. One reason for this is the importance of similarity as an influence on attraction. For example, an advertiser interested in modern art might request a partner who shares this interest, and a person of the Catholic faith might indicate a desire for a partner who is Catholic. However, neither of these qualities is sought by everyone, or even by most people. Other requested partner characteristics may reflect advertisers' idiosyncratic preferences or their desire for complementarity on some dimensions. They represent attempts to attract individuals whom the advertisers expect to find most desirable and with whom they feel they will be most compatible.

Similarly, the traits people use to describe themselves in their personal ads include ones aimed at making them generally appealing to many potential partners and also ones intended to appeal mainly to particular types of people. For example, personals advertisers are much more likely to describe themselves as attractive than unattractive, even though they are probably no more attractive than other people, on average. This tendency probably reflects their belief that most potential suitors would prefer a physically attractive partner. Advertisers also describe their own particular interests (e.g., jazz, classical, or rock music), presumably in order to attract others whose interests are similar to, or compatible with, their own.

These considerations suggest that the frequencies with which particular traits are mentioned in personal advertisements can tell us something about the value of these traits in a culture. If a trait is frequently mentioned in descriptions of ideal partners, and if inconsistent alternative traits are rarely mentioned, this suggests that the trait is widely valued. If a trait is frequently included in advertisers' descriptions of themselves, this suggests that the advertisers think many people seek a partner with that trait. In contrast, if a trait is mentioned about as frequently as its alternatives, whether in self-descriptions or in those of desired partners, this suggests that the trait is one for which similarity, or compatibility, is seen as important.

Thus, for example, if lesbians generally desire feminine partners, their personal advertisements should be heavily biased toward feminine descriptors. In contrast, if most lesbians prefer masculine partners, then masculine descriptors should predominate. And if some lesbians value feminine partners and others value masculine partners, this should be reflected in more similar rates of feminine and masculine descriptors. Parallel arguments can be made regarding the content of personal advertisements placed by gay men. In this study, we examined the use of masculine and feminine descriptors in personal advertisements of gay men and lesbians in order to determine whether either group showed a general preference for sex-typical partners.

Method [↑](#)

Participants. [↑](#)

The sample included gay men who placed personal advertisements in one of 10 consecutive issues of a gay-male-oriented publication (*Gay Chicago*) and lesbians who placed personal advertisements in one of 20 consecutive issues of a more lesbian-oriented publication (*Nightlines*). These publications contained the

highest number of personal advertisements of Chicago gay and lesbian publications, respectively. The issues examined included, in total, 2,729 male ads and 782 female ads. The excess of male ads was due to the much larger size of the male publication. The number of female ads was sufficient for our purposes.

Procedure, measures, and data analysis.

We coded advertisements for the presence or absence of masculine, feminine, and androgynous descriptors related to two broad domains: nonsexual and sexual. We separated the two domains because of the common belief among gay men and lesbians that masculinity or femininity in one is not highly predictive of those traits in the other (“Femme on the streets, butch in the sheets”) and because of the evidence that homosexual people may be more sex typical in aspects of their mating psychology than in other domains.

The inclusion of some words (e.g., *masculine* and *feminine*) in our coding system was straightforward. Others (e.g., *top* and *bottom*) were less straightforward to code, requiring some knowledge of gay and lesbian idiom. Thus, prior to coding the data for the study, we examined many gay and lesbian personal advertisements and compiled a list of descriptors to be included in our coding scheme. Several times we consulted gay and lesbian acquaintances or employees at the aforementioned publications in order to clarify the meaning of candidate terms. Descriptors were coded either masculine or feminine if they are synonyms of either term (e.g., *butch*) or are stereotypically associated with men or women (e.g., *athletic*). Androgynous descriptors included both terms such as *androgynous* and combinations of masculine and feminine terms (e.g., *soft butch*).

The most common descriptors in the nonsexual domain referred to physical characteristics (e.g., *muscular*), behavior (e.g., *straight acting*), or interests and activities (e.g., *athletic*) or were unspecified (e.g., *feminine*). Sexual descriptors tended to be more idiomatic. For example, gay men use *top* and *bottom* to refer to a preference for the penetrative or receptive role, respectively, in anal sex (or, less frequently, oral sex). Lesbians also occasionally use these terms, but when referring to women, *top* and *bottom* indicate one's likelihood of taking sexual initiative and one's tendency either to give or receive sexual pleasure. The primary masculine sexual descriptors were *top*, *dominant*, and *aggressive*, and the main feminine sexual descriptors were *bottom* and *submissive*.

Thus, raters were assigned to locate relevant descriptors and then to classify them as sexual or nonsexual. They also determined whether the words referred to the advertiser or the desired mate. Finally, they distinguished those cases in which advertisers desired a mate with the relevant descriptor from those in which they explicitly did not (e.g., “no butches”). Raters coded all relevant descriptors in each ad. (Results were similar when we limited the analysis to one attribute per ad, by either eliminating ads with multiple coded descriptors or randomly choosing one descriptor in the multiply coded ads.) The two raters were advanced undergraduate psychology majors.

Because performing multiple significance tests and coding more than one descriptor per advertisement (thus violating the independence assumptions of the statistical tests) both increase the probability of a Type I error, we used a conservative significance level, $p < .001$.

Results

In order to examine reliability of the coding procedure, two raters both coded a subset of the data, advertisements from one issue of the male-oriented publication and from two issues of the female-oriented one. From the male advertisements, there were 160 descriptors coded by at least one rater. Of these, 144

(90%) were coded by both. From the female advertisements, there were 96 descriptors coded by at least one rater, of which 75 (78%) were coded by both. Most instances in which one rater failed to code a descriptor were due to that rater's failure to notice the descriptor in a specific ad; in most cases the rater had coded the same descriptor elsewhere. Considering only those descriptors identified by both raters, reliabilities were high ($[\kappa] > .90$) for categorization as sexual or nonsexual, as applying to the advertiser or preferred partner, as desirable or not, and as masculine or feminine.

Of all advertisements examined, 1,112 (41%) of the male ads and 349 (45%) of the female ads contained at least one relevant descriptor. There were a total of 2,031 descriptors in the male ads and 592 descriptors in the female ads. Thus, on average, men had 1.8 relevant descriptors per coded ad, and women had 1.7.

Table 1 contains the frequency distributions of ratings, listed separately for male and female advertisements. Table 2 presents the most frequently coded words and phrases, including those that appeared in at least 1% of advertisements. Men's nonsexual descriptors were much more likely to be masculine than feminine, both in the advertisers' self-descriptions (98% masculine, $p < .001$; unless otherwise noted, probabilities are for the sign test that proportions deviate from .50) and in their descriptions of their preferred partners (96% masculine, $p < .001$). All 72 of the descriptors that advertisers explicitly did not want were feminine ($p < .001$). The most frequently coded descriptor in both self and partner descriptions was *masculine*.

