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On Wanting and Being Wanted: Sexual Desirability and Its Effects on Men Who Have Sex with Men

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Abstract

Our sexual desires are purported to be an arena where social forces should not penetrate. Yet who and what we want – what we find sexually desirable – are already influenced by coercive powers. In this thesis, I analyze sexual desirability, its relationship to systems of power, dominance, and discrimination, and three effects that desirability versus undesirability has on men who have sex with men. After introducing sexual desire and desirability in Chapter 1, I show how men who have sex with men ($N = 24$) define sexual desirability in Chapter 2. Sexual desirability consists of appearance, affect, and behavior, and is shaped distally via systemic, institutional, and interpersonal discrimination, and proximally, via the internalization of these discriminatory sexual logics. In Chapter 3, I analyze how the Melbourne bear community socially constructs sexual desirability. Bears, as fat, hairy, and older men, are sexually marginalized within the gay community, but produce sexual contexts where they are the objects of sexual desire. I show how bears eroticize one another through spectacles of desire which redefine the bear body as sexy. In Chapters 4, 5, and 6, I demonstrate some of the consequences of sexual (un)desirability. In Chapter 4, among Grindr users in Australia ($N = 264$, $T = 13{,}679$), I use experiencing sampling to show that feeling more sexually desirable relates to feeling more satisfied with one's body, and vice versa. In Chapter 5, also among Grindr users ($N = 234$, $T = 12{,}162$), I show that feeling more masculine (but not more or less feminine) is associated with feeling more sexually desirable, and vice versa. In Chapter 6, I show that feeling sexually undesirable relates to greater concerns about rejecting condomless sex, and that partner desirability predicts greater intentions to have condomless sex, across three experiments ($N = 1{,}459$). I find that sexual desirability is both personal and political for men who have sex with men. Hegemonic desirability reproduces social oppression within our sexual desires, which has consequences for the psychological and sexual health of those deemed undesirable. I suggest that sexual

desirability is performative rather than a natural, prediscursive trait inherent in some bodies. Undesirability is socially and historically contingent, and functions to make life less liveable. I offer revisions to theories on the social organization of sexuality and pathways for future work on sexual desirability.

Keywords: sexual desirability, sexual desire, sexual field theory, men who have sex with men

To August, and to the broken, the beaten, and the damned

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bell hooks (1991, p. 1) once wrote

> I came to theory because I was hurting – the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend – to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing.

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Finally, thank you to my cat, Frank, who oversaw much of the analysis, writing, and editing of this thesis while sitting on my desk and sniffing out the window. She reminded me there's more to life than work. There are also biscuits.

TRUE LOVE IS POSSIBLE

ONLY IN THE NEXT WORLD -- FOR NEW PEOPLE

IT IS TOO LATE FOR US

WREAK HAVOK ON THE MIDDLE CLASS

–*Disco Elysium*, 2019

Declaration by Author

I declare that this thesis is my own work and contains no work written or published by another person except where stated in the preface or duly acknowledged in text. The research reported here was conducted in accordance with the principles for the ethical treatment of human participants, as approved by the University of Melbourne. The word count is below the maximum allowable length.

_____

Wesley Grey

July 2025

Preface

The body of this thesis is made up of five stand-alone empirical chapters in various stages of publication. Chapter 4 is based on an article I wrote for *Body Image*, which was published in January 2024 (see Grey et al., 2024). I have made substantial revisions to this chapter to improve the rigor of the analyses. The figures used here are also different from the published version. Chapters 2, 3, 5, and 6 are currently being reviewed in separate journals.

I alone collected the data reported in this thesis, except those reported in Chapters 4 and 5 which were collected alongside Duncan Hunt and Katey Park. The analyses reported throughout were done by me alone, with revisions made following suggestions from my supervisors and coauthors.

I wrote everything in this thesis except for Emma Austen's positionality statement in Chapter 2 (which I have edited). Each chapter was reviewed by the relevant coauthors. While I edited the text in light of feedback, the final chapters and their relevant manuscripts were produced by me. I coauthored Chapter 2 with Janquel Acevedo, Emma Austen, Scott Griffiths, Emily Harris, Terry Kung, and Paolo Mancin, Chapter 3 with Emma Austen, Scott Griffiths, Hannah McCann, and August Parkinson, Chapter 4 with Scott Griffiths, Emily Harris, and Elise Kalokerinos, Chapter 5 with Emma Austen, Scott Griffiths, Emily Harris, and Jordan Hinton, and Elise Kalokerinos, and Chapter 6 with Emma Austen, Scott Griffiths, Emily Harris, Jordan Hinton, and Michael Thai. I have made minor changes to the language in these chapters for consistency: 'we' and 'our' are now 'I' and 'my', 'paper' or 'article' have been changed to 'chapter', and some pronouns have been changed to articles.

I received an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship stipend for the duration of my candidature. My studies were funded by National Health and Medical Research and Medical Research Future Fund grants awarded to Scott Griffiths.

Chapter 1: General Introduction

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:
Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss
Though winning near the goal yet, do not grieve;
She [sic] cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

–John Keats, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, 1819

What do we want, and why do we want it? What effect does being wanted versus unwanted have on us? Sexual desire ('wanting') is putatively a state that propels our most intense, vulnerable, and personal experiences: sex, pleasure, and intimacy, among others (Mitchell et al., 2014; Murray & Brotto, 2021; Weaver & Byers, 2022). It is most often considered deeply personal, beyond social or political analysis – "the private realm of desire is sacred and should be guarded against coercion and control" (Jordens & Griffiths, 2022, p. 369), a view repeated in both theoretical and empirical work on sexuality (Austen et al., 2022; C. S. Han & Choi, 2018; Srinivasan, 2021). Yet our sexual desires are already subject to coercion and control. Who is and is not a legitimate object of our sexual desires is informed and, at times, defined by systems of power.

Despite this, the majority of scientific work on sexual desire has focused on the function of the human body in response to sexual stimuli (e.g., Ågmo & Laan, 2024; Suschinsky et al., 2019; Timmers et al., 2023). Such work provides a partial and insufficient

view of the psychological and social function of sexual desire. By focusing on just the brain or body, sex researchers neglect how sexual desire is embedded within social practices (A. I. Green, 2008a, 2008b), is contingent upon historic and contemporary representations of people and bodies (Harrison, 2021; Strings, 2019), reflects and reinforces hegemonic modes of power, dominance, and discrimination (Connell, 2005; Hennen, 2008; Whitesel, 2014), and displaces our capacity to be active participants in sexuality's social construction (Butler, 1990, 1993).

Who is desired and who is not is a political question (Srinivasan, 2021). This much is revealed by an increasing volume of research which finds patterns of sexual subordination replicate politics at the level of sex. By far the best documented example is how hegemonic gender politics position men as dominant over women, a pattern which plays out within individual (hetero)sexual relations (Connell, 2005; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; MacKinnon, 1989; van Anders et al., 2022). Still other systems of political subordination are also reflected in individual people's sexual desires: racism (C. S. Han & Choi, 2018; Thai et al., 2019, 2025), anti-fat discrimination (Austen et al., 2022; Whitesel, 2014), and transphobia (Anzani et al., 2021; Tompkins, 2014), to name a few.

In this thesis, I describe how men who have sex with men define and construct sexual desirability. In doing so, I analyze how sexual desire is coordinated and made regular by forms of dominance that impinge on who and what we see as sexually desirable. By pointing out that desire, more often than not, follows the path of least resistance, flowing along lines produced through hegemonic beliefs about which bodies are deserving of sex, pleasure, and intimacy, I assume a necessarily ethical stance vis-à-vis the study of sexual desire. I highlight this to echo Connell's (2005, p. 44) point that "to acknowledge the inherently political character of our knowledge" is "an epistemological asset, not an embarrassment." Understanding how society reproduces discrimination in and via desire is to suggest that such

desires are contingent and open to critique (Srinivasan, 2019). By revealing their genealogy, we might conceive of desires that "cut against what politics has chosen for us, and choose" for ourselves (Srinivasan, 2021, p. 90).

In this introduction, I first present a critical genealogy of sexual desire. I show that current medical and psychological understandings of sexual desire have failed to account for its social organization. I then introduce sexual fields as a framework to connect the psychological experience of sexual desire to the social institutions thar pattern and regularize it. I then argue that social accounts of sexual desire take the psychological for granted. By focusing on the social organization of sexual desirability, existing literature has neglected how sexual status produces consequences for psychological and sexual health. I close this chapter by outlining the structure of this thesis, giving a brief overview of the empirical chapters and general discussion.

Sexual Desire and Its Limits

Classic models of the human sexual response cycle have ignored the role of sexual desire in human sexuality. The analysis of sexuality begins *in medias res*, with sex already underway. Masters and Johnson (1966) provide a seminal example. Despite identifying that Kinsey and colleagues' (1948, 1953) early sociological descriptions of sexual behavior were "not designed to interpret physiologic or psychologic response to sexual stimulation" (p. 3), Masters and Johnson only described how the human body physiologically responds to heterosexual sex or masturbation. Human sex, in their framework, progresses through four arbitrarily delimited phases: excitement, plateau, orgasm, and resolution. The distinctions between them were quantitative rather than qualitative. Excitement occurs in response to "effective sexual stimulation" (Masters & Johnson, 1966, p. 6), before sufficient tension, and so plateau, is reached. Continued stimulation results in the release of "vasoconcentration and myotonia" (p. 6) – the constriction and congestion of blood vessels and increased muscle

tension – and concomitant orgasm, after which sexual actors returned to their pre-sex baseline.

Noticing that earlier models elided the factors that lead to sex, revisions to the human sexual response cycle presented sexual desire as a preliminary and preceding stage (Levin, 2008). Clinical research, such as that by Kaplan (e.g., 1977, 1979, 1988), posited sexual desire as an internal drive that occurred immediately prior to excitement. Because they sought to import sexual desire into Master and Johnson's framework, early definitions of desire were physiological. Kaplan (1977, p. 3) defined "[s]exual desire [as] an appetite that has its locus in the brain" which causes sexual actors to "seek out, or become receptive to, sexual experiences" (H. S. Kaplan, 1979, p. 10). Sexual desire was unmoored from social processes, and wanting sex or sexual pleasure was localized within the body or brain. The relationship between one's sexual desire and the 'object' of one's desires – who one wanted – went untheorized and was assumed to be (clinically) irrelevant. Ignoring the object of sexual desire served to tacitly recapitulate hegemonic heterosexuality: by refusing to analyze the object of desire, early theorists assumed sexual desire occurred between men and women (a trend which continues to be reflected in recent work, e.g., Toates, 2020).

I want to briefly note the use of 'object' of desire. I use object here in the grammatical sense of subject-verb-object, rather than to suggest a process of objectification (cf. Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Scholars of objectification theory characterize objectification as the process by which certain people, typically women, are treated as only ever sources of others' sexual gratification, with no consideration of their own desires or sexual autonomy (Ward et al., 2023). While the distinction between object and objectified is porous, being an object of desire is not inherently problematic. In the sentence "I want you," the object of desire "you" is not rendered less human by being wanted. In fact, as it relates to men who

have sex with men, one's ability to engage with sexuality hinges on being seen, by oneself and others, as both a subject and object of desire (L. Green, 2000).

The elision of the object of desire is common across clinical and psychological definitions. Levine (2003, p. 280), for example, suggested "people feel their desire in their bodies," defining it as "the sum of the forces that lean us toward and push us away from sexual behavior" (emphasis changed from original). Sexual desire, then, is taken to originate from an internal locus, occur without reference to any particular object, and defined by the factors that inhibit and elicit sexual desire – that is, by sometimes contradictory impulses.

Definitions that figure desire as an internal drive, appetite, or impulse prohibit a complete understanding of who or what elicits sexual desire. Taking Kaplan's as representative of individualized definitions of sexual desire (e.g., Janssen et al., 2008; S. B. Levine, 2003; Mitchell et al., 2014; van Anders, 2015; van Anders et al., 2022), the object of sexual desire is only considered when that object is 'wrong.' Despite publishing six years after homosexuality was removed from the diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (Glassgold, 2022), Kaplan (1979, p. 67) identified men who have sex with men's sexual desires (and those of other queer people) as paraphilic:

> [E]rotic desire [that] is primarily or exclusively evoked by fetishistic objects, by sadomasochistic activities, by an animal, by cross-dressing, by exhibiting or looking, and also by *a partner of the same gender*, etc.—by any of the variations or paraphilias — is usually able to experience no or little desire in situations which most persons would find erotic, i.e., an intimate sexual relationship with *an attractive partner of the opposite gender*. (Emphasis added)

This represents the theorizing potential of internalized definitions of sexual desire: the object of sexual desire is presumed to be a member of the opposite sex, occur in the context of penetrative and (ideally) procreative sex, and occur within formal institutions that structure

gender relations (e.g., between members of the same generation, within a Christian marriage, etc.; Rubin, 1984). These definitions of sexual desire overwhelming reproduce cisheteronormativity (Mark & Lasslo, 2018). In other words, identifying sexual desire as the precursor to 'seeking out' or 'receiving' sex, sex is positioned as normatively heterosexual and penetrative. Sexual desire is only unproblematic if it occurs between cisheterosexual men and women. In so doing, the medical, scientific, and social discourses that produce and circulate these definitions of sexual desire exert a pathologizing and normalizing effect, which enacts and then hides a hegemonic sexual order (e.g., compulsory cisheterosexuality) and its influence on individual people's sexuality (Foucault, 1976; cf. van Anders et al., 2022).

By constructing sexual desire as something that bubbles up from a latent, internal drive, these accounts miss that certain people, but not others, elicit sexual desire. Regardless of gender, lay definitions yoke sexual desire to attraction. Participants in Mitchell and colleagues (2014) define sexual desire as occurring in relation to particular sexual objects, most commonly expressed as being attracted to someone. In this way, particular stimuli, a person, fantasy, or other sexually relevant material (e.g., porn; Gormezano et al., 2022), produces the "need to experience sexual satisfaction" (Mitchell et al., 2014, p. 22). Attraction is seen to determine sexual desire, to precede and produce it, just as sexual desire overlaps with physiological sexual response, namely sexual arousal (Graham et al., 2004; Janssen et al., 2008).

Incentive Motivation Model of Sexual Desire

The incentive motivation model of sexual desire posits that sexual desire (termed sexual motivation by Ågmo & Laan, 2023) occurs in response to sexual incentives (Ågmo & Laan, 2024; Toates, 2009). Sexually relevant stimuli activate a central motive state which stimulates sexual desire and arousal, coterminous psychological and physiological states

(Graham et al., 2004; Janssen et al., 2008; Mitchell et al., 2014). In this take, sexual desire acts physiologically to prepare the body to have sex but also psychologically by triggering approach behaviors: physical or social actions aimed to reduce the distance between oneself and the object of one's desire. Sexual desire is theorized to be produced from particular objects that are imbued with sexual relevancy. Thus, "'spontaneous' sexual desire does not exist" (Laan & Both, 2008, p. 510) – it occurs in response to a particular objects.

Yet the incentive motivation model individualizes the process by which certain objects take on their sexually incentivizing value. For Ågmo and Laan (2023) this process is cognitive, occurring as a result of reinforcement. Affective responses during and following sex and orgasm associate particular sexual objects with sexual pleasure. One comes to learn that particular sexual stimuli produce pleasure, increasing the likelihood of seeking out those stimuli in future. Who does and does not elicit sexual desire is a matter of individual history. Left unaccounted for in this model is the process by which certain people come to be sexually incentivizing through social processes.

Sexual desire is modulated by social systems. Certain objects come to take on a greater or lesser sexual value based on one's context. For example, within heterosexual dyads, women who perform more household labor on average than their men partners experience blunted sexual desire within their relationship (E. A. Harris et al., 2022). Relational elements affect desire, rendering particular persons as less sexually desirable – as less able to elicit sexual desire. Importantly, the dyadic relationship of individual men and women reproduce systemic gender relations which posit domestic labor as the responsibility of women (van Anders et al., 2022). The systemic is played out at the level of the individual.

Even when they theorize that sexual desire occurs in response to an object, psychological accounts of sexual desire are limited because they ignore the social organization of sexual desire (Laan et al., 2021). Sexual desire, considered as the motivating

precursor to human sexual behavior, is produced and organized by social and cultural practices. In the example above, heteronormativity is reproduced in individual people's sexual desires (E. A. Harris et al., 2022; van Anders et al., 2022). That is, gender relations affect the extent to which one experiences sexual desire for a particular person. Yet sexual desire is also an inculcated set of tastes; systems of power delimit who one feels sexual desire for – that is, who one finds sexually desirable – as well as how the extent to which one finds them sexually desirable. Rubin (1984, p. 149) identified this when she wrote:

> [S]exuality is constituted in society and history, not biologically ordained… [it] is not comprehensible in purely biological terms. Human organisms with human brains are necessary for human cultures, but no examination of the body or its parts can explain the nature and variety of human social systems. The belly's hunger gives no clues as to the complexities of cuisine. The body, the brain, the genitalia, and the capacity for language are necessary for human sexuality. But they do not determine its content, its experiences, or its institutional forms.

Cuisine is to food as the social organization of sexual desire is to who and what one finds attractive. Sexual desire is socially organized such that particular kinds of desires are encouraged or mandated while others are proscribed (Foucault, 1976). The clinical and psychological theories of sexual desire reviewed so far cannot account for this social dimension of sexual desire. Rather, I will now review how sociological accounts of sexuality provide a framework for understanding how systems of power impinge on sexual desire.

Sexual Fields and the Social Organization of Sexual Desirability

Sexual field theory defines sexual desire as a social, as well as cognitive and biological, phenomenon (A. I. Green, 2008a, 2008b; Martin & George, 2006). Social norms dictate how sexual desire is engaged with, including who is sexually desirable. According to sexual field theory, individual peoples' sexual desires becomes aggregated within specific

social nodes (e.g., particular bars, clubs, suburbs, websites, dating apps, etc.) to form a sexual field (A. I. Green, 2011), which extend individual desires into social space, collectively reinforcing particular modes of sexual desire (Hennen, 2014). Sexual desire is therefore mutually constituted by sexual actors and sexual fields: who is sexually desired becomes a social as well as psychological matter when it is externalized into a sexual field. As a result, some individual and collective sexual desires are foreclosed. Rather, sexual desire becomes oriented towards some people to the exclusion to others, structured by "a shared logic of desirability" (A. I. Green, 2014, p. 27). The degree to which one fits this logic of desirability garners them more or less sexual status, and therefore sexual capital. How this process occurs, how sexual desirability becomes socially organized as an enduring quality of a sexual field, has not been sufficiently investigated by sexual field theorists. I investigate the mechanism by which sexual desirability is constructed, structuring the individual sexual actors within a sexual field, in Chapter 3.

Green (2008b, p. 29) defined sexual capital as "the quality and quantity of attributes that an individual possesses, which elicit an erotic response in another." Sexual capital elicits sexual desire, so imbues a particular person or attribute with sexual relevancy (Ågmo & Laan, 2023), and is used interchangeably with sexual desirability by sexual fields theorists (e.g., A. I. Green, 2014). I distinguish loosely between sexual capital and sexual desirability by referring to sexual capital as the instantiation of sexual desirability within a sexual field, and sexual desirability as the instantiation of sexual capital vis-à-vis sexual desire. Thus, sexual capital is of interest when I discuss the accrual of particular bodies with the capacity to elicit sexual desire, and sexual desirability as social, psychological, and behavioral effects of that accrual. Defining sexual desirability is my aim in Chapter 2.

Sexual capital is accrued unequally based on the degree to which individual sexual actors fit a field's undergirding sexual logic. For example, in Green's (2008b) ethnography of

the racialized sexual hierarchy of New York City's gay ghettos suggested that within Chelsea and the West Village, Black men were disadvantaged in sexual fields structured around White desirability. Relegated to a lower sexual status, Black men reported being passed over as sexual partners in favor of White men. That is, Black men accrued less sexual capital than White men and, as a result, were less sexually desirable. Similar trends of sexual racism occur within many sexual fields available to men who have sex with men (Callander et al., 2015; C. S. Han & Choi, 2018; Jordens & Griffiths, 2022; J. G. Smith et al., 2022).

Rather than a static attribute, sexual desirability is dynamic and interactional. While certain people and traits are sexually marginalized – rendered undesirable and excluded – they can navigate sexual hierarchies by catering towards a field's logic, or by transplanting themselves to different sexual fields. In this way, sexual actors navigate sexual hierarchies. While Green (2008b) reported Black men were relegated to a lower average sexual status within their New York sexual field, they were able to draw on other dimensions to improve their sexual standing. In the White imaginary, Blackness as a marginalized masculinity is imbued with particular traits (Connell, 2005; Harrison, 2021; Stacey & Forbes, 2022). Black men could play to the sexual desires of White men by presenting particular kinds of racialized hypermasculinity (e.g., the Mandigo or thug; A. I. Green, 2011). Doing so accrued them greater sexual capital and sexual success with primarily White sexual partners. Playing into racialized fantasies developed and deployed by the hegemonic sexual actors within a sexual field is problematic, however, a point I return to below. I explore how sexual desirability effects the psychological and sexual health of men who have sex with men in Chapters 4, 5, and 6.

Similar to Black men's active contestation of their undesirability, Whitesel (2014) found that fat gay men challenged their sexual exclusion by forming new sexual fields. Fat is desexualized, and fat people are relegated to the sexual margins (Austen et al., 2022; Foster-

Gimbel & Engeln, 2016). Rather than playing the sexual field, fat gay men engage in the construction of new sexual fields. Whitesel contrasts fat gay men's experiences in 'mainstream' gay sexual fields, where the overwhelming shame and stigma of fat renders them marginal, to sexual fields structured around the sexualization of the fat body. In contrast, fat is not only accepted, but foregrounded as sexy, the fat body becomes centralized in the logic of desirability, and fat gay men enjoy a surplus of sexual capital.

At the Limits of Sexual Fields

Three related limitations of sexual field theory underpin this thesis. First, while the social organization of sexual desire orbits around sexual desirability, it is unclear what "quality and quantity of attributes" actual constitute sexual desirability (A. I. Green, 2008b, p. 29). A more specific definition is necessary to understand how sexual desirability is structured socially. Second, by focusing on how sexual desirability is produced within individual sexual fields, sexual field theorists neglect how desirability is structured at the level of society across sexual fields. How, and why, do some forms of sexual desirability become hegemonic, and so embedded in our social understanding of particular bodies? Relatedly, sexual field theory does not suggest how sexual desirability is constructed; how do individual sexual agents accept and resist normative sexual desirability? Third, sexual field theory has not addressed the effect normative sexual desirability has on individual people. How does being relegated to a low (versus high) sexual status influences one's view of themselves, their health, and their behavior?

What is Sexual Desirability? What constitutes sexual desirability is taken for granted in existing literature. Outside of sexual field theory, physical attractiveness is seen as synonymous with sexual desirability (Agocha & Cooper, 1999; Griffiths et al., 2017; Kleisner et al., 2024; Kowal et al., 2022; Pazhoohi et al., 2024). Despite this, non-appearance

qualities, such as personality, appear to contribute as much if not more to desirability than does bodily attractiveness (Sidari et al., 2021).

Sexual desirability is a form of social embodiment (D. Kaplan & Illouz, 2022): it relates both to a person's body, the kinds of physical features that body has (e.g., muscularity, height, weight, age), as well as the kind of affective stances taken with that body, its adornments, the way it is presented within social relations. Research showing that individual sexual actors can draw upon non-appearance related factors to play the sexual field, increasing their sexual status by way of their affect (Wade, 2021), suggests that defining sexual desirability as appearance alone is insufficient. As well, since multiple forms of sexual subordination may exert their influence on sexual desirability via different elements (e.g., Black men navigate both sexual racism vis-á-vis their appearance and their affective stances; A. I. Green, 2008b), understanding what those elements are is necessary to understand how they are shaped.

Hegemonic Forms of Desirability. Because of sexual field theory's focus on the behavior of individual sexual actors and their sexual fields, it fails to account for the how sexual (un)desirability produces effects between contexts and over time. Sexual fields are not just the product of bottom-up aggregation of sexual desires, but organized by general, regular inter-field patterns common between different sexual contexts (Phan Howard, 2023; J. G. Smith et al., 2018). The degree to which normative White supremacy affects the sexual logic of individual sexual fields is chalked up to the history of individual sexual actors: their immersion within White supremacist cultures, for example. In this sense, collective racist sexual desires are a result of individual people's sexual racism. Collective sexual racism then inculcates sexually racist preferences in individual sexual actors by orienting them towards White men over men of color or producing fetishistic stereotypes of the racial other. Questioning why some races, and not others, are desired results in tautology: individual

racialized desires are collectivized, collective racialized desire is individualized, *ad infinitum*. Exclusionary sexual desires are located within the individual person or their sexual field, prohibiting an analysis of the regular symbolic injustices that produce patterns of sexual desire across most or even all fields. In contrast to Green's (2008b) argument that sexual racism was immanent to the sexual actors of Chelsea and the West Village, sexual racism is reproduced across men who have sex with men's sexual fields, both on- (Callander et al., 2015; J. G. Smith et al., 2022) and off-line (Phan Howard, 2023).

Sexual fields are affected by the social context they sit within; how sexual desire is organized extends beyond individual sexual fields. Some desires are foreclosed at a social level which systemically produces certain forms of sexiness. In this way, sexual desirability is discursive, shaped through the production of knowledge, with some attributes are rendered sexually desirable at across levels of social organization. These discourses inflect our sexual desires with socially entrenched biases independent of any individual sexual field. Kaplan (1979, p. 69) provides an example of the ways in which sexual desire is discursively shaped when she remarked that it is irrational "that persons think they [their romantic partners] *should* be attracted [to them], *should* feel desire when it makes no sense" (original emphasis). She cited one such case:

> One such couple consisted of an extremely obese (350 lbs.-5'3" [approx. 158.76 kg, 160.02 cm]), unkempt man and his shy, petite wife. His complaint was that she did not desire him sexually. He was correct, but common sense precludes a diagnosis of pathologically inhibited desire in this case.

Anti-fatness is tacit yet unmistakable here: fat people are believed to be incapable of being desired; fat is assumed to be repulsive, a fact which is seen to be common sense. Kaplan positions her patient, a fat man, as an illogical object of desire for a "shy, petite wife," and conjures a comparison between his supposed demanding sexual and physical appetites and

her evident lack thereof. Contemporary sexual politics would suggest a similar level of ingrained anti-fat bias (e.g., Austen et al., 2022). Normative anti-fat bias is replicated through discourse. Its circulation positions fat bodies as illegitimate objects of desire. The sexual undesirability of the fat body is not tethered to any particular sexual field, but rather transcends them, and part of a recurrent and diffuse pattern of sexual desire (Gordon, 2021; Textor, 1999; Whitesel, 2014). Such sexual desires become expected, assumed to be ingrained in sexual fields (Flave-Novak & Coleman, 2019). As a result, we enter sexual fields with our desires already oriented. We never see bodies outside of their demarcated social location; "we never encounter the body unmediated by the meanings culture gives to it" (Rubin, 1984, p. 149).

Normative sexual desirability is not necessarily deterministic, however. While hegemonic desirability assumes that all sexual desire will flow from some sexual objects and not others at a macro-level, this does not necessarily mean that all sexual fields are beholden to these broader sexual logics. Just like sexual field theory's analysis of sexual desire as inherently bottom-up, a process of sexual desire is only ever top-down is equally insufficient. Individual sexual fields can resist and displace hegemonic forms of desirability, constructing new types of desire in its place. While fat people are relegated to the sexual margins, specific sexual fields crop up which resist the normative desexualization of the fat body (Edmonds & Zieff, 2015; McGlynn, 2023; Monaghan, 2005; Whitesel, 2014; Whitesel & Shuman, 2013). By centering sexual desire for the fat body, such communities' reveal the processes by which sexual desirability is socially constructed, and reveal how historically contingent schema of desirability can diverge from hegemonic forms (Srinivasan, 2019; Strings, 2019). I argue that we can learn how sexual desirability is socially constructed by looking at such divergent cases, which is my aim in Chapter 3.

The Consequences of Sexual Undesirability. Sexual field theorists have suggested that relegation to a higher or lower sexual status may, over time, negatively impact an individual sexual agent's psychological, social, and physical health (A. I. Green, 2014). Research suggests that sexual undesirability negatively affects how one feels about their body (Shepherd et al., 2023; Woertman & van den Brink, 2012), influences one's relationship with their gender (Amos & McCabe, 2016; Hattie et al., 2022), and one's sexual health decisions, such as whether or not to use condoms (Eleftheriou et al., 2016, 2019; A. I. Green, 2008b).

These effects make the psychological, sexual, and physical health of people rendered undesirable more precarious. For example, playing into White men's racialized fantasies relegates Black men to the status of sexual objects, negatively impacting their mental and social health (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Stacey & Forbes, 2022; Ward et al., 2023). Fetishistic desires are not the product of individual sexual fields – they represent how systemic sexual racism plays out regularly across micro-level interactions (J. G. Smith et al., 2018). By widening the scope of inquiry to include both "micro-level dynamics" and their stable effects across time, I aim to study "how low sexual status translates into exploitation, abuse, and public health threats" (Wade, 2022, p. 292).

Some forms of sexual desirability are relatively common, and so some sexual actors find themselves habitually relegated to a low sexual status. Extending the above example of Black men's fetishization, recent evidence suggests that race structures men who have sex with men's sexual desires across sexual fields: White men are positioned at the top of the sexual hierarchy, while men of color are stratified below them (Cascalheira & Smith, 2020; Thai et al., 2025). In aggregate, sexual undesirability increases men of color's risk for disorder eating (Le et al., 2023, 2023), social isolation (C. S. Han & Choi, 2018), and lower self-esteem (Thai, 2020). Similar trends are noted to affect other marginalized men who have

sex with men, such as fat, feminine, HIV-positive, and poor men, who face corresponding forms of sexual exclusion (Hammack et al., 2022).

While sexual capital hinges to some degree on the sexual field (A. I. Green, 2011, 2014), sexual status remains relatively continuous across multiple contexts. Relegation to a sexual status produces enduring psychological and behavioral effects over time. Existing research has looked at how manifestations of specific sexual marginalizations effect specific outcomes such as internalized anti-fat beliefs, subjective social exclusion, and self-esteem (Foster-Gimbel & Engeln, 2016; Pachankis et al., 2020; Thai, 2020). How sexual undesirability in particular effects psychological and behavioral outcomes remains an open question. What is the effect of regular, chronic (un)desirability? How does being relegated to the sexual center versus the margins influence one's self-perception? How do social norms of desire become embedded in one's cognitions and behavior? I aim to provide inroads into answer these questions in Chapters 4, 5, and 6.

Why Focus on Men Who Have Sex with Men?

I primarily focus on men who have sex with men throughout this thesis. There are two exceptions. First, a minority of participants in Chapters 4 and 5 were trans women and non-binary people recruited through Grindr (hence the use of 'Grindr users' in these chapters). Second, in Chapter 6, I recruited women who have sex with men (hence 'people who have sex with men' in this chapter), the vast majority are men who have sex with men. My choice to focus on men who have sex with men was a pragmatic rather than necessary.

Men who have sex with men have no special connection to sexual desirability. Everyone's sexual desires are inflected with systemic oppression, queer or not. In contrast to existing literature that assumes that sexual stratification poses a unique problem among men who have sex with men (e.g., Bonell et al., 2023), I propose that the position that men who have sex with men take vis-à-vis sexual desirability is a discursive one. There is an existing

bedrock of scientific literature on men who have sex with men's sexual desires because their desires have been figured as a 'problem' requiring scientific attention (Foucault, 1976). I take advantage of this bedrock in this thesis.

Men who have sex with men are also a useful population to study because the majority of theoretical work I make use of in this thesis was based on analyses of their communities. For instance, the first, formal articulation of sexual field theory was proposed on the basis of the study of gay men (A. I. Green, 2008b). A number of foundational studies on the social organization of desire are based on samples of men who have sex with men (A. I. Green, 2008b; Hennen, 2008; Humphreys, 1970; M. P. Levine & Kimmel, 1998), and a flourishing body of literature exists studying the specific effects of hierarchies of desirability among gay men's communities (Austen et al., 2022; Hammack et al., 2022; C. S. Han & Choi, 2018; Pachankis et al., 2020).

The structures of sexual desirability among men who have sex with men are also easier to study because they are not bifurcated by gender. Sexual desirability is not horizontally stratified between actors of different genders in gay sexual fields, as is the case in heterosexual sexual fields where women desire certain things in men that men do not necessarily desire in women, and vice versa (A. I. Green, 2014; e.g., see Pazhoohi et al., 2024; and Sidari et al., 2021). For example, despite their relegation to a lower hierarchical position, Asian men (C. S. Han & Choi, 2018) or fat men (Austen et al., 2022) are stratified by a common hierarchy to White and lean men, respectively.

Lastly, as a gay man, I have a particular epistemic privilege to understand the structures of sexual desire and desirability among men who have sex with men (Harding, 1992; Savolainen et al., 2023). This access to knowledge about other men who have sex with men is not universal: as a White man, I do not have epistemic privilege to understand

desirability from the eyes of an Asian man, for example. But, as Srinivasan (2019, p. 127) reminds us

> Each of us finds himself [sic] not just already in the world, but already in a particular world: a particular moment in history, a particular culture, a particular family, a particular language, a particular body… our representations of the world – our beliefs, values, and concepts – are radically shaped by these contingent facts…

I would add that our epistemological stances, and so our ability to produce particular kinds of knowledge, are contingent upon them, as well. I acknowledge that my interest in sexual desire and desirability is owed to the contingent facts of my social location. For these reasons, I focus on men who have sex with men.

Thesis Research Questions and Aims

At the outset of this introduction, I asked what do we want, and why do we want it? And what effect does being wanted versus unwanted have? Put formally, in this thesis, I address three overarching research questions: (1) what do men who have sex with men sexually desire? (2) what social processes shape these sexual desires? (3) what effect does sexual (un)desirability have on men who have sex with men? Dovetailing these theoretical threads, in this thesis I aimed is to analyze sexual desirability. I aimed to examine how men who have sex with men define sexual desirability, the processes by which men who have sex with men construct some, and not others, as sexually desirable, and to outline some of the consequences that sexual desirability versus undesirability have on men who have sex with men's psychological and sexual health. Below, I provide the overall structure of my thesis, giving a brief introduction to my five empirical chapters and the concluding general discussion.

Thesis Structure

This is a thesis with publication. Chapters 2 to 6 are all stand-alone empirical studies that are either published, soon-to-be published, or under review at the time of writing. At the beginning of each chapter is a literature review, followed by the specific method, results, and discussion related to a specific research question. In this way, this thesis presents a central object, sexual desirability, and a series of methodological diverticula aimed at exploring its definition (Chapter 2), the social processes that produce norms of sexual desirability (Chapter 3), and to respond to Green's (2014) call to study how sexual desirability, and especially sexual undesirability, affects psychological and sexual health (Chapters 4, 5, and 6). At the end, I review the findings and present some general conclusions about sexual desirability and offer avenues for future research.

Chapter 2. To answer the question "what do men who have sex with men sexually desire?" suggests two separate questions. First, what attributes are included within the construct of sexual desirability; what do men who have sex with men count as "stimuli with sexual relevancy" (Ågmo & Laan, 2023, p. 969). Green's (2008b, p. 29) definition of sexual desirability as "the quality and quantity of attributes that an individual possesses, which elicit an erotic response in another" is vague. What qualities, and in want quantities, constitute sexual desirability? As sexual desire is not spontaneous (Laan & Both, 2008), the attributes which elicit sexual desire are not random. As with sexual desire (Mitchell et al., 2014), expert definitions of sexual desirability should be grounded in the experience of desirability by individual sexual actors.

Second, how do some people and attributes come to be sexually desirable, and others do not? Sexual desirability appears to be inflected by systems of gender (Connell, 2005; Hennen, 2008), sexual racism (Jordens & Griffiths, 2022) and weight stigma (Austen et al., 2022), among others. Yet, how desirability becomes inured to systems of power, dominance, and discrimination remains unclear.

In Chapter 2, following a similar tradition in studies on sexual desire and arousal (Graham et al., 2004; Janssen et al., 2008; Mitchell et al., 2014), I present an inductive definition of sexual desirability based on interviews with men who have sex with men. By purposively sampling interviewees based on race and body size, I present an analysis of how sexual desirability is shaped by systems of power, grounding this in the everyday experiences of my interviewee's sexual desires.

Chapter 3. Having articulated a definition of sexual desirability in Chapter 2 and giving an overview of how normative sexual desirability is constructed, Chapter 3 investigates how particular norms of sexual desirability become established within a sexual field, using the Melbourne bear community as an example. Bears are a subculture of men who have sex with men that are typically fatter, hairier, and older than their 'mainstream' counterparts (Franklin et al., 2022; Hennen, 2008).

While the social organization of sexual desire assumes that individual sexual actors' sexual desires are aggregated within a social site to form a sexual field, the actual process by which norms of sexual desire are produced remains unaccounted for. In asking, "why do we want what we want?", I mean to examine the specific process by which sexual desirability is socially constructed. Green (2014, p. 56) suggested:

> A sexual field emerges when a subset of actors with potential romantic or sexual interests orient themselves towards one another according to a logic of desirability imminent in their collective relations and this logic produces … a system of stratification.

In Green's view, sexual desirability is only produced bottom-up through the clustering of individual sexual actors' desires within a particular field. Yet patterns of normative sexual desirability extend across sexual fields and inflect individual people's sexual desires with logics espoused by systems of political domination. One such system relevant to bears'

sexual desirability is anti-fat bias, the medical, social, and psychological denigration of fat and fat people (Austen et al., 2022; Whitesel, 2014).

Bear communities both form in response to shared stigma and to express a shared desire for the fat, hairy, and older body (Hennen, 2005). In so doing, bears construct norms of sexual desirability that conflict with the hegemonic standards of the gay community: desire for predominately young, muscular, smooth, and White cis men (Austen et al., 2022; Whitesel, 2014). What social processes are used to construct these conflicting norms? What effect does being rendered sexually desirable have on bears? I address these questions in Chapter 3 using ethnographic fieldwork and interviews.

Chapter 4. Beginning in Chapter 4, I present three studies that are a response to Green's (2014, p. 51) call to action to explore the "implication[s] of low sexual status" which "over time, can produce enduring psychological states" and, as I will suggest, behaviors. In Chapter 4, I investigate the relationship between sexual desirability and body satisfaction – the extent to which one likes their body shape, weight, and appearance. Body image, one's thoughts, feelings, and attitudes towards one's own body, has a relationship to sexual desirability insofar as their overlap is arguably considerable. That is, whether one feels sexy also speaks to the degree to which they feel happy with their body. Sexual discourses also assign value to particular kinds of bodies based on their conformity to normative appearances. Fatness, for example, is ugly and unsexy; fat people are expected to feel unhappy with their bodies as a result (Austen & Griffiths, 2022).

Chapter 5. Gender expression, whether one acts and feels masculine or feminine, appears to be related to how sexually desirable others are (Cascalheira & Smith, 2020; Sánchez & Vilain, 2012; Thai et al., 2025; Townsend & Levy, 1990). Chapter 5 investigates the relationship between one's self-view of their gender expression and sexual desirability. As well, gender norms deviate between subcultures of men who have sex with men (Hennen,

2008). Gay subcultures, groups organized around shared experiences of marginalization, aesthetics, or sexual practices, also articulate collective gender practices. As a result, gender's relationship to sexual desirability is likely influenced by hegemonic gender in which masculinity subordinates femininity (Connell, 2005; Hoskin, 2020), as well as specific communities' gender norms (e.g., bears, twinks, fat gay men, etc.).

