

How sexual minority men cope with harassment, masculinity, and body image

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What does an ideal man or woman look like? How do they dress and behave? These are questions that every young person agonizes over. For those who don't compare to the typical man or woman, ridicule from peers and insecurities about oneself can often be the result.

Men who are in the [sexual minority](#) (gay, bisexual, queer, etc.) are especially at risk of developing [body image](#) concerns due to the emphasis placed on [physical appearance](#) in the gay community and susceptibility to childhood harassment for gender nonconformity. In a recent article by Laurel Brooke Watson and Franco Dispenza titled "The Relationships Among Masculine Appearance Norm Violations, Childhood Harassment for Gender Nonconformity, and Body Image Concerns Among Sexual Minority Men," published in the *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health*, 216 sexual minority men were surveyed to better understand the relationships among sexual minority men's objectification experiences, childhood harassment for gender nonconformity, and [body image concerns](#).

Previous studies have found that gay men may have more irregular eating behaviours, often emphasize the need to be physically fit, and are more likely to objectify themselves and other men. Being criticized or harassed based on masculine appearance norm violations (MANV) could be a unique experience for sexual minority men that could account for their body image concern. Consequently, some men may adopt a more muscular physique just to avoid harassment. The study shows that when sexual minority men are harassed for violating masculine appearance

norms, they are more likely to turn that criticism inwards and self-objectify, perhaps in an effort to avoid future confrontations. While objectification based on MANV did not directly predict feeling shame, early childhood harassment for gender nonconformity did. It seems as though childhood harassment for gender nonconformity is "a formative experience that shapes sexual minority men's relationships with their bodies and physical appearances."

Watson and Dispenza stress the importance for mental health practitioners to consider this early life context before assuming that body image issues in gay and bisexual men are the result of a psychological disorder. Clinicians may benefit from directly asking patients about their childhood experiences to determine the level of harassment they endured. Sexual [minority men](#) would benefit from understanding how their childhood experiences shape the feelings they experience about their bodies presently. Lastly, this study confirms that reduction of harassment, discrimination, and bullying of sexual minority youth are important strategies to prevent later mental health problems in this population.

More information: "The Relationships Among Masculine Appearance Norm Violations, Childhood Harassment for Gender Nonconformity, and Body Image Concerns Among Sexual Minority Men." [DOI: 10.1080/19359705.2014.993229](https://doi.org/10.1080/19359705.2014.993229)

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