Table 1
Frequencies of Gender-Related Ad Descriptors, by Sex

Descriptor category	Men	Women
Self		
Nonsexual		
Masculine	659	87
Feminine	14	123
Androgynous	1	22
Sexual		
Masculine	92	34
Feminine	145	10
Preferred partner		
Nonsexual		
Masculine	600	46
Feminine	24	188
Androgynous	0	15
Sexual		
Masculine	263	13
Feminine	161	14
Undesired partner		
Nonsexual		
Masculine	0	38
Feminine	72	2

Note. Nonsexual and sexual descriptors are distinguished in the text.

Table 1 Frequencies of Gender-Related Ad Descriptors, by Sex

Descriptor	Category	<i>N</i>	Ads examined containing descriptor (%)
Men			
Self			
<i>Masculine</i>	N	149	5
<i>Muscular</i>	N	100	4
<i>Bottom</i>	S	87	3
<i>Top</i>	S	76	3
<i>Straight appearing</i>	N	54	2
<i>Straight acting</i>	N	47	2
<i>Athletic</i>	N	37	1
Preferred partner			
<i>Masculine</i>	N	212	8
<i>Top</i>	S	147	5
<i>Muscular</i>	N	123	5
<i>Bottom</i>	S	87	3
<i>No fems</i>	N	69	3
<i>Aggressive</i>	S	42	2
<i>Dominant</i>	S	39	1
<i>Straight appearing</i>	N	30	1
Women			
Self			
<i>Feminine</i>	N	100	13
<i>Athletic/like sports</i>	N	25	4
<i>Top</i>	S	16	2
<i>Dyke</i>	N	13	2
Preferred partner			
<i>Feminine</i>	N	150	19
<i>Athletic/like sports</i>	N	35	4
<i>No butch</i>	N	21	3

Note. N = nonsexual; S = sexual.

Table 2 Most Frequent Descriptors

Regarding women's nonsexual self-descriptors, the women were more likely to use feminine than masculine terms (53% versus 38%, respectively), but this feminine bias was much lower than men's masculine one, $[\chi]^2(1, N = 873) = 244.6, p < .001$, and it was not significant. When describing preferred partner characteristics, women were significantly biased toward feminine descriptors (76%, $p < .001$). Most of the masculine nonsexual partner descriptors (76%) concerned sports participation; eliminating these raised the feminine bias to 89%. Attributes that women explicitly did not want were usually masculine (95%; $p < .001$). Women were more likely than men to describe themselves and their preferred partners androgynously: for self-description, 9% versus 0.1%, $[\chi]^2(1, N = 929) = 55.4, p < .001$; for partner description, 6% versus 0%, $[\chi]^2(1, N = 888) = 36.1, p < .001$. The most frequently coded descriptor used by women to describe both themselves and their preferred partners was *feminine*.

We also examined the relation between nonsexual masculine and feminine self-descriptions and desired partner characteristics (Table 3). The table reveals two primary effects true of both sexes. First, some advertisers were generally more concerned than others about masculinity and femininity. That is, advertisers who self-described as either masculine or feminine were also much more likely than other advertisers to seek either masculine or feminine characteristics in potential partners: for men, $[\chi]^2(1, N = 2, 726) = 250.0, p < .001$; for women, $[\chi]^2(1, N = 782) = 106.6, p < .001$. Second, women who described themselves as masculine and men who described themselves as feminine were much less likely than other advertisers to request a partner with sex-typical traits (i.e., masculine men and feminine women); for men, Fisher's exact $p < .001$; for women, $[\chi]^2(1, N = 251) = 138.8, p < .001$.

Table 3
Correspondence Between Claimed and Desired Nonsexual Descriptors

Self-descriptor category	Preferred partner descriptor category					
	Gay men			Lesbians		
	Masculine	Feminine	Unspecified	Masculine	Feminine	Unspecified
Masculine	228	2	309	38	12	39
Feminine	5	6	3	4	69	38
Unspecified	285	14	1,877	4	124	454

Table 3 Correspondence Between Claimed and Desired Nonsexual Descriptors

Men's sexual descriptors were much less biased than their nonsexual ones. Indeed, men were significantly more likely to describe themselves, sexually, as feminine (60%) rather than masculine (40%; $p < .001$). In contrast, they tended to seek a partner who took a masculine sexual role (61%, $p < .001$). Sexually, women tended to describe themselves as masculine (74%, $p < .001$) but were about as likely to seek feminine (52%) as masculine (48%) characteristics. In general, a smaller percentage of women's relevant descriptors was sexual compared with men's, 14% versus 33%, $[\chi]^2(1, N = 2, 623) = 80.4, p < .001$. Both men's and women's sexual descriptors showed strong complementarity effects. Of advertisements that included both sexual self-descriptions and sexual desired partner characteristics, 96% of the men's and 100% of the women's advertisements requested a partner to take the role opposite of that preferred by the advertiser, Fisher's exact $ps < .001$.

Discussion [↑](#)

Results strongly support a bias among most gay men for masculine characteristics outside the sexual domain. Both gay men's self-descriptions and their desired partner characteristics were massively biased toward masculine descriptors. Gay men tended to portray themselves as masculine-looking and masculine-acting and to desire masculine-looking and masculine-acting partners. Results were less clear for women. Although women were more likely to describe both themselves and their ideal partners as feminine rather than masculine, this bias was substantially less than for men. This sex difference was partly due to women's frequent mention of athletic interests, which may represent a somewhat different latent trait than "masculine." For example, women who seek athletic partners may desire someone who shares a common interest rather than someone with a particular behavioral or physical style. When we eliminated athletic interests, women were twice as likely to give a feminine as a masculine self-descriptor and 19 times more likely to seek a feminine than masculine characteristic in their partners. Thus, results of this study suggest

that with the exception of sexual practices, masculine characteristics are a valued commodity for gay men, as are feminine characteristics for lesbians.

These results replicate those of earlier studies of personal advertisements ([Laner & Kamel, 1977](#); [Lumby, 1978](#)) regarding gay men's preferences for masculine partners. Unlike [Laner \(1978\)](#), who used a smaller sample, we found a similar preference for sex-typical partners among lesbians. Our findings are consistent, then, with our reasoning based on [D. J. Bem's \(1996\)](#) “exotic becomes erotic” theory of sexual orientation. The category of peers from whom gay men and lesbians may have felt most different as children—those of their own sex who best fit gender stereotypes—are the ones to whom they are most attracted as adults. Furthermore, the fact that this preference was more uniform among gay men than among lesbians is consistent with the finding that the difference in sex typicality of recalled childhood behaviors is greater for homosexual and heterosexual men than for homosexual and heterosexual women ([Bailey & Zucker, 1995](#)).