Chapter 6. Sexual actors engage in numerous strategies to navigate hierarchies of sexual desirability. What kinds of boundaries would one allow to be violated to secure more sexually desirable partner? One such boundary is condom use (Eleftheriou et al., 2016, 2019; A. I. Green, 2008b; Thai & Barlow, 2019). In Chapter 6, I experimentally test whether one's intention to use condoms during casual sex is influenced by the relative sexual desirability between oneself and their partner. I draw upon three samples to investigate this effect: undergraduate students who are predominately women who have sex with men, a mixed gender sample of people who have sex with men, and a sample from Grindr who are predominately men who have sex with men. In doing so, I investigate whether sexual desirability has a unique impact among men who have sex with men: does sexual desirability play a unique role in men who have sex with men's sexual lives, or does this also extend to women who have sex with men? If not, how does the role differ between men and women who have sex with men; how might sexual desirability be different for different sexual communities, especially when they make similar sexual health decisions?

Chapter 7. In the final chapter, I summarize the findings of my thesis and offer some general theoretical and practical implications for future research on sexual desirability. Drawing primarily on my findings in Chapters 2 and 3, I suggest that sexual desirability is performative (Austin, 1962; Butler, 1990, 1993, 1997). Rather than being a natural quality of an individual person's body, sexual desirability appears to be a product of participation within a sexual field. In general, some bodies are not allowed to be sexy because the context

renders their attempts at being sexy failures. When previously unsexy bodies have access to contexts that allow them to be sexy, they become the object of sexual desirability. This radical change between contexts calls for a re-evaluation of the attractiveness as a natural, objective characteristic. Drawing on findings across each of my empirical chapters, I suggest that sexual desirability renders some lives less liveable, by making them intolerable to live. Who is sexually desirable in part defines who is considered fully human; undesirable and fetishized people, in contrast, experience great social, psychological, and physical precarity. I conclude by suggesting that future research should examine how sexual desirability is constructed during the development of particular sexual fields and further explore my proposed definition of sexual desirability.

Chapter 2: How do Men Who Have Sex with Men Define Sexual Desirability?

What do we desire, and why do we desire it? Sexual desire is responsive (Mitchell et al., 2014), occurring in relation to specific "sexual incentive stimuli" (Ågmo & Laan, 2023, p. 975), and functions to prepare the body for sex, pleasure, and orgasm. Not all stimuli are equal, however: some, but not others, elicit our sexual interest (Jordens & Griffiths, 2022; Pazhoohi et al., 2024; Thai et al., 2025; van Anders, 2015). As Laan and Both (2008, p. 511) suggest, "there is no such thing as 'spontaneous sexual desire.'" What we find sexually desirable – what elicits our sexual desires – is patterned. These patterns of desirability are not only individual but reflect the role that systems of discrimination play in our preferences. An existing body of research has suggested this is the case for men who have sex with men (Austen et al., 2022; Hammack et al., 2022; C. S. Han & Choi, 2018). Yet, despite its widespread use within empirical sex research (e.g., Murray & Brotto, 2021; Phan Howard, 2023; Wade, 2021), sexual desirability remains poorly defined, and how its relates to systemic discrimination has not been investigated. Here, I look at how men who have sex with men define sexual desirability. I ask: what is it men who have sex with men desire? Why do they desire it? And what social and political forces influence these desires?

Sexual Desire and Desirability

Sexual desire drives one towards sex and sexual pleasure (Graham et al., 2004; Janssen et al., 2008; Murray & Brotto, 2021; Weaver & Byers, 2022). Early definitions of sexual desire view it as an appetite similar to hunger (H. S. Kaplan, 1977, 1979, 1988; S. B. Levine, 2003). Sexual desire is seen as arising from within individual people, causing them to "seek out, or become receptive to, sexual experiences" (H. S. Kaplan, 1979, p. 10). These definitions divorce sexual desire from sexual desirability, and view sex as a spontaneous behavior. In contrast, more recent empirically derived definitions highlight how sexual desire follows from specific objects of desire (Mitchell et al., 2014).

Sexual desire is elicited by sexually relevant stimuli (Ågmo & Laan, 2023; Toates, 2009). What counts as sexually relevant is broad, referring to people, attributes, and sex acts, as well as their representations, such in porn and sexual fantasy (Gormezano et al., 2022). Per the incentive motivation model, one's response to stimuli functions to prepare the body for sex and motivate approach behaviors toward the object of one's desire (Ågmo & Laan, 2024). Who and what becomes sexually relevant is seen as a cognitive process: an object's sexual relevancy is positively reinforced by sexual pleasure and orgasm. Sexual desirability is considered a conditioned response. Yet how we learn who and what is sexually desirable is also vicarious, delimited by political, cultural, and social forces operating outside of sex (Fahs & Swank, 2023; Hennen, 2008, 2014; Kowal et al., 2022).

Sexual field theory (A. I. Green, 2008a, 2008b, 2011; Martin & George, 2006) provides a framework to understand how sexual desirability is produced by both social and psychological forces. Sexual actor's sexual desires are collectively organized within specific social nodes (e.g., bars, clubs, dating apps, college campuses, etc.; Wade, 2021). This collectivization produces a sexual field where sexual actor's desires are aggregated, and so structured around an undergirding sexual logic. In turn, a group's sexual desires become oriented toward certain objects to the exclusion of others. Individual sexual actors' sexual success depends on how well they fit a field's logic, known as their "structures of desire," (A. I. Green, 2008b, p. 30). One becomes desirable if they look and act in line with the expectations of their sexual field. For instance, while a hairless, lean, young man (a twink; Fogarty & Walker, 2022) might find ample sexual opportunities in a 'mainstream' gay nightclub, he would likely be disadvantaged at a leather bar, where older, hairier, and more muscular men are the sexual norm (A. I. Green, 2008b; Hennen, 2008). That is, he accrues more sexual capital in one sexual field and less in the other.

Sexual Capital as Sexual Desirability

Green (2008b, p. 29) defined sexual capital as "the quality or quantity of attributes that an individual possesses, which elicit an erotic response in another." Sexual capital is synonymous with sexual desirability, and used interchangeably by sexual field theorists (e.g., A. I. Green, 2014; D. Kaplan & Illouz, 2022). Sexual capital, and thus sexual desirability, is accrued based on how well one fits a sexual field's sexual logic. Sexual actors are stratified across tiers of desirability depending on this level of fit as a result. Green's definition of sexual desirability is flexible, applicable across a range of sexual fields, but lacks specificity. Which attributes, with what qualities, and in what quantities, constitute sexual desirability?

Sexual desirability is assumed to be synonymous with appearance (M. F. Braun & Bryan, 2006; Cascalheira & Smith, 2020; Kleisner et al., 2024; Pazhoohi et al., 2024). The degree to which one looks attractive is seen as the only index of one's sexual desirability. Yet appearance is only one within an array of traits that influences who is sexually desirable. Interactional factors such as personality appear to be as important to sexual desirability if not more so than appearance (Sidari et al., 2021). Affect, how one displays particular kinds of emotions, also plays into the degree to which one is sexually desirable. For example, in her study of casual sex among US college students, Wade (2021) found sexual desirability was predicated on playing it cool, a deliberate display of aloofness. Whether sexual desirability is composed of only appearance and affect, however, is unclear.

Hegemonic Sexual Desirability

Why is it that some are seen as sexually desirable, while others are not? While Green (2008b) argued that sexual capital has no hegemonic forms, there appears to be systematic inequalities in who is and is not sexually desirable (e.g., J. G. Smith et al., 2018). Hegemonic forms of sexual desirability are reproduced across sexual fields, rendering groups of people as sexually desirable or undesirable. As I outline in Chapter 1, I focus on men who have sex with men because recent work has identified how sexual desirability among men who have

sex with men's communities is stratified along lines of social marginality (e.g., Foster-Gimbel & Engeln, 2016; Hammack et al., 2022; and Pachankis et al., 2020). To wit, "the ideal body for gay men: [is] a body that is white, muscular, and lean" (Austen et al., 2022, p. 163). Sexual desirability appears structured around forms of normative desirability which lead to the sexual marginalization of groups of men, namely men of color[1] and fat[2] men (C. S. Han & Choi, 2018; Whitesel, 2014).

Hegemonic desirability affects who and what is sexually desired outside of appearance alone. Social oppression may render some sexually undesirable because of its effect on other dimensions of sexual desirability. For example, Green (2008b) found that Black men were rendered less sexually desirable based on their appearance within New York City's gay sexual fields. Despite this, he found that his Black informants could assume different affective stances, such as exaggerating their masculinity, to attract White men's sexual desires. Hegemonic desirability shaped desire for Black appearances and affects differently (Stacey & Forbes, 2022). While Black men's appearance was desexualized, their affect was hypersexualized. Racist norms of sexual desirability produce different effects based on what attribute of sexual desirability they impact. Understanding what attributes sexual desirability is composed of is necessary to understand how hegemonic desirability influences who is and is not desired.

Sexual Desirability and Health

Hegemonic desirability reproduces forms of political, cultural, and social inequality in the sexual arena. In doing so, it relegates some to the status of undesirable and curtails their access to sex, romance, and intimacy (A. I. Green, 2014; Wade, 2022). The effects on social,

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[1] I use the term 'men of color' to refer to non-White men. As it relates to our participants, I use men of color to refer to men from Aboriginal, East, South-East, and South Asian, Middle Eastern, Pacific Islander, and South American racial and ethnic backgrounds.

[2] I use fat as a neutral descriptor in place of euphemistic (e.g., 'larger') or stigmatizing language (e.g., obese; Gordon, 2021).

psychological, and sexual health may be profound. For example, to mitigate sexual undesirability, some may be more likely to accept condomless sex with partners from a higher sexual status (Eleftheriou et al., 2016, 2019; A. I. Green, 2008b, 2011). In doing so, they risk exposure to sexually transmitted infection or human immunodeficiency virus seroconversion. Playing into fetishistic norms articulated by hegemonic sexual desirability may lead to fetishization. Black men report that the expectation to perform racialized hypermasculinity for White partners stymies social and sexual intimacy (Anzani et al., 2021; Stacey & Forbes, 2022; Ward et al., 2023). In turn, chronic sexual undesirability may be psychologically harmful, producing poorer self-esteem (Thai, 2020), body image (Amos & McCabe, 2016), relationship satisfaction (Murray & Brotto, 2021; Weaver & Byers, 2022), among other indices of mental health.

The Current Study

Using reflexive thematic analysis (V. Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2022a), I investigated how men who have sex with men in Australia define sexual desirability, and how sexual desirability is shaped by social and political forces. I asked: "how do men who have sex with men define sexual desirability?" This suggested two subordinate questions. First, "what attributes do men who have sex with men consider as relevant to sexual desirability?" That is, what do men who have sex with men see as sexually relevant stimuli. Second, "why do some of these attributes come to elicit men who have sex with men's sexual desires, while others do not?" That is, how does hegemonic sexual desirability shape individual men who have sex with men's sexual desires?

Method

Ethics and Open Science

I received ethics approval from the University of Melbourne (25620). My orientation to reflexive thematic analysis was preregistered on the Open Science Framework (OSF),

where I have made 21 of the 24 (87.50%) of the analyzed de-identified transcripts publicly available with participants' consent.

Procedure

Recruitment

I purposively sampled my interviewees based on race, ethnicity, and body shape and size. My approach was informed by intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) and standpoint epistemology (Harding, 1992, 2010). Existing work (e.g., Austen et al., 2022; and C. S. Han & Choi, 2018) suggests men who have sex with men's concept of who is and is not sexually desirable is organized around race and ethnicity and body shape and size. I theorized that men with different at different intersections of these axes would have unique insights ("epistemic privilege"; Savolainen et al., 2023, p. 1332) into sexual desirability unavailable to others (Srinivasan, 2019). I note that my approach sought to analyze how marginalization in general influences sexual desirability. I did not look at how specific intersections of race and body size figure into sexual desirability. For example, how fat Asian men specifically define sexual desirability is a matter for future research.

I recruited participants from Grindr, a gay dating and hookup app, and social media (e.g., Twitter/X, Instagram) via a Qualtrics survey. They were eligible if they were over 18 years of age, lived in Australia, were comfortable talking in English for at least 30 minutes, and did not have a current mental health diagnosis. After screening for eligibility, participants self-reported their race and ethnicity, body shape and size, gender and sexual identity, age, and subjective socioeconomic status. I asked participants to self-report their subjective socioeconomic status using the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status (Adler et al., 2000). This scale asks respondents to place themselves on a 10-point scale depicted as a ladder where lower rungs (i.e., scores approaching 1) represent less access to money, education, and employment, and vice versa for higher rungs (i.e., scores approaching 10).

I used the data on race and ethnicity, and body shape and size, to select a diverse subset of respondents to invite to be interviewed. Due to a large volume of fraudulent submissions from my social media advertisements, I manually selected authentic respondents to be interviewed.

Interviews

I conducted all of the interviews. The interviews were semi-structured and explored participants' their definitions of sexual desirability, what they saw as sexually (un)desirable, their dating and sex lives, and their views on attractiveness. I approached interviews using a schedule of questions (available on the OSF) but also explored ideas and topics raised spontaneously during interviews. The interviews ranged between 47.10 and 106.85 minutes long (M = 74.53, SD = 15.27).

Participants

Sample Size Justification

I used an information power approach in my sample size determination (Malterud et al., 2016). I anticipated recruiting 25 to 30 participants because (i) my study's aims were broad, (ii) reflexive thematic analysis (my chosen analytic method) is cross-case (i.e., it looks for "pattern[s] of shared meaning evident across responses"; V. Braun & Clarke, 2022a, p. 7), and (iii) I was a novice qualitative interviewer. The rapport between participants and the interviewer was strong, perhaps because I was a gay man with similar demographics and lived experiences to the interviewees. I decided the data was sufficiently detailed after 25 interviews and concluded data collection.

Interviewees

I recruited interviewees between 23 and 26 May 2023. I received a total of 674 submissions to the pre-screening survey, from which I interviewed 25 Australian men who have sex with men between May and July 2023. Five (20%) interviews were conducted in

person at the Melbourne School of Psychological Sciences, with the remainder (n = 20, 80%) conducted online via Zoom. I excluded one interviewee's transcript from the analysis because I suspected them of providing inauthentic[3] data (see Drysdale et al., 2023). My final analysis was based on the remaining 24 transcripts. I summarize my interviewees' demographics in Table 1. Interviewees reported a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds and described their bodies with a variety of labels. Participants ranged from 21 to 64 years old. Participants' appraisal of their subjective socioeconomic status suggested they came from a range of social backgrounds.

Table 1

Interviewee Demographics

Variable		*n*	Percent
Race	Aboriginal	3	12.50
	East and Southeast Asian	5	20.83
	Middle Eastern or North African	1	4.17
	Pacific Islander	2	8.33
	South American	4	16.67
	South Asian	3	12.50
	White	8	33.33
Body shape and size	Athletic	2	8.33
	Average	9	37.5

[3] This interviewee gave conflicting information in the demographics survey and interview. For example, interactions following the interview suggested that the participant did not live in Australia despite reporting so in the screening survey.

Variable		*n*	Percent
	Fat	1	4.17
	Lean	1	4.17
	Muscular	5	20.83
	Overweight	2	8.33
	Slim	3	12.50
	Stocky	1	4.17
Gender	Cis	23	95.83
	Trans	1	4.17
Sexuality	Gay	21	87.50
	Bisexual	3	12.50

		Range	
	M (*SD*)	Min	Max
Age	35.50 (10.75)	21	64
Subjective socioeconomic status	6.29 (1.76)	2	9

Note. Participants could provide multiple responses for race and ethnicity and body shape and size. Mean is denoted by *M* and standard deviation by *SD*.

While my sample was diverse, I did not interview any Black men and interviewed only one North African or Middle Eastern man. I received only one expression of interest from a Black gay man, who could not be reached to organize an interview. I also received only two expressions of interest from North African or Middle Eastern men. As a result, my analysis does not capture Black and Arab Australian gay men's experiences. Previous research in Grindr users in Australia (N = 2,177; Callander et al., 2015) found that 67.7% of

recruited users were White, 13.8% were East Asian, 2.89% were South Asian, 1.8% were Latino, 1.4% were Middle Eastern, and 0.3% were Black (with no data reported for Aboriginals or Torres Strait Islander users). The under-representation of North African or Middle Eastern and Black man in my interviews may be a result of their under-representation on Grindr in Australia.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Interviewer Positionality

As the study's interviewer and coder, my positionality shaped the study's design, data collection, analysis. I am an Australian White gay man with a straight-sized body (i.e., is not fat; Gordon, 2021). While I interviewed other men who have sex with men 'within difference,' my race and body shape give me, much like my interviewees, epistemic privilege to a narrow range of knowledge relevant to sexual desirability. I am familiar with how race and body shape affect sexual desirability through research and discussions with other men who have sex with men but have never experienced racism or anti-fat bias in the community. As a result, my analysis will be to some degree insensitive to my participants' experiences of marginalization, especially regarding race and ethnicity (V. Braun & Clarke, 2022a; Savolainen et al., 2023). When interviewing 'across difference', participants may have been hesitant to disclose experiences of sexual racism or anti-fat bias to me, as someone with social privilege on these axes, limiting the scope of the data. Conversely, participants may also have been more willing to share what they saw as prejudicial sexual desires, especially ones informed by racism or anti-fat bias, because I was White and straight-sized. They may not have done so with an interview who was non-White or fat for fear of insulting them.

I also acknowledge the positionality of the senior author for this chapter, Emma Austen, who assisted in refining the initial set of themes. She is a White, straight-sized woman. Although she has authored several papers on men who have sex with men's body

image, including one qualitative investigation of anti-fat bias among men who have sex with men, she does not have lived experience on these topics. Her positionality precludes her from understanding to the fullest extent how different systems of oppression (e.g., racism, anti-fat bias, homophobia) intersect to shape the lived experiences of men who have sex with men.

Analysis Stages

I analyzed my data using reflexive thematic analysis (V. Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022a, 2022b). My analysis has six stages: (1) data familiarization, (2) initial coding, (3) initial theme development, (4) reviewing initial themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the written report.

Data familiarization began during transcription. I developed an orthographic transcription key (available on the OSF) and transcribed 12 of 25 transcripts. Due to time constraints, a professional transcription service transcribed the remaining 13 interviews. I then checked all transcripts for consistency by reading them alongside the interview recording.

I randomized the order in which the transcripts were coded to help minimize any order effect on the analytic process (V. Braun & Clarke, 2022b). All coding was done in NVivo (Version R1/2020). After 12 of 24 were coded, I condensed the number of codes by grouping codes reflecting the same underlying concept into a single code.

After coding, I produced initial themes by grouping codes around a "central organizing concept" (V. Braun & Clarke, 2022b p. 89). I then met with the senior author to review these themes, before clarifying and editing the themes' names and definitions. After completing the first draft of the reflexive thematic analysis, I invited feedback from the rest of the research team, who approached the research question from different positions of gender, race, body shape, and expert knowledge. The themes were then finalized in the final write-up.

Orientation to Reflexive Thematic Analysis

My reflexive thematic analysis drew upon sexual field theory (A. I. Green, 2008b, 2008a, 2011). I viewed sexual desire and desirability as a social and psychological process. Sexual desire is individual, driving sexual behavior responsive to particular sexual objects. But which objects become sexually relevant is a product of one's own and others' social position. Who and what men who have sex with men desire is oriented by their lived experiences, their sexual communities, and the systems of power that structure their political and social backdrop (Foucault, 1976; Susen, 2022). Yet sexual fields are also a product of their participants (Hennen, 2014; Wade, 2022). While hegemonic forms of desirability relegate disproportionate attractiveness onto masculine, muscular, White men, men who have sex with men individually and collectively contest and resist this normative desirability and participate in shaping new forms.

Because sexual actors are aware of their own and others' positions within their sexual fields (Martin & George, 2006), I focused on participants' semantic and latent meanings. Certain attributes are known by individual sexual actors to be sexy. Why some attributes, and not others, become sexy in the first place is underpinned by forces which are embedded within men who have sex with men's desires, but not necessarily explicit. Muscles are sexy, for instance, and suggest that appearance is an important element in defining desirability. But the desire for muscles is underpinned by anti-fat bias which relegates unmuscular men to lower sexual statuses (Austen et al., 2022).

Results and Discussion

I generated two themes with accompanying subthemes (see Table 2 for theme definitions and example quotes): (1) What sexual desirability is and what it is not; (2) Sexual desirability is shaped by power, dominance, and discrimination.

Table 2

Overview of Themes, Theme and Subtheme Definitions, and Example Quotes

Theme and subtheme	Definition	Example Quote
What sexual desirability is and what it is not	Sexual desirability is not one thing. Interviewees defined it as a complex and dynamic interplay of different dimensions, social and cultural contexts, and lived experiences.	"[A] toned body, I find that attractive. … But yeah, yeah it's not that one specific thing, though. … There's the other part of it, which is the emotional connection. And then how intelligent they are, and whether I feel like I can have a conversation with them. 'Cause there's so many things that people say that makes you feel more attracted to them, right? [And] their manners." (Luca[4], South American, athletic/toned/twink)
Sexual desirability is multidimensional	Sexual desirability is composed of the interlocking factors of appearance, affect, and behavior. These aspects of sexual desirability overlap to inform who is and is not seen as desirable, and who does and does not feel desirable.	"I've hooked up with many different body types… I can definitely look at someone and be like "they're good looking," like in my eyes they're good looking and they're attractive. But I wouldn't actually hook-up with them based on just that… I need to have some kind of conversation [with a hook-up], I need to know that they're gonna give a good time." (Bartholomew, East Asian, average/chubby/overweight)
Sexual desirability is dynamic	What one finds sexually desirable, and whether one sees themselves as sexually desirable, depends on social interactions and one's physical, digital, and cultural environment.	"It [what makes him feel desirable] will depend. For me, what I'm into with whoever is whatever that person's is into with regard to making them feel attractive, attracted to me… for us to have fun and a good time." (Agog, Pacific Islander, average)
Sexual desirability is not sexual objectification or fetishization	Sexual desirability is not the same as sexual objectification or sexual fetishization. Rather, sexual desirability is consensual, pleasurable, and typified by non-fungibility (i.e., one	"I did have a hook-up over the weekend, and I felt sexually desirable… because of like the chemistry, I guess… It was an encounter of a sexual nature [he laughed]. I mean, I found them attractive… there was a lot of eye contact, I didn't feel like they were… feeling [I was] somebody else… I've

[4] All interviewees' names are pseudonyms.

Theme and subtheme	Definition	Example Quote
	cannot be exchanged for someone with similar traits).	had sex before where you feel like both of you are just sort of going through the motions, and it doesn't really matter about your face and that or what your individual characteristics [are], I suppose. Whereas, with this person, I felt [desirable] because of the eye contact… I was [desired] as a person." (Zachariah, White, slim)
Sexual desirability is shaped by power, dominance, and discrimination	Systems of power, dominance, and discrimination inform day-to-day interactions, experiences of systemic, institutional, and interpersonal discrimination which, alongside the psychological processes that they produce, all shape sexual desirability.	"Sexual desirability is completely– it's impossible to disentangle from social and economic and political context … [it's influenced by] the social environment and the representational field that we're living in… what we're told is a good body or an attractive person… I think money and class has a huge role to play….. size, body size, is really big… and gender norms and race…" (Julian, Aboriginal, chubby/muscular/stocky)

What Sexual Desirability Is and What It Is Not

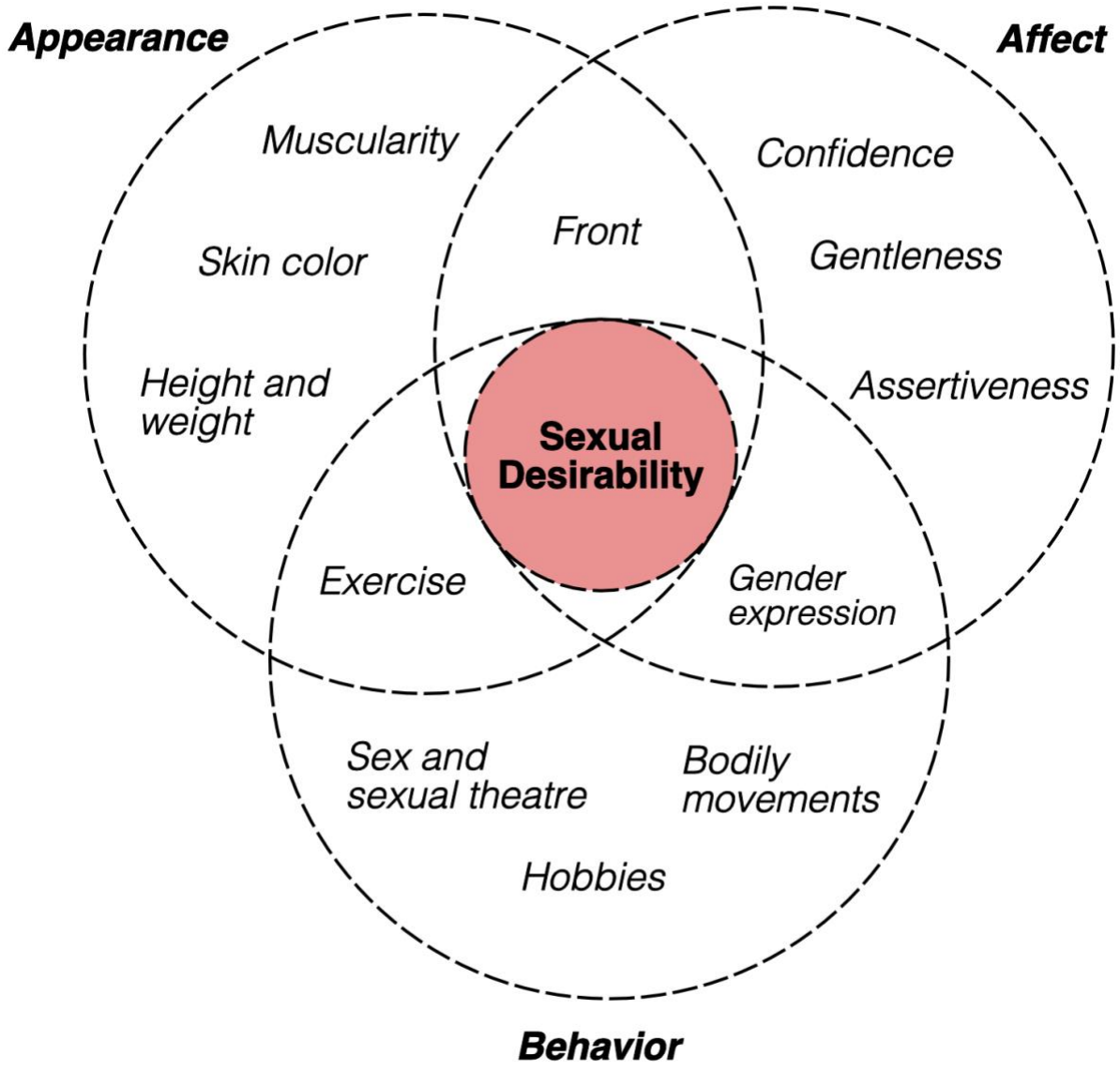
This theme reflects how my participants defined sexual desirability as what it is and what it is not. I generated three subthemes: (i) sexual desirability is multidimensional, (ii) sexual desirability is dynamic, and (iii) sexual desirability is not sexual objectification or fetishization.

Sexual Desirability is Multidimensional

My interviewees defined sexual desirability as multidimensional. I organize the factors contributing to sexual desirability into three interlocking categories: appearance, affect, and behavior. Figure 1 is a graphical representation of this interrelationship. Appearance refers to how one looks, including one's physical appearance among other aspects, such as the types of clothing one wears (e.g., Tran et al., 2020). Affect refers to how one feels and how they display those emotions in sexually relevant ways, such as confidence or aloofness (e.g., Wade, 2021). Finally, behavior refers to what one does, both via sexual and non-sexual behaviors (e.g., Murray & Brotto, 2021).

Figure 1

The Multidimensionality of Sexual Desirability Encompassing Interconnected Aspects of Appearance, Affect, and Behavior



Sexual Desirability is Appearance. My participants defined appearance as the primary index of sexual desirability. This was most commonly expressed in the form of physical attractiveness. For example, Felix (South American, average) defined sexual desirability as what makes him "physically attracted to [a person], someone that I would like to be with just by looking at them." Appearance, in this framing, is the foremost component necessary to elicit sexual desire. But appearance does not exclusively reflect one's physicality

(e.g., height, weight, muscularity, skin tone) but includes a "sartorial aspect" (Diego, Southeast Asian, muscular), such as one's clothing and shoes.

Appearance is especially central to desirability on dating and hook-up apps. As Steven (Middle Eastern or North African, average/bear/husky/large/stocky) put it, "Given the nature of the thing, on Tinder, you don't swipe right on a personality… you swipe right on a set of photos." These photos are tailored to showcase app users' appearance, physically attracting others' sexual and romantic interest by emphasizing those traits that accrue sexual capital, and so desirability, on the app (Regan, 2023).

Participants' use of attractiveness typically (although not exclusively) addressed the role of appearance in sexual desire. This suggests a definitional distinction between sexual attractiveness and desirability. Participants defined sexual attractiveness as appearance to the exclusion of other elements, while sexual desirability is related to appearance among the other dimensions I shall now discuss.

Appearance is Insufficient for Sexual Desirability. Appearance is only one element of desirability. How someone acts and the emotional states they present, alongside how they look, all shape desirability. The compounding influence of appearance and affect, for example, in part reflects the sociological concept of a 'front.' In her ethnography of a Californian high school, Pascoe (2005, 2012) described how Black boys could strike a 'cool pose' (see also Hall, 2009; and F. Harris et al., 2011). These informants drew upon compounding aspects of their (racialized) appearance and affective stances, such as being carefree and relaxed, to demonstrate a level of social desirability unavailable to White boys (cf. Unnever & Chouhy, 2021). My participants noted how appearance interacted with affect in producing sexually desirable self-presentations:

> He was dancing and smiling and singing along to Destiny's Child and it was nice. …
>
> We danced for a bit and made out for a bit, and eventually, we went home together

> that night… There were other people I found physically attractive [that night] but it was a combination of he was dancing, and he felt very comfortable with himself, and happy to be there, and free moving, and I find that very attractive. (Romeo, White, slim)

Romeo contrasts his attraction to other men at this nightclub with his attraction to his now-partner. The former was based exclusively on physical appearance. Physicality by itself was insufficient to attract his sexual desire. Rather, it was the additional affective dimension, the way his partner appeared relaxed and self-confident, that attracted Romeo.

The interplay between appearance and affect also altered participants' perceptions of otherwise undesirable and stigmatized features such as fatness (Austen et al., 2022). Isaac (South Asian, muscular) described how "I don't care if they're thin or fat, sometimes they would carry their belly with so much pride and poise it's just so attractive." To Isaac, affecting a prideful attitude alongside a belly is what signals a fat(ter) partner as sexually desirable.

The centrality of appearance for sexual desirability is also transitory and limited to those contexts in which other information about desirability was limited or absent, such as on dating and hook-up apps. As Cain (East Asian, chubby/muscular) put it, "physicality does … factor into it, but … goes away once you get to know somebody." Our participants viewed appearance as one among many dimensions of desirability. Diego (Southeast Asian, muscular) suggested, "I gauge desirability holistically. It's not just about the fact that they're hairy, and they're bigger, and they're older. They have to also be able to engage in a conversation and have a brain and use it." Appearance is considered alongside affect and behavior. I turn to these dimensions of desirability now.

Sexual Desirability is Affect. Participants defined affect as a factor of sexual desirability. This included types of affect such as confidence, assertiveness, gentleness,

humor, intelligence, and personality. Ben (South American, lean) cited "intelligence… as a major turn-on," and Henry (East Asian, average/chubby/overweight) extended this to "outlook… what you have inside. It's more important … more enduring, more sustaining." Contrasting this with appearance (and "youth" in particular), Henry identified "your personality … [and] what sort of knowledge you have deep inside, and sense of humor" as significant to sexual desirability, and more so insofar as they can endure throughout one's life in contrast to appearance.

As Green (2008a, 2008b) theorized, affect is an element of sexual capital that is regulated within sexual fields alongside appearance. In her study of US campus hook-up culture, Wade (2021) identified "an affective dimension of a structure of desire." (p.197), finding that students who were more aloof in their sexual and romantic interactions with peers were more desirable.

My interviewees cited similar experiences. Golden Boy (White, athletic/muscular) outlined how his boyfriend's "assertiveness" when initiating sex was desirable (and made him feel desirable): "[he] jumped on me and was really wanting to have sex … without any really flirty signals." Different affects were also sexually desirable: confidence, self-assuredness, cuddliness, gentleness, and calmness, among others. Much like with appearance, which affect one sees as desirable is likely idiosyncratic. My participants cited personal histories, different kinds of prior experiences, and culture, among other sources, as reasons why they found certain affect desirable.

Sexual Desirability is Behavior. Sexual desirability was also defined as behavioral, in that the things that someone does, both sexual and non-sexual, bear on how sexually desirable someone sees themselves and others. Sebastian (White, overweight) stated that although "I never have found myself objectively sexy," he could make himself sexually desirable through "sexual theatre." He described how he could "tease [his partner], and please

him, and have fun with him … curate an experience for him," citing his lack of a "gag reflex" (i.e., his ability to perform oral sex without a pharyngeal reflex) and his skill at "edging [his partner]" (i.e., delaying his partner's orgasm during sex) as behaviors that made him sexually desirable. Performing sex acts on others, and particularly on romantic partners, is a route by which one becomes sexually desirable (Ågmo & Laan, 2023; Toates, 2009). Considering sexual capital (and thus sexual desirability) are the qualities that elicit others' sexual desire (A. I. Green, 2008b; D. Kaplan & Illouz, 2022), behavior that demonstrates one's ability to arouse and pleasure a sexual partner represents an intuitive part of sexual desirability.

Non-sexual behavior is also relevant for sexual desirability. Julian (Aboriginal, chubby/muscular/stocky) described how "looking after my interests and pursuing my interest in my hobbies" helped cultivate sexual desirability, such as by "going to the gym, taking pictures of myself, talking to guys online that are interested in me." Behavior can eclipse other aspects of desirability, within particular contexts. Bartholomew (East Asian, average/chubby/overweight) identified rugby players' expertise and performance on the field as sexually desirable. He stated, "I'll be like fuck, he's [a rugby player] so sexy, he plays so well I really like the way he's on the field… I'll quite often think somebody's really attractive just based off like how they play on the field … whereas my friends will [say] he's fucking ugly."

The gendered nature of certain self-presentations, through gesture and bodily movement, is relevant to sexual desirability. How masculine or feminine one exhibited themselves was cued through what the things one does and how one does them. Henry (East Asian, average/chubby/overweight) identified his attraction to sexual partners who had "deeper voices [and were] pretty straightforward and non-feminine sort of acting, pretty masculine". Resonating with other participants, 'acting' or 'presenting' masculine or feminine was seen as a factor moderating desirability (Gerrard et al., 2022).

The relationship between gendered expression and sexual desirability was heterogenous. As in femmephobia research (e.g., Hoskin, 2020), some interviewees saw feminine men as undesirable. David (White, average) contrasted the gendered expression of Asian men and White Australian men: "Asian guys are more feminine and just by their mere physicality. Smaller dicks, cute asses, smooth bodies, that I go 'Oh! Give me a bloke!'". David presents a racialized account of masculinity and femininity and its relationship to desirability: Asian femininity is undesirable, and White masculinity is desirable. Asian men are contrasted with the 'bloke,' an archetypal straight or straight-acting working class White Australian man (Connell, 2005). David provided an example of a bloke and sexual partner who "no one would ever look at him in the street and go 'oh, he likes to be fucked.' No one would look at him and go 'he's bisexual.' He's blokey bloke McBloke."

In contrast, Isaac (South Asian, muscular) identified the complementarity between his masculinity and femininity and his partners' gendered expressions as a relational aspect of sexual desirability: "I crave the same masculine that I have from [sexual partners], or [for them] to complement the femininity that I have. It's either that or whether it's their masculinities is so empowering that it kind of comforts my femininity." Similarly, Luca (South American, athletic/toned/twink) noted:

> I don't think being feminine is something that – I don't think is bad… I am very [from a South American country] myself and so I actually find that being able to express yourself in a feminine way, if you want to put it, can be quite attractive too.

Luca contrasted this account of femininity with "toxic masculinity… where you almost had to behave like a straight person and still be gay to [have other men] find you attractive." Acting straight, behavior compelled by cisheterosexist norms, was undesirable to Luca. Femininity, then, can be sexually desirable, and a rejection of the hegemony of masculine desirability suggests a complex, subjective, relational, and culturally situated relationship

between gendered expression and sexual desire and desirability (Butler, 1993; Connell, 2005).

Sexual Desirability is Dynamic

What participants saw as desirable or whether they felt desirable was not stable but influenced by social interactions and physical, digital, and cultural contexts. That is, sexual desirability was seen to be relational and contextual.

Sexual Desirability is Relational. Participants viewed sexual desirability as tied to social interaction. Whether one felt sexually desirable or viewed others as desirable was modulated by person-to-person contact. This subtheme was summarized by Romeo (White, slim): "It's hot to be wanted." One's perception of oneself as sexually desirable (i.e., "hot") is moderated by one's engagement with others (i.e., being "wanted"). Social interactions between individual people and groups moderate what one finds desirable and whether one feels desirable.

In certain circumstances, relationality can radically change one's perception of oneself and others' desirability. The ways that one interfaces with a potential sexual partner can recharacterize, change, or obfuscate one's usual perceptions of desirability. Interviewees most commonly described this as the ineffable effect of 'chemistry.' For instance:

> I remember at the time thinking, "I don't actually find you [a man he met at a gay club and had sex with] attractive." But there's just something really sexually attractive... He wasn't my type at all. [But] I don't know, there was something that I found really sexually attractive about him… He was a shorter dude, he was [Eastern European]… It really [was] his personality and the dynamic we had really changed that element for me. (Noah, White, slim/toned)

Noah found this sexual partner desirable when he would not have otherwise. The reason given as to why was tied to their rapport ("the dynamic"). One's interaction with a potential

sexual partner can lead one to re-evaluate how desirable they find said partner. In doing so, someone that one would not have sex with based on appearance alone can 'become' sexually desirable.

This also occurred in reverse. Sexual desirability can lessen through relational processes. As Elijah (South American, average) recalled:

> I thought [about a partner], "Oh, you look really hot," and we became friends… We ended up in bed, and I think what happened [was] he liked me too much. He had hugged me really strongly; he wanted to sleep with me that night… and that put me off.

Despite finding this sexual partner attractive, insofar as Elijah had sex with him, the relational dynamic between them (i.e., Elijah's sex partner being too affectionate) rendered him undesirable ('put him off'). This may reflect that sexual desirability is sensitive to violations of consent (Ågmo & Laan, 2024). If one asserts a boundary that a sexual partner subsequently breaks, that partner may become less sexually desirable in light of that violation.

Relationality also impacts desirability through taboo (Anzani et al., 2021). For men who have sex with men, sex with straight or straight-acting men is one such cisheteronormative taboo that, if violated, can become erotic.

> I did have a strange and pretty compelling attraction to him when he was really in his toxic heterosexual mindset [laughs]. There was something overall about our relationship that felt really taboo. Because it was a secret affair, that was probably the main thing, and that he was really comfortable in having affairs. Something about that was a little bit scandalous and thrilling for me. There was something wrong about it that I was attracted to and felt shame about, but the shame was erotic. It wasn't really … impacting my mental health. (Julian, Aboriginal, chubby/muscular/stocky)

Julian and his sexual partner's violation of normative social dictates and the sanctity of monogamous heterosexuality augmented Julian's desire (Connell, 2005). It was because his partner felt comfortable breaking these norms while presenting himself as 'toxically heterosexual,' which increased his sexual desirability. This attraction diminished when the taboo in their sexual relationship was eliminated: "his [sexual] identity [changed] over time, and so some of that fantasy element did dissolve for me." It was precisely this element of "fantasy" in their relationship which was erotic and thus desirable.