Our analyses also revealed exceptions to the general preference for sex-typical partners. Most advertisers either described themselves as sex typical or did not specify their own masculinity or femininity. These two groups requested sex-typical partners much more often than partners who were sex atypical. However, those advertisers who described themselves as sex atypical did not show this pattern. Lesbians describing themselves as masculine tended to request masculine partners; the small number of gay men describing themselves as feminine showed no clear preference regarding partners' masculinity or femininity.

In contrast to the results for nonsexual characteristics, homosexual men and women were more varied in their sexual proclivities, according to their personal ads. Gay men were somewhat more likely to advertise a feminine than a masculine sexual role and to seek a partner with a masculine rather than a feminine role; however, these tendencies were much less extreme than for nonsexual descriptors. Lesbians were somewhat more likely to advertise a masculine sexual role and equally likely to seek a partner preferring a feminine or masculine role. Regarding sexual roles, advertisers appeared to be concerned with compatibility rather than general desirability. Both men and women tended to request partners whose preferred sexual roles fit well with their own.

The different pattern of results for sexual versus nonsexual descriptors confirms our expectation that addressing them separately in our analyses would be informative. It also suggests that the notion embodied in our coding scheme that active or penetrative sexual roles are more masculine than passive or receptive roles may be mistaken. It is unclear from our data whether, for example, gay men who wish to engage in receptive anal sex see themselves as seeking a feminine sexual role, though there is some evidence that they are more feminine in some other respects ([Weinrich, Grant, Jacobson, Robinson, & McCutchan, 1992](#)). Future research should investigate the meaning of sexual roles to gay men and lesbians and the relation of such roles to sex typicality in nonsexual behavior.

A possible limitation to our conclusions concerns their generality. It is unlikely that gay men and lesbians who place personal advertisements are representative of gay men and lesbians in general. For example, if homosexual people who conform to gender stereotypes are sufficiently rare, then those who prefer such conformity in their mates may have more difficulty finding them. Thus, they may be more likely to place personal advertisements, and if so, our results may be misleading. The fact that the gay and lesbian advertisers were considerably more likely to refer to themselves as sex typical than sex atypical argues against this possibility. However, these self-descriptors may be reflective of self-presentational concerns rather than advertisers' actual self-assessments. As discussed above, self-descriptors are included in personal ads partly to make oneself appear generally attractive. Suppose, for example, that gay men advertising in the publication we sampled are aware of the general preference for masculinity within this culture. Some of them may then describe themselves as masculine not because they think of themselves as masculine but in

order to increase their attractiveness to potential partners. It is important, therefore, to assess masculinity and femininity in ways that minimize these self-presentational concerns, and we did so in Study 3.

Another limitation is that the analysis of personal ads allows examination of only the information people choose to put in them. It provides no way, for example, of assessing the preferences for masculine or feminine partners among those who failed to include any such preference in their ads—which includes the majority of those that we sampled. We addressed this concern, as well, in Study 3.

At a general level, our results suggest that gay men, and perhaps lesbians, tend to prefer partners with (heterosexually) sex-typical looks and behavior. This is intriguing in light of evidence that gay men and lesbians are especially likely to display sex-atypical behavior ([Bailey & Zucker, 1995](#); [Pillard, 1991](#); [Whitam & Dizon, 1979](#)) and thus might be expected to be especially tolerant of it. Indeed, heterosexual persons could be even more particular about gender-conforming looks and behavior. On the other hand, some researchers are deeply skeptical of the possibility that homosexual people are more sex atypical than heterosexual people. One way to distinguish these possibilities is to examine heterosexual personal advertisements, and we did so in Study 2.

Study 2

Although a few studies support the validity of stereotypes of homosexual people as sex atypical, some writers remain skeptical of the stereotypes (e.g., [Hyde, 1991, 1994](#), p. 287; p. 131; [Lips, 1997](#), p. 24; [Unger & Crawford, 1992](#), p. 131). Instead, these writers claim that homosexual and heterosexual people are virtually indistinguishable in their appearance and behavior and suggest that the stereotypes arise from simplistic assumptions of heterosexual people. If this were so, one might expect homosexual people to disbelieve the stereotypes, because they have extensive experience interacting with other homosexual people, and people appear to be fairly accurate in their perception of gender-related behavior ([Swim, 1994](#)). If homosexual people do not believe the stereotypes, then there would be no strong reason, a priori, to expect them to emphasize masculinity or femininity more than heterosexual people do. In this case, the preference for sex typicality we found in Study 1 should also be frequently expressed in the ads of heterosexual people. If, however, homosexual people use descriptors relating to masculinity and femininity more than heterosexual people do, this would support the validity of the stereotypes. (The support would not be definitive, however, because it is possible that homosexual people might believe false stereotypes about themselves.)

The primary aim of this study was to examine personal advertisements of heterosexual people to aid in the interpretation of homosexual preferences found in Study 1. We wanted to see whether heterosexual men and women expressed preferences for masculine or feminine partners and to compare the strength of any such preferences with those found for homosexual people in Study 1.

Method

Participants.

The sample included heterosexual women and men who placed personal advertisements in one of 10 consecutive issues of the *Reader*, a Chicago-based publication with a large personals section. These included 2, 225 male ads and 1, 434 female ads.

Procedure, measures, and data analysis.

The two raters of Study 1 examined each advertisement for relevant descriptors. The set of descriptors to

be coded was somewhat more limited in this study than in Study 1. Specifically, raters searched only for *masculine*, *feminine*, and close synonyms (e.g., terms analogous to *butch* and *femme*). These were the most commonly coded descriptors in Study 1. Raters were alerted also to search for (unspecified) synonyms for *masculine* and *feminine* used exclusively by heterosexual people.

Results

Nine heterosexual men described themselves as masculine and 24 requested feminine women. No heterosexual man described himself as feminine or requested a masculine woman. Thirty-two heterosexual women described themselves as feminine and six requested masculine men. None described themselves as masculine or requested a man who was feminine. Raters found no close synonyms of *masculine* or *feminine*.

Compared with the gay men of Study 1, heterosexual men were far less likely to describe themselves as masculine, 0.04% versus 5% of ads, respectively, $[\chi]^2(1, N = 4, 954) = 101.5, p < .001$, or to request a masculine partner, 0% versus 8%, respectively, $[\chi]^2(1, N = 4, 954) = 180.6, p < .001$. Although the heterosexual men tended to ask for feminine partners if they asked for anything, they were much less likely to do so than the lesbians of Study 1, 1% versus 19% of ads, respectively, $[\chi]^2(1, N = 3, 007) = 347.8, p < .001$.

Compared with the lesbians of Study 1, heterosexual women were far less likely to describe themselves as feminine, 2% versus 13% of ads, $[\chi]^2(1, N = 2, 216) = 100.7, p < .001$, or to request feminine partners, 0% versus 19%, $[\chi]^2(1, N = 2, 216) = 295, p < .001$. Although the heterosexual women tended to ask for masculine rather than feminine partners, they were much less likely to do so than the gay men of Study 1, 0.4% versus 8% of ads, respectively, $[\chi]^2(1, N = 4, 163) = 102.3, p < .001$.

Discussion

Both the heterosexual advertisers from Study 2 and the homosexual advertisers from Study 1 tended to describe themselves as, and to request that their potential partners be, sex typical (i.e., masculine men and feminine women) rather than sex atypical. However, homosexual and heterosexual advertisers differed in the frequency of this behavior; this tendency was much stronger in homosexual than in heterosexual advertisements. Indeed, if results of this study are taken at face value, it would seem that homosexual people are especially concerned with conformity to stereotypic sex roles. This interpretation, however, conflicts with all available evidence, which suggests that on average, homosexual people are less likely than heterosexual people to conform to gender stereotypes (e.g., [Bailey & Zucker, 1995](#); [Bailey et al., 1996](#); [Bell et al., 1981](#); [Green, 1987](#); [Pillard, 1991](#); [Whitam & Mathy, 1986](#)).

It is more plausible that the pattern of results we obtained arose because the people who advertised in these publications, regardless of sexual orientation, desired gender-conforming mates, but there is more variability in gender conformity among homosexual than among heterosexual individuals. If so, homosexual people would have more reason than heterosexual people explicitly to offer and request sex typicality in their advertisements. To offer an analogy, probably most people prefer a partner with two legs rather than fewer, but variability in leg number is sufficiently negligible that most personals advertisers do not bother to list *two-legged* among their own or desired partner's characteristics. Perhaps heterosexual people do not mention *masculine* or *feminine* because it is safe for them to assume that potential mates are sufficiently sex typical. This interpretation, which we find most plausible, is consistent with our premise that homosexual people display more sex-atypical behavior than heterosexual people, which has recently garnered more direct support ([Bailey et al., 1996](#)). As such, it contradicts assertions to the contrary, that homosexual and heterosexual people differ only in their preferred sex objects (e.g., [Hyde, 1991, 1994](#)).

Study 3 [↑](#)

This analysis of personal advertisements is limited in at least two important respects. First, one is limited to the data contained in the advertisements, and these are likely to leave important questions unanswerable. Second, as we have noted, personals advertisers may be unrepresentative, and hence, results of studies using personal advertisements as data may not generalize to populations of interest.

Study 3 addressed three main questions. First, would the results of Study 1 hold for homosexual people recruited in ways other than through personal advertisements? Second, if gay men or lesbians prefer sex-typical partners, how does this preference compare in magnitude to another, widely recognized preference: that for physically attractive partners? (The inclusion of physical attractiveness as a covariate also allowed a statistically more powerful test of the main hypotheses.) Third, do any identifiable characteristics distinguish gay men or lesbians who have stronger preferences for sex-typical partners from those with weaker preferences?

In this study gay men and lesbians viewed photographs and descriptions of potential same-sex partners and rated their desirability. The photographs varied in physical attractiveness, and each description included the term *masculine*, the term *feminine*, or neither descriptor. In addition, participants responded to several questions about their own characteristics. Thus, we determined whether gay men and lesbians preferred targets with sex-typical descriptors, as well as whether any participant variables moderated the relation between targets' sex typicality and participants' ratings of them.

Method [↑](#)

Participants. [↑](#)

Participants included 144 gay men and 96 lesbians recruited from a variety of sources. Of the men, 84 were recruited from a gay and lesbian bookstore, 15 from a gay-oriented dance club, 7 from a gay pride parade, and 38 from a gay gym. Of the women, 72 were recruited from the same gay pride parade, 6 from the same gay and lesbian bookstore, and 18 from a lesbian bar. Cooperation rates were 61% for men and 70% for women (excluding a small number of heterosexual men and women whom we approached before determining that they were not homosexual), and did not vary significantly by location.

The mean ages of the gay men and lesbians were 32.1 years ($SD = 7.5$) and 30.4 years ($SD = 7.6$), respectively. Unfortunately, we did not record the ethnicity of participants; however, we noted informally a fair degree of ethnic variation. Of the gay men, 47% had a partner at the time of the study, 20% had placed a personal advertisement, and 40% had answered such an advertisement. Respective percentages for lesbians were 67%, 10%, and 22%.

Materials. [↑](#)

Each participant received a brochure and a questionnaire. Each brochure contained information about two hypothetical same-sex dating partners (targets). For each target, there was a photograph and a brief self-descriptive passage. Photographs were taken from a set of 48 (24 male and 24 female), which included 16 photographs from each of three attractiveness levels: high, average, and low. Most of the target photographs were Caucasian, but four were African American, and five were Asian. These photographs had been classified by the consensus of seven people (three heterosexual men, two gay men, and two heterosexual women), who each rated each picture independently on a 10-point scale (1 = *least attractive*, 5 = *average*, 10 = *most attractive possible*). The mean ratings were 7.7 for the most attractive, 4.6 for the average, and

1.9 for the least attractive photos. The two photographs in each brochure always differed in their attractiveness level. We wrote four brief passages (two for each sex) to be associated with the two photographs. Thus, all men received the same two passages written for men, and all women received both passages written for women, with an important qualification. We manipulated whether each passage contained one of the descriptors *masculine* or *feminine*, or neither descriptor. For example, one of the female passages stated,

Good-looking [masculine/feminine/no descriptor] lesbian in early twenties seeks partner for relationship. I am in shape and enjoy rollerblading, jogging, and tennis. I live in the city and would like someone with whom I can share everything from an exciting evening in town at the clubs to a relaxing day at the museum. My hobbies include traveling, being outdoors, and listening to music.

Each brochure contained one description with either *masculine* or *feminine* and one description with neither term. (Henceforth, we refer to these as the gendered and neutral targets, respectively.) Thus, each participant received a brochure that included one target of either high, average, or low attractiveness with a gender-neutral description and another target of a different attractiveness level whose self-description included either *masculine* or *feminine*. Photographs were of young adults (early 20s). We counterbalanced over order of presentation, attractiveness level (also being sure no one had two photos of the same attractiveness level), which ad was shown, and feminine/masculine/no descriptor. Every photograph appeared equally often with the masculine and feminine descriptors.¹

Questionnaires completed by participants contained four questions about each target, each of which assessed how desirable, overall, he or she was to the participant and each of which was completed using a rating scale: (a) "If you did not have a partner, how much would you like to date this person?" (b) "Given what you know about this person, try to estimate how interested you would be in romantic involvement with him/her if you did not have a partner." (c) Given what you know about this person, try to estimate how interested you would be in pursuing a long-term relationship with him/her if you did not have a partner." (d) "Compared to people you have dated, this person is . . ." (responses to this question ranged from "much less desirable" to "much more desirable"). In addition, several items about participant characteristics were included as potential moderator variables. These included age, whether the participant was currently part of a couple, whether he or she had ever placed or answered a personal advertisement, and how masculine or feminine he or she felt (the final item was embedded among several other personality descriptors).