Interviewees identified several ways that they could strategically manipulate their own sexual desirability by tailoring their appearance, affect, or behavior to a desired sexual partner. Golden Boy (White, athletic/muscular) said, to attract others, "I'm playing it cool": he increased his sexual desirability by acting aloof. He did so to attract men who liked 'the chase', the pursuit of a (seemingly) uninterested sexual partner: "there's certain personality types that enjoy a little bit of chase, or a little bit of a hard-to-get thing." By creating a social exchange that plays into sexual actors' preferred roles (e.g., chaser and chased), one can augment their sexual desirability.

Similarly, men of color used specifically racialized strategies to modulate their sexual desirability. Some of my interviewees of color reported playing on their sexual partners' racialized desires, to their sexual advantage. Jack (East Asian, bear/chubby/overweight/large/stocky) said that when faced with a sexual partner who, because he is East Asian, expected him to "be a certain way or [expected] that I'm more passive… or that I like to be submissive," that he could "lean into that, if I wanted to." Bartholomew (East Asian, average/chubby/overweight) reported similar experiences:

> I feel like the only way I'm desired is based off the Asian fetish thing… I play into it. … 'Cause I feel like that's the only way that I can be desired on Grindr and stuff like

> that… I'm like, if you want to fetishize me for being Asian, I'm like that's the only way I'll go and get it [i.e., sex].

Sexual racism, which I discuss further below, both prescribes and proscribes acceptable behavior for men of color. Bartholomew reported playing into the potential sex partners racialized desires, engaging in behaviors expected of East Asian men who have sex with men such as being sexually submissive. To refuse to do so risks sexual marginalization, and so sexlessness. The sexually racist organization of sexual desirability limits the types of behavior men of color can engage in within a rigid margin. Interviewees of color did not see these sexually racist or fetishistic norms as universally negative. Rather, many reported playing on these sexual stereotypes to their advantage. Some men of color used others' sexual racism to justify their own racialized sexual desires. Per Isaac (South Asian, muscular): "There's this fetishizing [from White men] or the exotic thing. But I don't see it as an insult because, in a way, I'm also fetishizing their Whiteness."

Sexual Desirability is Contextual. In line with sexual field theory, my participants viewed sexual desirability as tied to their immediate location both on- and offline, as well as developmental context. Cain (East Asian, chubby/muscular) stated this explicitly: "I think that's [i.e., desirability] very geographically specific." He elaborated by contrasting the sexual hierarchies of Australia and East Asia:

> In my experience, when I'm back in [an East Asian country], which is where my parents are from, it's very different in terms of the, if you call it, a hierarchy of desirability. … I've spoken to other dudes, White gay guys, who feel like they are not as desirable relative to their experiences in Western countries. So yeah, it is geographically dependent.

Compared to East Asia, Cain viewed the stereotypically ideal in an Australian context as "tall, skinny, White guys." The racialized structure of different sexual fields' hierarchies of

desirability emerges from specific cultural milieu (C. S. Han & Choi, 2018; J. G. Smith et al., 2018). In Australia, much like other Western countries (e.g., the US; J. G. Smith et al., 2018), this cultural milieu is informed by White supremacy, both within and beyond men who have sex with men's communities (Chalmers et al., 2022; Jordens & Griffiths, 2022). Among different cultures, sexual fields and their sexual actors' individual sexual desires are organized according to different sexual logics (A. I. Green, 2008b).

For other interviewees, specific social locations dictated what was sexually desirable (e.g., see Phan Howard, 2023). Steven (Middle Eastern or North African, average/bear/husky/large/stocky) compared his experiences in pubs and clubs frequented by "bitchy gays, muscle Mary, sort of less attracted to people that aren't fully roided and hairless". He described his experience of being hairy in sexual fields where hairlessness was *de rigueur*:

> I look a bit ambiguous, ethnically… People sort of gravitate towards that, they're like "You're exotic and I'm into that." … People would come up to me and just start touching my beard, unprovoked… I'd also be like "don't touch me, it's not an invitation, this isn't a zoo."

Facial hair was racialized and 'exotic', suggesting his appearance was unexpected or unusual in the context of a mainstream gay club. Steven contrasted these experiences with those at a pub "that's tailored towards the more bear community," saying "I would feel more comfortable at [that pub] too… I don't feel as judged… 'cause a lot of people there also look like me." In this second sexual field, Steven felt free to pursue sexual partners:

> I've gotten to know a few of the people that go there so I guess from that angle … there's more of a comfort there because you're like "I recognize so and so, I'll go say hi." … You do get the odd comment like, "you're really cute."

Steven's experiences highlight that field-specific differences determine who is and is not desirable.

Context also influences the extent to which desirability is important to sex and sexual desire. In some environments, such as speed dating (see Sidari et al., 2021), sexual desirability is central to 'mate choice.' This is not always the case. In some circumstances, whether or not one finds a potential sexual partner sexually desirable is irrelevant to one's decision to have sex with that partner. Contrasting this is Diego's (Southeast Asian, muscular) experiences of seeking casual and anonymous sex:

> The type of engagement I have with them [sexual partners], if it's at a beat or a sex on premises venue, I tend not to have a conversation with them … it's [a] purely sexual pursuit and … that exchange happens in normally minutes to half an hour … If it's a hook-up on Grindr then it's sort of somewhere between.

Diego makes the contextual importance of desirability explicit: "I think it's circumstantial, I think there's a time and a place which is why all avenues are open, it's not just one way, and it's not just one app, and it's literally not just one person." Put differently, "When you get like super horny, your standards get lower" (Isaac, South Asian, muscular) (Ariely & Loewenstein, 2006; Savio, 2022). Sexual desirability's relevancy to sexual desire also depends on context. In the context of anonymous public sex, whether or not one finds a partner sexually desirable is less important in whether one decides to have sex with that partner.

In his ethnography on men who have anonymous gay sex in public toilets, Humphreys (1970) found that men's selection of sexual partners at 'tearooms', known as beats in an Australian context (Broady, Chan, MacGibbon, Bavinton, Mao, McKenzie, et al., 2022; Chan et al., 2022), was based on factors unrelated to sexual desirability. For Diego, as with other men who attend beats for anonymous sex, he "scale[d] a level of attractiveness

with another curve of how horny am I." This appears to be the case for both gay and straight men (cf. more recently Reback & Larkins, 2010; and Silva, 2017). Within beats, participants' sexual response is divorced from sexual desirability in favor of immediate sexual pleasure.

Sexual Desirability is not Sexual Objectification or Fetishization

Sexual desirability is not the same as sexual objectification. The latter is a social and psychological process aimed at restricting one's personhood or social worth to their appearance (Felig et al., 2022; Ward et al., 2023). Sexual fetishization is similar in that an individual's sexual 'value' is reduced to a (typically marginalized) element of their appearance or identity (e.g., Anzani et al., 2021; Stacey & Forbes, 2022). Both involve dehumanization and fungibility. When one is objectified or fetishized, they are treated as "a mere object," (L. Green, 2000, p. 44) which is exchangeable with any other object of that 'type' (e.g., with any other fat person, Black person, or trans person because they are fat, Black, or trans, respectively).

Sexual desirability is distinguished by consent, non-fungibility, and pleasure. This distinction was put succinctly by David (White, average), who compared feeling desirable to being objectified: "I would have to say [what is important for sexual connection is] eye contact and full body exploration – I'm not just a dick or an ass." Ben (South American, lean) elaborated:

> I think you can tell, in most cases, when someone is actually involved with you or when someone … is just using you to get off, right? … It's quite different when it's you're not necessarily feeling desired because *it's just like a piece of meat*, you're *basically the substitute for anyone else* who would be doing the same emotion [or] feeling. (Emphasis added)

In David and Ben's accounts of sexual desirability, consent, nonfungibility, and pleasure are all necessary but not sufficient elements of sexual desirability. This is because any individual

precondition of sexual desirability does not, in isolation, distinguish it. In David and Ben's accounts of sexual undesirability, despite consenting to be sexualized by their partners, they are still treated as fungible. The resulting sexual dynamic made them feel as though they were "the substitute for anyone else." In short, they felt like "a piece of meat" (Koval et al., 2019).

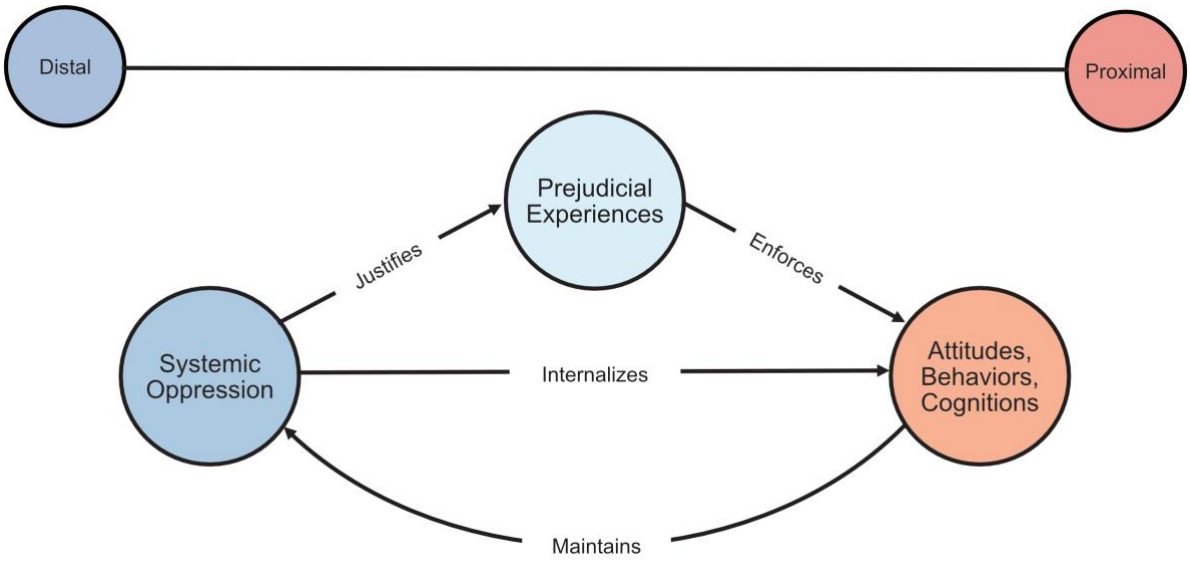
Sexual Desirability is Shaped by Power, Dominance, and Discrimination

My participants identified several "discriminatory grooves along which [their] sexual desires already move" (Srinivasan, 2021 p. 85). Desirability was seen to be ordered and shaped systematically by various social and political forces (Hammack et al., 2022). I borrow the distinction between distal and proximal stressors made in minority stress theory in my analysis of how these forces shape sexual desirability (Frost & Meyer, 2023; Meyer, 2003). Distally, per Julian (Aboriginal, chubby/muscular/stocky), "the representational field that we're living in, what we're being shown in the media, what we're being told is a good body or an attractive person," systemically structures sexual desirability. This systemic oppression justifies institutional and interpersonal violence, which manifests as experiences of prejudice. Systemic, institutional, and interpersonal influences insert and reinforce hegemonic sexual desirability within individual men who have sex with men's sexual desires. In doing so, normative forms of sexual desirability penetrate one's attitudes, cognitions, and behaviors, psychologically shaping who and what one finds sexually desirable. Together, these processes reproduce hegemonic sexual desirability both within individual men who have sex with men and their sexual fields. I diagram this relationship in Figure 2.

Figure 2

The Social, Cultural, and Psychological Processes Shaping Sexual Desirability via Systemic,

Institutional, and Interpersonal Discrimination and their Effect on Attitudes, Cognitions, and Behaviors



I draw upon my participants experiences as examples of how hegemonic sexual desirability shapes their sexual desires. Mirroring previous research, my participants identified several systems of oppression that shape sexual desirability: sexual racism (C. S. Han & Choi, 2018), colorism (Jordens & Griffiths, 2022), and anti-fat bias (Austen et al., 2022), among others. My analysis also suggests sexual orientalism, as a form of sexual racism which specifically impacts Asian men, as an additional system that bears upon sexual desirability (see Said, 2003).

The Distal Influence of Power, Dominance, and Discrimination

Systemic oppression shaped who and what my participants found sexually desirable. The main vector by which systemic oppression was seen to influence what one wanted was through the representation of different kinds of people. Media representations in film, television, and print were seen to circulate hegemonic desirability which participants came to internalize. White, muscular, and masculine men were seen as the primary beneficiaries of these representations:

> I am very much attracted to what I was groomed to be attracted to as a kid in the nineties… We had the Back Street Boys, and it was boy bands and that. Everyone just looked a particular way. They were mainly all White. I do think maybe media portrayal of what we should be attracted to played a part. (Miguel, Pacific Islander/White, muscular)

The repeated exposure to certain people, alongside the cultural mandate to find them attractive, inculcated ("groomed") normative sexual desirability into Miguel. What he finds attractive as an adult was a product of a culture which allows some bodies (but not others) to be seen as sexy. In Australia, as in other Western contexts, the bodies that are allowed to be represented, and seen as sexy, are White. In this way sexual racism, the sexual marginalization of men of color, functions through omission. Whiteness is centered as default because it is represented to the exclusion of other races. Normative White desirability becomes "reinforced and perpetuated by images that we all encounter every day" (Agog, Pacific Islander, average).

While undesirability functions through omission, it also functions through representations which recapitulate discriminatory beliefs. In this way, racialized desires and fetishes are circulated, instituted as "wanting the other or something that's unusual or exotic" (Malcolm, South Asian, average). What one sees comes to shape what one expects from others and so defines parameters by which those others are sexually desirable. Isaac (South Asian, muscular) demonstrated how sexually orientalist representations of South Asian men shaped their sexual desirability: "Brown guys are seen as very savage, like take charge, destroy, or plough their way. We are not seen as delicate, fragile men." He continued:

> Some [partners] would think I'm Indian and just go with it. [They would say] "you're my little Aladdin" or something like that. Isn't Aladdin Middle Eastern, or? [laughs] It's kind of far. … Some would say "I only date Brown guys." I'm like okay, I mean

> it's a preference. Like if it gets really creepy, like "you know what, you are my slave."

Symbolic violence positions South Asian men as "very savage" and sexually animalistic. This exoticization continues through an association between South Asian men and Disney's Aladdin. A Western representation of agglomerated 'Near East' cultures informed the frame within which Isaac felt he was able to be seen as sexually desirable. These distal forces positioned him as exotic or a fetish, at once seen as "savage," subordinated as a White man's Aladdin, and, at the extreme, a slave.

Systemic oppression was also seen to shape sexual desirability through porn. As in other media, who is represented in porn and how that representation occurs informs who and what is desirable. Porn platforms organize content, and so different bodies, into those that are fit or unfit for broad consumption. As with the examples above, White, muscular, and masculine men were seen as the primary beneficiaries of this categorization and positioned the 'normal' objects of desire. Fat men and men of color are, in contrast, relegated to a sexual niche or fetish. Nathan (Aboriginal, stocky) explained:

> Because a lot of porn you come across is very fit men, and if you want to see diverse bodies you kind of have to go into categories of porn. Which makes you feel like "oh, if you don't have this fit body you're … someone's kink"… To see bodies like mine, I would have to go through categories [of porn] labeled chub or overweight... that's where a lot of diverse bodies were … 'interracial'. It's just very segregating to queer people who aren't fit or aren't White, you're put into some subcategory.

As Isaac (South Asian, muscular) suggests, "we are exposed to gay sex with porn." Porn is figured as a teacher which identifies certain bodies as sexually desirable, and others as undesirable. Porn remains a social of sex education for young men who have sex with men sex in the absence of robust formal sex education (Newton et al., 2024). By limiting exposure

to porn featuring non-hegemonic men, normative desirability is reproduced in the consumption patterns of individual men who have sex with men. As a result, porn defines who men consider desirable versus undesirable (L. Green, 2000; Srinivasan, 2021). Porn also codifies sets of parameters by which undesirable men may become desirable, such as by playing into a fetish or assuming specific sexual roles. Desirability becomes contingent upon playing into these parameters.

These systemic representations undergird interpersonal discrimination. Because of the way particular bodies are represented in porn, particular people become assigned sets of expected appearance, affect, and behavior. Jack (East Asian, bear/chubby/overweight/large/stocky) described how pornographic representations of East Asian men produced particular dynamics within his sexual relationships, giving this example:

> It was a hook-up. And race never played into it. … I thought they were just into me but then when I went there [to his hook-up's house], there was porn on. And it was raced-based porn of a White guy with a lot of Asians being subservient. But then, getting into the act, he just assumed I would be really submissive. And then, I guess, spoke, I don't want to say derogatory, but then spoke like he was using me. But I never consent to this. I never thought that this would be okay. And you [his hook-up] never asked me, "Is this okay?"

The representation of East Asian men in porn structured Jack's sexual partners' beliefs about East Asian men. This came along with a set of expected behaviors: Jack was assumed to be sexually docile, submissive, and pliant because that is how East Asian men have been represented in porn. Jack's reaction also shows how sexual orientalism expresses itself proximally; certain language, even though it is sexually objectifying, is not seen as derogatory, despite being reportedly unacceptable and non-consensual (cf. Thai et al., 2019).

Hegemonic desirability and its pursuant sexual marginalization were also seen as institutional, embedded within the politics of individual sexual fields. My participants highlighted how discriminatory logics worked to limit who had full access in specific sexual fields. Who was able to freely participate in Grindr, for example, and so connect with potential sexual partners, was seen to be fueled by hegemonic sexual desirability. For some, this experience is one where sexual attention was systematically withheld. As described by Diego (Southeast Asian, muscular), during a period of European travel:

> I've used Grindr in numerous countries worldwide for so long that there is this sort of, in my own head, statistical gauge of how many hits that I can get. So, in Hungary, I actually got none… I was getting literally nothing, and I could only assume why. The first thing I would have gone to was race.

Diego's experiences show how hegemonic sexual desirability structures apps like Grindr. Because Grindr's sexual field institutionalizes sexual racism, it structures desirability around normative Whiteness. Men of color are socially and sexually excluded as a result. Because sexual racism undergirds the cultural and social milieu within which men who have sex with men's sexual fields sit (J. G. Smith et al., 2018), its logics are reproduced across separate sexual fields.

Attempts to address these institutionalized forms of sexual marginalization are stymied because sexual desirability is collective as well as individual (Hennen, 2014). While sexual racism has become increasingly socially unacceptable among men who have sex with men's sexual communities (Stacey & Forbes, 2022; Thai et al., 2019), it still functions to render men of color less desirable than White men. Social programs such as Kindr Grindr (2018), an initiative aimed at curtailing sexual racism (among other social pathologies) on Grindr, have been largely unsuccessful in redressing hegemonic White desirability. Rather,

according to Diego, they appear to have "changed the way [White men] speak to people of color, and Grindr has been able to moderate that."

By user's underlying sexual racism unaddressed, sexual racism becomes covert. Although Kindr Grindr may have decreased overt prejudicial speech, it did not addressed the sexually racist beliefs of its users. Callander and colleagues (2015) found, prior to Kindr Grindr, that 147 (3.70%) out of 2,177 (majority White) Australian men who have sex with men surveyed 'disagreed' that they could form an intimate relationship with someone outside their ethnicity. Smith and colleagues (2022), publishing after Kindr Grindr, found 144 (23.38%) of a total of the 616 (also majority White) American men who have sex with men surveyed disagreed. Covert forms of sexual racism, such as White men's social and sexual avoidance of men of color, persist (J. G. Smith et al., 2022). Moreover, despite my participants reporting a reduction, overt forms of sexual racism continue. Diego contrasted his experience above to one another where a Grindr user told him, "I'm not into gooks."

Distal Influences Become Proximal Influences

Overt prejudice is justified by its systemic forms. Violence against men who are deemed sexually undesirable expresses systemic oppression, reproducing sexual marginalization and enforcing hegemonic desirability within specific sexual fields. John (Aboriginal/White, fat) provided an example (Austen et al., 2022; Whitesel, 2014) when he described how "some bloke just decided to randomly message me and called me a fat fuck and that I should probably kill myself. I hadn't tapped him, hadn't chatted, hadn't done anything … just random."

Hegemonic desirability is reproduced through social violence. John's interaction reinforced for him the normative belief that fat men were not sexy and that they have no place on Grindr. John reported that it "made me feel terrible… [and] reaffirmed all the things that I had in my head all those years of no one would want me because I'm a larger bloke and

everyone wants buff blokes." Overt discrimination positions certain traits as undesirable, enforcing distal influences proximally by reinforcing one's beliefs about certain bodies. The belief that fat men and men of color are undesirable was reinforced for John and Diego, respectively. Systemic and institutionalized forms of sexual marginalization also normalize interpersonal discrimination, making discrimination more likely to occur and reoccur. In doing so, they reproduce hegemonic sexual desirability socially, engraining it across men who have sex with men's sexual fields, and reinforce its internalization within individual men who have sex with men.

In turn, hegemonic sexual desirability influenced how interviewees saw themselves and others. These beliefs played out on different aspects of sexual desirability. For example, for David (White, average), hegemonic sexual desirability played out by compelling certain behaviors:

> One of my clients yesterday … took a short video of me and posted [it] online. … I just go, "Oh, it wasn't a flattering angle" … I went, "Oh god, I'm not sexually desirable." I went, "Oh, you're a fatty." … That's probably when I see myself and I go "you're a bit of a, yeah, you're not in the best shape you could be in. I mean, I go to the gym." (David, White, average)

David's experiences motivated behaviors aimed at losing weight because David had internalized normative anti-fat bias. Because muscularity is seen as sexy, behaviors aimed at increasing it are seen as a method by which to attain sexual desirability and curtail to sexual stigma associated with fatness. Hegemonic sexual desirability becomes constituted by particular behaviors; normative anti-fat bias impinges on sexual desirability through behavior.

Distal and proximal influences on sexual desirability work in tandem. In aggregate, distal influences assert that proximity to hegemonic sexual desirability is sexually

advantageous. These distal influences are internalized, producing subjectivities that align with these normative assumptions. Reminders that one is not White, muscular, or masculine invoke hegemonic desirability, reinforcing its effect on one's attitudes about who and what is sexually desirable. Kanak (South Asian, average/toned) recalled an example, following a message from a Grindr user which read, "you don't look like … the [South Asians] we have in [a Middle Eastern country]", saying

> [It] just brings back all my memories of how I have [been] made to feel about being [South Asian] in my early days of being gay man… [It] reminds me how I force myself by physically changing my appearance and the way I look with a lot of effort just to fit in the category of not being [South Asian].

This reminder rearticulated to Kanak that he was not hegemonically desirable, reinforcing a framework that defines Whiteness and muscularity as prerequisites for attractiveness. By compelling beliefs about who is and is not sexually desirable, individual men who have sex with men take up hegemonic sexual desirability. By internalizing certain criteria for attractiveness, Kanak's reported how his own desires aligned with hegemonic desirability. He described how he began to see and evaluate desirability in light of his experience of discrimination; he saw potential sexual partners "with, let's say, [a] receding headline, or it's not even fat, just a little bit healthy, my first reaction is 'that it's not gonna work.'" In this way, the proximal maintains the distal (Emens, 2009; Robinson & Frost, 2018): hegemonic desirability becomes internalized by individual men who have sex with men, who then reasserts its discriminatory logics within their sexual fields.

Implications

In this chapter, I aimed to investigate how men who have sex with men in Australia define sexual desirability. In doing so, I also investigated how sexual desirability is shaped by social and political forces. My reflexive thematic analysis of 24 diverse men who have sex

with men in Australia suggests that sexual desirability is multidimensional, consisting of appearance, affect, and behavior. What my interviewees found desirable was dynamic, changing across time, place, and between interactions. Who is and is not desirable was shaped by systems of oppression. I found that systems of oppression patterned sexual desirability socially, interpersonally, and psychologically. Who is desired, and who feels desirable, is political as well as personal.

My analysis challenges the notion that appearance is the only, or even the most important, sexually relevant information involved in sexual desire and desirability (Amos & McCabe, 2016; Sidari et al., 2021). Rather, desirability is a multidimensional gestalt of appearance, affect, and behavior. These elements work dynamically with relational and contextual factors to influence who and what one desires and who does and does not feel desirable. I stress that tethering sexual desirability to any one of these factors is likely problematic. The overvaluation of appearance as a factor of sexual desirability may lead to self-objectification (Brewster et al., 2017; Ward et al., 2023). A similar focus on affect and behavior would also be harmful. An overvaluation of sexual behavior for sexual desirability may lead men who have sex with men to engage in risky or otherwise unwanted sex. One over-relying on particular kinds of affect for desirability, such as aloofness, may lead to social isolation (Wade, 2021).

There are clinical and public health implications to how men who have sex with men define sexual desirability. Sexual and mental health clinicians and researchers working with men who have sex with men ought to be aware of how sexual desirability may function to influence patients' self-perceptions and health behaviors. The centrality of muscularity to desirability, for example, may lead men who have sex with men to engage in behaviors that are deleterious to their mental and physical health. At the extreme, these can include disorder eating and anabolic androgenic steroid use (Griffiths et al., 2021). Other qualitative findings,

such as Green (2008b), suggest that sexually marginalized men of color may agree to riskier sex (e.g., condomless anal sex) with partners they see as more attractive than them as a strategy to mitigate their sexual undesirability (Eleftheriou et al., 2016, 2019).

My findings dovetail with previous work to suggest that membership in a sexual community is predicated on fitting norms of sexual desirability (Hennen, 2008; Whitesel, 2014). Men who have sex with men, owing to their greater social and political precarity relative to heterosexual men and women, may be especially sensitive to pressures to conform to prohibitive standards of sexual desirability (Austen et al., 2020; Bajada et al., 2024; Pachankis et al., 2020). I suggest that men who have sex with men's sexual communities are structured around sexual desirability such that some, and not others, are seen as legitimate sexual objects and thus legitimate sexual citizens. These structures of sexual desirability, in turn, are shaped by systems of power, dominance, and discrimination. Political pathologies like cisheternormativity, racism, anti-fat bias, and orientalism, among others, provide the topography of sexual desirability. Much like Rubin's (1984) argument that "the belly's hunger gives no clues as to the complexities of cuisine" (p.149), I suggest that to understand sexual desire and behavior, we ought to consider the social and psychological organization of sexual desirability.

As with existing theoretical work (Hammack & Manago, 2024; Robinson & Frost, 2018; Srinivasan, 2021), I suggest that sexual desirability is both profoundly political and personal. Sexual desirability shapes not only one's sense of self-worth and agency as a sexual actor (Hattie et al., 2022; Murray & Brotto, 2021; Weaver & Byers, 2022) but also determines one's membership in social and sexual life (Shepherd et al., 2023). My finding that sexual desirability is relational and contextual suggests that individual men who have sex with men exist in dialogue with their sexual fields and other sexual actors. Sexual undesirability, and the physical, social, and psychological harm it causes (e.g., in a non-

sexual setting Hunger et al., 2018), may be addressed through systemic, interpersonal, and individual interventions. Whitesel's (2014) ethnography of a fat gay men's group (Girth and Mirth) shows the utility of this approach. In his study, fat gay men faced anti-fat discrimination in mainstream gay spaces. When these same men participated in a sexual field specific to fat gay men, such as annual holiday conventions, fatness was not only accepted but centered as desirable. As a result, they could explore sex with and sexual desire towards other fat and non-fat men in a supportive and non-stigmatizing environment (cf. McGlynn, 2023). A theoretical and practical approach to sexual desirability as multidimensional, dynamic, and tied to power may provide a base from which to counter the harm done by systemic undesirability.

Future Directions

I have focused on hegemonic sexual desirability in this chapter. Although sexual desirability is inflected by systems of power, dominance, and discrimination, this does not necessarily mean that individual men who have sex with men accept these forms of desirability uncritically. Rather, many of my interviewees were engaged in resisting and subverting them:

> In the last couple of years, I have been exploring sex with other Asian men which is something I never did …I started taking photos of other Asian men. It's sort of changed my idea about myself as well, in a way. … When you think about how you build an idea [of] what's desirable ... We tell each other who's hot and who's cool rather than looking within ourselves to make that decision, we mirror that. That's what I did for a long time… I never thought about my own culture as desirable myself until my thirties. (Diego, Southeast Asian, muscular)

While sexual racism and orientalism cast East and Southeast Asian men as hegemonically undesirable, these systems can, and are, resisted: Diego was engaged in displacing hegemonic

Whiteness and exploring his sexual attractions to other Asian men. While hegemonic desirability is rigid, it is not absolute. Experiences like Diego's offer insights into the processes by which sexual desirability is constructed, and how these constructions can cut against the grain establishing by hegemonic desirability. Future research should explore how individual sexual agents resist hegemonic sexual desirability, both individually (as with Diego) and collectively (cf. Phan Howard, 2023).

While my purposive sampling was successful in that my participants were from a range of races and ethnicities, I recruited very few men of color from certain backgrounds. I had no Black participants and only one Middle Eastern or North African participant. Recent census data indicates White, East and Southeast Asian, and South Asian constitute the majority racial and ethnic breakdown of Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). In this sense, my sample was approximately representative of Australia's racial and ethnic makeup. My lack of Black and Arab men likely reflects the specific systemic exclusion of Black and Brown people in Australia and gay communities in particular. Future work should investigate the particular role anti-Blackness has in shaping sexual desirability in an Australian context and beyond (J. G. Smith et al., 2018; Strings, 2019).

Conclusion

Sexual desire is responsive to sexual desirability (Mitchell et al., 2014). Here, I have added to Green's (2008b, p. 29) definition of sexual desirability as "the quality or quantity of attributes … which elicit an erotic response." Appearance, affect, and behavior constitute the attributes which define sexual desirability; their quality and quantity are shaped by systems of sexual stratification which fluctuate across time, place, and social interaction. Systems of power, dominance, and discrimination pattern sexual desirability according to discriminatory logics. In an Australian context, these systems position White, muscular, and masculine men as hegemonically desirable at the expense of their marginalized counterparts. What men who

have sex with men sexually desire appears more complex than a simple conditioned response to particular sexually incentivizing stimuli. Sexual desire is delimited by distal systemic and institutionalized discrimination, as well as their proximal psychological effects. In this way, sexual relevancy is social as much as it is psychological. Addressing the sexual expression of social discrimination appears to be an important but neglected part of redressing oppression and its impact on men who have sex with men's social, psychological, and sexual health (Emens, 2009; Robinson & Frost, 2018).

Chapter 3: Bears Resist Hegemonic Sexual Desirability Through Spectacle: An Ethnography of a Gay Subculture in Melbourne, Australia

> What is a bear? Among the natives there is much disputation. For some it is an attitude (or better, a lack of 'attitude'), for some it is an image, *a gay sexual icon of desirability*. For some it is parts of both, for some the absolute refusal to submit to categorization is the essence of being a bear. (Wright, 1997b, p. 2, emphasis added)

Most research on men who have sex with men's sexual desires has been limited to hegemonic forms of desirability (e.g., Hammack et al., 2022), where general systems of subordination desexualize stigmatized men. In these contexts sexual desirability is overwhelmingly conferred onto muscular, lean, and masculine cis White men (Austen et al., 2022; Foster-Gimbel & Engeln, 2016; Thai et al., 2025), due to their positions within systems of power and domination (e.g., anti-fat bias and White supremacy; Monaghan, 2005; J. G. Smith et al., 2018). Research on communities which resist and reject hegemonic desirability presents an opportunity to study how sexual desirability is constructed, and how systems of sexual marginalization are resisted (Whitesel, 2014). Bears, a subculture of fat, hairy, and older gay men who generally desire fat, hairy, and older men, and so reject their normative desexualization, are one such community (Edmonds & Zieff, 2015; Hennen, 2005; Moskowitz et al., 2013).

Here, I investigated the social processes through which sexual desirability is produced by studying with the bear community in Melbourne, Australia. I provide an account of bear sexual fields which resists hegemonic forms of desirability and reconstructs otherwise sexually marginalized bodies as sexy. In this introduction, I first define what a bear is, highlighting bear desirability's relationship to gender and appearance norms. Drawing on sexual field theory, I show how bears are fertile ground to study the social construction of

sexual desire and desirability: bear communities exist to redress bears' sexual marginalization as much as to consolidate bears' desires for the fat, hairy, and older male body.

What is a Bear?

Most definitions of bears center physical appearance (Moskowitz et al., 2013). Bears are fatter, hairier, and older than the gay 'mainstream' (Franklin et al., 2022; Hennen, 2005; McGlynn, 2023; Moskowitz et al., 2013). I use fat, hairy, and older "accordingly in a matter-of-fact way" (Gordon, 2021, p. 8), to avoid euphemism (e.g., "hirsute" rather than hairy; Fogarty & Walker, 2022, p. 128; or "large girth" rather than fat; Quidley-Rodriguez & De Santis, 2017, p. 1673) and stigmatizing language (e.g., "overweight or obese"; Mass, 2001, p. 20). Some bears use different terms, and find fat, hairy, and older problematic. Where bears prefer other descriptors[5], I defer to them, keeping with Wright's (1997b, p. 1) assertion that bear "natives can and must be allowed to speak for themselves."

'Bear' is defined in opposition to other groups of men who have sex with men vis-à-vis their appearance, relationship to masculinity, and sexual desires. What subgroups bears sit in opposition to is historically contingent (Hennen, 2005; Wright, 1997b). Bears view their fat, hair, and age as more natural, and contrast themselves to the gym-disciplined bodies of gay clones (M. P. Levine & Kimmel, 1998), the hypermasculinity of leathermen or (Hennen, 2008), and, more recently, the embodied effeminacy of twinks, twunks, and jocks (Fogarty & Walker, 2022; Moskowitz et al., 2013). Common across all of these intercommunity dynamics is that bears are contrasted with rigid, prohibitive hegemonic appearance norms associated with subsections of queer men's communities.

Compared to straight-sized (i.e., not fat; Gordon, 2021) men who have sex with men, bears and other fat men are sexually marginalized. For fat men, sexual marginality manifests

[5] One informant suggested I should report that bears are the "skinniest subculture" – a type of humor common among bears.

as desexualization and fetishization (Monaghan, 2005; Ward et al., 2023; Whitesel, 2014). Men who have sex with men face sexual and social exclusion based on their weight (Foster-Gimbel & Engeln, 2016). In his ethnography of Girth & Mirth, Whitesel (2014) found that fat men were expelled from gay sexual communities because of their body size. Fat men's organizations act to redress the resulting social and psychological injuries.

Bear historians (Suresha, 1997; Wright, 1997a) position bears as a response to clones' and leathermen's prohibitive norms of appearance, masculinity, and sexual practices (Hennen, 2008, 2014). Clones embodied 'macho' masculinity, often contrasted with the gender liberalism of Stonewall era activists: hard muscles, hard partying, hard drugs, and hard sex (Hennen, 2008; M. P. Levine & Kimmel, 1998). Bears are believed to have arisen out of clone communities, having faced marginalization based on their appearance (as fat men) and as a rejection of the rigid formula of clone sexual practices. For example, clones were reported to use a hanky code, where a colored hanky placed in certain pockets denoted one's preferred sex act and position (e.g., top or bottom). Wright (1997a) suggested that 'bear' was metonymic, based on the subculture's early members using teddy bears in place of a hanky to signal they were interested in cuddling and physical intimacy rather than depersonalized sex (Barrett, 2017).

A similar opposition existed between bears and leather communities. Regarding the first bear club in Australia, Hay (1997, p. 231) writes "[l]ike the Bears Movement in general, Ozbears had its origins partly in the leather community… but some felt that leather … was as much a barrier to communication as ultra-fem drag." In contrast to drag, and much like the gym-pumped body of the clone, leather was seen as artificial and hypermasculine. Bear masculinity was presented as a natural alternative to the exaggerated gender expressions of leathermen, drag queens, and twinks, all of which rested on the deliberate assumption of additional gender practices (e.g., wearing leather, make-up, and grooming, respectively).

Bears have been more recently defined in contrast to twinks (Franklin et al., 2022), a subgroup of men who have sex with men associated with conflicting definitions over the previous three decades (cf. Silva, 2022; also Wright, 1997b). Contemporary definitions of twink emphasize thinness (Fogarty & Walker, 2022), but twinks were originally conceived as "gym-buffed" (Wright, 1997b, p. 2). The throughline in these definitions is twinks' preoccupation with appearance, which is taken as indicating their superficiality, and hence effeminacy. Twinks appearance, either as thin or lean and muscular, is used by bear writers to indicate a symbolic association with (cis) women and femininity. Wright (1997b, pp. 8–9) summed up the opposition between bears, twinks, and women, when he wrote:

> At one end of the bear spectrum, the "natural"-bodied man is likely to be heavyset or even extremely obese, drawing from the "girth-and-mirth" crowd [see Whitesel (2014)]. Another "natural" bear body may be from the biker/hippie set, with an emphasis on long, flowing beards and hair. When a bear makes such a counter-statement, that he is not a "woman," not a "twink," not a "heterosexual," he is using his body to participate in changing social practice and challenging hegemonic power.

Bears' bodies are positioned as natural because the cultivation of their appearance does not rely on femininized practices (Hoskin, 2020). In doing so, this construction of bears belies their appearance as equally 'artificial' (Barrett, 2017). Bears affect certain dimensions of working-class masculinity (e.g., beer drinking, blue collar clothing, avoidance of deodorants, etc.), cultivating a particular culture of sexuality and gender. An analysis of this response reveals how bears, as a community, position themselves in response to axes of interlocking hegemonic subordination: masculinity and desirability, in particular.

Bear Masculinity and Sexual Community

While bears position their masculinity in opposition to twinks, a strawman for the effeminate gay man, their articulation of gender also conflicts with hegemonic masculinity.

This is a distinction missed in previous ethnographic research on bears. Hennen (2005) concluded “Bear masculinity simultaneously challenges and reproduces hegemonic masculinity” (p. 26) because bears, despite articulating a femininized sexual ethic, focused on sexual and physical intimacy and affection, also assume a self-consciously masculine identity in opposition to effeminacy. Bears’ rejection of effeminacy is supposed to signal their attempt to recoup the patriarchal dividend – the social, political, and economic benefits accrued to masculinity – lost because of their sexuality by asserting an embodied masculinity which cites exemplars of (putatively heterosexual) working-class masculinity (Barrett, 2017; Connell, 2005).

Hennen’s (2005) reading of bear masculinity misapplied Connell’s (2005) hegemonic masculinities (see also Carrigan et al., 1985; and Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), as well as the role that masculinity takes in bears’ sexuality. Hegemonic masculinity operates within a mosaic of gender relations both between and within genders. As it relates to the relationship between genders, hegemonic masculinity subordinates women and femininity (Butler, 1990; Hoskin, 2019; MacKinnon, 1989). This subordination is affected through symbolic violence, positioning anything feminine as inferior (Bourdieu, 2007; Hoskin, 2020), and fuels the physical, social, political, and economic domination of men and masculinity over women and femininity (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Hennen, 2023; Hoskin et al., 2024; Roberts et al., 2018). In this gloss, any gender politics which articulates masculinity as preferrable over femininity is taken to reassert this underlying masculine logic.

Yet hegemonic masculinity is organized such that it distributes patriarchal dividends unequally among men. Connell (2005, p. 196) argues that “[f]rom the view of hegemonic masculinity, the potential for homoerotic pleasure was expelled from the masculine and located in a deviant group, symbolically assimilated to women or to beasts,” and, in so doing, “heterosexuality become a required part of manliness.” Gay masculinities cannot access these

dividends as easily as their cisheterosexual counterparts (Barrett, 2019). As a result, men who have sex with men, including bears (e.g., Quidley-Rodriguez & De Santis, 2016, 2017), have poorer physical and financial health than straight men (Drydakis, 2022; Haarmann et al., 2024), who represent an ongoing source of violence (Hoskin et al., 2024).