Procedure.¹

At each site, we attempted to approach potential participants systematically (e.g., by asking every person who entered during a certain time). We asked participants whether they would take part in a study of gay and lesbian dating preferences. Before proceeding, we asked whether they were gay or lesbian. If they were eligible and accepted, we showed them the brochures consisting of the two sample ads, side by side. We asked them to first look at the brochures and then answer some questions. Afterward, we told participants that sample advertisements were constructed for the study and not by people interested in finding partners.

Data analysis.¹

The four items about each target's desirability were standardized and averaged to form a desirability composite. There were, thus, two composites for each participant: one from the neutral target and one from the gendered target. Internal consistency reliabilities for all composites exceeded .90.

We analyzed the data by means of multiple regression, separately for men and women. The dependent

variable was the desirability composite for the gendered target. Independent variables included the physical attractiveness (low = 1, average = 2, high = 3) of the gendered target and whether the gendered target included the sex-typical or sex-atypical descriptor (coded 2 and 1, respectively). In addition, we included the desirability composite for the neutral target (which controlled for participants' general choosiness and rating bias). A subsequent series of analyses examined possible moderators of the relation between a target's sex typicality and the respondent's ratings of the target, by means of inclusion of appropriate interaction terms.

Results [↑](#)

[Table 4](#) contains the results of the simultaneous multiple regression analysis for men. The model containing all three predictors was significant, $R^2 = .26$, $F(3, 140) = 16.0$, $p < .001$. Furthermore, each predictor made a significant unique contribution: desirability of the neutral target (the covariate), [DELTA] $R^2 = .09$, $t(140) = 4.1$, $p < .001$; attractiveness of the gendered target, [DELTA] $R^2 = .15$, $t(140) = 5.3$, $p < .001$; and sex typicality of the gendered target, [DELTA] $R^2 = .07$, $t(140) = 3.6$, $p < .001$. Participants rated masculine and attractive targets as most desirable. The unstandardized regression coefficients for the latter two predictors were comparable, .44 and .47, respectively. Thus, the average difference in desirability between masculine and feminine targets was about half as large as the corresponding difference between the highly attractive and unattractive targets. (This result, of course, depends on the attractiveness difference between those two sets of photographs. A different group of judges may have chosen photographs that yielded either larger or smaller differences.)

Table 4
*Simultaneous Multiple Regression Analyses for Gay Men:
Influences on Desirability of Gendered Targets*

Predictor	<i>B</i>	ΔR^2	<i>t</i> (140)
Desirability of neutral target	.31	.09	4.1*
Attractiveness of gendered target	.44	.15	5.3*
Sex typicality of gendered target	.47	.07	3.6*

Note. *B*s are unstandardized regression coefficients. ΔR^2 represents the unique contribution of each effect.

* $p < .001$.

Table 4 Simultaneous Multiple Regression Analyses for Gay Men: Influences on Desirability of Gendered Targets

We examined the interactions between several participant variables and target sex typicality to see whether any of the former affected the importance of the latter in determining desirability ratings. Neither placing prior personal advertisements nor responding to them nor being in a committed relationship nor age yielded a significant interaction ($ps > .20$). However, the item requiring participants to rate themselves as masculine or feminine on a 7-point scale did produce a significant interaction, $B = .41$, [DELTA] $R^2 = .09$, $t(137) = 3.8$, $p < .001$. Male participants who rated themselves as relatively masculine weighted the target's sex typicality more highly than did participants who rated themselves as relatively feminine, to whom it made little difference ([Figure 1](#)).

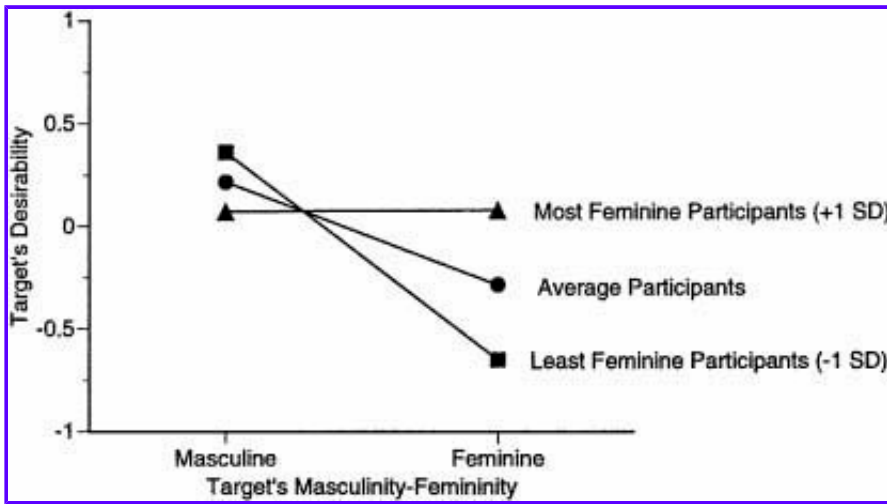


Figure 1. Relation between targets' masculinity–femininity and desirability for three levels of gay male participants' masculinity–femininity.

Table 5 contains the results of the multiple regression analysis for women. The model containing the three predictors was significant, $R^2 = .09$, $F(3, 92) = 2.9$, $p < .05$. Both desirability of the neutral target and attractiveness of the gendered target were significant predictors, [DELTA] $R^2 = .05$, $t(92) = 2.3$, $p < .05$, and [DELTA] $R^2 = .06$, $t(92) = 2.4$, $p < .05$, respectively. However, in contrast to results for men, the sex typicality of the gendered target appeared to make no difference, [DELTA] $R^2 = .00$. Finally, for women, no participant variable interacted significantly with the sex typicality of the gendered target to predict her desirability to the participant.

Table 5
Simultaneous Multiple Regression Analyses for Lesbians: Influences on Desirability of Gendered Targets

Predictor	B	ΔR^2	$t(192)$
Desirability of neutral target	.25	.05	2.3*
Attractiveness of gendered target	.46	.06	2.4*
Sex typicality of gendered target	.00	.00	0.0

Note. Bs are unstandardized regression coefficients. ΔR^2 represents the unique contribution of each effect.
 * $p < .05$.

Table 5 Simultaneous Multiple Regression Analyses for Lesbians: Influences on Desirability of Gendered Targets

In order to test whether sex typicality of the gendered target was significantly less important for women than for men, we included both sexes in one analysis, using the following predictors: desirability of the neutral target, attractiveness of the gendered target, sex typicality of the gendered target, sex, and the interaction between sex and sex typicality of the gendered target. The interaction term was significant, $t(233) = 2.2$, $p < .05$, confirming that sex typicality of the gendered target affected the responses of men more than those of women.