Bears, as men who have sex with men, are marked by the "discursive construction of the male homosexual as a 'failed' or 'feminized' man" (Hennen, 2008, p. 11), and subordinated by cisheterosexism. Bears' use of the visual language of straight manhood (fatness, blue-collar clothing, beer drinking, etc.; Barrett, 2017) obfuscates their subordination, and leads them to be identified with straight manhood (Hennen, 2005). As an analytical trend, it recapitulates "the phenomenon … that gay men simply may not look much different from their heterosexual counterparts" (Butler, 1990, p. 51). Bear masculinity may also be a protective stance: queer men's emasculation renders them vulnerable to violence (Gul & Uskul, 2021; Pascoe, 2005, 2012), so adopting masculinity may insulate them against that violence (Sánchez & Vilain, 2012). In relation to other gay masculinity, however, bears cannot be said to hold systemic power by virtue of their masculinity. Connell's (2005) framework, because of its focus on the vertical stratification of masculinities, cannot account for the ways in which gay masculinity are horizontally differentiated (Barrett, 2019): bear masculinity sits within a tapestry of other kinds of gay masculinities. Each cite and subvert different aspects of hegemonic masculinity but are more or less equal vis-à-vis one another.

By positioning the 'natural' masculine body as an object, rather than subject, of sexual desire, bear masculinity articulates a critique of hegemonic masculinity. Acting against their desexualization in the broader gay community, bears center the fat, hairy, and older male body as an object of want. As Connell (2005, p. 219) put it, "[h]egemonic masculinity forbids the receptive pleasures of the anus and opposes [gay] assimilation. Gay men get murdered in homophobic attacks regardless of their personal styles." For bears, the

fat masculine body becomes the double-beneficiary of anal sexuality as both the receiver and giver of the "pleasures of the anus." Despite bears referencing straight, working class masculinity (Barrett, 2017), they remain queer men and sit in a precarious, and often violently oppressed, social position.

Bear masculinity is further undermined because "fat is feminine" (Austen et al., 2022; Textor, 1999). Through its association with self-indulgence, laziness, and sensuous pleasure (Monaghan, 2005), fatness signifies a failed masculinity: masculine men are expected to exercise self-control and rigorously discipline their bodies (but should not appear vain, as do clones and twinks, another signifier of moral turpitude; D. E. Han & Laurent, 2023). Fat femininizes the male body because, especially when deposited on the thighs, hips, and chest, it produces a physicality associated with the female body (Whitesel, 2014). While bears are able to recoup some masculine embodiment via hairiness and (in some cases) muscularity, their bodies reflect a femininized social position. Bear bodies are not only precarious in relation to hegemonic masculinity but also serve a role in their sexual marginalization.

Sexual Desire and Desirability Among the Bears

By centering bears' antipathy toward twinks (as well as leathermen and clones) as founded on gender, Hennen (2005) and Wright (1997b) elide the social damage done by the latter on the former. Bears do not, by virtue of their association with masculinity, accrue protection against social injuries committed by other, hegemonically desirable, men who have sex with men. Twinks have access to greater sexual capital than bears by virtue of their age and body size (Austen et al., 2022; D. Kaplan & Illouz, 2022). This capital affords them greater social and sexual status. This status is both a product and a tool for the sexual marginalization of hegemonically undesirable men like bears among other fat men (Gough & Flanders, 2009). Moreover, because this form of marginalization is intraminority, occurring between groups of men who have sex with men men, twinks' sexual marginalization of bears

may be more injurious than similar anti-fat discrimination committed by straight man (Foster-Gimbel & Engeln, 2016; Pachankis et al., 2020).

Hegemonic standards of sexual desirability marginalize fat men who have sex with men and render them as sexually undesirable. While bears tend to be more sexually desirable than other groups of fat gay men in both US (Whitesel, 2014) and Australian[6] (Austen et al., 2022) contexts, their body size works against them in most gay sexual fields (Edmonds & Zieff, 2015; Foster-Gimbel & Engeln, 2016; Pachankis et al., 2020). I focus on bears' weight because while bears' age (Sandberg, 2016) and body and facial hair (Terry & Braun, 2016) likely play a role their sexual marginalization, fat is implicated as an overwhelming barrier to bears' equal sexual citizenship in mainstream gay communities (Austen et al., 2022; Edmonds & Zieff, 2015; Foster-Gimbel & Engeln, 2016; Whitesel, 2014; Whitesel & Shuman, 2013).

Despite this backdrop of sexual marginality and desexualization, bear communities provide bears access to sex, romance, and intimacy. Sex among bears is characterized as frequent and egalitarian (Hennen, 2005; Moskowitz et al., 2013). Within bear contexts, fatness is not only destigmatized but embraced. Mijas and colleagues (2020) found bears with greater body mass reported higher self-esteem, an inversion of the relationship among other samples of men who have sex with men (e.g., Austen & Griffiths, 2022). In his analysis of an online bear forum, Barrett (2017) showed that bears, as a community, developed language to sexualize other bears (or bear-like men): for example, fat and hairy men are not just sexy,

[6] In the US, there is a dialogue between different fat subcultures such as bears and Girth & Mirth (Textor, 1999). Whitesel (2014) argued that bears are culturally distinct from Girth & Mirthers, a distinction taken by Austen and colleagues (2022) in an Australian sample. Yet this distinction is problematic as bears are the only organized subgroup for fat men who have sex with men in Australia. Consequently, Australian bears include most of fat men which might be differentiated as bears, chubs, or big men within a US context. I found evidence of one unsuccessful attempt to establish a Girth & Mirth chapter in Australia circa 2002 (Australian Business Registry, 2014).

they are ‘woofy.’ Being a bear is not seen as a stained social identity among bear communities, but indicative of their sexiness.

Sexual Fields and Sexual Desirability

Sexual field theory provides a framework to understand the discontinuity between bear sexual communities, with those available to men who have sex with men more broadly (A. I. Green, 2008a, 2008b; Martin & George, 2006). Sexual fields are informed by the aggregated sexual desires of a group of sexual actors within a social space (e.g., a bar, nightclub, dating app, etc.; A. I. Green, 2011). Norms of sexual desirability emerge because shared sexual desire for particular objects are agglomerated, orientating individual sexual actors’ sexual desires to follow their undergirding sexual logic. Consequently, sexual desirability is not necessarily a replication of its hegemonic, societal configurations; if individual sexual actors within a sexual field desire a physical or affective trait (Wade, 2021, 2022), it becomes an accepted object of sexual desire – and so sexually desirable – regardless of whether it is stigmatized at large.

Hegemonic anti-fatness is encoded into the majority of sexual fields available to men who have sex with men. Sexual status is vertically stratified with sexual desirability conferred onto lean and muscular men at the expense of fat men (Edmonds & Zieff, 2015; A. I. Green, 2014). In response, groups of fat men seek out alternative sexual contexts to both avoid overt discrimination and so that they can pursue sexual intimacy (Whitesel, 2014). In this sense, fat sexual fields do not redress generic social injuries. While Whitesel (2014) suggests that fat positive spaces provide fat gay men “a safe and supportive environment in which they can have an opportunity to sexualize the injuries they experience in the gay world” (p. 59), such sexual fields act to redress fat men’s normative desexualization. Bears’ sexual marginalization occurs because of engrained patterns of anti-fat beliefs which view the fat body as unworthy of sex, sexual pleasure, and intimacy (Elbe et al., 2024; Oswald et al.,

2023; Schmidt et al., 2023). In this sense, bears desiring other bears is not just a balm for other social injuries. It is a solution to the specific social injury of bears' sexual marginalization.

Despite the general marginalization of fat, sexual desire for bears undergirds the formation of the bear community as much as bears' sexual marginalization. Wright (1997a) notes some of the earliest uses of 'bear' were in reference to 'play parties', a euphemism for (primarily masturbatory) orgies. Hennen (2005) catalogued a number of displays of bear-focused desire:

> I am surprised to hear him introducing himself to one of the other men [by] kissing him, rubbing his body and "nuzzling" his beard. I can't help but notice how "bear like" the men's movements are, especially the rubbing and "nuzzling" of the face. This goes on for some time. Throughout the "hugging" people come in and out of the mess hall and take very little notice of the activity. The "hug" group is momentarily interrupted as new arrivals come in wondering if they can still get some supper. (Hennen, 2005, p. 39)

Normative anti-fat discrimination and its concomitant desexualization of the fat body appear to be suspended in bear sexual fields. Moskowitz and colleagues (2013) found that bears desired bears and, in particular, bears who were fat(ter) generally had fat(ter) sexual partners. How this is accomplished, what processes bears engage in to resist their sexual marginalization, is not clear, however.

The Current Study

The bear community serves a dual function: it provides haven to men otherwise excluded from the gay 'mainstream', and facilitates a shared sexual desire for fat, hairy, and older male bodies. In this chapter, I aimed to investigate how bears (re)construct their themselves as the object of sexual desire. I ask how do bears redefine the fat body as an

object of sexual desire? To answer this question, I spent a year among the bear community in Melbourne Australia, conducting ethnographic fieldwork and a series of interviews with bears.

Method

Ethics

I received ethics approval from the University of Melbourne (26463).

Procedure

Fieldwork

I was a participant-observer of Melbourne's bear community between October 2023 and August 2024 (Emerson et al., 2011; Orne & Bell, 2015; Small & Calarco, 2022). This represents a complete 'bear year' for The Bears (my name for the Melbourne bear community) and captures the major beats of bear activity: Bear Fest, the state-based bear pride week held in summer, the Mr Australia Bear competition held in Winter, and ending with The Bear annual general meeting where a new committee is elected.

The Bears represent the only bear organization in the state of Victoria. Their membership is growing rapidly. When I began my work with them, they recorded approximately 500 voting members. By the end of my fieldwork a year later, this had grown to over 730 members. This does not include casual attendees, and members of The Bears brother clubs in other Australian states and internationally.

Most of my time in the field was spent at The Bar, my pseudonym for The Bear's den and club house. The relationship between the two organizations is described by many bears as symbiotic: The Bears benefit from the unique sexual field produced by The Bar, which serves as the de facto home of the bear community. The Bar is a men-only pub in the inner-suburbs of Melbourne, which serves as a social nexus for Melbourne's bear community, among other 'alternative' sexual communities (e.g., pups and leathermen; Hammack &

Wignall, 2024; Hennen, 2008). The gendered nature of The Bar is important to the culture of The Bears. In Victoria, venues to discriminate on otherwise protected characteristics – in The Bar's case, sex – if the exemption serves the purposes of redressing discrimination (*Equal Opportunity Act*, 2010). Similarly, The Bears are a men-only organization and support The Bar's men-only status. As an organization, they acknowledge it like this:

> Whilst the desire for a male only space may seem a further perpetuation of patriarchal privilege, this is not about men subordinating women, it is about a society where subordinated men may find social refuge and personal acceptance.

Notably, neither distinguish between sex and gender: both The Bar and The Bears bill themselves as 'men only' and, more commonly, 'cis and trans male only'. Masculine embodiment is the ultimate determinant of entrance to both (Connell, 2005). As CJ, one of my informants, put it: "The Bar is for very male presenting people. That's the best way to put it. Male presenting people." The resulting sexual field is one that is structured around bear (among other gay) masculinities.

In total, I attended over 40 events, completing 155.97 hours of observations (median time per fieldtrip = 3.62 hours, standard deviation [*SD*] = 2.43 hours, ranging from 0.73 hours to 12.82 hours). In that time, I attended Mr Bear competitions and underbear parties (the two types of events I discuss at length in this chapter) as well as weekly walks around a major Melbourne park, monthly den nights, aqua aerobics at a municipal swimming pool, and social lunches, and *ad hoc* parties and pride events throughout Victoria.

During fieldwork, I immersed myself into The Bears as a participant-observer. Outside of socializing with bears, most of my fieldwork was spent assisting the executive committee: helping with den night barbeques, working the cloakroom, or manning stalls at pride events. I was out about my role as a researcher in the field. Following approval from The Bears', my photo and a brief description my research was circulated among the

community by email. When asked by bears, I told them I was a doctoral student studying bears and described the study to those who were interested.

I jotted observations made in the field using my smartphone (Emerson et al., 2011). I chose this method of notetaking because it was unobtrusive. Despite this, bears would sometimes comment that I was taking notes, and prompt me to record particular things. For example, during a charity event for a HIV-positive support organization at The Bar, a member of the executive committee, a large, handsome bear with a salt-and-pepper beard, exclaimed "Put that in your paper!" when he saw The Bears had raised over 2,500 AUD. I expanded my jottings into fieldnotes after leaving the field. My approach to both jottings and fieldnotes was unstructured, and I focused on providing an overarching narrative of my experiences and observations. I supplemented these notes with other official records collected by The Bears: I made use of The Bears social media (predominately Facebook), their official photography, and other documents circulated at events (e.g., contestant biographies published during the Mr Bear competitions). These constituted my corpus of fieldwork data.

Interviews

Outside of informal field interviews, I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with Melbourne bears and bears from clubs in other states. I theoretically sampled informants who had an important relationship to key concepts or events that arose during my time in the field (Bryant & Charmaz, 2012; Morse, 2007; Orne & Bell, 2015). For example, I interviewed Mr Bear 2024 and Mr Bear 2025, as well as a number of runner-ups, because their status as competitors in the Mr Bear competition gave them unique insights into what the competition means for both the community and the bears who compete. I interviewed 16 bears, with interviews averaging 90.13 mins (SD = 20.09 mins, ranging from 59 mins to 127 mins). I interviewed 14 bears one-on-one, and two bears together in a joint interview. I wrote analytic memos on the major themes of the interviews, which guided my analysis and

informed when I thought my analysis was saturated (Hennink et al., 2017; Orne & Bell, 2015). I gave each informant the choice of choosing a pseudonym. Where they did not, I use an extant subspecies of brown bear (*Urus arctos*) as a pseudonym instead. To protect the anonymity of my interviewees, I do not provide any demographic information for these interviewees: the Melburnian and Australian bear communities are tight knit, making interviewees' (re)identification likely.

The interviews were semi-structured around a set of 48 questions organized into four topics: the definition of 'bear', bear sex and sexuality, femininity and masculinity, and stigma, especially around fatness. I developed my interview questions based on my observations in the field and, to a minor extent, prior literature. I followed-up on topics which arose during the interviews, which centered around themes of body image, sex and romance, community, and intimacy.

Positionality

My social identity, as a gay man and non-bear, influenced my data collection and analysis, and my experience as a participant-observer. I came into The Bears with familiarity with bears as a subculture. I was unsure of how I would be greeted by the community. As a straight-sized gay man, and one who is not stereotypically masculine, I was conscious that my physical appearance and affect would make me stick out as an outsider during my fieldwork. I was both right and wrong: some community members welcomed me as a bear, insisting that my body shape and size was only part of the equation, while others were confused or unsure about my presence because I did not 'look like' a bear.

Both reactions were a benefit to my data collection at times. When I was identified as a bear, my informants would speak openly about their experiences around me, and I blended into the bear social milieu, gaining important access to data, experiences, and people that I would not have otherwise. When others did not consider me a bear, they would explain

elements of the community and its members to me as they would another outsider. This gave me data about basic, taken-for-granted social facts in a way that could be glossed over if I were an insider. At times, the reverse was also true: being identified as an insider led to some confusion when specific ideas, events, or people were referenced that I was unfamiliar with, while being identified as an outsider meant that I had to develop rapport with informants slowly over the course of the study. Overall, my identity had a complex relationship to the scope and depth of my data.

Relevant to my focus on sexual desirability is that I found myself navigating others' sexual and romantic attentions. I had anticipated that, because I did not think of myself as a bear, I would not be approached by bears. This was somewhat, but not entirely, naïve: while I was hit on by bears, either in person or online, this only happened a handful of times in contrast to the many and varied sexual interactions I catalogued during my fieldwork. During these encounters, however, I felt my role as a researcher and as a participant in The Bears strain. I was acutely aware that I did not want the bears who hit on me to feel that I was rejecting them because they were fat, hairy, or older than me, and so imply I thought they were sexually undesirable. At the same time, I also had to assert an ethical boundary. I resolved both conflicts by rejecting the bears who approached me by saying that I was in a monogamous relationship, or, more often, I was a researcher and that I could not reciprocate interest.

These experiences informed my analysis, and the focus I have put on attraction among the bear community. They provided insights into the specific role that bear desirability plays in the social and sexual field of The Bears and The Bar. Notably, the role of sexual desirability among the formation of the bear community was foregrounded for me early on. In my second field excursion, I was discussing my research with a handsome 30-something bear, who was wearing a muscle tee, denim shorts, and baseball capped. He asked,

"Sorry if this is personal, but are you attracted to bears?" I responded, "Yeah, of course." He appeared satisfied and explained that he felt I would make a good researcher because "You have a connection to bears." Sexual attraction to bears was figured as central to the bear community itself, and something that gave one a connection and insight into what it means to be a bear.

Analysis

I approached analysis using grounded theory (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, 2012; Emerson et al., 2011). Grounded theory focuses on generating insight from data, anchoring the resulting analysis to the lives and experiences of the people studied. I chose grounded theory as my analytical approach because it allowed me to develop a theory of action that was anchored in the experiences of Melbourne bears. My analysis began when I entered the field in the form of analytic memos written in relation to my fieldnotes and as summaries of my fieldwork. I used these to narrow down my focus on specific aspects of Melbourne bears' sexual fields, before formally coding my fieldnotes. My initial codes were open and based on a close reading of my notes, analytic memos, fieldwork experiences, and interviews with bears. I iterated my analysis, discarding or adapting codes with reference to my data, before grouping codes into emergent[7] themes and completing the write-up of the analysis (Saldaña, 2011).

Results and Discussion

Bears socially construct norms of sexual desirability through the spectacle of desire. Through spectacle, deliberate and routinized methods of presenting the fat, hairy body as an object of desire, the Melbourne bear community resists hegemonic norms which sexually marginalize them. Building on Foucault's (1975) concept of the spectacle of the scaffold,

[7] I use emergent here to indicate findings emerging from my analysis, not in the findings "emerging" from my data (language that has been extensively critique by qualitative methodologists; V. Braun & Clarke, 2022a, 2022b; Emerson et al., 2011; Sim et al., 2018).

where the truth of crime is manifested in the body of the criminal through ritual torture, the spectacle of desire describes how bears use rituals to eroticize the fat, hairy male body. I draw on two examples: Mr Bear competitions and underbear dances. Spectacles are in part defined by their spectators, so I incorporate an analysis of how The Bears control who has access to the spectacle of desire, and the legal and political factors which facilitate that control, and discuss how the spectacle of desire is precarious, especially in relation to spectators' gender and sexual identities.

While my focus in this chapter is the construction of sexual desirability, it should not be taken as indicative of the culture of the bears in general. Many bears see the community as social, and are uncomfortable with what they see as an unnecessary sexualization of bear spaces:

> This fucks me off *with gays*, is a lot of them think that the only way to actually interact with someone else is to be sexual and the fact that the community is so sexually charged is why I pull away from it. (Tony, emphasis added).

Tony locates the issue of sexualization with the gay community, but highlights that it plays out in The Bears, and that this sexualization makes him feel alienated. Yet sexualization serves a social purpose; it gives bears access to sexuality otherwise denied to them. Dazzy Pygall put it like this: "The Bears were set-up as a haven for the leavings of the gay society, the people that felt they had nowhere else to go." In so doing, The Bears blur the distinction between homosexuality and homosociality: "the core function of the group is to provide opportunities for social intercourse. Which of course leads to sexual intercourse" (Dazzy Pygall). I leave an analysis of the bear community beyond sexual desirability for future research.

The Spectacle of Desire in Hegemonic Contexts

The spectacle of desire operates within hegemonic contexts to produce normative desirability and so renders bears as the illegitimate objects of other's sexual desires. Before discussing how bears make use of the spectacle of desire, I first provide two examples of how it constructs the bear body as undesirable. The spectacle of desire most commonly desexualizes bears, similar to other fat men (Whitesel, 2014). Fantasy gives an example:

> I was on this website called Man Hunt, I don't know if you are familiar with it.
>
> *I am, yeah. Go on.*
>
> For context I grew up … 40 kilometres [from the] city, so there weren't as many gay or visibly gay men out in those suburbs. A lot of them will move into the city because there are gaybourhoods in big metropolitan cities where they can kind of find their folk and will quite often then get married and move to suburbs with their partner. I had been chatting to this fella who lived [outside of the city], but east of where I grew up and we had agreed that– and I had put up like these little 20mb kind of pictures on the website and this was before– we didn't have smartphones, so we couldn't take a heap of pictures.
>
> You would take photos on your digital camera then upload them to fucking your PC. Because I was still living at home at the time, I wasn't really putting full body pics on my family's PC. So, we had all agreed to meet up and I don't drive, I don't have a license so I caught a bus out … and was waiting for this fella at this pub and I was standing at the bar and I saw him pull up in his car, see me in the pub, and then turn around and walk back to his car. I think that was him and he messaged me after that, he said, "Was that– were you the big guy that was standing at the bar?" And I'm like, "Yeah, that was me." He's like, "Go home."

In witnessing Fantasy's body within a hegemonic context, the date was over before it had begun. Not only did being fat render Fantasy an impossible sexual or romantic interest, but it also precludes other types of intimacy, even negative forms like face-to-face rejection. In this way, fatness marks the fat person as unworthy of sexual and social connection. This serves to stain fat men's social identities through embarrassment, which Fantasy reflected when he summed up his experience: "That was quite humiliating."

In hegemonic sexual fields, the dissonance between the underlying sexual logic and the individual sexual actor's embodiment renders the fat body undesirable. Bears' access to desirability is severed as a result. Such logics typically recapitulate normative social representations of the fat body (Monaghan, 2005), favoring the lean muscular body (and bodies which approach it). Normative desirability among communities of men who have sex with men is produced through a diffuse spectacle of desire which represent muscular bodies as the 'correct' object of sexual desire. Bears pointed to normative spectacles which position the fat body as undesirable as existing not only in media ("TV! Magazines! Like it's what you're told!", *Beringianus*), but also within specific hegemonic contexts. For example, *Pruinosus* recalls

> I went to an underwear party there and I'm like my size now but I still had my curves and everything and I was dancing with my friend on the dance floor and I overheard some guy next to me looking me and up down and he was talking to his friend like "oh, what a fat fuck."

Pruinosus was incorporated into a hegemonic spectacle of desire which insists upon the exclusion of fat bodies. By "looking [him] up and down" and vocalizing their disgust at the exposed fat body, the hostility the sexual field, and individual sexual actors within it, have towards the fat body is invoked and strengthened. In this instance, it had its intended effect: *Pruinosus* left the underwear party.

In bears' accounts, the relationship between context and desirability appears to be performative (Austin, 1962; Barrett, 2017; Butler, 1990, 1993, 1997). Within a sexual field, the body acts as an unfolding set of utterances, in the form of speech as well as bodily acts, which 'cite' desirability. When an individual acts sexy, they invoke certains norms that relate to appearance, affect, and behavior (A. I. Green, 2008b; Wade, 2022). To succeed in being desirable, acting sexy requires the "uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances … appropriate for the invocation" (Austin, 1962, pp. 14–15). Being a fat man in a normative context causes the invocation of desirability to fail (i.e., to be 'unhappy'; Austin, 1962; Barrett, 2017).

The Bear's Spectacles of Desire

Mr Bear Competitions

Bears construct sexual fields where bear's invocation of desirability can succeed. The social construction of bear desirability hinges both their collective and purposeful construction of bear sexual fields and the engagement of individual bears within those fields. This is most apparent in the case of the Mr Bear competitions which function as bear beauty pageants. The Bears host two each year: Mr Bear and Mr Australia Bear. Mr Bear competitions are an international phenomenon, which formalize the spectacle of desire and redefine who and what counts as a bear through the deliberate eroticization of contestants. This process can recapitulate to more widely palatable stereotypes of the desirable man who has sex with men. In his experience as a judge of a Mr Bear competition, Wright (2001, p. 212) noted:

> I see a strong tendency toward consolidating the bear image away from the fairly chunky type to the more mesomorphic stockiness celebrated in the pages of the more recent issues of BEAR and American Bear [see Wright (1997a) and Suresha (1997)] magazine and always with a full beard.

In the Melbourne bear community, however, Mr Bear competitions function to "overcome the self-limiting belief that [bears have] to conform to media images of gay male beauty" (Wright, 2001, p. 213). In contrast to the chubby and chaser competitions reported by Whitesel (2014), where winners were selected by how loud the audience cheered, Melbourne's Mr Bear competitions are regimented, the result methodically arrived at through consensus by four judges and a popular vote. In so doing, Mr Bear competitions systematically associate bear features with social and sexual capital, producing a context where bears may perform the fat male body as sexy. By articulating a formal set of rules by which men who are otherwise stigmatized may gain public renown, Melbourne bears consolidate a sexual logic contrary to hegemonic "gay male beauty." By encouraging a diversity of bodies, bears present a pluralistic image of bear desirability.

Melbourne's Mr Bear competitions formally consist of a private interview round, three public rounds (Bear Wear, Bear Minimum, and Fantasy/Talent, which I outline below), and the sashing of the winner (selected by the judges) and Mr Congeniality (selected by the contestants themselves). The sash is made out of leather in the colors of the bear flag: black, orange, yellow, white, and gray. Mr Bear is the state-based competition, open only to Victorians, while Mr Australia Bear is an 'all-stars' national competition between winners of the state-level sashes (including Mr New Zealand bear).

While the competition night is its culmination, the Mr Bear's spectacle of desire begins when the competitors are announced, months prior. In this time, competitors enjoy micro-celebrity. They are encouraged to politick for recognition among the community, attempting to win the popular vote in the lead up to the competition night. In doing so, competitors enjoy increased social status, often experienced as sexual attention from community members. The spectacle of desire works in the lead up by attracting spectators' sexual desires to competitors, inviting them to sexualize their beary characteristics.

In general, the judging process establishes the suitability of each contestant's "[i]magination, sense of humor, stage presence, community involvement, elements of combining civic-mindedness and affability" (Wright, 2001, p. 213). The Bears formalize this as "the five C's: Confidence, Communication, Community, Creativity, and Commitment to Bear Ideals" or, more tongue-in-cheek, competitors are asked to show off their "Charisma, Originality, Courage, and Knowledge."

During the formal Mr Bear proceedings, competitors are first privately interviewed by the panel of judges. The three public rounds are conducted on stage at The Bar to a crowd of about 250 bears. The first round, Bear Wear asks each competitor to showcase a quintessential bear outfit before answering a series of beauty pageant questions. Competitors use this opportunity to sexualize themselves, one another, or cite a general history of bear desirability. Two bears in the Mr Bear 2024 competition exemplify this. In discussing his elected charity (winners are expected to fundraise for a chosen charity), the Australian Queer Archives (2025), one competitor joked on stage:

> They have so much knowledge, and it's so hard to pass that on without verbalizing it. I got to go to the archives and have a little dig through the bear stuff. Oh! That is a lot of porn. So much porn! It was beautiful!

This, and the crowd's laughter in response, functioned to position and reinforce the fat body as one that is historically sexual. By mentioning bear's history of producing bear porn, the contestant reveals bears role in their self-erotization. This occurred alongside a variety of other sexual references which positions bears as desiring agents despite their normative desexualization. Another contestant during his own Bear Wear performance began pulling bottles of alkyl nitrite, a muscle relaxant used by men who have sex with men during anal sex (Slavin, 2001; Waugh, 1979), from various hiding places about his body. He then proceeded

to hand them one after another to the judges, cheered on by the crowd. In both cases, bears centered themselves as sexual, with a focus on camp and humor.

Where Bear Wear acts to show bears as sexual actors, Bear Minimum invites their direct and explicit sexualization. The round asks competitors to wear their underwear in front of the crowd. The Bears bill it as "our contestants will off their natural charm, proving that bears are at their most confident when they're just being themselves." The following is an excerpt from my fieldnotes:

> The first contestant wears a fuzzy bear hoody and orange jockstrap, with a bear ear headband. The next walks out in a red crop-top, the word "Cummy" on the back, and a black light up jockstrap. Another hand constructed a harness and jockstrap from thick steel chain. Another still, wearing a blue neoprene harness, wields a dildo on stage as he announces "Unlike [the MC], this year I'm gonna learn how to bottom!" The penultimate carries a trident on stage. While there, he pulls out a sock he used to stuff his underwear and throws it into the crowd. The final contestant wears a pair of briefs with a sparkling see-through nightgown which accentuates the fact he is otherwise naked.

The fat, hairy body is on full display here – its exposure and sexualization is insisted upon by the nature of the spectacle. As the displays become more erotic, the crowd cheers louder, reinforcing and encouraging the competitor's campy displays of sexuality. In aggregate, the bodies on- and off-stage are bound together within the logic of the spectacle.

The spectacle reaches its climax in the Fantasy/Talent round, where the audience is "dazzled as our contestants bring their summer fantasies to life with talent and creativity." Here again, the spectacle of desire displaces the normative force of hegemonic desirability and allows bears to performatively articulate themselves as sexy. This is done in a variety of

ways but, as with Bear Minimum, the more erotic the competitors act are the more the audience cheers. For example, one participant

> Performed a dance number with two back-up dances to Troye Sivan's *Rush*. Behind him, a video plays of him fucking himself with a dildo in the shower. The clip ends when he trips, and the dildo is launched at the camera. All the while, a large cardboard cut-out of an alkyl nitrite bottle is danced about on stage.

The sexualization of the bear body is clear here: the fat body is capable of producing pleasure, which should be recorded, and shown to others. The fat body is centered in bear sexuality as one that can feel pleasure and does so on its own terms. As well, sexual mishaps (the contestant falling over in the shower) are a source of shared humor, and work to destigmatize sex. The contestant is not being laughed at: he is inviting the laughter. Other talents feature different types of eroticism:

> During the final act, a pottery wheel is brought onto stage. The contestant declares he needs help from a member of the audience. The helper is a plant and joins him on stage. They begin throwing a piece of pottery, before the contestant feigns concern for the plant's shirt. Eventually both are shirtless. The scene's inspiration from *Ghost* becomes obvious. The plant ends up sitting behind the contestant. He starts guiding his hands sensuously. Music swells as the scene climaxes. The contest has clay rubbed over his naked stomach, chest, and neck, as the duo thrust back and forward into one another.

Here, the contestant invites the audience to sexualize his body by gazing at his stomach, chest, and neck, which are sensuously emphasized with splattered clay.

Challenging Norms of Desirability

The formalized process of selecting a Mr Bear, ensuring that he is an accurate and meaningful representative of a bear both in appearance and personality, imbues the winner

with a social and sexual capital. As Ted E. Bear put it: “[Mr Bears are] chosen by the community to represent you as a person for the club, for the country, for the state.” The body of the winner reinforces different ways which individual community members can embody being a bear.

By electing Mr Bears, The Bears challenge hegemonic desirability as well as the norms of desirability within Melbourne’s bear community. During my fieldwork, bears would remark how important it was that Mr Bear 2024 was the first bear of color to win, or that Mr Bear 2025 was a rare winner who was very fat. Because these winners are drawn from marginalized communities, their wins represent a degree of acceptance within the Melbourne bear community not just for them as individuals, but also for the communities they represent. The competitions, and through the particular winner, normative desirability among the Melbourne bear community is reshaped, allowing the community to reject a static and constricted image of the bear.

Mr Bears represent the Melbourne bear community for their title year. The importance of the role is belied by bears referring to Mr Bears as “the tits and teeth” (Ted E. Bear) of the bear community at large. Yet winners, as well as runner-ups, “do something very, very big and very publicly” when they “go and *bear* it all on stage, so to speak” (Ted E. Bear). The competition’s centrality to contesting bear’s norms of desirability is known to Melbourne bears. For example, *Arctos*, a bear of color, when asked how bears might challenge racial segregation among bears, suggested

> One of the best things they [The Bears] could do is have more bears of color run for Mr Bear. Consistently, Mr Bear has been White. Often all of the contestants are White as well. I understand that a big part of that might be because the community is predominantly White. But then having this, I guess, longstanding leadership of White bears. … I think if there's just more people of color in that space, hopefully it will

become more like it's normal. Ironically, it's hard for people of color to break into that space.

As noted in previous work, bears are a predominately White subculture (Edmonds & Zieff, 2015; Hennen, 2005). Bear desirability often reproduces normative sexual racism and articulates sexual fields which tacitly position Whiteness as sexually desirable by default. Mr Bear 2024 being the first bear of color, as a Southeast Asian man, was a formalized challenge to normative Whiteness. It did not eliminate sexual racism from Melbourne's bear community but was frequently cited as a positive step to challenge the image of bears as an exclusively White subculture. While representation in Mr Bear competitions is important, bears of color are pessimistic about entrenched racism: "racism is always going to unfortunately exist in some form or factor [in the bear community]," (Pocket Cub). The spectacle of Mr Bear competitions provides a ritualized process to contest the communities normative Whiteness, and the belief that bears are only White. Yet it is insufficient alone. To this end, as it relates to normative Whiteness as well as hegemonic desirability in general, the spectacle of desire functions in other, more regular events.

Underbear Dances and the Spectacle of Desire through Public Sex

Underbear dances (or simply 'underbears'), a pun-name derived from underwear parties, constitute a more routine practice of the spectacle of desire. While otherwise a typical party, underbears require attendees to wear only their underwear. The dress code is strictly enforced. In this way, the exposure of the fat, hairy body is insisted upon. The most common form of underwear worn are jockstraps, which only cover the wearer's genitals. In contrast, the briefs I wore during the underbears I attended were relatively conservative.

By radically revealing the bear body, underbears produce a sexual field where fat is sexy. Within the logic of an underbear sexual field, bears attain a normative status as sexually desirable. This changed sexual logic does not invert the sexual hierarchy, placing bears at the

top and relegating hegemonically desirable men below them, but rather centers bears within a flattened hierarchy. In this way, desire is equitably distributed, and bears gain access to sex, desire, and physical intimacy.

This democratization of desirability is most easily observed during underbears but undergirds The Bears' sexual fields in general. Bears experience a marked difference between hegemonic and bear sexual fields. *Gyas* noted this when contrasting his experiences with a partner he described as "a beautiful man" who "was attracted to bigger guys" in a hegemonic sexual field to The Bar:

> We'd, say, go to [a mainstream gay bar] or something, he'd [*Gyas*'s boyfriend] have guys coming up to him trying to pick him up and I'd be standing next to him, and [his boyfriend] would say, "I'm with my boyfriend." And they'd look me up and down and say, "What?" … So, The Bar and The Bears became more comfortable for both of us because we didn't have to put up with that sort of shit. But little did we know that there's an equal amount of toxicity in the bears where … it was sort of the reverse. They'd say, "You're a bear. Why are you with this skinny little beautiful guy?" And it was like, "Can't fucking win."

Gyas's boyfriend did not lose his hegemonic desirability as a "skinny little beautiful guy," rather *Gyas*'s sexual status was increased. In this way, the assumption that normative beauty should be associated with greater sexual and romantic success is challenged, dislodged from its taken-for-granted status.

The exposure of the bear body is formalized within underbears, and effects this democratization of desirability. In so doing, underbears reject the normative anti-spectacle attached to the fat body. In hegemonic sexual fields and society in general, the fat body is expected to be hidden: a fat person is expected to always have his shirt on, and preferably one

that obscures his size and shape to onlookers (Edmonds & Zieff, 2015). *Beringianus* gives an example, reminiscent of an underbear dance, where he felt anxious because

> It was the first time I'd ever [taken my shirt off] in a space like that. I used to swim with my shirt on.
>
> *What kind of effect do you think that had on you?*
>
> It made me feel really good, after. Like, after I got past the nerves of it, and had a few drinks to help get past the nerves of it… Yeah, that just made me feel really good, and I was just like, "oh, people are looking at me, but looking at me differently."
>
> *How are they looking at you?*
>
> They were coming up to talk to me, telling me that they liked what they saw, in not so many words. [laughter]

This kind of unveiling can produce anxiety. My autoethnographic notes echo *Beringianus* above: I felt anxious while undressing at my first underbear dance because, despite being straight-sized, my body does not conform to the gay ideal. Yet by insisting upon nudity, underbears desensitize attendees to being uncovered, overcoming the physical as well as psychological barriers which prevent the fat body from being eroticized. The spectacle of desire reveals how concealment of the fat body also functions to desexualize it. When uncovered, nakedness allows an easier transition from social to sexual contact.

The porosity between social and sexual is further facilitated by the legal status of public sex in Victoria. Underbears held at The Bar feature at least two dark rooms, euphemistically called 'dimly lit social areas,' where attendees can have sex with one another, or "where you can really get to know someone, very deeply… [r]eally get inside them" (*Pruinosus*). Dark rooms function with quasi-legal status, owing to a precedent established by the Supreme Court of Victoria (*Inglis v Fish*, 1961). In *Inglis v Fish*, a man was found not guilty of offensive conduct after using a peep hole in a public toilet to observe

women in an adjoining block because the officer who caught him had to look underneath the door of the cubicle to do so. The justice ruled

> [C]onduct [that] is observable only by the observer taking some unusual or abnormal action in order to gain view of that conduct… does not cease to be … behaviour in private; and conduct which is not capable of giving offense to anybody because it cannot be seen, cannot be said to be offensive behavior. (p. 612)

The ruling was later expanded in 1992, when police charged two Melbourne men who "met at 12:30 am, before walking to a dark area with trees next to the tennis courts" to engage in "oral sex and mutual masturbation" with offensive behavior ("Court Backs Public Sex," 1992, p. 3). The magistrate found, citing *Inglis v Fish*, that the police could only have seen the men's 'offensive behavior' if they had engaged in unusual or abnormal behavior themselves. As a result, no offense had occurred.

Owing to these legal precedents, dark rooms at underbear are ubiquitous, and their ubiquity fuels the sexualization of the bear body through facilitating sex and by displaying the bear body having sex to observers. Because attendees know there are dark rooms, and agree to attend knowing it, they are implicated in the spectacle inherent in public sex. Attendees, in the parlance of *Inglis v Fish* (1961) are engaging in unusual or abnormal conduct. This implicates both the sexual participants and the onlookers in the spectacle of desire. In comparison the coercive power of the state which has historically rendered public sex deviant and illegal (Rubin, 1984, 2011), Victorian common law functions to provide a context wherein the bear body can be the object of public sexuality. Bears are able to be seen as sexy because they are seen having sex, because the possibility of sexual contact between individuals is made a reality and facilitated directly by the affordances of the sexual field. In doing so, sexual capital is radically redistributed, redressing bears' routine desexualization (Emens, 2009).

Dark rooms also formalize a bear sexual ethic. Among bear communities, the boundaries between social and sexual intercourse are flexible (Hennen, 2005), and dark rooms provide a place to take a sexual partner immediately after establishing sexual interest. In this way, dark rooms facilitate the eroticization of the bear body by allowing a full range of sexuality to be performed immediately. The following excerpt from my fieldnotes is one such example where two bears, Ted and Artie met and established their mutual sexual interest. It also showcases the bears matter-of-fact approach to race and age in desirability: Ted is a middle-aged White bear, and Artie is a twenty-something bear of color.

> Jack, Ted, and Artie, and me stand in a circle. Ted stands close to Artie and has an arm around his waist and touches him freely on the arms, back, and flank. Jack leans against the waist high wall, and I stand leaning towards Artie and Ted on the other side. Ted first notices that a red disco light is shining on Artie's chest, saying he has 'a sniper' trained on him. He mimes jumping in front of Artie to stop a bullet. Artie and Ted begin to make out while Jack and I look on. We don't talk. After about a minute or so of kissing, Ted makes a joke that he has to frisk Artie down, patting him on the sides of his body while stating he's "trained to do it," to which Artie responds saying, "Are you really?" After patting his sides, Ted hooks a finger on the front elastic band of Artie's jockstrap to 'check' him, looks downwards to his penis, and says "nothing there." Artie responds scoffs, mock offended. Ted clarifies he meant no weapons rather than no penis. Ted then moves in front of Artie, blocking the lower part of Artie's body from view. Ted stands with his hands behind his back at the level of Artie's penis. After a few minutes, we part ways. Later on, around 12:30 AM, I run into Artie and ask whether he went to a 'dimly lit social area' with Ted, to which he says yes.