Discussion [↑](#)

For men, the results of Study 3 strongly supported those of Study 1, suggesting that most gay men prefer masculine to feminine partners. In Study 3 the preference was for behavioral masculinity; targets' physical appearance was controlled for by having each photograph appear equally often as *masculine* and *feminine*. The magnitude of the preference was substantial, on average, but the bias for masculine partners was strongest for gay men who rated themselves as especially masculine and was absent for gay men who rated themselves as especially feminine. This is consistent with the results of Study 1, in which a small subgroup of men both described themselves as feminine and were as likely to ask for feminine as masculine partners. It is also consistent with another recent study of gay men, in which we found that the gay men who rated themselves as most masculine had the strongest preference for masculine partners (Bailey et al., 1996). These results conflict with the common notion that gay men prefer partners with gender role behaviors opposite to their own. However, they are consistent with the notion that, for a wide range of relationships and a wide range of personal characteristics, similarity enhances attractiveness. Alternatively, perhaps some gay men are especially comfortable with male femininity, in both themselves and their partners. The explanation of this intriguing finding will require further research.

The lesbians in this study showed no preference for partners who described themselves as feminine rather than masculine. This conflicts with the results of Study 1, though even in that study, results for women were less definitive than for men. There are at least two possible explanations for the failure to find sex-typicality preferences in Study 3. First, it is possible that lesbians in general do not have such preferences. If, however, lesbians preferring sex-typical partners were especially likely to place advertisements (because, e.g., such partners are rare), this could account for the Study 1 findings.

The second possible explanation concerns the target stimuli. It is our impression that with respect to sex typicality, there is greater concordance between appearance and behavior among lesbians than among gay men. Masculine-behaving lesbians are likely to have short hair and wear masculine clothing, but we know of no analogous appearance for feminine-behaving gay men. Most of the women in the target photographs had long hair and were rather feminine looking, and none was especially masculine looking. Thus, when the gendered target contained *masculine* as a descriptor, this may have conflicted with visual information provided by the photograph, and lesbian participants may have ignored the descriptor. A related possibility is that when lesbians in Study 1 advertised for feminine partners, they meant feminine-looking partners, and the photographs in Study 3 were all sufficiently feminine looking. One additional concern is that because no lesbians were involved in initially rating the stimuli for attractiveness, those ratings may have been inaccurate with respect to lesbians. In Study 4 we independently manipulated information about female targets' appearance and behavior in order to discern whether lesbians are biased against masculine-looking potential partners.

Study 4

The goal of this study was to resolve the apparent discrepancy between Study 1's and Study 3's results for lesbians, by disentangling the importance of sex typicality in appearance and behavior.

Method

Participants.

The sample included 80 lesbians who agreed to participate in a study of lesbian dating preferences. They were recruited by two lesbian research assistants from among the assistants' acquaintances and contacts at lesbian social events. We did not collect demographic information such as ethnicity and age.

Materials.

Each questionnaire contained two sample lesbian personal advertisements, one of which contained information about sex typicality of looks and behavior, followed by a 7-point rating scale that asked participants to rate the relative desirability of the two ads. Finally, participants rated themselves with respect to several personality descriptors, including *butch-femme*, which was of primary interest.

The two lesbian advertisements were as follows:

Brave and Crazy? Yes I Am. And looking for someone to share those good times with. Attractive, intelligent, compassionate, hopeless 27 year old romantic in search of someone to hold during cold Chicago nights. If you enjoy a healthy laugh, stimulating conversation, good movies, and breakfast in bed, let's give it a try. No game players or heart breakers.

Looking for someone to star with me in an incredibly true adventure of two women in love. Fun loving, honest, and from what I'm told, witty woman in search of someone who loves life. I am 33, I'm looking for someone to go with me on a bike ride on the lake or a boat ride in Venice. If you're ready for something new and exciting, I'd love to hear from you.

One of the advertisements in each questionnaire included one of the following four pairs of descriptors: *femme-looking, femme-acting*; *butch-looking, femme-acting*; *femme-looking, butch-acting*; or *butch-looking, butch-acting*. These were equally likely to be included in either ad, and the order of the ads was counterbalanced. The terms *butch* and *femme* were used instead of *masculine* and *feminine*, respectively, because several lesbians we consulted believed the former sounded more realistic.

Data analysis. [↑](#)

The dependent variable, relative preference for the two ads, was recoded so that 7 indicated complete preference for the gendered target and 1 indicated complete preference for the alternative ad.

Results and Discussion [↑](#)

A 2 (butch vs. femme appearance) \times 2 (butch vs. femme behavior) \times 2 (alternative advertisements) analysis of variance revealed significant main effects for both appearance, $F(1, 72) = 5.21, p < .05$, and advertisement, $F(1, 72) = 5.4, p < .05$. No other effect was significant, including behavior, $F(1, 72) = 0.1, p > .70$. Examination of adjusted means revealed more positive ratings for targets who described themselves as femme-looking ($M = 4.0$) than butch-looking ($M = 3.0$). The main effect for advertisement indicated that the advertisement with the 33-year-old target ($M = 4.0$) was rated more favorably than that with the 27-year-old target ($M = 3.0$), though we cannot determine whether the age difference was the salient factor.

We also examined whether participants' own sex typicality moderated the relation between targets' sex typicality and relative desirability. Thus, we analyzed the data by means of regression and included as predictors target's appearance and behavior, advertisement, participant's self-rating on a 7-point butch-femme scale, and interactions between target's and participant's sex typicality. Neither the main effect of participant's sex typicality nor interactions involving it approached significance.

Findings from Study 4 suggest that on average, lesbians discriminate against potential romantic partners who look masculine, but not those who act masculine, thus resolving the apparent conflict between results of Studies 1 and 3.

We emphasize, however, the limitation that the participants of this study were recruited as acquaintances of two research assistants and thus may be unrepresentative. Future studies recruiting participants in other ways can provide evidence for the generality of our findings.

General Discussion

Results of our studies replicated, extended, and qualified previous findings suggesting that gay men prefer masculine partners. Prior studies of partner preferences focused primarily on personal advertisements. Both our Study 1, using personal advertisements placed by gay men, and our Study 3, using a different approach, also found a large general preference for masculine over feminine partners. Results further suggested that gay men tend to favor both masculine-looking and masculine-acting men. This preference was much weaker, however, in the realm of sexual roles; in general, gay men and lesbians tended to seek partners whose sexual role behavior was complementary to their own. Both Study 1 and Study 3 also found evidence that the average gay male preference for masculinity is not quite universal: A subgroup of gay men both are less masculine (or more willing to admit that they are less masculine) and place less emphasis on a partner's masculinity.

In contrast to previous studies, ours revealed evidence of a lesbian preference for feminine partners, though this preference was less general than the analogous one for gay men. Results of Studies 1, 3, and 4, together, suggest that lesbians prefer feminine-looking but not feminine-acting women.

Finally, comparison of heterosexual and homosexual personal advertisements highlighted the relative emphasis that homosexual people tend to place on sex typicality. Homosexual people were much more likely than heterosexual people to claim and to request sex-typical traits in their personal advertisements.

Although our research found consistent evidence that homosexual people tend to prefer sex-typical versus sex-atypical partners, important questions remain. The most basic issue concerns the question of how gay men and lesbians interpret the general terms *masculine* and *feminine* and precisely which masculine or feminine attributes they weigh in judgments of partner desirability. In other words, when gay men ask for masculine partners, and lesbians for feminine partners, what, precisely, do they want?

Our results suggest that gay men search for both masculine-looking and masculine-acting partners. Both *muscular* and *straight appearing* were among the most common descriptors in Study 1. Advertisements for phone sex services in gay magazines invariably include photographs of very muscular men. Study 3's design controlled for the effects of physical characteristics that can be discerned from facial photographs, and thus, gay men's preference for the masculine targets probably reflected assumptions about their behavior. But it remains unclear which specific masculine behaviors gay men tend to find more attractive than alternative, feminine behaviors. On average, gay men are somewhat feminine with respect to some patterns of interests, including domesticity, interest in fashion, and occupational interests ([Bailey et al., 1996](#)). However, our informal impression is that gay men often classify each other as masculine or feminine on the basis of mannerisms and speech patterns, without knowing anything about such interests. They may, of course, see these mannerisms and speech patterns as cues to other traits that they value or disvalue.

In contrast to gay men, lesbians did not appear to favor potential partners who were sex typical in their behavior. They did, however, prefer partners whom they believed looked sex typical. Several physical characteristics might be labeled masculine or butch in women, including short hair, muscular build, high waist-to-hip ratio ([Singh, 1993](#)), and certain facial characteristics ([Burton, Bruce, & Dench, 1993](#)). It is presently unclear which of these, if any, lesbians dislike.

A second issue concerns the valence of the preference for sex typicality. It is unclear, for example, whether gay men find masculine men especially attractive or feminine men especially unattractive. Although the designs of our studies were not well suited to answer this question, there was some indication that attraction to masculinity and dislike of femininity were both important. In Study 1 gay men both requested masculine partners and rejected feminine partners ("No femmes"). On the basis of the number of relevant descriptors, advertisers were more intent on attracting masculine mates than discouraging feminine mates. The analogous question for lesbians, whether they especially like feminine-looking partners or especially dislike masculine-looking partners, or both, also remains unanswered by this study. These issues could be resolved fairly straightforwardly with future research.

Implications for Theories of Interpersonal Attraction

In our introduction we discussed several theoretical predictions concerning the masculinity or femininity of lesbians and gay men and their attractiveness as partners. None of the theories we mentioned can alone explain our findings. Indeed, we found evidence consistent with several of the possible patterns we presented, along with differences both between the sexes and within them.

First, because many gay men and lesbians appear somewhat less constrained than most heterosexual people by traditional sex roles (Bailey et al., 1996), it seemed possible that they might show no clear preference for sex-typical or sex-atypical behavior in their partners. Taken together, the results of Studies 3 and 4 suggest that this is, indeed, the case for lesbians' evaluations of potential partners' behavior, though not their physical appearance. There was no parallel finding for men. This is consistent with the fact that masculine behavior in females is generally tolerated more than feminine behavior in males (e.g., Feinman, 1981; Gomes & Abramowitz, 1976; Martin, 1990; Zucker & Bradley, 1995; Zucker, Wilson-Smith, Kurita, & Stern, 1995).

A second possibility was that both gay men and lesbians might prefer sex-typical partners, that is, that gay men would find masculine men especially attractive and lesbians would be especially attracted to feminine women. In Studies 1 and 3 we found that, in general, gay men preferred masculine partners. Lesbians showed a parallel, though weaker, preference for feminine partners in Study 1. The results of Study 4, however, suggest that this preference is confined to potential partners' physical appearance and does not extend to evaluations of potential partners who differ in the sex typicality of their behavior. A preference for sex-typical partners is consistent with D. J. Bem's (1996) EBE theory of sexual orientation; the implications of our overall findings for this theory are discussed in more detail below.

Past research has shown that gay men and lesbians resemble heterosexual people in some aspects of mating psychology (Bailey et al., 1994). Thus, it seemed possible that gay men, like heterosexual men, might seek feminine partners; similarly, lesbians, like heterosexual women, might prefer partners who are masculine. We found little evidence of a male preference for femininity or a female preference for masculinity, for either heterosexual or homosexual people. In Study 2, which focused on personal advertisements of heterosexual people, the few advertisers who requested masculinity or femininity per se fit this pattern; however, the vast majority of advertisements did not mention these characteristics. The most likely interpretation is that heterosexual men prefer feminine to masculine women, and heterosexual women prefer masculine to feminine men, but both assume that potential partners are sufficiently sex typical. This was not true of homosexual people, who were quite likely to request masculine or feminine partners. Their general tendencies, however, were opposite this prediction, with lesbians tending to request feminine partners, and gay men, masculine partners.

Exceptions to these general preferences seem most explicable by the theory that similarity increases interpersonal attraction. In Study 1, those few lesbians who described themselves as masculine tended to

request masculine, rather than feminine, partners; however, this finding was not replicated in either Study 3 or Study 4. In both Study 1 and Study 3, gay men who described themselves as feminine were less likely than other gay men to express a preference for masculine partners.

Finally, as we have already noted, results of Study 1 provide some evidence for the effects of complementarity on attractiveness. Both gay men and lesbians expressed a desire for partners whose sexual behaviors or preferences were complementary to their own. This is in contrast to the more common finding that similarity, rather than complementarity, enhances attraction. Prior research and theorizing about complementarity and similarity have focused on a range of attitudes, demographic characteristics, personality traits, and needs. Our findings are consistent with the idea that attraction-enhancing effects of complementarity may be found more often for specific dyadic behaviors (Simpson & Harris, 1994). If individuals must differ in particular ways in order to engage in a desired activity together, then they may tend to seek partners whose behavioral preferences complement their own.

Implications for Theories of Sexual Orientation [↑](#)

As discussed above, at least some of our findings seem consistent with [D. J. Bem's \(1996\)](#) EBE theory of sexual orientation development. This theory should predict that gay men and lesbians who were sex-atypical children (and Bem offers evidence that most were, in some crucial ways) should be attracted to adults who behave sex typically: masculine men or feminine women. Our results are broadly consistent with EBE for gay men, who showed an average bias for masculine men. Why do many gay men prefer masculine partners? According to EBE theory, it is because these are the individuals from whom they felt most different as children. Sex-typical males are the peers they saw as exotic as children and toward whom they now feel the most erotic feelings as adults.