A number of factors of the spectacle of desire coalesce here. Because bears are all in their underwear, physical contact between them is easily sexualized. The distinction between social and sexual touch is often a dialogue, which allows for inchoate sexual desires to be explored. Where sexual interest is established, underbear dances facilitate that interest, which reaches its fulfillment through sex.

The effective resexualization of the fat body relies on a communalization of nudity (Edmonds & Zieff, 2015; Hennen, 2005; Monaghan, 2005; Whitesel, 2014). The eroticization is weakened if even a small number of individual bears refuse to be naked. Fantasy told me:

> You forget that you are just in your undies after a while because everyone else is and it's not a big deal. One thing that I have noticed recently… is that there are people who are less inclined to take all their clothes off [at underbears]. Which is fine, but it kind of defeats the purpose. It also makes the people who have committed to stripping down to their jocks a bit uncomfortable. This person, it's kind of unfair because you are seeing all of us in our jocks and you are not kind of returning the favor. No one is entitled to perceive your body if you don't want them to, but if that's the case then don't come to an underwear party.

The purpose remaining clothed defeats is twofold. By covering the bear body in a space where it should be unveiled, an individual bear rearticulates that the bear body should be hidden, performatively reinforcing the association between fat and unsexiness. Such an act also refuses the democratization of sexual desire. It is "unfair" to hide one's body because everyone else is exposed. This hiding is reconfigured as not "returning the favor." In bear sexual fields, the unveiling of the fat body becomes not only normal, but positive: being publicly naked is seen as doing a favor for others.

Precarious Spectacles

The spectacle of desire which bears engage in rests, in part, on controlling who can and cannot be a spectator of desire, and so who can and cannot be part of resisting normative desirability. This is, at its core, a gender politics: only men can be members of The Bears and enter in The Bar. Yet, an analysis of the gender politics which undergird bears' construction of sexual desirability reveals its precarious position within the mosaic of social and sexual milieu.

The exclusion of women from the Melbourne bear community forcibly removes bears' gender and sexual practices from the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990, 1993; Textor, 1999). Rather than dominating women, The Bears seek to construct desirability beyond the expected (hetero)sexual relations between men and women. In doing so, the relationship between desire and masculinity is troubled. For example, The Bar produces a distinctly gay sexual field, rather than replicating hegemonic masculinity. Bear masculinity then can take on different forms that conflate masculine and feminine signifiers. CJ gives an example: "I thought The Bar was going to be masculine. And then I went there, and none of them watched football and they all go to musicals. And I've never seen a musical!" As a result, bear masculinity is dissonant to hegemonic masculinity. While on the surface bears seem hegemonic masculine ("I thought The Bar was going to be masculine"), a closer inspection of bear masculinity reveals how it violates cisheterosexist norms (e.g., "none of them watched football"). As a result, The Bears produce a social context and sexual field which, according to internal documents published by the executive committee, allows "marginalized and devalued men [to] acquire visibility and a form of acceptance."

Bears predicate the success of their sexual fields, and the spectacle of desire, on the exclusion of women. The construction of sexual desirability, especially where that deviates from hegemonic norms, relies on both a gendered and sexualized context. Ingress by women

is seen as fundamentally undermining bears' ability to engage with their desires. Papa made this clear:

> I don't go to all-gender events at The Bar because I don't want to go there when women are there. Because when women are there it's no longer comfortable for me. … If I'm going to go to a kink event, right, I pretty much know what I want to wear. I can wear that in the comfort of The Bar, doesn't matter who is there. Whether it's people I don't know, whether it's The Bears people or anything like that, I can always wear whatever I want, as little as I want, without any discomfort. The second women are there, that changes everything.

The Bar provides a field that allows for men who have sex with men to sexualize each other and themselves in comfort. Papa makes an allusion to this when he says he know what he wants to wear – something sexual and revealing. Bear's view this kind of comfort as predicated on the spectacle of desire spectacle of desire occurring within a gendered structure which allows them to sexualize one another in the absence of women.

Bears also view straight women as perpetrators of a heterosexual gaze which positions sex between bears (and other men) as a spectacle which centers cisheterosexual curiosity. In this way, the intrusion of the heterosexual matrix leads to an intergender relation where women are empowered to subordinate men who have sex with men.

> I feel comfortable at The Bar. Sometimes [at another club] you have to barge through 20 women to get to the bar, right? And if they were lesbians, I would be absolutely happy.
>
> *Yeah, but because it's straight women*.
>
> It is, yeah. Yeah, with their boyfriends and they travel in packs and there's a space for them… I mean I could be getting railed by one or two guys and then have a woman

> walk in and go “Oh my God! Yes, slay!” It can be a little off putting or confronting, right? (*Syriacus*)

As *Syriacus’s* association of straight women with gay slang demonstrates, bears see the heterosexual gaze as othering them within a context carved out for their comfort. This discomfort was most often expressed by bears as making them feel like animals in a zoo. Bears view The Bar and The Bear’s men-only status as central to preserving the autonomy of their sexual fields. Christopher makes this explicit: “it's a response to that historical threat … [to] our gay, queer, bi, male sexuality. It's been under threat, it's still under threat, it's under threat right now.” Bears’ ability to construct bear-focused desirability hinges on being able to safely practice a gay masculinity which supports that construction. This precarity is further impounded by the ability for straight, hegemonically masculine men to intrude upon bear spaces with impunity.

Straight men are not necessarily excluded from The Bar, though they rarely seek entrance. Where straight men do see entrance, the dissonance between straight and gay masculinities makes the relative social and political position of both clear. One illustrative case from my fieldnotes is this:

> After I make my way out of The Bar, I wait for my Uber with Burger and Pup. It’s cold, and we all stand close together. While I wait, two attractive young White men come round the corner from the direction of the main street. They’re both were wearing RM William style dress shirts with stone washed jeans, cowboy boots, and wide-brimmed hats. The first is handsome, clean shaven, and wearing a black Akubra. “Is this the gay bar?” black-Akubra asks us. We mutter “yes” in awkward reply. A moment later, about 10 to 15 men come around the corner in tow, all in a similar drover-drag. Black-Akubra leads the way, and they file into The Bar. One stops, pointing to the only door, and asks us “This door here?” Pup and Burger whisper that

> it must be a buck's night. Before long black-Akubra comes back out with a confederate in tow. They start laughing, saying they can't wait to see their friend's reaction. Burger asks him if it's a buck's night. Black-Akubra says it's a 20th. There's a tense pause. Breaking the silence, black-Akubra's mate asks whether their friends inside have "noticed yet." Pup says, "It's just a chill night. They're not gonna see anything crazy." This dampens their mood. Black-Akubra asks which suburb we're in and says "makes sense" when I tell him. Before long, he goes in to retrieve his friends.

Here, the bears are cast in a different spectacle by these young heterosexual men: a freak show. Straight men's incursion into The Bar reconfigures the bears as the object of ridicule, one that is presumably meant to shock, disgust, or scar the birthday boy. The stark relief between hegemonic (or at least complicit) versus subordinated masculinities is evident in this scene. Social contexts structured around gay masculinities offer precarious safety to bears, and other men who have sex with men. This manifests as an inability for gay masculine spaces, like The Bar, to defend against straight men's incursion and derision. Bears, while a reportedly masculine subculture, gain no special protection. Rather, despite their deliberate and careful cultivation of a sexual field which seeks to provide sexually marginalized men safe and comfortable access to sexuality, bears still exist within a broader heterosexist social order. The Bear's spectacles of desire, and the bear community in general, are a fragile attempt to redress this discrimination.

Conclusion

Previous analyses of bears typify them as a normalizing, apolitical community. This typification belies the complexity of their sexual politics, and the important function that bears play in redressing the sexual marginalization of the fat, hairy, and older male body. For example, Hennen (2005) concluded his ethnography of an American bear group by writing

> Unlike their queer cousins who identify as sex radicals and activists, few Bears assume an aggressive political profile. While queer activists make a claim to radical difference and demand broader public acceptance, Bears make a claim to radical similarity; a similarity to both heterosexual men and conventional masculinity. For Bears to pursue this claim politically entails undermining its "natural," self-evident character. Thus, Bears seem trapped in political acquiescence. (pp.41-42)

Yet Hennen recognized, tacitly, the social and psychological benefit that bear communities provide their members when, having identified his own "expanding middle-aged frame and natural hirsuteness," he concluded "the hedonic appeal of having my aging body recast in a significantly sexier social frame, through the approving glances of the [bears], provided the overwhelming appeal" (p. 28). Bears provide "the leavings" of gay society an opportunity to access social and sexual connection and intimacy. In a society that systematically marginalizes bears first as men who have sex with men, and then as fat, hairy, and older, the bear community's ability to recast their bodies as objects of sexual desire rather than disgust or repulsion is a radical political act.

Through the deliberate, ritualized uncovering and sexualization of the bear body, bears provide a context when sexually marginalized men may performatively construct themselves as desirable. This process is normalizing in the sense that it provides bears with experiences which are normative – sex, desire, companionship, eroticism, and intimacy – but which are systematically denied to them outside of bear communities.

Witnessing desire, seeing fat people act sexy, allows bears to reevaluate themselves. Spectacles of desire are not unique to the Melbourne bear community. Rather, it appears to be a part of bear communities internationally. Christopher, in a trip to a European bear festival, suggests as much:

> There was a bunch of us from Melbourne… At first, we were both completely intimidated, being like, “oh my god, look at all these power bears.” We're not beary enough to be here, what are we doing? … The next day, I first went for a 25-kilometre hike … so I had horrible blisters afterwards, which was a big issue. But at the end of that hike, I walked back down with everyone to the nude beach, which I hadn't been to yet. And it was just this beautiful sea of beary bodies. Completely inhabiting this, taking over this nude beach. Everyone was there, and so you had the mix of everybody being accepted. And you had a mix of all different types of bears and bodies as well. Chasers, non-chasers, muscle bears, you know, bigger bears, just attractive guys, right? And people were finding me attractive and hanging out with me in the water and stuff like that. And then it was also just that empowering experience where, you know, those experiences where it's really like, “Oh, fuck, I'm gay, and we're the majority here right now.” … A very empowering, crazy feeling. Similar – I've been to Castro district in San Francisco, same feeling I had when I went there, being like, “oh my god, this is for us.” … And again, that was also a time … my weight fluctuates, where I was like, “I'm not in the shape I wanted to be for this 30th Europe trip” … carrying that extra weight at the start of it and stuff like that. I was in the ocean, I was instantly getting cruised by guys in the ocean, and making out [with them].

Christopher’s preoccupation with his body (blisters, excess weight, age) is contrasted with his prelapsarian description of nude bear bodies engaged in free and open sexuality. The spectacle of desire function to normalize not only Christopher’s sexuality (“oh fuck, I’m gay”) but also his body. If “carrying that extra weight” would have led to his expulsion from hegemonic desirability, among bears it was recast as not only accepted but very sexually desirable (“I was instantly getting cruised”).

Contrast Christopher's experience at a beach with a bear sexual field, to Adam, one of Edmonds and Zieff's (2015, p. 425) bear informants:

> I've always had an issue with being shirtless and being out in the midst of a beach… I've always gotten sort of a nervousness about it… the primary reason why I don't go to the beach is because … [of] my gut.

The ability of the bear community to redefine the fat, hairy, and older male body as an object of desire is precarious insofar as it pushes against both hegemonic masculinity and desirability to redress sexual marginalization and produce sexual fields which facilitate desire for bears. The bear community seeks to resexualize and rehumanize the fat body. In so doing, bears acknowledge the fundamental role that sex, pleasure, and intimacy play in our social and psychological lives. Their deliberate sexualization is a form of redress to the routine sexual marginalization of the fat male body. This sexualization is not trivial. Rather, it makes bear lives more liveable.

Chapter 4: On Liking How You Look and Feeling Sexy: Quantifying the Overlap Between Sexual Desirability and Body Satisfaction in a Sample of Grindr Users in Australia

"The time has come to think about sex" – (Rubin, 1984, p. 147)

Sexual desirability is *prima facie* relevant to body image. After all, whether we think of ourselves as good-looking, sexy, attractive, or fuckable speaks as much to our view of our bodies as it does to whether we feel sexually desirable. Indeed, existing literature highlights the importance of feeling desired by sexual and romantic partners in psychological and social wellbeing (Murray & Brotto, 2021; Srinivasan, 2021; Weaver & Byers, 2022). As one straight man in Murray and Brotto (2021) wrote, feeling desired by one's partner is "as important as eating and sleeping" (p. 424). Here, I extend these findings to body image by using experience sampling to quantify the degree of overlap between body satisfaction, how positively an individual feels about their appearance, weight, and body shape (Stevens & Griffiths, 2020; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b), and sexual desirability in men who have sex with men.

Liking How You Look: Developing Positive Body Image

Positive body image protects against eating and body image disorders and benefits many indices of social and psychological well-being (Alleva et al., 2022; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b). As a result, the body image field seeks to cultivate positive body image and understand the factors by which it is either facilitated (e.g., Alleva et al., 2022) or inhibited (e.g., Austen & Griffiths, 2022). Whether one feels that their body is sexually desirable to others (and especially those whom one desires; Weaver & Byers, 2022) is thus relevant to the body image field, but to my knowledge, has received no attention (Woertman & van den Brink, 2012). In what follows, I argue it is time for the body image field to "think about sex" (Rubin, 1984, p. 147) as a factor that underpins positive body image.

The literature on body image and sexuality has focused almost exclusively on group differences in body image, such as between sexual majority (e.g., straight) and minority (e.g., gay and bisexual) populations or within sexual minority populations across different sexualities (e.g., gay versus bisexual men; Dahlenburg et al., 2020; Nowicki et al., 2022). These findings highlight that sexual orientation or identity (components of sexuality) may influence the degree to which individuals feel positively or negatively about their bodies. For example, a review by Nowicki and colleagues (2022) found small-to-moderate between-sexuality differences in body image, such as the drive for thinness (greater in men who have sex with men) or muscularity concerns (greater in straight men).

To some extent, these findings may relate to group-based gendered and sexual norms that reflect the indirect influence of sexual desire and desirability on body image. Austen and colleagues (2020) found that gay and bisexual men experience more weight-based discrimination than straight men, with earlier data (Foster-Gimbel & Engeln, 2016) suggesting men who have sex with men are more critical of potential sexual partners' weight. At the same time, straight men who endorse masculine norms report experiencing more frequent sexual objectification (Davids et al., 2019). In turn, endorsing normative masculinity and being sexually objectified positively correlate with a drive for muscularity in straight men. These findings dovetail to suggest that whether one ‘aligns’ with their sexual group’s norms of attractiveness influences their body image.

The association between sexuality and body image extends beyond group-based body image differences. Meta-analyses from Woertman and van den Brink (2012) and, more recently, Nowicki and colleagues (2022) have suggested several associations between dimensions of sexuality and body image. Evidence from men who have sex with men suggests that dimensions of sexuality, such as lower sexual efficacy, are associated with greater body image issues (Nowicki et al., 2022). Similar patterns arise in women, for whom

better genital self-image negatively correlates with sexual distress, and greater body satisfaction negatively correlates with discomfort at being seen naked by sexual or romantic partners (Woertman & van den Brink, 2012). Additionally, Amos and McCade (2016) suggest that, on average, regardless of gender or sexuality, greater body esteem correlates strongly with self-perceived sexual attractiveness (Pearson's *r* [hereafter *r*] = .45). In men, Hattie and colleagues (2022) found similar modest-to-strong relationships (*r*s = .28 – .62) between sexual esteem (e.g., perceptions of sexual competence) and several dimensions of body esteem (e.g., perceptions of sexual attractiveness, strength, height, etc.). Again, these results suggest that the extent to which one feels sexually attractive relates to how positively one feels about one's body.

The causative direction between body image and sexuality is not intuitive. Does body image anxiety lead to changes in one's perceptions of sexual attractiveness, or the reverse (Hattie et al., 2022)? For example, if one feels more positive about their body, perhaps this leads to more sexual confidence (e.g., "I feel good about my appearance *therefore* I feel sexy"). The reverse may also be true (e.g., "I look sexy *therefore* I feel good about my appearance"). Indeed, I believe both directions are plausible: positive body image may lead to feeling more sexually desirable, and simultaneously, feeling more sexually desirable may lead to a more positive body image.

Feeling Sexy: The Role of Feeling Sexually Desirable in Body Image

Sexual desirability describes how attractive, sexy, or 'fuckable' an one feels. Said differently, sexual desirability is the extent to which one feels they can elicit others' sexual desires (A. I. Green, 2008a, 2008b, 2011). In turn, I define sexual desire as an erotic motivation toward or sexual interest in particular people, situations, or objects (Gormezano et al., 2022). My conceptualization of sexual desirability builds upon a sexual fields framework

as theorized by Green (2008a, 2008b, 2014; see also Wade, 2022), especially the concept of embodied sexual capital outlined by Kaplan and Illouz (2022).

According to sexual field theory, sexual desirability is 'shaped' by sexual fields, the particular social and cultural norms dictating sexual desire and desirability within a particular context. Within these fields, certain physical appearances, behaviors, and affects accrue sexual capital depending on how well they 'fit' the field's underlying logic of desire (Wade, 2021). Individuals with a better fit accumulate sexual capital, which they can then 'spend' to attract romantic and sexual interest (D. Kaplan & Illouz, 2022). In other words, when one accumulates sexual capital, they become sexually desirable (i.e., their sexual capital becomes 'embodied'; D. Kaplan & Illouz, 2022).

Whether one 'fits' into the hierarchy of desire (i.e., 'pecking order') of their current sexual field depends upon both the field itself and the characteristics of the individual. Race, ethnicity, body shape and size (Austen & Griffiths, 2022) have been highlighted as influences on sexual capital and desirability (Shepherd et al., 2023). Research on these characteristics has highlighted that how sexually desirable one feels corresponds to some degree to one's feelings about one's body.

Regarding race and ethnicity, Green (2008b) found that Black gay men were sexually marginalized within sexual fields where Whiteness was prized. Black men were at the 'losing end' of this sexual hierarchy and thus were more likely to be seen as undesirable and excluded from sexual or romantic relationships. One informant in Green's (2008b) ethnography said, "Being black makes your opportunities different. I don't have the visibility to have the opportunities. There are white guys who just don't see you and don't want to see you" (p.39). Cascalheira and Smith (2020) extended this finding by showing that, among men who have sex with men, Asian men are less preferred as sexual partners than White, Black, and Latino men, while White men are preferred over Black and Latino men. These intra-

community preferences for White(r) features may have profound negative influences on men of color's body image (Chalmers et al., 2022; Jordens & Griffiths, 2022).

Research on anti-fat bias similarly suggests a similar relationship between sexual capital and its pursuant sexual desirability with body shape and size (Austen et al., 2022). Fat gay men are typically seen as less sexually desirable than their non-fat counterparts within sexual fields that favor leanness and muscularity (Whitesel, 2014). Foster-Gambel and Engeln (2016) found that men who have sex with men are substantially more likely than straight men to find fatness unattractive (Cohen's *d* [hereafter *d*] = .51) and ignore (*d* = -.33) or reject (*d* = -.71) potential fat romantic or sexual partners. Greater experiences of weight-based discrimination are associated with greater appearance concerns and disordered eating in mixed-gender samples (Hunger et al., 2020). Extending these findings to psychological well-being in general, Austen and Griffiths (2022) found that internalizing weight stigma predicts poorer psychological quality of life in men who have sex with men.

There appear to be multiple factors that influence sexual capital and, consequently, sexual desirability. Green (2008b) found that while Black gay men's race was marginalized within White sexual fields, these men were able to emphasize other aspects of their appearance (e.g., muscularity), behavior (e.g., sexual assertiveness/submissiveness), and affect (e.g., masculinity) to increase their available sexual capital (Wade, 2021). Some gay Black men may choose to perform particular stereotyped forms of hypermasculinity, catering towards their higher-status White partner's racialized desires and securing more sexual capital than they might otherwise. Moreover, changing from one sexual field to another may influence who does and does not feel or get to be seen as sexually desirable. Whitesel (2014) found that while a general lack of sexual desirability negatively influenced fat gay men's body image, this is not static. Instead, fat gay men's body image seemingly improved when

fatness was desired (e.g., at events celebrating fat gay men's bodies) and suffered when it was not (e.g., in the mainstream gay community broadly).

Sexual desirability is likely not a static influence on body image. Instead, the relationship between sexual desirability and body image may be dynamic, developing, changing, and unfolding across daily life. Koval and colleagues (2019) showed that everyday experiences of sexual objectification (e.g., cat-calling) predict greater self-objectification in women. Self-objectification, in turn, has been associated with negative body image in both sexual minority and majority women and men (Brewster et al., 2017; Daniels et al., 2020; Davids et al., 2019; see Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). These researchers were interested in the harmful effects of sexual objectification as it relates to self-concept in everyday life. I considered the possibility that positive experiences, such as feeling sexually desirable to others, may be similarly dynamic but beneficial to body image.

Before continuing, I will describe what I see as the differences between positive and negative sexualization as they pertain to body image (building on the distinction I outline in Chapter 2). Whether a particular experience is objectifying or elicits feeling sexually desirable likely depends on a range of psychological, relational, and contextual factors (Ward et al., 2023). For instance, unwanted sexualizing comments such as cat-calls are detrimental to women's body image (Koval et al., 2019). Yet wanted, but insufficient, sexualization from sexual partners may also negatively affect body image. For example, one woman in Weaver and Byers (2022) suggested compliments from her partner would make her "feel better", yet was disappointed after a lukewarm response, stating "they [the compliments] were … 'You look nice'… never 'You're sexy' or 'You're hot'" (p. 7). A similar pattern of contextual differences is found in sexual majority and minority men (Davids et al., 2019; McDonagh et al., 2018; Murray & Brotto, 2021). Whether an experience of sexualization is viewed as positive or negative may depend on the receiver's interest or consent to be sexualized, the

dyad's emotional closeness or relational trust, the physical location sexualization occurs in, among other variables.

Awareness of Sexual Desirability

People tend to be aware of their position within a sexual field's pecking order and their accrued 'amount' of sexual capital (A. I. Green, 2014; Ruppel, 2022; Wade, 2021). Thus, individual sexual actors are likely aware of how sexually desirable they are. Again, this is evidenced in the literature on sexualized racism. As one gay Asian American man in Han and Choi (2018) said of his experiences in White sexual fields, "… people just … see that I'm Asian and … they just walk by me without looking… So I feel marginalized, I feel isolated, I feel, you know, yeah, *not wanted*" (p. 13, emphasis added). Asian men who have sex with men's repeated experiences of sexual exclusion are associated with poorer self-esteem (Thai, 2020) and a heightened risk of disordered eating (Le et al., 2023). I argue that one's awareness of how sexually (un)desirable they may be a mechanism by which sexual desirability influences body image.

Why Focus on Men Who Have Sex with Men?

Prior research into men who have sex with men's communities suggests they are organized around structures and hierarchies of sexual desire and desirability (Fogarty & Walker, 2022; Hennen, 2008; Shepherd et al., 2023; Whitesel, 2014). These sexual hierarchies influence who is and is not considered sexually desirable. For example, across two field studies, Hennen (2008) found that bear and leathermen communities were organized by divergent sexual practices and aesthetics that gave rise to different standards of desirability. Bears were found to valorize 'regular guy' masculinity and to eroticize hairier and fatter bodies typically desexualized or stigmatized in gay communities (Austen & Griffiths, 2022; Foster-Gimbel & Engeln, 2016). Leathermen's desires were conversely organized around bondage, sadomasochistic aesthetics, hypermasculinity, and exaggerated

muscularity. For men who have sex with men, the extent to which one's body 'fits' the sexual aesthetics of their community clearly seems to underpin their positive body image. However, these logics of desirability may well underpin every sexual community, suggesting at the outset that future research on other communities is necessary (Silva, 2022).

Men who have sex with men's sexual desirability may be influenced by both minority (e.g., cisheteronormativity; Frost & Meyer, 2023; Meyer, 2003) and intraminority stressors (e.g., anti-fat dating preferences; Pachankis et al., 2020). Many of these stressors are pertinent to body image. Gendered social expectations may pressure men who have sex with men to be more masculine to avoid what Hennen (2008) termed the 'effeminacy effect'. For example, men who have sex with men may experience social pressure to appear masculine by increasing their muscularity, cultivating facial and body hair, wearing particular clothes (e.g., flannel; Hennen, 2008), and so on. In turn, a more masculine, and by extension 'straight(er)', appearance may protect men who have sex with men from homophobic violence or harassment, as well as increasing their sexual desirability (Austen et al., 2022; Meyer, 2003).

Intracommunity dating and sexual norms appear to leverage these wider social expectations regarding appearance and sexual desirability. Research on men who have sex with men's anti-fat dating preferences has suggested fat gay and bisexual men are typically viewed as more feminine and less sexually desirable than their non-fat counterparts (Austen & Griffiths, 2022; Whitesel, 2014). Despite recent evidence suggesting discrepancies between men who have sex with men's sexual preferences (typically less anti-fat) and their expectations of their community's sexual norms (typically viewed as more anti-fat; Flave-Novak & Coleman, 2019), the belief that fatness is viewed as unattractive persists as an organizing principle of who is and is not seen as sexually desirable (Foster-Gimbel & Engeln, 2016; Pachankis et al., 2020). Taken together, such inter- and intra-community stressors

likely dovetail to increase the relevance of sexual desirability for men who have sex with men's body image by providing two complementary sources of appearance pressure.

The Current Study

I investigated the dynamic relationship between sexual desirability and body satisfaction in everyday life using experience sampling. Here, I asked whether sexual desirability and body satisfaction are bidirectionally related – does prior body satisfaction predict current sexual desirability, and vice versa? Experience sampling is one such method to answer questions regarding dynamic relationships by taking many repeated measurements over a relatively brief period (in this study, a maximum of 56 observations per participant over a week). Researchers can leverage these data to understand processes and relationships simultaneously at the within-person level (i.e., the relationships between variables and as they unfold over time for individual people) and the more stable, trait-like 'between-persons' level (Hamaker, 2012; Koval et al., 2021; Wrzus & Neubauer, 2022). For the current study, experience sampling allowed us to: (1) investigate the dynamic relationship between sexual desirability and body satisfaction at the level of the individual (i.e., look 'within-person'; Hamaker, 2012) and (2) maximize my data's ecological validity by minimizing recall bias such that my results better reflect in-situ relationships.

Looking 'Within-persons'

To my knowledge, all published research on sexuality and its role in body image has been cross-sectional (Nowicki et al., 2022; Woertman & van den Brink, 2012). These data do not demonstrate how individuals' experiences of sexual desirability and body satisfaction may be related as cross-sectional associations (e.g., trait-level correlations) cannot generalize to within-person relationships except under prohibitive assumptions inappropriate in psychological research (i.e., ergodicity; see Hamaker, 2012). To illustrate, imagine the relationship between average (i.e., between-person) painkiller use and pain. This relationship

is likely positive – individuals who take more painkillers on average experience greater average levels of pain. However, this between-persons relationship does not correspond to the within-persons relationships. For separate individuals across time, the relationship between painkillers and pain is likely the opposite of the cross-sectional relationship – when one takes a painkiller, their pain decreases (i.e., there is a negative relationship). There are also likely variations for the within-person benefits of painkiller use influenced by between-person variables. While painkillers still reduce pain for everyone, they likely reduce pain more effectively for someone who uses fewer painkillers on average. As such, to understand how sexual desirability and body satisfaction influence one another, I argue that we ought to look within-person.

As I argued above, the relationship between how sexually desirable men who have sex with men feel and how satisfied they are with their bodies is likely dynamic rather than static. Importantly, how sexually desirable one feels is likely influenced by both stable factors such as race, body shape and size, socioeconomic status, and so on, but also by *in situ* field-specific sexual logic and the concomitant sexual capital among other day-to-day influences (e.g., random variation from particular social interactions, physical or psychological states such as being hungry or sad, etc.). As a result, I chose to investigate this interrelationship via experience sampling to quantify the extent to which sexual desirability and body satisfaction overlap, interact, and change across everyday life (Koval et al., 2019, 2021).

Study Aim and Hypothesis

This study aimed to quantify the relationship between feeling sexually desirable and body satisfaction in a sample of Australian Grindr users. I had two hypotheses. First, I predicted that feeling sexually desirable would positively correlate with body satisfaction within- (separate individual's correlation between sexual desirability and body satisfaction) and between-person (the correlation between person-mean sexual desirability and body

satisfaction). Second, I predicted that feeling sexually desirable and body satisfaction would be bidirectionally related, such that either variable would predict the other (i.e., the cross-lagged regressive effect) across time.

Method

Ethics and Open Science

I received ethics approval from the University of Melbourne (23352). I have made my data, code, and output available on the Open Science Framework (OSF).

Procedure

Participants were recruited through Grindr, a dating app popular among men who have sex with men. Participants were recruited in two rounds, between 3rd May 2022 to 4th May 2022 and 22nd May 2022. Interested users clicked on the study advertisement and were redirected to the baseline Qualtrics survey, where they were invited to participated in a study on how and why body image changes throughout the day for men who have sex with men. Following the plain language statement and consent form, respondents self-reported demographics, weight, and height (see Measures below) and provided an email address. Responses were screened for eligibility, after which eligible participants were sent an email containing a link to download SEMA^3 (O'Brien et al., 2024) and information on how to participate in the experience sampling phase of the study. Participants were eligible if they were over 18 years of age, were fluent in English, lived in Australian, and had provided an email address.

Participants were then prompted to complete eight experience sampling surveys daily for seven days. Surveys were signal-contingent and sent at semi-random times each hour between 8:00 am and 10:30 pm, with a maximum interval between surveys of 45 minutes. As this study was part of a larger project, participants completed 26 momentary questions per survey. I only report on the five questions that were relevant to my hypotheses.

Participants

From a total sample of 530 Grindr users, I excluded those who had fewer than 20 observations (n = 266) to minimize bias in my estimates of lagged parameters (see *Analysis* below; Asparouhov & Muthén, 2019; Schultzberg & Muthén, 2018). I had a final sample size of 264 Grindr users who were predominately White, gay, and cis men. Their demographics are shown in Table 3. Participants completed an average of 51.81 out of 56 surveys (SD = 3.26, range = 34 to 59[8]), with a compliance rate of 92.53% on average (SD = 5.82%, range = 60.71% to 105.36%). The number of observations from my participants was 13,679.

Table 3

Participants' Demographics

Variable		*n*	Percent
Race	Asian	39	14.77
	Aboriginal Australian	1	0.38
	Middle Eastern or North African	4	1.52
	Mixed Race	18	6.82
	Pacific Islander	3	1.14
	South American	6	2.27
	South Asian	4	1.52
	White	183	69.32
	Other	1	0.28
	Prefer not to say	3	1.14
Gender	Cis man	245	92.80
	Non-binary	13	4.92
	Trans man	5	1.89
Sexuality	Bisexual	36	13.634
	Gay	202	76.52
	Pansexual	9	3.41
	Queer	5	1.89
	Questioning	3	1.14
	Straight	1	0.38
	Other	4	1.52
	Prefer not to say	3	1.14

		Range	
Variable	*M* (*SD*)	Min	Max
Age	34.11 (10.33)	18	69
BMI	26.65 (6.00)	14.79	53.27

[8] Three participants were sent over 56 surveys due to a technical error.

Note. *M* = mean, *SD* = standard deviation, *BMI* = body mass index. Missing data are not included.

Measures

Baseline Measures

Participants were asked to self-report their racial and ethnic identity, gender and sexuality, age, height, and weight. These latter two variables were used to calculate body mass index (BMI). I used these variables to describe the sample population, rather than as variables in my analyses.

State Measures

Sexual Desirability. I calculated sexual desirability as the average response on two face-valid items: "How sexually attractive do you feel right now?" and "How sexually desirable do you feel right now?". Both items were rated on a 101-point scale where 0 is "Not at all," and 100 is "Extremely." I found good within-person reliability, r^w = .76 (97% CI, .75, .77]), and excellent between-persons reliability, r^b = .99 (97% CI [.98, .99]).

Body Satisfaction. I calculated body satisfaction as the average response to three face-valid items used previously in Griffiths and Steanovski (2019) and Stevens and Griffiths (2020): "How satisfied with your appearance are you right now?", "How satisfied with your weight are you right now?" and "How satisfied with your body shape are you right now?". Each item was rated on a 101-point scale where 0 is "Extremely dissatisfied," and 100 is "Extremely satisfied." I computed the average within- and between-persons correlation between all three items as my measure of reliability. I found fine within-persons, r^w = .49 (97% CI [.49, .51]), and excellent between-persons reliability, r^b = .92. (97% CI [.91, .93]).

Analysis

I wrangled the data and conducted correlation analyses in R-Studio Version 4.4.2. I used the *tidyverse* suite of packages (Wickham et al., 2019) to wrangle the data, and the *brms*

package (Bürkner, 2017), an overlay of Stan (Stan Development Team, 2022), to compute correlations. I conducted my main analyses in *Mplus* version 8.11 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017).

Correlation Analyses

To summarize the relationship between sexual desirability and body satisfaction, I calculated within-person and between-person Pearson's *r* correlations. For within-persons, I estimated the correlation between sexual desirability and body satisfaction, summarizing these as the pooled correlation across participants. For between-persons, I estimated the correlation between person-mean body satisfaction and sexual desirability.

Dynamic Structural Equation Modeling

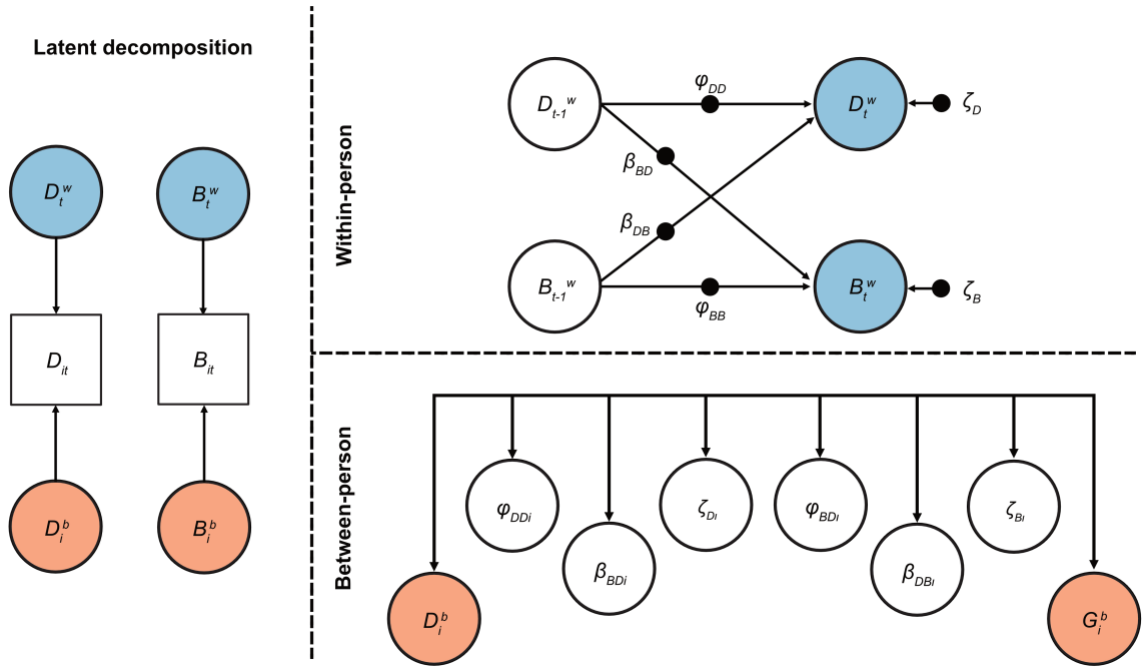
I tested the relationship between sexual desirability and body satisfaction using a dynamic structural equation model (DSEM), a statistical technique which combines multilevel, time-series, and structural equation modeling. As a result, DSEMs can test complex and dynamic relationships between variables in nested data, as is the case for intensive longitudinal data (Hamaker et al., 2018, 2023).

I tested the DSEM model shown in Figure 3. The leftmost panel shows the decomposition of within- and between-persons variance. Each variable (sexual desirability and body satisfaction) was measured for each person (*i*) at each timepoint (*t*). Within-person (shown in the upper right-hand panel), I modeled the bidirectional relationship between sexual desirability and body satisfaction at the within-persons level (for person *i* across timepoints *t*). I modeled the autoregressive (the same variable predicting itself across time) and cross-lagged (one variable predicting the other variable across time) effects between sexual desirability and body satisfaction across consecutive observations (i.e., lag 1; Koval et al., 2021) for each person. I centered the variables and standardized the estimates within-person using latent means (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2019) and variances (Schuurman et al., 2016), which I summarized as the average effect across participants. I modelled random

innovations to accounting for person-levels differences in factors which contribute to both variables unaccounted for in the model.

Figure 3

Path Diagram for Multilevel Bivariate Dynamic Structural Equation Model Testing the Relationship Between Sexual Desirability and Body Satisfaction



Note. *D* = sexual desirability, *B* = body satisfaction, φ = autoregressive effects, β = cross-lagged effects, ζ = random error variances. The within-person parameters are estimated across time (given by subscript *t*) for each person (given by subscript *i*). All autoregressive and cross-lagged effects are modeled between consecutive timepoints (i.e., lag 1), with the current timepoint denoted by *t* and the previous timepoint denoted by *t* - 1. Between-persons, person-level parameters for each within-person variable (including person-mean sexual desirability and body satisfaction) are correlated, represented by the arrows.

Between-persons, I allowed all of the person-level estimates of the within-person parameters to be correlated (shown in the lower right-hand panel of Figure 3). I tested the

relationships between person-mean sexual desirability, body satisfaction, and person-level dynamics (e.g., the autoregressive parameters).

Bayesian Estimation

I used Bayesian estimation for all of the analyses. Each analysis was conducted using four chains of Markov Chain Monte Carlo, setting an *R*-hat mixing criteria of less than 1.1 . For the DSEM, I used *Mplus*'s uninformative priors because they give estimates similar to maximum likelihood estimation (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2019). I summarize each estimate with the report the mean of the posterior distribution, the posterior distributions standard deviation (*SD*), alongside a 97% credible interval (CI).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Means, *SD*s, and ICCs for the momentary variables are given in Table 4. The average person-means for both variables were below the scale's midpoint. The within- and between-person *SD*s and varying ICCs suggested that participants' scores on either variable tended to vary within narrow portions of the response scale, with greater variance between participants mean levels of either variable, indicating that both variables were more trait-like (stable and enduring) than state-like (varying and context-dependent).

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics for Body Satisfaction and Sexual Desirability

	Sample size			*SD*		
Measure	*N*	*T*	*M*	Within	Between	vICC
Sexual desirability	264	9,707	46.15	11.38	22.32	.88 [.76, .94]
Body satisfaction	264	9,697	44.83	8.77	21.94	.96 [.95, .97]

Note. *N* denotes the total number of participants, *T* denotes the number of non-missing observations per variable, *M* denotes mean, *SD* denotes standard deviation, and vICC denotes varying intraclass correlation. 97% Bayesian credible intervals are given in square brackets.

Correlation Analyses

I found that sexual desirability and body satisfaction were strongly positively correlated within-, r^w = .42 (97% CI [.40, .44]) and between-persons, r^b = .91 (97% CI [.88, .96]). Figure 4 shows the distribution of the within-persons correlations, while Figure 5 shows the scatterplot of person-mean sexual desirability against person-mean body satisfaction. For 86.36% of participants (n = 228), feeling more sexually (un)desirable was associated with greater (dis)satisfaction with their bodies (i.e., $r > .10$). The relationship between sexual desirability and body satisfaction was negligible (i.e., $-.10 < r < .10$) for 11.36% of participants (n = 30), or negative (i.e., $r \leq -.10$) for 2.27% of participants (n = 6). Between-persons, those who felt more satisfied with their bodies on average also tended to feel more sexually desirable on average.

Figure 4

Histogram of Within-Person Pearson's r Correlations Between Momentary Body Satisfaction and Sexual Desirability

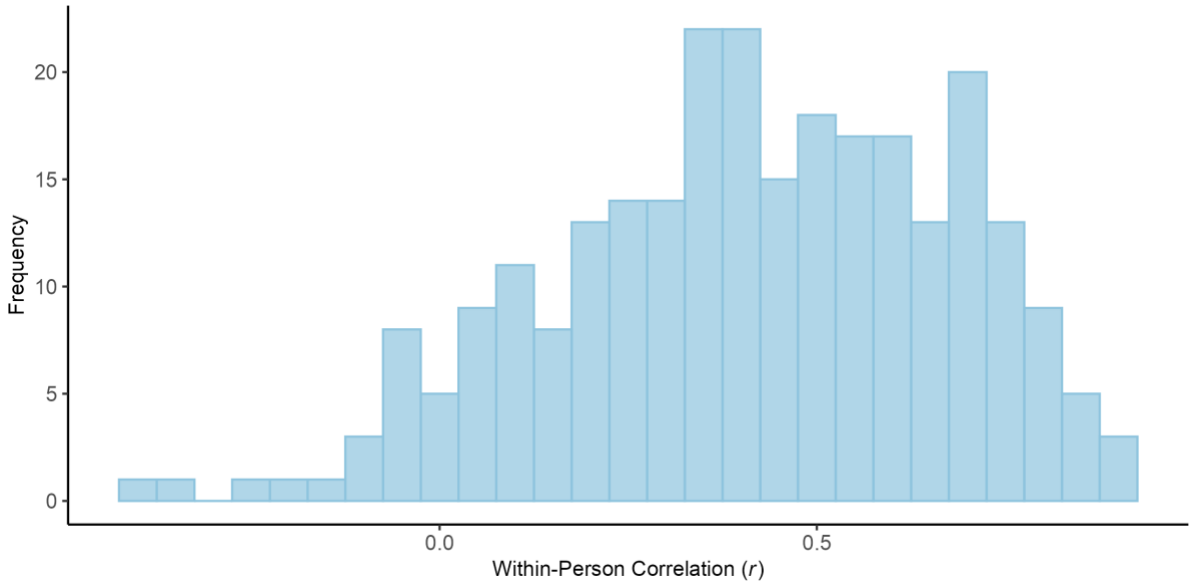
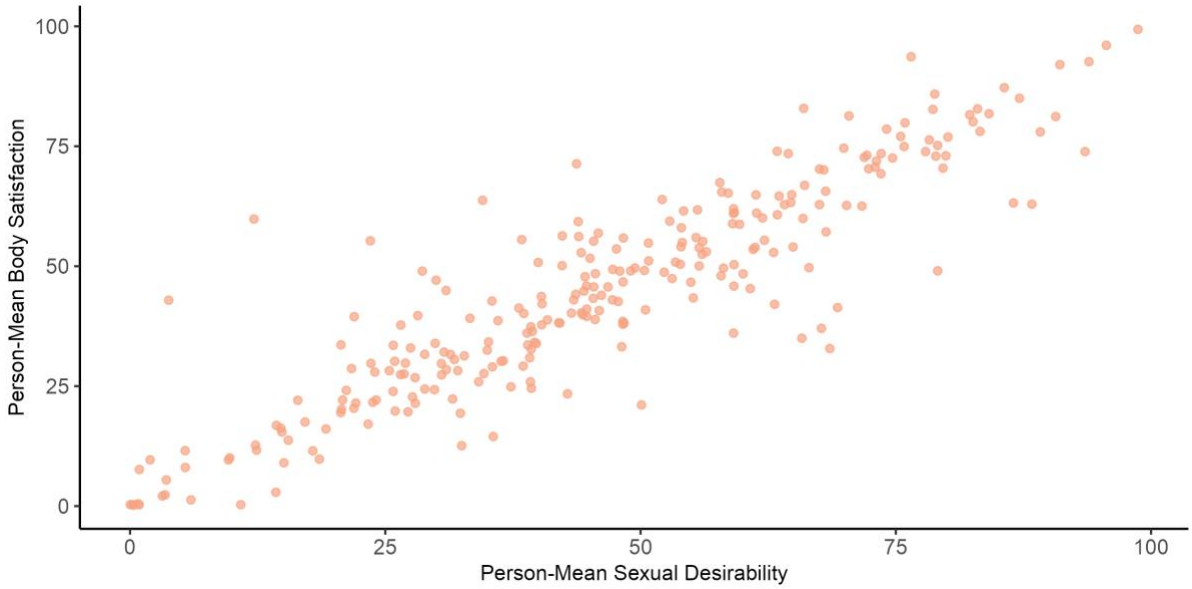


Figure 5

Scatterplot of Person-Mean Body Satisfaction and Person-Mean Sexual Desirability



I found some individual differences in the within-person correlations. Interestingly, not only did the relationship between sexual desirability and body satisfaction differ from the median within-person correlation and the between-person correlation for some participants (i.e., weaker or stronger), it was absent or even reversed for others. As such, for some men who have sex with men, feeling more sexually desirable is either irrelevant to how satisfied they are with their bodies or associated with feeling more *dis*satisfied with their bodies, and vice versa.

Dynamic Structural Equation Model

The standardized within-person DSEM parameters and the between-person correlations between these parameters are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5

Summary of Within- and Between-Person Dynamic Structural Equation Model Testing the Bidirectional Relationship Between Sexual Desirability and Body Satisfaction

Parameter	Estimate	Posterior *SD*	97% CI 1.5%	97% CI 98.5%	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
1. D	46.43	1.45	43.29	49.60	–							
2. B	45.06	1.42	41.98	48.14	.91 [.88, .93]	–						
3. φ_{DD}	0.23	0.01	0.20	0.25	.18 [.02, 0.34]	.14 [-.03, .30]	–					
4. φ_{BB}	0.23	0.01	0.21	0.25	.04 [-.14, 0.21]	.03 [-.15, .20]	-.65 [-.77, -.50]	–				
5. β_{DB}	0.19	0.01	0.18	0.21	.02 [-.15, .19]	.03 [-.14, .20]	-.65 [-.76, -.51]	.84 [.75, .90]	–			
6. β_{BD}	0.17	0.01	0.16	0.18	.22 [.04, .38]	.23 [.06, .39]	.80 [.71, .87]	-.64 [-.75, -.51]	-.42 [-.58, -.26]	–		
7. ζ_D	0.66	0.01	0.64	0.67	.09 [-.05, .24]	.07 [-.07, .21]	.06 [-.11, .23]	-.04 [-.22, 0.13]	-.02 [-.19, .16]	.07 [-.11, .25]	–	
8. ζ_B	0.66	0.01	0.65	0.67	.13 [-.01, .27]	.13 [-.01, .27]	-.05 [-.21, .11]	.05 [-.12, .21]	.03 [-.14, .20]	.08 [-.09, .24]	.80 [.73, .85]	–

Note. Estimate denotes the within-person standardized effects, posterior *SD* denotes the standard deviation of the posterior distribution, and CI denotes credible intervals. Intercepts are denoted by D and B, autoregressive effects by φ, cross-lagged effects by β, and residual variances by ζ. Bracketed values denote 97% Bayesian credible intervals.

Every within-persons effect in the model was meaningfully different from zero. Accounting for both the autoregressive effects and random residual variances, the within-persons relationship between body satisfaction and sexual desirability appears to be bidirectional – prior body satisfaction positively predicts current sexual desirability, and prior sexual desirability positively predicts current body satisfaction. These results suggest that sexual desirability and body satisfaction cyclically reinforce one another across time, supporting my second hypothesis.

Although the cross-lagged effects appear to be approximately equivalent: prior sexual desirability appears to contribute at least as much to current body satisfaction as does previous body satisfaction to current sexual desirability. Lastly, the within-person model accounted for a mean of 34% of the variance in sexual desirability (R^2_w = .34, 97% CI [.33, .36]) and body satisfaction (R^2_w = .34, 97% CI [.33, .35]).

Between-persons, I found several correlations between the person-level estimates. Person-mean body satisfaction was positively correlated with the cross-lagged effect of sexual desirability on body satisfaction, suggesting that participants for whom past sexual desirability contributes more to current body satisfaction tend to feel more satisfied with their body on average. I found a similar positive correlation between person-mean sexual desirability and sexual desirability's autoregressive effect and cross-lagged effect on body satisfaction. I did not find a relationship between person-mean sexual desirability and body satisfaction with the autoregressive effect of sexual desirability or body satisfaction nor the cross-lagged effect of body satisfaction predicting sexual desirability, however.

Regarding the correlations between the dynamic parameters, I found that the autoregressive effect of sexual desirability was negatively related to the autoregressive effect of body satisfaction and the cross-lagged effect of body satisfaction on sexual desirability. These

results suggest that if one's feeling of sexual desirability is more resistant to change, their body satisfaction tends to be more unstable and has less influence on sexual desirability over time. The autoregressive effect of sexual desirability was positively related to the cross-lagged effect of sexual desirability on body satisfaction, however, suggesting that if one's experience of sexual desirability is more resistant to change, it contributes more to body satisfaction over time.

I found a similar pattern of results for the autoregressive effect of body satisfaction, which was positively correlated with the cross-lagged effect of body satisfaction on sexual desirability and negatively correlated with the cross-lagged effect of sexual desirability on body satisfaction. These findings, as above, suggest that when body satisfaction is more resistant to change, it contributes more to sexual desirability across time, while sexual desirability contributes less to body satisfaction across time. Finally, the cross-lagged effects were negatively correlated with one another. This may suggest a system of relative investment whereby if an individual's feeling of sexual desirability is more important to their body satisfaction across time, then body satisfaction is less important for sexual desirability, and vice versa.

Discussion

In this chapter, I aimed to quantify the relationship between feeling sexually desirable and body satisfaction in Australian Grindr users. In doing so, I have shown that understanding and addressing sexual desirability may be critically important to the body image field. Using a Bayesian approach, I found support for my hypotheses that sexual desirability and body satisfaction would be positively correlated within- and between-persons (hypothesis 1) and bidirectionally related across time in everyday life (hypothesis 2). Overall, I have shown that feeling sexually desirable appears closely related to how satisfied Australian men who have sex with men people feel about their bodies.

Interpretation

Supporting my first hypothesis, I found strong within- and between-correlations between sexual desirability and body satisfaction. Within-persons, my data suggest that when men who have sex with men feel sexually (un)desirable they feel more (dis)satisfied with their bodies. Between-persons, my data suggest that men who have sex with men who feel more sexually (un)desirable on average tend to feel more (dis)satisfaction with their bodies on average. These findings align with the prior literature and confirm the intuitive relationship between sexual desirability and body image.

The within-person relationship did not hold for every participant, however. I found a minority of participants for whom the correlation between sexual desirability and body satisfaction was either negligible or negative. For the former, I speculate that these participants may experience sexual desirability and body image as separate or detached – they feel (un)attractive regardless of their perceptions of their appearance (or vice versa). For the latter, influences on appearance (e.g., comments by sexual partners, working out or exercising) may signal sexual objectification (Brewster et al., 2017; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). For these participants, experiences that typically elicit feelings of desirability may instead signal feelings of denigration as a sexual object (Koval et al., 2019), triggering self-surveillance, body shame, or a heightened awareness of one's (un)desirability (Ward et al., 2023). Why some experiences differentially trigger self-objectification versus feeling sexually desirable, and the individual or contextual differences why some might perceive these experiences as sexually objectifying versus empowering, remains an open question for future research, however. At a conceptual level, my findings reinforce Hamaker's (2012) argument to look within-persons to characterize

general laws (e.g., the median within-person correlations) and individual differences (i.e., the distribution of these correlations).

Supporting my second hypothesis, when accounting for the variables' carryover (i.e., the autoregressive effects), I found that sexual desirability and body satisfaction were bidirectionally related and mutually reinforcing across time. Said differently, one's prior sexual desirability predicts their current body satisfaction, while, simultaneously, one's prior body satisfaction predicts their current sexual desirability. The effects seem to be relatively on par: sexual desirability appears to have an equivalent effect on body satisfaction as body satisfaction has on sexual desirability.

Between-person, I found that average sexual desirability and body satisfaction and their dynamics across time (cross-lagged and autoregressive parameters) show complex correlation patterns. For example, whether an individual feels sexually desirable *and* how resistant that feeling is to change over time influences how satisfied one feels with their body (and vice versa). Indeed, there appears to be some push-and-pull between the cross-lagged effects. This suggests an intriguing element of individual difference: when sexual desirability is more important for body satisfaction, body satisfaction tends to be less important for sexual desirability, and vice versa.

Finally, I found that person-mean sexual desirability and body satisfaction tended to be greater in those for whom sexual desirability contributed more to body satisfaction over time. I did not find a similar relationship between person-mean sexual desirability or body satisfaction and the cross-lagged effect of body satisfaction on sexual desirability, however. I speculate this might be because the potential influences contributing to feeling sexually desirable, such as pursuing or being pursued by a sexual partner, receiving compliments or sexual advances, having

sex, and so on, are more relevant to body satisfaction than the reverse. Positive body image includes diverse constructs, such as body appreciation, functionality, and positivity (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b), whereas sexual desirability may be narrower. Whether one appreciates the functionality of their body, for example, may not be as relevant to whether they feel sexually desirable (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b), outside of genital functioning (e.g, erectile dysfunction; Emetu et al., 2021; McDonagh et al., 2018). Of course, disability scholars argue that physically disabled people's body functionality is fundamental to their sexual desirability, especially where built and social environments render sexual or romantic relationships difficult to establish or maintain (Chambers, 2023; Emens, 2009; Taleporos & McCabe, 2001).

Implications

My results confirm the intuition I stated at the beginning of this chapter: sexual desirability, the extent to which one feels sexy, attractive, hot, or fuckable, is relevant to body image. As I have argued above, if the body image field wishes to cultivate and understand the factors that bar individuals from positive body image, it appears that sexual desirability ought to be a focus of study. My findings suggest that sexual desirability may be an element that prevents or facilitates body satisfaction, perhaps insofar as it should be considered an element of positive body image (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b). Indeed, my results suggest that sexual desirability may influence body satisfaction more so than the reverse. Although future work will be necessary to determine whether or not sexual desirability is an element of or influence on positive body image, my results nonetheless suggest that its importance to body satisfaction should not be ignored.

As research on sexualized racism (C. S. Han & Choi, 2018), colorism (Chalmers et al., 2022; Jordens & Griffiths, 2022), and anti-fat bias (Austen et al., 2022; Whitesel, 2014) has

highlighted, there appear to be systematic differences in who does and does not get to feel sexually desirable. Understood from a sexual field theory perspective, these differences may be tied to racialized, gendered, and appearance-based distribution of sexual capital, highlighting one's social and cultural context's dynamic role in sexuality and body image. These trends also seem to mirror who does and does not get to experience positive body image. These data dovetail with previous work to suggest that sexual desirability may be one factor that underlines systematic differences in body image outcomes. As a result, the efficacy of existing and future interventions and research to identify and address inequalities in body image may be improved by addressing or incorporating an understanding of sexual desirability. To this end, measures of trait and state sexual desirability are called for from future research.

My findings suggest that sexual desirability likely has a context- or person-dependent influence on body image, evidencing sexual desirability's connection to embodied sexual capital. Although some people tend to feel more or less sexually desirable, how sexually desirable they feel fluctuates across everyday life. Alongside previous work, my data suggest sexual desirability is contextual, especially across time and between people. In some circumstances or people, feeling sexually desirable may facilitate positive self-image, such as when one is genuinely desired by their sexual or romantic partner (Murray & Brotto, 2021; Weaver & Byers, 2022).

Pursuing sexual desirability may lead individuals to overinvest in achieving or maintaining a particular appearance, behavior, or affect (Wade, 2021). Such an overinvestment in obtaining a 'sexually desirable appearance', for instance, likely perpetuates appearance stigma and discrimination that is detrimental to body image. The risk of overvaluing sexual desirability as a perpetuating factor in anti-fat bias is illustrated by a participant in Hammack and colleagues (2022) who reported, after indicating he used to be fat,

> I felt like no one would want me as, like, a boyfriend. But then I lost the weight. I got some confidence back. I was able to find more guys who were attracted to me and more guys who would actually wanna go out on dates with me. (p. 2419)

Sexualized anti-fat bias appears to have led this participant to overvalue his weight in his experience of sexual desirability (Austen et al., 2022). Indeed, the pursuit of sexual desirability may result from and reinforce sexualized discrimination, promote appearance ideals, and exacerbate negative body image (A. I. Green, 2008b). This may be especially relevant for individuals with minoritized appearances, especially vis-à-vis race, gender, body shape and size, and the intersections thereof. Body image researchers and clinicians should take care not to promote an overvaluation of appearance in participants' and patients' feelings of sexual desirability. That being said, it is possible laypeople may see sexual desirability as synonymous with positive body image. For most feeling sexy and liking how they look may be indissociable: promoting sexual desirability may be essential to promoting positive body image, but ought to be done without yoking feeling sexually desirable to obtaining certain (idealized) appearances.

Future Directions

My findings are limited to body satisfaction. Although body satisfaction is an important component of positive body image (Alleva et al., 2022), it is not the only component (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b). While future research should extend my current findings to other dimensions, I see no reason why sexual desirability should not be related to a range of body image constructs (as discussed above). For example, body appreciation, the extent to which one respects and treats one’s body favorably, has been linked to sexual functioning, including arousal and orgasm (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015a). Sexual desirability may be related to body

appreciation as it is to body satisfaction – perhaps it is easier to respect one's body if one sees it as sexually desirable.

Although my data suggest my measure of sexual desirability had good reliability, a two-item measure is never ideal (see Eisinga et al., 2013). The construct validity of a two-item measure is questionable and likely unable to measure sexual desirability comprehensively. For instance, other content-valid experiences (feeling sexy, fuckable, sexually wanted by others, capable of arousing others, etc.) ought to be included in future measures. Relatedly, I also could not give a more in-depth analysis of the psychometric properties (e.g., internal consistency) of the measure of sexual desirability over-and-above an inter-item correlation. To address both issues, future research should extend the measure of sexual desirability used here to develop and validate a scale for use in future experience sampling studies.

My recruitment from Grindr may have influenced my results. Presumably, as users of a dating and hook-up app, the relationship between sexual desirability and body satisfaction may be pronounced for men who have sex with men on Grindr. However, Grindr's ubiquity likely renders this limitation moot. In an Australian context, between 42.8% to 50.1% of men who have sex with men are estimated to have met a sexual partner via Grindr between 2021 and 2022 (Broady, Chan, MacGibbon, Bavinton, Mao, Cripps, et al., 2022; Broady, Chan, MacGibbon, Bavinton, Mao, McKenzie, et al., 2022). These numbers are likely even higher if we consider some men who have sex with men may use Grindr but not meet partners via the app. Therefore, participants recruited through Grindr likely represent a good cross-section of the community, suggesting my results may apply to Australian men who have sex with men writ large. Still, I recommend that future research recruit participants from diverse sources, rather than Grindr exclusively, to address any limitations of only looking at app users.

Finally, prior work suggests sexual desirability is dynamically influenced by a range of factors, such as navigating sexual fields (A. I. Green, 2008b; Wade, 2021) or sexual and romantic interactions (Murray & Brotto, 2021; Weaver & Byers, 2022). While my data provide evidence that the relationship between sexual desirability and body satisfaction is dynamic, it does not suggest specific *in situ* influences. Future work should identify specific environments (e.g., gyms versus nightclubs) and social factors (e.g., compliments or rejection from sexual partners) and the extent to which they affect moment-to-moment sexual desirability. As well, further research is needed to conceptually differentiate sexual objectification (see Koval et al., 2019) from sexual desirability.

Conclusion

I end this chapter by re-evoking the epigraph from Rubin (1984, p. 147) as a call to action: "the time has come to think about sex." Feeling sexually desirable influences how satisfied Grindr users are with their bodies. My findings suggest that the field of body image should reckon with sexual desirability and its role in body image. An appropriate first step for future work is to extend my findings to other sexual communities. Here, I found evidence that (predominately) men who have sex with men feelings of sexual desirability predict and strongly correlate with how satisfied they feel with their bodies, and vice versa. What influences this relationship and the factors contributing to its dynamics across time should be better understood. To this effect, I suggest that future qualitative work is necessary to understand better how feeling desirable is experienced relative to body image. Measures of state and trait sexual desirability are also called for to give the field a foundation for future work. My results support the intuition that feeling sexy and liking how one looks are closely related, so much so that it demands urgent attention.

Chapter 5: Masculinity, not Femininity, is Bidirectionally Related to Sexual Desirability Among Grindr Users in Australia

Men who have sex with men's sexual status appears to be structured around masculinity and femininity (Austen et al., 2022; Hammack et al., 2022; Hennen, 2008; Pachankis et al., 2020). Recent evidence (Cascalheira & Smith, 2020; Gerrard et al., 2022; Thai et al., 2025) suggests that masculine men who have sex with men are seen as more attractive, while their feminine counterparts are seen as less attractive, findings consistent with femmephobia research (Hoskin, 2019, 2020). This research has focused on men who have sex with men's perceptions of others' gender expression and attractiveness. Whether men who have sex with men's view of their own gender, and its influence on whether they see themselves as sexually desirable – that is, capable of attracting others' sexual desires – has received comparatively little attention.

The kinds of gender expression that are socially and sexually acceptable are also influenced by men who have sex with men's membership in sexual subcultures (hereafter, gay subcultures; Hennen, 2008). Gay subcultures are communities of men who have sex with men organized around shared aesthetics or appearances, sexual practices, or marginalization (Franklin et al., 2022), and articulate standards of gender expression and sexual desirability that frequently differ from more general norms (Silva, 2022). Membership in some gay subcultures may increase or decrease the relationships among masculinity, femininity, and sexual desirability. While twinks' (skinny, effeminate men) may see themselves as more sexually desirable when they are more feminine, for others, such as leatherman (muscular, hypermasculine men), the reverse is more probable (Hennen, 2008).

How does gender expression affect whether men who have sex with men see themselves as sexually desirable in everyday life? How might men who have sex with men's membership in

particular gay subcultures influence these relationships? By analyzing experience sampling data from a sample of Grindr users in Australia, I aim (1) to quantify the relationship between gender expression (operationalized as how masculine and how feminine participants felt) and sexual desirability, and (2) to test whether identification with specific gay subcultures influences these relationships.

Anti-Effeminacy and Its Effect on Men Who Have Sex with Men's Sexual Desirability

Men are adjured to be masculine and unfeminine (Bourdieu, 2007; Carrigan et al., 1985; Connell, 2005, 2023; Hennen, 2023). Failure to present oneself as sufficiently masculine, or as feminine, is often met with femmephobia: the denigration, devaluation, and marginalization of femininity (Hoskin, 2019, 2020). For men, femmephobia is often termed anti-effeminacy (Gul & Uskul, 2021; Hennen, 2008; Sánchez & Vilain, 2012).

Effeminacy refers to the ways in which men present femininity, especially where their appearance, affect, or behavior is 'womanly' or 'unmanly' (Hammack et al., 2022; Hennen, 2023; Sánchez & Vilain, 2012). There is a close association between the effeminate man and 'homosexuality' (Gul & Uskul, 2021; Pascoe, 2005, 2012; Sánchez & Vilain, 2012). Effeminacy is in part stigmatized because of, as Hennen (2008) described, "the discursive construction of the male homosexual as a 'failed' or '*feminized'* man" (p. 11, emphasis added). Men who are seen as effeminate are more likely to be seen as gay (Gul & Uskul, 2021), and therefore as less socially and sexually desirable (Bailey et al., 1997; Gerrard et al., 2022). Straight (e.g., Gul & Uskul, 2021) and gay and bisexual (e.g., Sánchez & Vilain, 2012) men alike typically invest considerable psychological and social energy to avoid being seen as effeminate (e.g., in gay and biseual men, see Hennen, 2008; e.g., in young and predominately heterosexual men, see Pascoe, 2012).

Femininity marks men as having failed in their social and sexual roles as men, a process Hoskin (2020) termed feminine demotion. Where men do not sufficiently conform to masculine expectations, they take on an unintelligible gender position, one that is responded to with escalating forms of social, psychological, and physical violence (Hoskin et al., 2024; Pascoe, 2012). Through a concurrent process, masculine promotion (Hoskin, 2020), men who adopt masculinity are insulated from gender-related criticism, insofar as they continue to maintain that masculinity (Vandello et al., 2008). For men who have sex with men, masculinity may be associated with sexual status because it is associated with protection, privilege, and (cisheterosexual) 'normalcy.' The association between sexual status and gender expression is also likely mutually reinforcing. To wit, men who are masculine gain more sexual status, and hence are seen as more sexually desirable; men who are sexually desirable come to be seen as sufficiently masculine and unfeminine.

The pressures to be masculine and unfeminine comes from both outside and within men who have sex with men's communities. In broader cisheterosexual society, men who have sex with men face social marginalization and anti-gay violence, especially from other men (Gul & Uskul, 2021), and cisheterosexual men in particular (Hoskin et al., 2024; Morrison et al., 2019). As Hoskin and colleagues (2024) found among 417 straight men, greater femmephobia was associated with both benign forms of social exclusion (e.g., avoidance of gays) and, at the extreme, physical anti-gay violence (e.g., gay bashing). From within their communities, qualitative evidence suggests men who have sex with men engage in consistent policing of their own and others' gender expressions (Austen et al., 2022; Hammack et al., 2022).

One form the intra-community policing of gender takes is the distribution of sexual status, and hence sexual desirability, among men who have sex with men (A. I. Green, 2008a,

2008b). Whether men who have sex with men are seen as sexually desirable is yoked to whether they are masculine, among other factors (e.g., wealth; Pachankis et al., 2020). Femininity comes at a social and sexual cost for men who have sex with men. Feminine men, as opposed to masculine men, are typically passed over as potential sex partners (Cascalheira & Smith, 2020), and do not attract others' romantic and sexual interest (Bailey et al., 1997).

Gender Expression's Relationship to Self-Rated Sexual Desirability

The evidence reviewed so far has focused on how men who have sex with men (or men in general) view and respond to the gender expression of other men. Less is known about how men who have sex with men's view of their own masculinity and femininity relates to whether they see themselves as sexually desirable. In a mixed-sexuality sample of men, Hattie and colleagues (2022) found that self-rated sexual attractiveness was weakly positively correlated with adherence to masculine norms, but negatively correlated with precarious manhood (men's view of masculinity as a constant struggle to protect and maintain; Vandello et al., 2008). Amos and McCabe (2016) found that, in a sample of 979 gay men, greater adherence to masculine traits (e.g., aggressiveness, independence, and dominance, as operationalized in Spence & Helmreich, 1978) was associated with greater self-rated attractiveness, while adherence to feminine traits (e.g., gentleness, kindness, empathy) was unrelated to self-rated attractiveness.

These past findings suggest that masculinity may be linked with self-rated sexual attractiveness but are limited by a number of methodological and theoretical constraints. Because they are cross-sectional, these data cannot tell us what the relationship between sexual desirability and gender expression for individual men who have sex with men (e.g., does one feel more sexually desirable when one feels more masculine, or vice versa?). Rather, they provide

evidence of a between-persons effect: that individuals who feel more sexually desirable on average also tend to feel more masculine.

They also cannot provide evidence of temporal dominance (i.e., which variable drives the relationship, or is causally dominant; Hamaker, 2012, 2025). While how masculine men who have sex with men on average feel may correspond to how sexually attractive they rate themselves (Amos & McCabe, 2016), this does not necessarily correspond to the day-to-day relationship between masculinity and sexual desirability. When men who have sex with men feel more masculine or less feminine do they feel more sexually attractive, and vice versa? These questions can only be answered by looking 'within-person' (Hamaker, 2012), and quantifying the relationship between gender expression and sexual desirability at the level of individual people.

Second, previous studies have implicitly assumed that men who have sex with men subscribe to a monolithic form of masculinity (i.e., they assume a *hegemonic* subordinated masculinity; Connell, 2005, 2015). Gay subcultures have produced a variety of gender-related norms and strategies to deal with the perceived effeminacy of homosexuality (Hennen, 2008, 2023). As a result, masculinity and femininity may take on different social meanings, and hence relationships to sexual desirability, for members of different gay subcultures. In this chapter, I investigate the link between gender expression and sexual desirability in four subcultural groups: jocks, bears, twinks, and fat men.

Gay Subcultures, Gender, and Sexual Desirability

Men who have sex with men's sexual communities are in part organized around membership in specific gay subcultures (Franklin et al., 2022; Hennen, 2008; Whitesel, 2014). These gay subcultures bring together men with similar sexual practices (e.g., kinksters; Sprott,

2023), physicalities (e.g.., bears; Mijas et al., 2020; Moskowitz et al., 2013), fashion or aesthetics (e.g., drag queens; Knutson et al., 2018), shared experiences of intersecting marginalizations (e.g., trans fetishism, racism, and anti-fat bias; Anzani et al., 2021; C. S. Han et al., 2014; C. S. Han & Choi, 2018; Whitesel, 2014), or some combination of these factors (e.g., pups and leathermen; Hammack & Wignall, 2024). Hennen (2008) hypothesized that gay subcultures develop and maintain sets of gender-based strategies to deal with the feminization of 'homosexuality,' a sociological phenomenon he termed the effeminacy effect. These strategies, articulated as normative proscriptions on appearance, affect, and behavior, typically seek to moderate members' femininity and masculinity. The participants of this study self-reported membership in four specific types of gay subcultures: jocks, bears, twinks, and fat men. I will briefly introduce these subcultures and discuss their particular gender norms.

'Jock' denotes men who have sex with men centered upon 'gym-culture' and an athletic, muscular appearance (Brewster et al., 2017; Fogarty & Walker, 2022; Franklin et al., 2022). Relatively little work has investigated the unique gender norms of jocks. I infer from their emphasis on exercise, physicality, and the associated sartorial elements, that jocks likely emphasize a 'straight acting' and 'masc' aesthetic (Sánchez & Vilain, 2012; Silva, 2022), and afford status to masculinity, namely via their appearance and engagement in strength training.

Bears are a subculture of typically fatter, hairier, and older[9] gay men com (Fogarty & Walker, 2022; Moskowitz et al., 2013). In his ethnography of an American bear community, corroborated by more recent findings in the UK (McGlynn, 2023) and Australia (Franklin et al.,

[9] In line with fat activists' recommendations (e.g., Gordon, 2021), I use fat, as well as hairy and old, as a neutral, rather than value-laden, descriptions of particular bodies. Other terms are found in the literature that are euphemistic (e.g., "larger" and "hirsute"; Fogarty & Walker, 2022, p. 128) or stigmatizing (such as obese or overweight; Whitesel, 2014). We avoid these terms here for these reasons.

2022), Hennen (2005) found that bears' approach to gender is complex. In some respects, especially outward appearance and social behavior, bears project a "regular [read: putatively 'heterosexual'] guy" (Hennen, 2008, p. 97) masculinity, defining their gender expression antagonistically to women and other assumed feminized gay men (i.e., twinks). Yet bears are also affectionate in their social, romantic, and sexual relationships, as expressed in their liberal use of physical touch (e.g., through cuddling or "bear hugs"; Hennen, 2005, 2008). This suggests an outwards projection of masculinity, but a more complex relationship to femininity within bear communities. The focus on aesthetic and behavioral masculinity suggests, for the purposes of this chapter, that masculinity is emphasized in relation to bears' sexual status.

Twinks are young, slim, and relatively hairless gay men (Franklin et al., 2022). Their adoption of feminine aesthetics and behavior (i.e., acting and looking "gay"; C. S. Han et al., 2014; Sánchez & Vilain, 2012) suggests they have embraced or accepted effeminacy, at least superficially. Similar to the radical gay faeries studied by Hennen (2008), twinks outward acceptance of effeminacy may belie a deeper reification of hegemonic gender norms, and masculinity in particular (Connell, 2015): twinks self-consciously act and look 'like women,' associating some appearances and behavior as 'for' women or men. Regardless, their comfort with displaying femininity suggests that they may use effeminacy to augment their sexual status, and hence sexual desirability.

Lastly, fat men[10] are fat or very fat men who are typically ostracized from the wider gay community to due anti-fat discrimination (Whitesel, 2014). They are distinct from bears insofar as they exhibit less routinized forms of masculine presentation, as well as other dimensions of

[10] Fat men are also referred to as chubs, a term which some fat men view as stigmatizing or infantilizing. I avoid it here for this reason.

masculine embodiment typical of bears (e.g., being hairy). While, in contrast to bears, whose hair and appearance transform their fat into masculine signifiers (e.g., 'dad bods'; Austen & Griffiths, 2022), fat men may be seen as more feminine due to 'womanly' fat distributions (e.g., fat on their chest or hips; McGlynn, 2023; Whitesel, 2014). This does not necessarily mean that fat men see themselves as more feminine but suggests that experiences of femininity may have an exaggerated negative effect on whether they see themselves as sexually desirable.

The Current Study

I aimed to quantify the relationship between sexual desirability and femininity and masculinity in a sample of Grindr users recruited in Australia. I also aimed to test whether there were gay subcultural differences in these relationships. I hypothesized that, for men who have sex with men in general, state masculinity and state femininity would be bidirectionally related to sexual desirability: (1) state masculinity and state sexual desirability would be positively and reciprocally related, such that greater masculinity would predict greater sexual desirability and vice versa, and (2) state femininity and state sexual desirability would be negatively and reciprocally related such that greater state femininity would predict lower state sexual desirability, and vice versa.

I also hypothesized that these effects would differ based on participants' affiliation with specific gay subcultures, compared to those who reported no gay subcultural affiliation. I anticipated that these effects would differ between subcultures. I anticipated that: (3) for subcultures which emphasize masculinity, such as jocks and bears, masculinity would have a stronger positive impact on sexual desirability, and vice versa; (4) for subcultures which emphasize femininity, such as twinks, femininity would have a positive influence on sexual desirability, and vice versa; and (5) for subcultures for whom femininity is especially damaging

to their sexual status, such as fat men, femininity will have an stronger negative impact on sexual desirability, and vice versa.

Method

Ethics and Open Science

I received ethics approval from the University of Melbourne (23352). I have made my data, code, and output available on the Open Science Framework (OSF).

Participants

I had a total sample of 530 Grindr users. To minimize estimation issues in my analyses (see *Analyses* below), I excluded participants with fewer than 20 observations (n = 289) and no variation on the momentary variables (i.e., participant who gave identical responses across all completed survey; n = 7). This left a final sample of 234 Australian Grindr users, and a total of 12,162 observations. I found a mean compliance of 66.19% of the total 56 momentary surveys completed per participant (M = 37.06 observation per participant, standard deviation [SD] = 8.90 observations). Demographics are provided in Table 6. The majority of participants self-reported identifying as White cis gay men. The largest minority of gay subcultural affiliation participants report was with bears, followed by no gay subculture, jocks, twinks, and fat men, in descending order. These proportions largely align with those find in prior research (Silva, 2022).

Table 6

Sample Demographics, Height, Weight, and Trait Gender

Variable		*n*	Percent
Gender	Cis man	220	94.02
	Non-binary	10	4.27
	Trans man	4	1.71
Race	Asian	33	14.10
	Indigenous	1	0.43
	Middle Eastern	4	1.71
	Mixed Race	17	7.26

Variable		*n*	Percent
	Pacific Islander	2	0.85
	South American	6	2.56
	South Asian	3	1.28
	White	163	69.66
	Other	1	0.43
	Prefer not to say	3	1.28
Sexuality	Bisexual	31	13.25
	Gay	181	77.35
	Pansexual	8	3.42
	Queer	4	1.71
	Questioning	3	1.28
	Straight	1	0.43
	Other	3	1.28
	Prefer not to say	3	1.28
Gay Subculture	No gay subculture	60	25.64
	Jock	42	17.95
	Bear	88	37.61
	Twink	27	11.54
	Fat men	17	7.26

		Range	
	M (*SD*)	Min	Max
Age (years)	33.74 (9.92)	18.00	69.00
Height (m)	1.78 (0.08)	1.60	2.04
Weight (kg)	85.02 (21.33)	49.00	165.00
Trait femininity	2.77 (1.11)	1.00	6.00
Trait masculinity	4.59 (1.01)	1.83	7.00

Note. Missing data excluded. Sample size is denoted by *N*, mean by *M*, standard deviation by *SD*. Age is given in years, height in meters (*m*), and weight in kilograms (*kg*). Trait masculinity and femininity were measured using the Traditional Femininity-Masculinity scale (Kachel et al., 2016).

Procedure

I recruited participants in Australia via Grindr, a dating app popular among men who have sex with men, in May 2022. Grindr users were shown the study advertisement in their private messages, which linked to the baseline survey. After completing the baseline survey, interested users' responses were screened for eligibility by a member of the research team and were eligible if they were aged 18 years or over, were fluent in English, lived in Australia, and

had provided an email address. Following screening, participants were emailed a link and instruction to download the experience sample app used in the current study, SEMA^3 (O'Brien et al., 2024). Participants were prompted via SEMA^3 to complete a total of eight signal-contingent surveys per day between the hours of 8 am and 10 pm over seven days (Dejonckheere & Erbas, 2021). Surveys were delivered semi-randomly in one-hour intervals with the maximum interval between survey prompts being 45 minutes.

Measures

As this study was part of a larger project, participants completed a number of baseline and momentary measures. For brevity, I only report the measures relevant to my analyses here.

Baseline Measures

Participants were asked to report their age, sexuality, race, height, and weight. As in Chapter 4, I used these variables to describe the sample population, rather than as variables in my analyses. Participants self-reported their gay subculture affiliations using a list of possibilities identified from existing literature (Fogarty & Walker, 2022; Franklin et al., 2022; Hennen, 2008; Whitesel, 2014), including bear, chub, cub, jock, otter, pup, twink, twunk, and wolf, among others. Participants were also presented to write options that were not listed. To simplify my analyses, I organized these more specific gay subcultural affiliations into superordinate categories based on cultural similarity. For example, bears, otters, and wolves each denote gay men underneath the broader bear community umbrella because of a shared approach to gender, body hair, sexual practices, among other factors (Hennen, 2008), while jocks, gym bunnies, and gym rats have a shared approach to exercise (Fogarty & Walker, 2022). I assessed the validity of my categorization by testing whether this new variable was associated with differences among my participants' body shape and size, age, and trait gender (see *Preliminary Analyses*). Finally,

participants completed two measures of trait gender: a measure of trait femininity and a measure of trait masculinity.

Trait Gender

I used participant ratings of their trait gender to test whether there were person-level differences in trait femininity and masculinity between gay subcultures. I measured trait gender using the Traditional Femininity-Masculinity scale (TMF; Kachel et al., 2016). The TMF consists of two 6 item unipolar scales measuring trait femininity and trait masculinity, where participants rate how feminine or masculine they on a 7-point Likert-type scale where 1 is "not at all feminine/masculine" and 7 is "very feminine/masculine." Two example items are "I consider myself very…" and "Traditionally, my behavior would be considered as…". I found good reliability for trait femininity, McDonald's ω (hereafter ω) = .89 (97% credible interval [CI] [.87, .92]), and trait masculinity, ω = .88 (97% CI[.85, .91]).