The existence of a subgroup of gay men who both describe themselves as feminine and are less concerned than other gay men that their partners be masculine is potentially problematic for EBE theory, because the theory predicts that feminine gay men should have the strongest preference for masculine partners. Perhaps this subgroup is better explained by a combination of both EBE theory and the preference for similarity. For those gay men who see themselves as relatively masculine, both EBE theory and similarity push them in the same direction—toward a preference for masculine men. But for the more feminine men, EBE theory and similarity push them in opposite directions (EBE theory toward masculine men and similarity toward feminine ones), which may explain why they end up showing no clear preference for either group.

In contrast to the results for men, the best tests of the EBE theory-relevant prediction for lesbians (Studies 3 and 4) failed to detect any bias among lesbians for feminine-behaving women. We did find a bias for feminine appearance, but this seems less clearly relevant for [D. J. Bem's \(1996\)](#) theory. Bem focuses on the consequences of children's preferences for different childhood activities (e.g., for rough-and-tumble vs. more quiet play); the focus, then, is on how same-sex children behave, rather than on what they look like.

In its original form, EBE purports to be a very general theory that can explain sexual orientation development in most men and women, both heterosexual and homosexual. Our results do offer some support for this theory, but they also suggest that it may be less general than originally proposed.

While EBE theory provides one explanation for what may be our clearest finding, the preference of most gay men for masculine partners, other possible explanations for this finding exist as well. Perhaps the preference reflects a general societal preference for masculine rather than feminine traits. Gay men may internalize this bias. This could explain why lesbians accept sex-atypical behavior in potential partners; such

behavior is masculine. An additional possibility is that we learn to be most attracted to those who have best inculcated gender stereotypes, perhaps through mere exposure ([Zajonc, 1968](#)). However, this explanation is inconsistent with our failure to find a lesbian preference for feminine-behaving partners.

One key observation is inconsistent with both the masculine preference and the mere exposure preference explanations. Heterosexually identified men who have no access to women (e.g., in prison) sometimes engage in sex with other men; this is referred to as situational homosexuality. In contrast to the gay men we studied, these men tend to prefer feminine men ([Rideau & Sinclair, 1982](#); [Wooden & Parker, 1982](#)). The tendency for heterosexually identified men who engage in homosexual behavior to prefer feminine male sex partners has sometimes been explained through their need to assert their own masculinity ([Price, 1984](#); [Rideau & Sinclair, 1982](#); [Wooden & Parker, 1982](#)). [Wooden and Parker \(1982\)](#) observed, consistent with our findings, that in prison feminine men are not considered desirable by gay-identified men; however, they did not suggest that gay men need to assert their femininity.

Together, our findings and the observations regarding situational homosexuality suggest that most men desire a sex partner who is either stereotypically male (if they are homosexual) or stereotypically female (if they are heterosexual). Evidently, preferential and situational homosexual behavior have fundamentally different causes and goals. Men who are preferentially homosexual are most attracted to men and seek a stereotypical man. In situational homosexuality, men are most attracted to women, who are unavailable, and thus they seek a man who resembles a woman. Even if we are correct, of course, the reasons that homosexual and heterosexual men develop different preferences remain unclear. An analogous model is also plausible regarding women's physical preferences but not their behavioral preferences.

Implications for Sex-Atypical Homosexual People

If our findings and reasoning are correct, feminine men and masculine-looking women may be somewhat marginalized in the gay and lesbian communities, respectively, at least sexually and romantically. This may have important mental health implications. If, for example, feminine gay men tend to be less successful romantically, they may be more unhappy than other gay men, on average.

There is evidence that homosexual people are aware of the association between sex atypicality and sexual unattractiveness. This idea is supported by data from the recent *Advocate* surveys of sexuality and health ([Lever, 1996](#)). Both gay men and lesbians rated themselves on a 7-point scale of sex typicality (ranging from butch to feminine). Respondents also rated how attractive they believed they are to other same-sex homosexual people. Both gay men and lesbians who rated themselves as most sex atypical believed they were least attractive to others; $r(2, 488) = .18, p < .001$, and $r(7, 887) = .21, p < .001$, respectively. Although these correlations are not large, they probably underestimate the true relation, because of measurement error.

Although no studies have examined the association between adult sex typicality and adjustment in homosexual people, three studies of gay men found a link between (recalled) childhood cross-sex-typed behavior and adult problems, including lower self-esteem ([Harry, 1983a](#)), higher rates of depression and anxiety ([Weinrich, Atkinson, McCutchan, & Grant, 1995](#)), and suicidality ([Harry, 1983b](#)). None of the studies that included women found similar associations for them ([Aubé & Koestner, 1992](#); [Harry, 1983b](#)). [Bailey and Zucker \(1995\)](#) speculated that these problems were due to heterosexual peers', parents', and others' mistreatment of feminine boys. Results of Studies 1 and 3 suggest an alternative (though not entirely separate) explanation involving gay men's treatment of feminine gay men. It is possible that consistent or anticipated rejection predisposes some feminine gay men to be unhappy. Future studies should examine whether, in fact, romantic frustration mediates the relation between femininity and adjustment problems among gay men.

Limitations

An important limitation of our studies is the reliance on participants in the Chicago area during 1994–1996. We are reasonably confident that our results apply to other American cities of recent years; prior studies whose results are consistent with ours used data from other cities, such as San Francisco. Obviously, we can be less certain regarding the generality of our findings to other cultures and times. The association between memories of childhood sex atypicality and homosexuality has, however, been replicated in diverse cultures including Brazil, Guatemala, and the Philippines as has variability in gay men's masculinity ([Whitam, in press](#); [Whitam & Mathy, 1986](#)). F. L. Whitam (personal communication, March 15, 1997) has informally observed the gay male preference for masculine partners in these and other cultures, but there are no careful studies of this issue. The extent to which our findings are true across diverse cultures, and have been true across historical periods, has important implications for their meaning.

Conclusions

Our results suggest that compared with heterosexual people, homosexual people are especially attuned to potential romantic partners' sex typicality. Furthermore, gay men tend to be biased toward masculine partners, and lesbians, toward feminine-looking partners. However, gay men's masculine bias is much weaker for those who describe themselves as feminine. These facts undoubtedly have important developmental antecedents and social consequences, which deserve further study. More generally, our results support our appeal elsewhere ([Bailey & Zucker, 1995](#)) that researchers pay greater attention to both between-orientations and within-orientation differences in sex typicality.

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¹Unfortunately, we cannot provide copies of these materials to researchers wishing to replicate our study. The photos were taken from a college yearbook of a few years back from another region of the country. Although we think it is unlikely that anyone photographed would ever be identified from the use of the photos in this study, we realized after the study was completed that we should have obtained permission in advance from the individuals whose photos were used. [\[Context Link\]](#)

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