State Measures

State Sexual Desirability. I measured state sexual desirability as two face valid questions: "how sexually desirable do you feel right now?" and "how sexually attractive do you feel right now?" Participants responded to both on a 101-point scale where 0 was "Not at all" and 100 was "Extremely". The correlation between these two items was very strong within-persons, r^w = .76 (97% CI[.77, 1.00]) and between-persons, r^b = .99 (97% CI[.97, 1.00]).

State Femininity. I measured state femininity using a single face valid item: "How feminine do you feel right now?" Participants responded on a 101-point scale where 0 was "Not at all feminine" and 100 was "Very feminine". As a test of predictive validity, I regressed state femininity on trait femininity, hypothesizing that those higher in trait femininity should demonstrate higher state femininity. For every standard deviation change in trait femininity, I

found a corresponding 11.04-point change in state femininity (97% CI [8.55, 13.42]), posterior *SD* = 1.10, suggesting that those higher or lower in trait femininity tended to be higher or lower in state femininity, respectively.

State Masculinity. I measured state masculinity using a single face valid item: "how masculine do you feel right now?" Participants responded on a 101-point scale where 0 was "Not at all masculine" and 100 was "Very masculine". As with state femininity, I regressed state masculinity on trait masculinity, hypothesizing that those higher in trait masculinity should demonstrate higher state masculinity. For every standard deviation change in trait masculinity, I found a corresponding 7.78-point change in state masculinity (97% CI [4.95, 10.60]), posterior *SD* = 1.32, suggesting that those higher or lower in trait masculinity tended to be higher or lower in state masculinity, respectively.

Data Analysis

Data Analysis Software

I wrangled my data and conducted preliminary analyses using *R* version 4.2.2. I cleaned and processed my data using the *tidyverse* suite of packages (Wickham et al., 2019), and analysed my data using the *brms* package (Bürkner, 2017), an overlay of *Stan* (Stan Development Team, 2022). I ran the primary analyses in *Mplus* version 8.11 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017).

Bayesian Estimation

I used Bayesian estimation for the analyses. I used four chains of Markov Chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) to compute posterior distributions. For each model, I used four chains of MCMC and set a mixing criterion of *R*-hat values less than 1.1. All of the estimates are given by the

mean of the posterior distribution, the posterior's standard deviation, and a 97% credible interval (CI).

Preliminary Data Analyses

Before analyzing the momentary data, I regressed weight, height, age, trait femininity, and trait masculinity onto gay subcultural identification to check whether my coding of gay subcultural identification reflected theoretically expected differences in body shape and size, age, and trait gender. For all of the analyses of gay subcultural affiliation, participants who reported no gay subculture were used as the reference group. As these participants do not report any specific gay subcultural affiliation, I assumed that the relationship between gender and sexual desirability is indicative of broader norms among men who have sex with men, rather than the specific gay subcultural (and therefore meso-level) relationships of interest to us in these analyses.

Primary Data Analyses

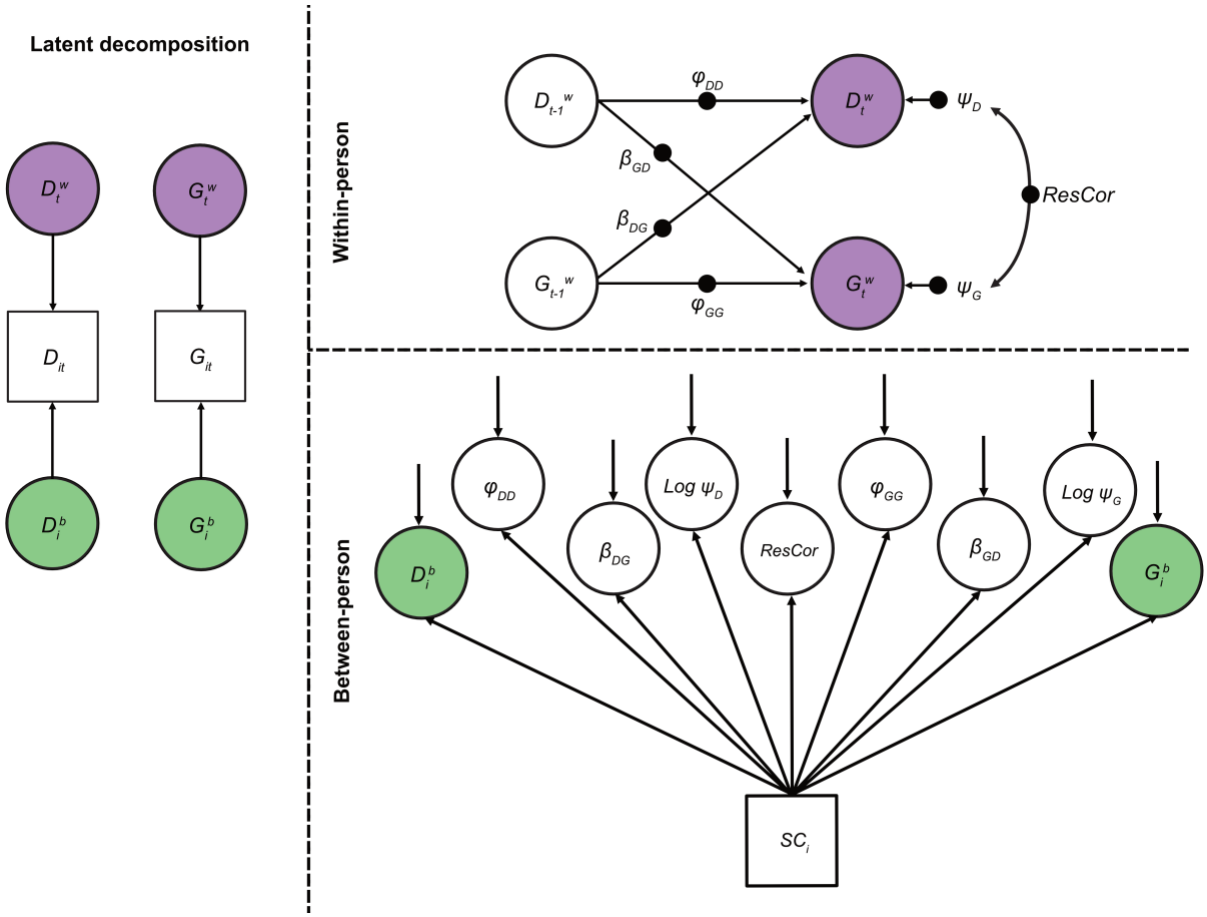
To test my hypotheses, I ran two dynamic structural equation models (DSEMs; Asparouhov et al., 2018; Hamaker et al., 2018, 2023). DSEMs combine the advantages of structural equation, time series, and multilevel modelling to estimate relations between momentary variables across time while accounting for the nested structure of experience sampling data (i.e., each participant provided many observations). This allowed us to quantify the relationships between state gender and sexual desirability across everyday life, and to test for person-level differences in state means and their dynamics.

I diagram the DSEMs in Figure 6. First, I decomposed the state variables into a within-person and between-persons component. I tested femininity and masculinity separately, such that

one model tested the relationship between state femininity and state sexual desirability, and the other tested the relationship between state masculinity and state sexual desirability.

Figure 6

General Dynamic Structural Equation Model Testing Reciprocal Effects Between State Sexual Desirability and State Gender



Note. Autocorrelations are denoted by φ, cross-lagged effects by β, log residual variances by Log ψ, and the correlation between residuals by ResCor. *SC* denotes gay subculture, *D* denotes state sexual desirability, while *G* denotes state gender (i.e., state femininity or state masculinity). For regression parameters φ and β, the first character of the subscript denotes the outcome, and the second the predictor. Purple denotes within-person decomposition, and green denotes between-persons decomposition.

Within-Person

At the within-persons level, I modelled the reciprocal effect of state gender and state sexual desirability. Each parameter was a 'random effect' and allowed to vary between participants. This let me to test whether there were between-person differences in each effect attributable to subcultural identification (see *Between-Person* below).

I modelled autoregressive and cross-lagged effects by regressing the variables on themselves at the previous timepoint (i.e., at a lag of 1). Autoregressive effects represent the amount of 'carry over' between timepoints, with estimates closer to 1 representing greater stability in scores between timepoints (Koval et al., 2021). Cross-lagged effects represent the effect of one variable on the other: the effect of state gender on state sexual desirability, and the effect of state sexual desirability on state gender. I also modelled random residual variances and covariances. The former can be interpreted as the unique innovations contributing to state gender and state sexual desirability for each person unaccounted for in the model. The latter can be interpreted as the variation produced from the cross-lagged effects as well as an estimate of whether there are overlapping but unobserved influences on both variables (Hamaker et al., 2018).

I centered each momentary variable using latent person means (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2019). To minimize bias in the estimation of lagged relationships, I chose to use only data from participants with 20 or more observations for each variable (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2019; Schultzberg & Muthén, 2018). I also standardized the effects within-person, such that the cross-lagged effect represent the average within-person effect when accounting for person-level means and variance (Schuurman et al., 2016). This approach to standardization also allowed us to compare the strength of the estimates (e.g., is the effect of state femininity on state desirability

stronger or weaker than vice versa?). This provided evidence towards Granger-causality[11] between two variables, whereby the stronger cross-lagged effect implies that one independent variable is temporally dominant over the other (Schuurman et al., 2016).

Between-Person

Between-persons, I regressed the random within-person parameters on subcultural identification. I did this as five comparisons. For each, as with my preliminary analyses, participants who reported no gay subculture were treated as the comparison group. First, I compared participants with no subculture to participants who reported any of the four subcultural groups. This tested whether subcultural identification itself, rather than identification with specific subcultures, may be related to differences in the model parameters. I then compared participant who reported no subculture to each group separately such that there were four comparisons: (1) No subculture versus jocks, (2) no subculture versus bears, (3) no subculture versus twinks, and (4) no subculture versus fat men. Each comparison was made for each of the within-person parameters and for each model: mean state sexual desirability and state gender, the autoregressive effects, the cross-lagged effects, the residual variances and their residual covariation.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

I give descriptive statistics, varying intraclass correlations, and between- and within-person correlations for the momentary variables in Table 7. I provide a breakdown of the momentary variables by gay subculture in Table 8. The varying intraclass correlations suggested

[11] Granger-causality is not equivalent to causality in that one cannot infer whether a relationship is spurious or not. Rather, Granger-causality provides evidence of temporal dominance by estimating cross-lagged effects while accounting for auto-regressive effects.

that the majority of variance for each momentary variables was attributable between-person (Williams et al., 2022). The correlations indicated that (1) sexual desirability and masculinity are positively related within- and between-person such that those higher in one moment-to-moment and on average tend to be higher in the other: (2) femininity and masculinity are negatively related within- and between-person such that those higher in one moment-to-moment and on average tend to be lower in the other: and (3) sexual desirability and femininity are unrelated both within- and between-person.

Table 7

Between- and Within-Person Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Matrices for State Variables

	Sample			*SD*					
Variable	*N*	*T*	*M*	Within	Between	vICC	1.	2.	3.
1.Sexual Desirability	234	8,654	45.84	11.62	22.08	.73 [.61, .79]	–	.02 [-.09, .14]	.54 [.46, .61]
2. Femininity	234	8,648	23.89	10.24	19.52	.82 [.73, .89]	.02 [.00, .04]	–	-.47 [-.55, -.37]
3. Masculinity	234	8,652	61.29	11.42	21.24	.94 [.91, .98]	.30 [.28, .32]	-.14 [-.16, -.12]	–

Note. *N* = participants and *T* = number of timepoints with non-missing values. Means are denoted by *M*, standard deviation by *SD*, and varying intraclass correlations by vICC, which were calculated using the ICC(1) formula from McGraw and Wong (1996) using the *vICC* package by Williams and colleagues (2022). Correlations above the diagonal are between-persons (i.e., correlations between person-means) and correlations below the diagonal are within-persons (i.e., mean correlation between momentary values for each person). Bracketed values represent 97% credible intervals.

Table 8

Sample Size, Observations, and Means and Standard Deviations for State Variables by Subcultural Identity

	State Sexual Desirability		State Femininity		State Masculinity	
Sample	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*

	N	*T*		Within	Between		*Within*	*Between*		*Within*	*Between*
No gay subculture	60	3,124	45.38	11.19	19.15	21.67	8.56	18.27	63.52	9.99	18.70
Jocks	42	2,184	48.16	12.97	20.74	20.02	11.43	13.42	61.46	13.25	18.65
Bears	88	4,578	48.66	11.41	22.80	22.57	10.11	20.52	65.78	10.77	20.33
Twinks	27	1,384	48.73	12.69	18.13	41.62	13.17	20.25	48.46	12.69	20.02
Fat men	17	892	22.60	9.33	21.97	21.20	9.19	18.33	48.62	13.54	28.51

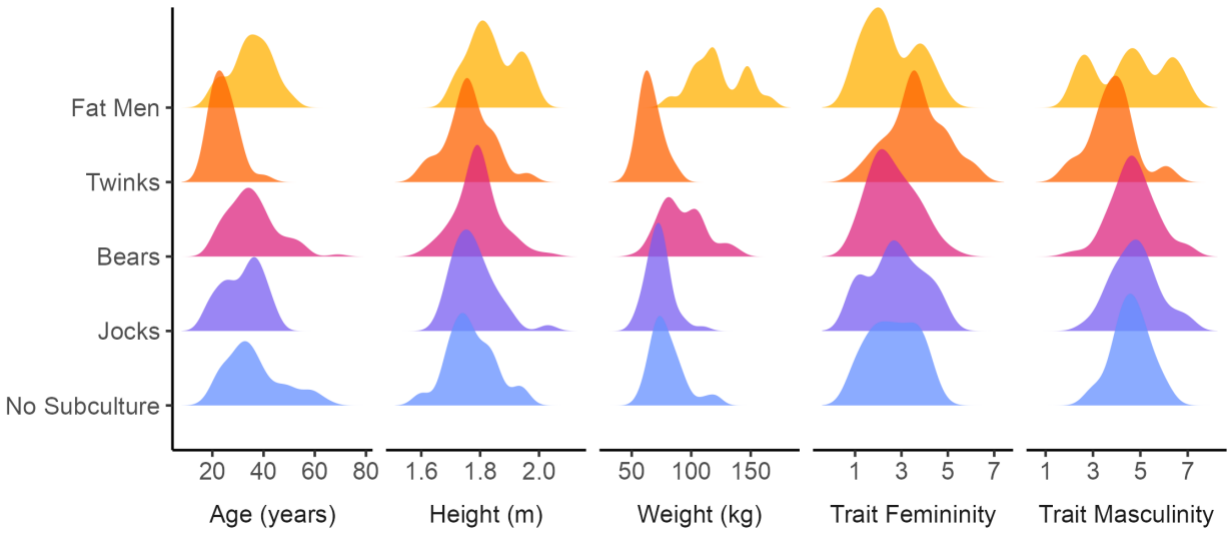
Note. Sample size is denoted by *N,* number of observations is denoted by *T,* mean is denoted by *M,* and standard deviation is denoted by *SD*.

Preliminary Analyses

Before running the DSEM models, I tested whether my recoding of the gay subcultural variable captures meaningful and theoretically expected variations in age, body shape and size, and self-reported trait gender. These subcultural differences are graphed in Figure 7, with regression output given in Table 9. I test whether there are subcultural differences in the state variables in the DSEMs.

Figure 7

Distribution of Age, Height, Weight, and Trait Gender by Subcultural Identification



Note. Age is given in years, height in meters (m), and weight in kilograms (kg). Trait femininity and trait masculinity are measured on the Traditional Femininity-Masculinity scales, with scores range from 1 to 7.

Table 9

Estimated Mean Differences Between Participants with No Reported Subcultural Affiliation and Jocks, Bears, Twinks, and Fat Men on Age, Height, Weight, and Trait Gender

	Age (years)		Height (*m*)		Weight (*kg*)		Trait Femininity		Trait Masculinity	
	Estimate	*SD*	Estimate	*SD*	Estimate	*SD*	Estimate	*SD*	Estimate	*SD*
Intercept	36.37 [33.73, 38.96]	1.20	1.77 [1.75, 1.79]	0.01	79.83 [75.42, 84.28]	2.06	2.65 [2.34, 2.96]	0.14	4.61 [4.34, 4.89]	0.13
Jocks	-4.72 [-8.78, -0.60]	1.88	0.01 [-0.03, 0.04]	0.02	-6.89 [-13.89, 0.21]	3.24	0.11 [-0.37, 0.58]	0.22	0.17 [-0.27, 0.61]	0.20
Bears	-0.93 [-4.31, 2.47]	1.56	0.02 [-0.01, 0.02]	0.01	13.03 [7.20, 18.87]	2.68	-0.02 [-0.42, 0.37]	0.18	0.10 [-0.26, 0.46]	0.17
Twinks	-11.97 [-16.66, -7.30]	2.16	-0.01 [-0.05, 0.03]	0.02	-14.07 [-22.08, -6.05]	3.70	0.99 [0.46, 1.53]	0.25	-0.78 [-1.28, -0.28]	0.23
Fat Men	-1.23 [-6.79, 4.33]	2.55	0.07 [0.02, 0.12]	0.02	42.76 [33.29, 52.28]	4.38	-0.10 [-0.75, 0.55]	0.30	-0.02 [-0.62, 0.56]	0.27

Note. Estimates are the predicted mean difference between participants who reported no gay subculture (the reference group) and jocks, bears, twinks, and fat men. Estimate denotes the mean of the posterior distribution, *SD* denotes the standard deviation of the posterior distribution, and bracketed values represent 97% credible intervals. Age is given in years, height in meters (m), and weight in kilograms (kg). Trait femininity and trait masculinity are measured on the Traditional Femininity-Masculinity scales, with scores range from 1 to 7.

Jocks and twinks reported being younger than Grindr users with no reported gay subculture, with no differences in age for bears or fat men. Regarding height, fat men, compared to Grindr users who reported no gay subculture, reported being taller. I found no other subcultural differences for height. Regarding weight, compared to Grindr users who reported no gay subculture, I found that bears and fat men reported higher weights, whereas twinks reported lower weights.

I found that only twinks differed from Grindr users with no gay subculture on trait gender: they reported higher trait femininity and lower trait masculinity compared to participants without a subculture. Regardless of subculture, participants tended to report trait femininity

below the scale midpoint and trait masculinity above the scale midpoint (i.e., respectively below and above 4 on a scale of 1 to 7). This may be a pattern of trait gender typical of men: higher masculinity, and lower femininity (for a similar pattern of reporting in women, see Study 1 in Kachel et al., 2016).

Overall, my preliminary analyses suggest that the subculture variable captures meaningful and anticipated variations in age and body shape and size. While I did not observe several expected differences in trait gender (e.g., jocks and bears were not more masculine in comparison to participants with no reported subculture), I did find differences for twinks on both trait femininity and masculinity. This accords with prior work on gay subcultures and masculinity (Silva, 2022), and may relate to using participants who report no subculture as the reference group.

Primary Analyses

Within-persons: What is the Relationship Between Sexual Desirability and Masculinity and Femininity?

I present the average standardized within-person parameters for the DSEMs in Table 10. First, for the DSEM testing the relationship between state femininity and state sexual desirability, I did not find any cross-lagged effects meaningfully different from zero; I found no evidence that femininity is related to sexual desirability, or vice versa. I found that prior state masculinity positively predicts current sexual desirability, and that prior state sexual desirability positively predicts current state masculinity. The estimates show sexual desirability more strongly predicts masculinity than vice versa. As the credible intervals for the cross-lagged effect do not overlap, sexual desirability appears to be temporally dominant over masculinity. That is, sexual desirability appears to more strongly drive masculinity than vice versa. Finally, I found a

strong residual correlation between the random residual variances for state sexual desirability and state masculinity, indicating substantial overlap between the unique contributors to both unaccounted for in the model. This suggests, for example, that other social and psychological variables (e.g., sensitivity to sexual rejection or invitation) contribute to Grindr users' moment-to-moment sexual desirability and masculinity.

Table 10

Average Within-person Standardized Parameters for Dynamic Structural Equation Models Testing the Reciprocal Effects Between State Sexual Desirability and State Femininity and Masculinity

	Femininity				Masculinity			
			97% CI				97% CI	
	Estimate	Posterior *SD*	1.5%	98.5%	Estimate	Posterior *SD*	1.5%	98.5%
φ_{DD}	0.39	0.01	0.36	0.40	0.37	0.01	0.35	0.38
φ_{GG}	0.25	0.01	0.24	0.28	0.29	0.01	0.27	0.31
β_{DG}	-0.02	0.01	-0.03	0.01	0.09	0.01	0.07	0.11
β_{GD}	-0.01	0.01	-0.03	0.00	0.16	0.01	0.14	0.17
ψ_{D}	0.75	0.01	0.74	0.76	0.75	0.00	0.74	0.76
ψ_{G}	0.80	0.00	0.78	0.80	0.76	0.00	0.74	0.77
ResCor	.05	.01	.04	.06	.21	.00	.20	.22

Note. Estimates are given as the median of the posterior distribution, with bracketed numbers denoting 97% credible intervals. Posterior standard deviations are given by Posterior *SD*. Autoregressive effects by φ, and cross-lagged effects by β. Sexual desirability is denoted by the subscript *D*, state gender by *subscript G.* Log residual variance is given by ψ, and the residual correlation by *ResCor*. For regression parameters, φ and β, the first character of the subscript denotes the outcome, and the second the predictor.

Between-persons: Do These Relationships Differ Between Gay Subcultures?

I found eight between-person effects which were meaningfully different from zero. Because I tested 90 comparisons (five comparisons for each of nine parameters for each of two

models), I only report these eight effects here, and I provide the complete results in a supplementary document on the OSF.

I found between-person differences in the DSEMs parameters for bears, twinks, and fat men compared to Grindr users who reported no gay subculture. I found that bears, in the model testing femininity and sexual desirability, had on average a lower autoregressive effect for sexual desirability compared to Grindr users with no reported subculture, b = -0.16 (97% CI [-0.29, -0.02]), posterior SD = 0.06, suggesting that bears tend to have less stable sexual desirability. I did not find a similar effect in the model testing masculinity and sexual desirability, however.

Twinks, compared to participants with no reported gay subculture, dovetailing with my preliminary analyses, had a higher mean state femininity, b = 20.86 (97% CI [10.81, 30.98]), posterior SD = 4.65, and a lower mean state masculinity, b = -12.50 (97% CI [-23.71, -1.37]), posterior SD = 5.13. On average, twinks felt less masculine and more feminine in their day-to-day lives. Lastly, I found that the cross-lagged effect of prior sexual desirability on current masculinity was lower in twinks compared to participants with no reported subculture, b = -0.17 (97% CI [-0.33, -0.01]), posterior SD = 0.07. For twinks on average, sexual desirability does not contribute to feeling masculine.

Fat men, compared to Grindr users with no reported gay subculture, report lower mean state sexual desirability, a result consistent in the DSEM testing femininity, b = -25.62 (97% CI [-38.95, -12.15]), posterior SD = 6.18, and the DSEM testing masculinity, b = -25.47 (97% CI [-38.76, -12.37]), posterior SD = 6.10. In contrast to my preliminary analyses, fat men showed comparatively lower mean state masculinity, b = -13.02 (97% CI [-26.05, -0.10]), posterior SD = 5.94, compared to participants with no reported subculture. Lastly, fat men showed a lower residual correlation compared to participants with no reported subculture, b = -0.24 (97% CI [-

0.24, -0.03]), posterior *SD* = 0.10. This implies that, for fat men, there is little or no overlap between those contributors to state masculinity and state sexual desirability. Rather, they may be separate. For example, quotidian experiences of anti-fat discrimination may influence whether fat men feel sexually desirable (Foster-Gimbel & Engeln, 2016; Hunger et al., 2018), yet have no relevance to masculinity.

Discussion

I aimed to quantify the relationships between sexual desirability and femininity and masculinity in a sample of Grindr users in Australia, and to test whether identification with specific gay subcultures moderated these relationships. My results partially supported my first hypothesis: sexual desirability was bidirectionally related to masculinity, but not to femininity. When participants felt more masculine at one timepoint, they tended to feel more sexually desirable at the next, and vice versa. My data suggest that whether participants felt more or less feminine at the preceding timepoint had no effect on whether they felt sexually desirable at the next (or vice versa). In line with Hoskin's (2020) framework, I found evidence for masculine promotion vis-à-vis sexual desirability, but not feminine demotion. Sexual desirability also contributed more to masculinity timepoint-to-timepoint than did masculinity to sexual desirability. Contrary to existing cross-sectional work, sexual desirability may be a better a predictor, rather than outcome, of masculinity (Amos & McCabe, 2016; Hattie et al., 2022).

I also found limited support for my second hypothesis: identification with particular gay subcultures, such as jocks, bears, twinks, or fat men, did not influence the relationships between state sexual desirability and state masculinity or state femininity. There were some exceptions: on average, twinks tended to feel more feminine and less masculine, while fat men tended to feel less sexually desirable and masculine. Regarding dynamics, only two arose that were

meaningfully different from zero. For twinks, feeling sexually desirable appeared to contribute less to current masculinity, in contrast to the overall within-person results. This might suggest that, for subcultures like twinks who embrace femininity, sexual desirability does not reinforce masculinity across time. My finding that the residual covariance between masculinity and sexual desirability tended to be lower for fat men suggests there is less overlap between the factors which contribute to both masculinity and sexual desirability unaccounted for in the DSEM. This suggests that the factors that which contribute to how sexual desirable fat men feel are unrelated to masculinity (e.g., experiences of sexual anti-fat bias; Austen et al., 2022), and vice versa.

Implications

My data suggest that masculinity, not femininity, is bi-directionally related to sexual desirability among Grindr users in Australia. Masculine promotion (Hoskin, 2020), especially where masculinity is a form of sexual status (Pachankis et al., 2020), appears to effect whether Grindr users view themselves as sexually desirable. I found no evidence that femininity, and hence feminine demotion, is relevant to whether my participants saw themselves as sexually desirable.

There are a few explanations for this finding. I may have had insufficient data (either number of participants or number of observations) to estimate a small effect between femininity and sexual desirability. Perhaps more data would have revealed that femininity and sexual desirability are weakly related to one another. There is some suggestion of this in the data: while the means of the posterior distributions for the cross-lagged effects between femininity and sexual desirability were both negative (i.e., in the hypothesized direction) and the posterior standard deviations were small, the credible intervals were too wide to infer an effect. Given that

the relationships between sexual desirability and masculinity are much larger, my data suggest, in aggregate, there is no meaningful relationship between sexual desirability and femininity.

Unmasculine Does Not Mean Feminine

My results may reflect the need for greater clarity regarding the unique role of masculinity and femininity in both femmephobia and anti-effeminacy research. Prior work has not adequately distinguished whether anti-effeminacy and femmephobia should reflect the specific influence of feminization (does one feel 'womanly'?) or emasculation (does one feel 'unmanly'?; Hennen, 2023). Expressed in terms of this chapter's variables, effeminacy's effect on Grindr users' sexual desirability appears to be the latter; feeling (un)sexy relates to whether one feels (un)masculine.

Previous empirical evidence on anti-effeminacy and femmephobia have not made this distinction. As it relates to sexual desirability, Cascalheira and Smith (2020) suggested that men who have sex with men found heteronormative masculine men desirable, and effeminate men (which they also referred to as "effeminate masculine", p. 635) undesirable. Their stimuli ('mirror selfies' of men in various stages of undress, available at Cascalheira, 2019) for effeminate men blend a number of masculine and feminine visual signifiers: youth, facial and body hair, muscularity, leanness, gendered clothing and accessories (e.g., military dog tags and baseball caps alongside brightly colored swimming trunks and patterned shirts, among others), large and prominently displayed penises, feminine poses, and so on. As a result, it is unclear whether effeminacy is undesirable because it indicates a deficit of masculinity or surplus of femininity. While my within-persons (r^w = -.14) and between-persons (r^b = -.47) correlations show that greater masculinity is related to lower femininity, they are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, these correlations are (perhaps surprisingly) weak.

The operationalization of gender in anti-effeminacy and femmephobia research has also confused this distinction. Gul and Uskul (2021) found consistently strong correlations (r = -.63 – -..49) between men's perceptions of other men's gender expression and their likelihood of being homosexual, as mentioned above. Yet they operationalized femininity and masculinity as a single scale: lower scores represented greater femininity, and higher scores represented greater masculinity. Similarly, Hoskin and colleague's (2024) conflate feminization and emasculation in their study on cisheterosexual men's femmephobia and its association on anti-gay violence. Items from their measure of femmephobia, adapted from the Genderism and Transphobia Scale (Hill & Willoughby, 2005), reflect both 'unmanliness' (e.g., "Passive men are weak") and 'womanliness' (e.g., "Men who act like women should be ashamed of themselves").

One strength of the current data is that I measured masculinity and femininity on separate unipolar scales. This allowed us to estimate the association of masculinity and femininity separately and highlight that the former but not the latter is relevant to sexual desirability. My results suggest that greater conceptual and measurement clarity is important for future studies. Assessing masculinity and femininity in a separable way would help distinguish between their unique influences which might otherwise be conflated.

My analyses suggest that sexual desirability is temporally dominant over masculinity. In my model, prior sexual desirability had a greater impact on current masculinity than did masculinity on sexual desirability. This suggests that, at least in Grindr users, feeling sexually desirable more strongly reinforces one's masculinity than vice versa. This is surprising insofar as we might assume that gender expression (whether one feels masculine or not) should precede one's self-view of themselves as sexually (un)desirable. This adds nuance to prior evidence which has assumed that, for example, self-rated sexual attractiveness is an outcome of gender

expression (e.g., Amos & McCabe, 2016) or that masculinity and attractiveness are coincident indices of sexual status (e.g., Pachankis et al., 2020).

While sexual desirability appears temporally dominant over masculinity, I interpret this finding with caution. My finding is that sexual desirability appears to be Granger-causal of masculinity (Schuurman et al., 2016), yet this does not denote true causality or casual dominance. Future research should rule out whether the casual dominance relationship is spurious, reflecting confounding biological (e.g., sexual desire or arousal) or social (e.g., sexual success) variables I have not accounted for (Hamaker, 2025). Future studies that combine experimental (e.g., manipulating sexual desirability or masculinity) and experience sampling (e.g., tracking the temporal effect of such manipulations) designs may be able to disentangle the causal direction of sexual desirability and masculinity.

My between-persons results suggest that Grindr user's identification with particular gay subcultures is largely unrelated to the dynamics of sexual desirability and masculinity and femininity. The lack of findings for inter-subcultural differences may reflect that I simply did not have enough data to estimate very small effects. Despite this, I found clear differences in person-mean gender for twinks and fat men. This suggests that subcultures differ more on their average levels of state sexual desirability and state gender than they do on the dynamics between the two across time.

My finding that twinks are more state feminine and less state masculine on average dovetails with previous data (e.g., Silva, 2022). It also suggests a concordance between twinks and non-twinks views regarding twinks' gender expression (Franklin et al., 2022). That is, twinks are viewed by others and feel themselves to be more feminine and less masculine.

My finding that fat men feel less state sexually desirable on average is unsurprising, given the desexualization and sexual marginalization of fat men found in previous studies (Austen et al., 2022; Foster-Gimbel & Engeln, 2016; Whitesel, 2014). I did not see a similar difference for sexual desirability in bears, despite bears showing a similar pattern of average age, body weight, and trait gender when compared to Grindr users with no reported subculture. This may be because bears are organized around a shared desire for the (fatter, hairier, and older) bear body (Hennen, 2008; Wright, 1997b), while fat men's communities are formed in response to sexual anti-fat bias and the concomitant desexualization of fatness (Whitesel, 2014).

Future Directions

In addition to the limitations discussed throughout, the sample size, while above average for an experience sampling study (Wrzus & Neubauer, 2022), requires a cautious interpretation of the between-person DSEM results. I had very small sample sizes for some gay subcultures, namely fat men (n = 17) and twinks (n = 27). Since my analyses aimed to estimate parameters for each individual and then test between-person differences in these estimates, there are multiple sources of error that may have inflated the false positive rate. To some extent, Bayesian estimation allows us to quantify the uncertainty around parameter estimates (a unqiue benefit of Bayesian statistics; McElreath, 2020), yet care should be taken in interpreting these between-person effects. Future work which purposively samples members from diverse gay subcultures is necessary to make reliable claims about differences in the dynamics between sexual desirability and gender.

Relatedly, we recruited a sample of Grindr users. Because a majority of men who have sex with men in Australia use Grindr (MacGibbon et al., 2024), our within-person results likely reflect the relationships between masculinity, femininity, and sexual desirability among men who

have sex with men in Australia generally. However, Grindr may not be used equally across gay subcultures. Because Grindr is primarily used as a hook-up app, stigmatized subcultures like fat men may be underrepresented among its users because they do not fit Grindr's standards of attractiveness. Fat men especially may be unlikely to use Grindr because of the degree of sexual anti-fatness present on the app experience on the app (Austen et al., 2022; Hammack et al., 2022). Instead, they seek out dating and hook-up apps and websites specific to fat men (Monaghan, 2005). This may also be the case for other subcultural groups, such as those embedded in kink and BDSM communities (e.g., pups; Hammack & Wignall, 2024). Future studies should recruit diverse sources, focusing on platforms that cater towards specific subcultural identities. For example, BiggerCity for fat men, FetLife for leather, pup, and other kink subcultures, and Growlr or SCRUFF for bears (Barrett, 2017; Chow, 2022; Whitesel, 2014; Wignall et al., 2022)

Conclusion

Masculinity, but not femininity, affects whether Australian Grindr users feel sexually desirable. Our finding adds nuance to the role that anti-effeminacy plays in men who have sex with men's sexual lives. Anti-effeminacy dictates that men should look and act 'like men,' a cultural norm that sexually stratifies men who have sex with men based on masculinity. While our data cannot speak to the exact type of masculinity our participants prescribed to, they indicate that the sexual value accrued to masculinity leads to men who have sex with men to judge themselves as sexually inadequate if they fail reach its standards. Together, the social and psychological value placed on masculinity may toxically reinforce manliness as a necessary component of sexiness. By doing so, masculinity becomes a vehicle that perpetuates not only anti-effeminacy, but also other forms of sexual inequality. Racialized masculinities, the sexual

accrued to cis over trans bodies, and the feminization of fat men, among other gendered forms of sexual desirability, all speak to the role that masculinity plays in the sexual hierarchy of men who have sex with men's dating and sex lives. At the psychological level, whether men who have sex with men live up to the normative pressure to be masculine also affects whether they see themselves as legitimate sexual objects.

Chapter 6: "If He Was Drop Dead Gorgeous, I Wouldn't Worry Too Much About a Condom": Partner Attractiveness Predicts Intentions to Use Condom Across Three Experimental Studies

> A couple of times I might not use condoms in the bathhouse. It depended on the attractiveness of the guy... I don't get swept up in the moment, but if a really hot guy came up to me and wanted to have sex without condoms, I'd probably say I don't want to jeopardize this so I'm not going to push the issue… I guess there are subtle feelings of … this guy is actually doing me a favor by sleeping with me. (A. I. Green, 2008b, pp. 41–42)

This quote, drawn from Green's (2008b) fieldwork on the racialized sexual hierarchy of New York City's gay communities, implicates sexual attractiveness[12] as an influence on condom use. It suggests two unique processes. First, more sexually attractive partners may be better able to negotiate for condomless sex (Eleftheriou et al., 2016, 2019; Thai & Barlow, 2019). Second, how sexually attractive one sees oneself relative to a sexual partner may affect the likelihood of negotiating for condom use (Widman et al., 2014). While Chapters 4 and 5 have shown that the extent to which men who have sex with men see themselves as sexually attractive influences their beliefs and responses to their own body. I extend these findings in this chapter by analyzing how sexual attractiveness affects how one responds to others' bodies, and what these responses may mean for one's sexual health decisions.

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[12] I use sexual attractiveness rather than sexual desirability in this chapter because that is the variable used in the Chicago Face Database (Lakshmi et al., 2021; Ma et al., 2015, 2021), from which the experimental material used here are drawn. Sexual attractiveness also reflects that I am primarily concerned with physical appearance in this chapter, rather than the other dimensions of sexual desirability (see "What Sexual Desirability Is and What It Is Not" in Chapter 2).

Across three studies, I investigated whether such discrepancies in attractiveness between oneself and a potential sexual partner influence people who have sex with men's intentions to engage in condomless sex and concerns about rejecting condomless sex. Using a sample of predominately women, a mixed-gender sample, and a sample of predominately men, I show that sexual desirability is not just relevant to the sexual health decisions of men who have sex with men, but people who have sex with men more generally. I first introduce the literature on condom use among people who have sex with men, highlighting that condoms remain an important part of sexual health, especially in preventing unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) seroconversion. I then present the role of attractiveness as a potential social influence on condom use, followed by my aim and hypotheses.

Condom Use and Sexual Health

International public sexual health strategies emphasize the 'consistent and correct' use of condoms[13] to prevent unintended pregnancy and the transmission of STIs and HIV (for US guidelines, see Workowski et al., 2021; for international strategies, see World Health Organization, 2022). Correct and consistent use of condoms may decrease likelihood of unintended pregnancy by 98%, while consistent (but not correct) use decreases this likelihood by 82% (National Health Service, 2024; Workowski et al., 2021). Meta-analytic evidence indicates condom use reliably reduces the incidences of STIs and HIV, with relative risk reductions varying between usage rates, the type of infection, and sample population. Warner and

[13] By 'condom', I refer to external condoms worn over the penis during sex (Workowski et al., 2021). While other types of condoms exist (e.g., internal condoms which, when used vaginally, are held in place by a rubber ring around the cervix and cover the vulva during sex), external condoms are more common and generally considered synonymous with the word condom.

colleagues (2006) found condom use is associated with a 56% decreased incidence of chlamydia and gonorrhea transmission following exposure, with similar risk reductions reported for syphilis and herpes simplex virus (Holmes et al., 2004). The effectiveness of condoms at preventing HIV seroconversion is similarly high for men who have sex with men (62.9% reduction if condoms are always used; D. K. Smith et al., 2015) and heterosexual women and men (80.2% reduction if condoms are always used; Warner et al., 2006).

Despite their effectiveness and availability, consistent condom use remains low. Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC; 2021) found, among Americans aged 13 to 17 years old, 48.15% reported not using a condom during their most recent sexual encounter, and 13.72% reported using no birth control method during their most recent heterosexual encounter. Among 1,496 Portuguese university students, upwards of 60% report inconsistent condom use (Santos et al., 2024). These figures also vary by specific sex act, especially for men who have sex with men. Smith and colleagues (2015) found, among a cohort of 3,490 participants, men who have sex with men used condoms during 62.39% of reported receptive anal sex, 51.07% of reported insertive anal sex, and 50.76% of reported receptive and insertive anal sex.

Condom use also remains important for individual and public sexual health, in spite of available alternative strategies for minimizing unintended pregnancy and HIV seroconversion or treating STIs. While long-term reversible contraception (e.g., copper or hormonal intrauterine devices) is effective at preventing unintended pregnancy, their use may be associated with greater incidences of chlamydia, gonorrhea, and trichomanias, likely owing to users' concomitant 40 to 60% reduction in condom use compared to users of less effective contraceptive methods (e.g., oral contraceptives; Steiner et al., 2021). The use of both

contraceptives and condoms would mitigate the risk of both unintended pregnancy and STI and HIV incidences.

Condoms are similarly important for managing STI incidences among men who have sex with men, despite the widespread uptake of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and its effectiveness at preventing HIV seroconversion (Callander et al., 2023; Medland et al., 2024). Cross-sectional data from Australia found that, between 2023 and 2024, the estimated percentage of men who have sex with men taking PrEP increased from 45.5% (Broady et al., 2023) to 53.2% (MacGibbon et al., 2024), while the number of men reporting consistent condom use with casual sexual partners fell from 15.5% to 12.2%. McManus and colleagues (2020) reported an increase in STI incidences after initiating PrEP for Australian gay and bisexual men, attributable to a decrease in condom use as well as an increase in STI testing (Traeger et al., 2022). As with contraceptives, there is an ongoing need to promote condom use among men who have sex with men.

Condoms play a key role in sexual and public health. Understanding the factors that influence whether or not condoms are used is important to mitigate the potential risk, both individually and communally, that STIs, HIV, and unwanted pregnancy can cause. Existing evidence on the behavioral or psychological highlights that individual sexual actors' decision to use condoms is influenced by social and psychological factors. For example, adolescents' and young adults' ability to communicate around condoms with potential sexual partners is associated with greater use (Widman et al., 2014), as is their belief about the effectiveness of condoms (Santos et al., 2024).

Condom Use Negotiation, Partner Attractiveness, and Intentions to Use Condoms

Sexual attractiveness is another factor that may affect condom use. The extent to which straight men (Eleftheriou et al., 2016), straight women (Eleftheriou et al., 2019), and men who have sex with men (Shuper & Fisher, 2008) see a potential sexual partner as attractive influences their sexual behavior (Townsend & Levy, 1990), and in particular their intention to use condoms (Thai & Barlow, 2019). Eleftheriou and colleagues (2016, 2019) found that heterosexual men and women were less likely to use condoms with people they rated as more attractive (Pearson's *r* [hereafter *r*] = -.63 for heterosexual women, and *r* = -.79 for heterosexual men). A similar relationship between rated attractiveness and intended condom use has been observed in HIV seropositive men who have sex with men (Shuper & Fisher, 2008). Together, these findings suggest that, all else being equal, individual sexual actors are less likely to intend to use a condom with partners they find more attractive.

Condom use is actively negotiated between sexual partners, rather than a choice that one makes alone (Widman et al., 2014). It is unclear whether participants' rated likelihood of using condoms with sexual partners they see as attractive may translate to their actual behavior *in situ*. That is, the ecological validity of these past findings is in question. As well, Eleftheriou and colleagues (2016, 2019) did not manipulate partner attractiveness. Together, whether a potential sexual partner's attractiveness influences that partner's ability to negotiate for condomless sex remains unaddressed.

Experimentally studying the social influences on condom use must balance ecological validity with ethical considerations. While it would be unethical to place participants in sexual contexts where their consent to condomless sex is negotiated by a sexual partner, a vignette describing such a scenario may generalize to participants' behavior in their 'natural habitat.'

Hence, in this chapter, I used a vignette and manipulated whether participants saw an attractive versus unattractive man's face.

Other vignette-based research has tested the relationship between attractiveness and condom use intentions. Thai and Barlow (2019) used a vignette to test the effect of a sexual partner's condom use preference and PrEP use on men who have sex with men's intentions to have condomless sex. While they found that participants' rated attractiveness of a potential sexual partner predicted greater intentions to have condomless sex, their use of only one target stimulus makes it unclear whether intentions to have condomless sex vary as a function of partner attractiveness or participants' individual differences. For example, as Thai and Barlow found, participants who reported previous engagement in condomless anal sex were slightly more likely to find the experimental stimulus more attractive ($r = .08$, $p < .05$). Earlier work by Shuper and Fisher (2008) found that HIV seropositive men's level of sexual arousal to a potential sexual partner increased their intentions to have condomless sex.

Attraction and attractiveness are not necessarily equivalent. While Thai and Barlow (2019) found an association between how attracted participants were to a potential sexual partner and their intended condom use, they did not manipulate the attractiveness of that stimulus, a limitation shared by other studies (Eleftheriou et al., 2016, 2019). As well, numerous factors bear upon who is and is not seen as attractive, such as the race (Cascalheira & Smith, 2020; Thai et al., 2025), perceived wealth (Agocha & Cooper, 1999; Townsend & Levy, 1990), and sexual arousal (Ariely & Loewenstein, 2006; Savio, 2022; Shuper & Fisher, 2008). These factors have not been controlled for in prior work on attractiveness and condom use intentions. I addressed them here by using a much larger number ($N = 132$) of experimental stimuli (photographs of men's faces) than prior studies, and drawing from a pool of racially diverse men's faces

differentiated only in terms of whether they are rated as very unattractive or attractive (Lakshmi et al., 2021; Ma et al., 2015, 2021). By randomly assigning participants to see an attractive or unattractive face, drawn from a large pool of faces, any observed experimental effect is attributable to whether a face is attractive or unattractive rather than the confounding effects of race, age, perceived wealth, among other stimulus- or participant-specific differences.

Some evidence suggests that whether or not someone sees themselves as sexually attractive might influence their ability to advocate for their own sexual health within sexual relationships. Sexual capital, in part defined by attractiveness (Pachankis et al., 2020) determines whether or not one attracts the sexual interest of others (i.e., whether they're sexually desirable; D. Kaplan & Illouz, 2022). Those without sexual capital, for example due to their race (Thai et al., 2025), weight (Austen et al., 2022), or economic status (Townsend & Levy, 1990), must navigate sexual marginality (Martin & George, 2006). For such people, sex and sexual health may be precarious. When sex occurs, one's sexual boundaries, especially vis-à-vis condom use, may be especially vulnerable to negotiation, regardless of one's comfort or enthusiastic consent. In brief, people who see themselves as sexually unattractive may be less willing to reject partners, and attractive partners in particular, for fear of 'missing out' on sex (A. I. Green, 2008b).

The Current Study

I aimed to investigate the influence of partner attractiveness on condom use intentions and concerns around rejecting condomless sex, and to test whether self-rated sexual attractiveness moderates this relationship. I used an experimental design, randomly assigning participants to be propositioned for condomless sex by an attractive or unattractive man drawn from a pool of racially diverse unattractive or attractive men's faces. I investigated the effect in

three samples of people who have sex with men: a sample of university-aged students who are predominately young women, a mixed gender convenience sample representative of the wider population recruited from Prolific, and a sample of Grindr users who are predominately men who have sex with men.

I hypothesized that participants who saw an attractive face will (1) be more likely to intend to have condomless sex and (2) feel less concern about rejecting condomless sex than participants who saw an unattractive face. I anticipated both relationships would be moderated by participants self-rated sexual attractiveness: participants who rate themselves as more sexually unattractive will (3) have greater intentions to have condomless sex and (4) feel greater concern rejecting condomless sex with an attractive versus unattractive sexual partner.

Study 1

University-aged young adults may be especially likely to not use condoms (CDC, 2021; Santos et al., 2024). Discrepancies being self-rated and partner attractiveness may also be especially influential on their decision (Wade, 2021). To test this, I recruited a sample of first- and second-year undergraduate psychology students from a large Australian university.

Method

Ethics and Open Science

I received ethics approval from the University of Melbourne (28004). I pre-registered the study on the Open Science Framework (OSF), where I have made the studies materials, data, and code available.

Participants

I simulated the sample size needed to detect a median knock-out interaction effect (i.e., a simple slope of 0.35 in one group, and 0.00 in the other; Baranger et al., 2023; Sommet et al.,

2023) between experimental condition and self-rated sexual attractiveness on participants' sexual intentions (see *Measures*). To do this, I used *brms* (Bürkner, 2017), an overlay of *Stan* (Stan Development Team, 2022). I tested whether the 97% credible interval (CI) of the interaction's posterior distribution included zero for sample sizes between 50 and 1500, increasing the sample size by 10 each iteration (i.e., 146 simulated samples). I determined a sample size of 450 would be sufficient.

I recruited a sample of 593 undergraduate students enrolled in first- and second-year psychology subjects at the University of Melbourne between 12 September and 31 October 2024. I excluded participants who did not provide consent (n = 18), did not complete the experimental manipulation (n = 63), and failed two of two attention checks (n = 71). My final sample size was 441. Participants' demographics are shown in Table 11, with correlations between continuous variables, pooled across studies, shown in Table 12. Participants in Study 1 were predominately cis straight East Asian and White women.

Table 11

Participant Demographics by Sample

		Total (N = 1,459)		Study 1 (n = 441)		Study 2 (n = 513)		Study 3 (n = 505)	
		n	Percent	*n*	Percent	*n*	Percent	*n*	Percent
Condition									
	Unattractive	736	50.45	226	51.25	252	49.12	258	51.09
	Attractive	723	49.55	215	49.75	261	50.88	247	48.91
Gender									
	Cis man	756	51.82	31	7.03	246	47.95	479	94.85
	Cis woman	640	43.87	402	91.16	238	46.39	0	0.00
	Trans man	23	1.58	0	0.00	19	3.70	4	0.79
	Trans woman	5	0.34	0	0.00	2	0.39	3	0.59
	Non-binary	31	2.12	8	1.81	7	1.36	16	3.17
	Other	1	0.07	0	0.00	0	0.00	1	0.20
	Prefer not to say	3	0.21	0	0.00	1	0.19	2	0.40
Sexuality									
	Straight	480	32.90	268	60.77	212	41.33	0	0.00
	Gay	456	31.25	18	4.08	94	18.32	344	68.12
	Bisexual	455	31.19	127	28.80	194	37.82	134	26.53
	Queer	25	1.71	6	1.36	0.00	0	10	1.98
	Asexual	3	0.21	2	0.45	0.00	0	1	0.20
	Lesbian	1	0.07	0	0.00	1	0.19	0	0.00
	Other	3	0.21	1	0.23	0	0	2	0.26
	Unsure	32	2.19	17	3.85	3	0.58	12	2.38
	Prefer not to say	4	0.27	2	0.45	0	0	2	0.40
Relationship status									
	Single	839	57.51	243	55.10	289	56.34	307	60.79
	Monogamous	366	25.09	175	39.68	153	29.82	38	7.52
	Polyamorous	213	14.60	11	2.49	65	12.67	137	27.13
	Other	13	0.89	1	0.23	4	0.78	8	1.58
	Prefer not to say	28	1.92	11	2.49	2	0.39	15	2.97
HIV status									
	HIV-negative	1,085	74.37	249	56.46	405	78.95	431	85.35
	HIV-positive	42	2.88	1	0.23	8	1.56	33	6.53
	No test/don't know	329	22.55	191	43.31	97	18.91	41	8.12
	Prefer not to say	3	0.21	0	0	3	0.58	0	0
Race									
	East Asian	293	20.08	179	40.59	63	12.28	51	10.10
	Australian Aboriginal	8	0.55	0	0.00	2	0.39	6	1.19
	Black	71	4.87	1	0.23	68	13.26	2	0.40
	Latine	29	1.99	3	0.68	7	1.36	19	3.76
	Middle Eastern	29	1.99	12	2.72	3	0.58	14	2.77
	Pacific Islander	8	0.55	2	0.45	3	0.58	3	0.59
	South Asian	81	5.55	39	8.84	13	2.53	29	5.74
	White	840	57.57	172	39.00	313	61.01	355	70.30
	Mixed Race	91	6.24	30	6.80	39	7.60	22	4.36

		Total (N = 1,459)		Study 1 (n = 441)		Study 2 (n = 513)		Study 3 (n = 505)	
		n	Percent	*n*	Percent	*n*	Percent	*n*	Percent
	Indigenous	2	0.14	1	0.23	1	0.19	0	0.00
	Prefer not to say	7	0.48	2	0.45	1	0.19	4	0.79
Country									
	Australia	1169	80.12	441	100	223	43.47	505	100
	United Kingdom	84	5.76	0	0	84	16.37	0	0
	United States	206	14.12	0	0	206	40.16	0	0
			Range		Range		Range	*M* (*SD*)	Range
		M (*SD*)	Min. Max.	*M* (*SD*)	Min. Max.	*M* (*SD*)	Min. Max.		Min. Max.
Age		31.47 (13.38)	18 86	19.89 (2.94)	18 51	33.59 (11.48)	18 86	39.45 (13.82)	18 85
Self-rated sexual attractiveness		57.12 (21.15)	0 100	57.35 (20.15)	1.57 100	54.51 (23.35)	0.00 100	59.56 (19.33)	0 99.71
Men sexual partners		4.77 (11.14)	0 100+	1.15 (2.55)	0 45	1.71 (6.63)	0 100+	11.05 (15.76)	0 100+
Women sexual partners		0.32 (1.08)	0 17	0.11 (0.42)	0 3	0.44 (1.22)	0 17	0.38 (1.28)	0 14
Non-binary sexual partners		0.18 (1.01)	0 20	0.11 (0.84)	0 10	0.08 (0.33)	0 3	0.35 (1.48)	0 20
Condom use		1.47 (1.20)	0 4	1.48 (1.27)	0 4	1.53 (1.34)	0 4	1.39 (0.97)	0 4
Sexual intention		1.6 (1.78)	0 6	0.86* (1.36)	0 6	1.32 (1.57)	0 6	2.58 (1.99)	0 6
Sexual concern		2.39 (1.77)	0 6	2.74 (1.73)	0 6	2.41 (1.74)	0 6	2.06 (1.78)	0 6

Note. Total sample size is given by *N*. Subsamples for each study are given by *n*. Mean is given by *M*, standard deviation by *SD*, the minimum of a variable's range by Min. and its maximum by Max. Age is given in years. Men, women, and non-binary sexual partners each reflect the reported number of unique sexual partners participants had in the preceding six months, on a scale of 0 to 100+.

* Sexual intention for the undergraduate student sample (Study 1) was the average of two rather than three items, as it was in the remaining studies and for the total across all three studies. See *Measures* in Study 1 for details.

Table 12

Multilevel Correlation Matrix of Continuous Variables Pooled Over Studies 1, 2, and 3

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
1. Age	–							
2. Self-rated sexual attractiveness	.04 [-.02, .09]	–						
3. Men sexual partners	.10 [.05, .16]	.17 [.11, .22]	–					
4. Women sexual partners	.03 [-.02, .09]	.13 [.07, .18]	.04 [-.02, .09]	–				
5. Non-binary sexual partners	.01 [-.05, .07]	.11 [.06, .16]	.22 [.16, .27]	.31 [.26, .36]	–			
6. Condom use	.00 [-.03, .07]	.00 [-.06, .06]	-.01 [-.07, .04]	.02 [-.04, .07]	.02 [-.03, .07]	–		
7. Sexual intention	.09 [.03, .14]	.03 [-.03, .09]	.18 [.13, .23]	.04 [-.02, .10]	.12 [.07, .17]	-.03 [-.09, .02]	–	
8. Sexual concerns	-.12 [-.18, -.06]	-.14 [-.19, -.08]	-.09 [-.14, -.03]	-.08 [-.13, -.02]	-.03 [-.09, .03]	-.02 [-.08, .03]	.09 [.04, .15]	–

Note. Bracketed values represent 97% credible intervals. Age is given in years. Men, women, and non-binary sexual partners each reflect the self-reported number of different sexual partners participants had in the preceding six months.

Procedure

Students signed up for the study via an online noticeboard and were remunerated with course credit. After sign-up, participants were provided a link to the study survey. I collected and managed data using *REDCap*, hosted by the University of Melbourne. Before accessing the study, participants completed a reCAPTCHA task, after which they provided their consent, before completing a demographics and sexual health survey, followed by the experimental manipulation. It took participants on average 22.11 minutes to complete the study.

I used a between-persons experimental design, randomly assigning participants to one of two groups (potential sexual partner: unattractive versus attractive). All participants were presented with a common vignette, which described participants meeting, going on a date with, and being propositioned for condomless sex by 'Alex,' represented by a photograph of a man, shown from the shoulders-up. Participants then rated their intentions to have condomless sex (their sexual intentions) and how concerned they felt rejecting condomless sex (their sexual concern, see *Measures*).

The face associated with the vignette was randomized. I drew these facial stimuli from the Chicago Face Database (Ma et al., 2015), and its Indian and Multiracial expansions (Lakshmi et al., 2021; Ma et al., 2021). Normed data on attractiveness is available for each database. Each model in the original and multiracial databases was given an average attractiveness score relative to other members of their race, based on responses from 1,087 (Ma et al., 2015) and 499 (Ma et al., 2021) raters, respectively. For the Indian database, I used the average attractiveness rating from 207 US participants (Lakshmi et al., 2021), rather than normed data from Indian participants, because I assumed standards of attractiveness were likely more similar between the US and Australia (e.g., Cascalheira & Smith, 2020; cf. Thai et al., 2025). Using these data, I

selected male faces which were rated one standard deviation below the mean on attractiveness (*n* = 67; used in the 'unattractive' condition), and faces rated one standard deviation above the mean (*n* = 65; used in the 'attractive' condition), as my experimental stimuli. Two example faces for each condition are shown in Figure 8.

Figure 8

Example Experimental Stimuli from the Unattractive (Left; 2 of 67 Stimuli) and Attractive (Right; 2 of 65 Stimuli) Conditions

Note. Stimuli derived from the Chicago Face Database, created by Ma and colleagues (2015), and its Multiracial (Ma et al., 2021) and Indian (Lakshmi et al., 2021) expansion sets.

Participants were randomly assigned to see either an unattractive or attractive face. The specific face each participant saw was randomized from this larger pool of 132 stimuli based on condition. Participants assigned to the unattractive condition were randomly shown one of 1 of 67 possible faces; participants in the attractive condition were randomly shown 1 of 65 possible faces. This double randomization was to control for inter-stimuli (e.g., the particular features of any one face), inter-racial (e.g., the systematic effect of sexual racism; Cascalheira & Smith, 2020; Thai et al., 2025), and inter-participant differences (e.g., the effect of participants' sexual desire or arousal; Shuper & Fisher, 2008; Thai & Barlow, 2019). As a result, any experimental effect is attributable to whether participants saw an unattractive or attractive face, rather than the individual differences between any one face or participant.

Measures

Demographics and Sexual Health

Participants self-reported their age, gender, sex, sexuality, race, and relationship status. I adapted a brief sexual health questionnaire from the GBQ+ Community Periodic Survey (Broady et al., 2023; MacGibbon et al., 2024), an annual national survey of the sexual health of men who have sex with men in Australia. All participants were asked to self-report their HIV status (if known), the number of unique men, women, and non-binary sexual partners and their condom use (coded as never, sometimes, often, always, or no sex) with men sexual partners in the past six months. Because they have been previously identified as important covariates (Callander et al., 2023; Thai & Barlow, 2019), I included condom use and number of men sexual partners in all of my models.

Self-Rated Sexual Attractiveness

I developed a seven-item scale to measure how sexually attractive participants saw themselves. I based these items on empirical and theoretical considerations. Two items, "I am sexually desirable" and "I am sexually attractive" were drawn from my measure of sexual desirability in Chapter 4. Three items were adapted from the Self-Perceived Sexual Attractiveness Scale (Amos & McCabe, 2015), with wording changed to be simpler and more direct: "I am sexy", "Others feel sexual desire for me", and "Others want to have sex with me." I included two further items based on a review of popular and academic literature (Klebl, Greenaway, et al., 2021; Klebl et al., 2022; Mitchell et al., 2014; Murray & Brotto, 2021; Srinivasan, 2021): "I am fuckable" and "I am ugly" (reversed scored). Participants were instructed to "[p]lease respond with how well each statement describes you. Your responses are anonymous. Please be accurate to your true feelings." They responded to each item using a 101-point visual analogue scale where 0 was "Not at all" and 100 was "Extremely." I used a visual analogue scale to be consistent with items used in Chapter 4, and because available evidence (Simms et al., 2019) suggests they have equivalent psychometric properties to 6-point or greater Likert-type scales (e.g., like the 7-point scale used by Amos & McCabe, 2015).

I evaluated the scale using a Bayesian confirmatory factor analysis model with each item loading on one factor. I tested model fit by graphing posterior predictive checks and using a posterior predictive *p*-value. The posterior predictive *p*-value gives the probability that data generated from the model would be more (or less) extreme than the original data, with values around .5 representing good fit. I found a posterior predictive *p*-value of .52, indicating a good fit to the data, which was corroborated by posterior predictive checks (available on the OSF). The

scale had good reliability, McDonald's ω (hereafter, ω) = .90 (97% CI [.88, .91]), posterior *SD* = 0.01.

Outcome Variables

I tested whether experimental condition influenced the degree to which participants would agree to have sex with the person depicted ('sexual intentions') and their level of concern at rejecting him ('sexual concerns'). Both measures were adapted from Thai and Barlow (2019) because they were face valid and demonstrated adequate reliability.

Sexual Intentions. I measured participants' intentions to have condomless sex using a three-item scale: "How reluctant would you be to have sex with Alex?" (reversed scored), "How likely would you be to have sex with Alex?", and "How willing would you be to have sex with Alex?" Responses were rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale where 0 was "Not at all" and 6 was "Extremely". The scale had poor reliability, ω = .65 (97% CI [.60, .70]), posterior *SD* = 0.02, likely owing to the first item being weakly correlated with the other two. As a result, I used the remaining two items as my measure of sexual intentions. Reliability of the two remaining items was good, *r* = .71 (97% CI [.66, .76]), posterior *SD* = 0.02.

Sexual Concerns. I measured the level of concern participants had about saying no to sex with Alex using a three-item scale: "How anxious would you be to say no to sex with Alex?", "How nervous would you be to say no to sex with Alex?", and "Would you feel pressure to say yes to sex with Alex?" Participants rated each item on a 7-point Likert-type scale where 0 was "Not at all" and 6 was "Extremely". The three items loaded well on one factor with a posterior predictive *p*-value of .51, and showed good reliability, ω = .76 (97% CI[.73, .80]), posterior *SD* = 0.02.

Attention Checks

I used two attention checks. First, participants were presented with a list of colors to choose from and given the following instruction: “The following question is very simple. When asked to select your favorite color, you must select 'Orange'. This is an attention check. Based on the text you read above, what is your favorite color?” Participants who selected anything other than the color orange failed the attention check. Second, in a matrix of questions, participants were shown the item “Please select ‘always’ to show you’re paying attention.” Participants who selected any response other than ‘always’ failed the attention check. I excluded participants from the sample if they failed both attention checks, while retaining participants who had not failed any or who had only failed one.

Analysis Plan

I analyzed my data in *R* version 4.4.2 using *brms* (Bürkner, 2017) and *Stan* (Stan Development Team, 2022). I used Bayesian estimation, running each model with four chains of Markov Chain Monte Carlo with a mixing criterion of R-hat values below 1.05. I summarize each statistics using the mean and standard deviation of the posterior distribution, alongside a 97% credible interval (CI).

I regressed sexual intentions and sexual concerns (my outcome variables) on experimental condition (0 = unattractive, 1 = attractive). I modelled self-rated sexual attractiveness as a moderator, which I mean-centered and standardized. Condom use and men sexual partners in the past six months were both included as covariates and were also mean-centered and standardized. I included these covariates because I theorized that (1) prior condom use may account for differences in participants’ current intentions and concerns about condomless sex (e.g., participants who only ever use condoms may have less intentions and greater concerns, and vice versa for participants who never use condoms) and (2) participants

with a greater reported number of men sexual partners may be less concerned condom use in general relative to participants with relatively fewer reported partners.

I had no missing data in Study 1, or in the following two studies. As a result, I conducted my analyses using all cases.

Results and Discussion

Results for Study 1 are shown in Table 13 and graphed in Figure 9. I found an effect for experimental condition on sexual intention, such that participants in the attractive condition had greater intention to have condomless sex than participants in the unattractive condition. I did not find an effect of self-rated sexual attractiveness on participants' sexual intention nor an interaction effect between experimental condition and self-rated sexual attractiveness. I did not find an effect of experimental condition on sexual concern. I did find an effect of self-rated sexual attractiveness on sexual concern, such that participants who rated themselves as more sexually attractive had lower rated concerns about rejecting condomless sex. The credible interval for self-rated sexual attractiveness's effect on sexual concern was very close to zero indicating that the effect may not be meaningfully different from zero or that I did not have sufficient data to precisely estimate the effect.

Table 13

Standardized Results by Study and the Mega-Analysis Testing Experimental Condition's Effect Sexual Intention and Sexual Concern Moderated by Self-Rated Sexual Attractiveness

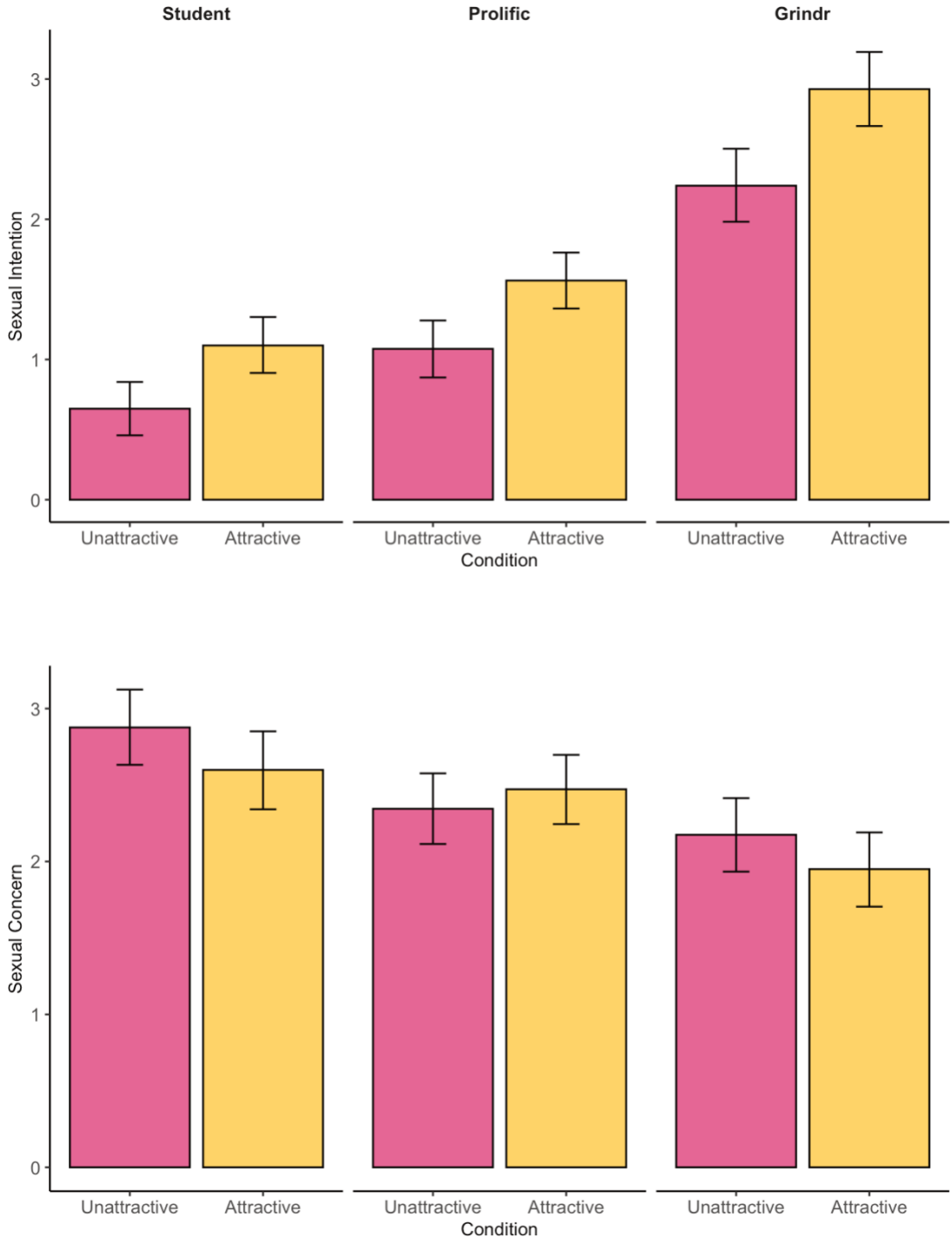
	Sexual intention			Sexual concern		
		97% CI			97% CI	
Coefficient	Est. *(SD)*	1.5%	98.5%	Est. *(SD)*	1.5%	98.5%
Study 1 (Undergraduate students)						
Intercept	0.65 (0.09)	0.46	0.84	2.88 (0.11)	2.63	3.12
Condition	0.33 (0.09)	0.14	0.53	-0.16 (0.09)	-0.36	0.04
Self-rated sexual attractiveness	0.01 (0.09)	-0.19	0.21	-0.25 (0.12)	-0.51	0.00
Condition X Self-rated sexual attractiveness	0.12 (0.13)	-0.16	0.39	0.07 (0.16)	-0.28	0.42

	Sexual intention			Sexual concern		
		97% CI			97% CI	
Coefficient	Est. *(SD)*	1.5%	98.5%	Est. *(SD)*	1.5%	98.5%
Condom use	-0.06 (0.06)	-0.20	0.08	-0.09 (0.08)	-0.27	0.09
Men sexual partners	0.19 (0.06)	0.05	0.33	-0.07 (0.08)	-0.25	0.10
Study 2 (Prolific)						
Intercept	1.08 (0.09)	0.87	1.27	2.34 (0.11)	2.11	2.57
Condition	0.32 (0.09)	0.14	0.51	0.07 (0.09)	-0.12	0.26
Self-rated sexual attractiveness	0.19 (0.10)	-0.03	0.41	-0.13 (0.11)	-0.36	0.10
Condition X Self-rated sexual attractiveness	0.00 (0.13)	-0.29	0.28	-0.27 (0.15)	-0.59	0.05
Condom use	0.02 (0.07)	-0.12	0.17	-0.03 (0.08)	-0.20	0.13
Men sexual partners	0.42 (0.07)	0.28	0.57	-0.08 (0.07)	-0.25	0.08
Study 3 (Grindr)						
Intercept	2.24 (0.12)	1.99	2.50	2.18 (0.11)	1.94	2.41
Condition	0.35 (0.08)	0.16	0.53	-0.13 (0.09)	-0.31	0.06
Self-rated sexual attractiveness	-0.29 (0.12)	-0.55	-0.04	-0.17 (0.11)	-0.41	0.06
Condition X Self-rated sexual attractiveness	0.10 (0.17)	-0.26	0.46	0.00 (0.15)	-0.34	0.34
Condom use	-0.16 (0.09)	-0.35	0.03	0.01 (0.08)	-0.16	0.18
Men sexual partners	0.39 (0.09)	0.20	0.57	-0.20 (0.08)	-0.38	-0.03
Mega-Analysis						
Intercept	1.43 (0.54)	0.20	2.75	2.50 (0.28)	1.91	3.24
Condition	0.28 (0.05)	0.18	0.38	-0.06 (0.05)	-0.17	0.05
Self-rated sexual attractiveness	-0.05 (0.06)	-0.18	0.08	-0.19 (0.07)	-0.33	-0.05
Condition X Self-rated sexual attractiveness	0.07 (0.08)	-0.10	0.25	-0.08 (0.09)	-0.28	0.12
Condom use	-0.04 (0.04)	-0.13	0.05	-0.04 (0.04)	-0.13	0.06
Men sexual partners	0.33 (0.04)	0.24	0.42	-0.12 (0.05)	-0.22	-0.02

Note. Estimate denotes the mean of the posterior distribution, *SD* denotes the standard deviation of the posterior distribution, and CI denotes the posterior distribution's credible interval between the lower 1.5% quantile and the 98.5% quantile. Condition is a binary categorical variable (0 = unattractive, 1 = attractive). Men sexual partners is the number of unique sexual partners who were men participants reported in the preceding six months.

Figure 9

Sexual Intention and Sexual Concern by Experimental Condition for Undergraduate Student (Study 1), Prolific (Study 2), and Grindr (Study 3) Samples



Note. Error bars represent 97% credible intervals.

Participants were more likely to agree to condomless sex if their partner was attractive (versus unattractive), and experienced greater concerns about rejecting condomless sex if they saw themselves as less sexually unattractive. This provides partial support for my hypotheses. Contrary to my hypotheses, the experimental effect was not moderated by self-rated sexual attractiveness (in the case of sexual intention), or unaffected by a potential sexual partner being unattractive versus attractive (in the case of sexual concern).

Study 2

I aimed to replicate my results in Study 1 in a sample more representative of the general population of people who have sex with men. To do so, I recruited participants online via Prolific from Australia, the UK, and the US.

Method

I used the same sample size determination, procedure, and measures for Study 2 as were used in Study 1.

Participants

I recruited participants from Prolific between 11 September and 1 October 2024. I used Prolific's in-built screening function to recruit only users who reported sexual attraction to men. It took participants on average 8.75 minutes to complete the survey, and they were remunerated £1.25.

My total sample size for Study 2 was 537 participants. Of these, 6 (1.12%) did not consent, 14 (2.61%) did not complete the experiment manipulation, 3 (0.56%) failed both attention checks, and 1 (0.19%) was not randomized to either experimental condition due to a technical error. My final sample size was 513. I give their demographics in Table 11. In

comparison to Study 1, I had approximately equal numbers of women and men who have sex with men, alongside a minority of trans and gender diverse participants.

Measures

Self-Rated Sexual Attractiveness

A one factor Bayesian factor analysis model fit the measure of self-rated sexual attractiveness well, with a posterior predictor *p*-value of 0.52. As in Study 1, I found good reliability, ω = .92 (97% CI[0.91, 0.93]), posterior *SD* = .00.

Sexual Intention

In contrast to Study 1, I found that all three items for the measure of sexual intention showed good reliability, ω = .82 (97% [.80, .84]), posterior *SD* = .01. I used the average of all three items as the outcome variable.

Sexual Concern

As in Study 1, I found my three-item measure of sexual concern showed good reliability, ω = .78 (97% CI [.75, .81]), posterior *SD* = .01.

Data Analysis

I conducted data analysis similar to Study 1 with the addition of looking at whether gender moderated the effect of experimental condition on my outcome variables. I binarized gender as (cis and trans) women versus (cis and trans) men participants, treating the former as the reference category, excluding non-binary participants from this analysis. I ran two models per outcome to test gender: (1) I regressed sexual intention and concern on condition, gender, their interaction, and the covariates, and (2) I regressed sexual intention and concern on condition, gender, and the covariates without an interaction effect.

Results and Discussion

The results for Study 2 are presented in Table 13 and graphed in Figure 9. They were consistent with Study 1: I found an effect of experimental condition on sexual intention, such that participants who saw an attractive face reported greater intention to have condomless sex than participants who saw an unattractive face, partially supporting my first hypothesis. For sexual concern, consistent with Study 1, I saw no effect of experimental condition on whether participants reported greater discomfort to reject a potential sexual partner. In contrast, I did not find a relationship between self-rated sexual attractiveness and sexual concern.

Gender did not moderate the effect of experimental condition on sexual intention, β = 0.17 (97% CI [-0.17, 0.52]), posterior *SD* = 0.16, or sexual concern, β = -0.20 (97% CI [-0.56, 0.17]), posterior *SD* = 0.17. In the model including gender and the interaction between gender and experimental condition, gender β = 0.36 (97% CI [0.12, 0.60]), posterior *SD* = 0.11, but not experimental condition, β = 0.22 (97% CI [-0.03, 0.47]), posterior *SD* = 0.12, predicted sexual intention. Notably, the inclusion of gender and its interaction with condition appears to have increased the uncertainty of the experimental effect's estimate. In contrast, when excluding their interaction, experimental condition, β = 0.31 (97% CI [0.13, 0.49]), posterior *SD* = 0.08, and gender, β = 0.44 (97% CI [0.26, 0.62]), posterior *SD* = 0.08, both predicted sexual intention. Participants assigned to the attractive condition or who were men reported greater intention to have condomless sex than participants assigned to the unattractive condition or who were women. Gender did not predict sexual concern when including an interaction between gender and condition, but did in the model without an interaction, β = -0.27 (97% CI [-0.45, -0.08]), posterior *SD* = 0.09, such that men reported less concern about rejecting condomless sex than did women.

The results of Study 2 corroborate those in Study 1, with the exception that I did find a relationship between self-rated sexual attractiveness and sexual concern. They also extend those from Study 1 by showing that the effect of experimental condition does not appear to differ by gender. People who have sex with men, regardless of their gender, appear equally affected by partner attractiveness on their intention to have condomless sex. It appears that men are more likely to intend to have condomless sex and have less concern about rejecting condomless sex than women. Especially considering the risk STIs and HIV pose to men who have sex with men (Traeger et al., 2022), this suggests a continued need for the promotion of consistent condom use among this population.

Study 3

Men who have sex with men appear more likely to intend to have condomless sex. Existing evidence also indicates that they may be uniquely sensitive to the effects of sexual marginalization based on (un)attractiveness (Hammack et al., 2022; Pachankis et al., 2020). Considering the inciting data for this chapter (A. I. Green, 2008b), the relationship between partner- and self-rated attractiveness may be especially relevant for men who have sex with men. In Study 3, I replicated the study in a sample of (predominantly) men who have sex with men on Grindr (hereafter, Grindr users), a dating app popular among men who have sex with men.

Method

The sample size determination, procedure, measures, and data analysis used in Study 3 were consistent with those used in Studies 1 and 2, except for recruitment procedure.

Participants

I recruited participants through Grindr, a geospatial dating app for men and queer people who have sex with men, between 26 and 28 September 2024. I geo-locked the recruitment to

users in Australia. Users received an invitation to the study in their inbox which linked to the online survey. Participation was not remunerated and took 12.55 minutes on average.

I recruited a total of 981 Grindr users. Of these, 273 (27.83%) did not provide consent, 164 (16.72%) did not complete the experimental manipulation, and 38 (3.87%) failed both attention checks. Due to a technical error, one participant was not assigned to an experimental condition and was excluded. I had a total sample of 505 Grindr users. Demographics and means for Study 3 are presented in Table 11; Study 3 participants were predominately cis White gay men.

Measures

Self-Rated Sexual Attractiveness

A one factor confirmatory factor model fit the measure of self-rated sexual attractiveness well in Study 3, with a posterior predictor p-value of 0.52. As in Studies 1 and 2, I found good reliability, ω = .89 (97% CI[0.88, 0.91]), posterior SD = 0.01.

Sexual Intention

My three-item measure of sexual intention had good reliability in Study 3, ω = .82 (97% [.79, .84]), posterior SD = 0.01. As in Study 2, I created averaged all three items to make my measure of sexual intention.

Sexual Concern

Finally, as in Studies 1 and 2, I found my three-item measure of sexual concern had good reliability, ω = .79 (97% CI [.76, .82]), posterior SD = 0.01.

Results and Discussion

As in Studies 1 and 2, the results for Study 3 are presented in Table 13. Consistent with both prior studies, Study 3 found that participants in the attractive condition had greater intention

of having condomless sex than did participants in the unattractive condition. I also found an effect of self-rated sexual attractiveness on sexual intention, but not sexual concern as in Study 1. Participants who saw themselves as less attractive reported greater intention to have condomless sex. Neither experimental condition nor self-rated sexual attractiveness predicted sexual concern. I found no interaction effect for either outcome variable.

My results in Study 3 further replicated the results from Studies 1 and 2. Consistent with both prior Studies, I found Grindr users were more likely to engage in condomless sex if they were presented with an attractive versus unattractive potential sexual partner. Grindr users were also more likely to intend to have condomless sex if they rated themselves as less sexually attractive, unlike participants in the prior two studies. This might suggest a distinct relationship between self-rated sexual attractiveness and sexual intention in men who have sex with men.

General Results

Mega-analysis

To maximize the reliability of my effect estimates, I conducted a 'mega-analysis' to pool data from Studies 1, 2, and 3 using a multilevel model. A mega-analysis, in contrast to a meta-analysis, pools raw data across studies rather than statistical outputs (Eisenhauer, 2021; for an example, see Steinberg et al., 1997). I used two multilevel models to partially pool my results, standardizing my continuous predictors within-sample (Hamaker & Muthén, 2020; Schuurman et al., 2016). These results are presented in Table 13.

The mega-analysis showed that experimental condition had an effect on sexual intention, and self-rated sexual attractiveness had an effect on sexual concern. Neither interaction effect, nor any other effect of experimental condition or self-rated sexual attractiveness differed

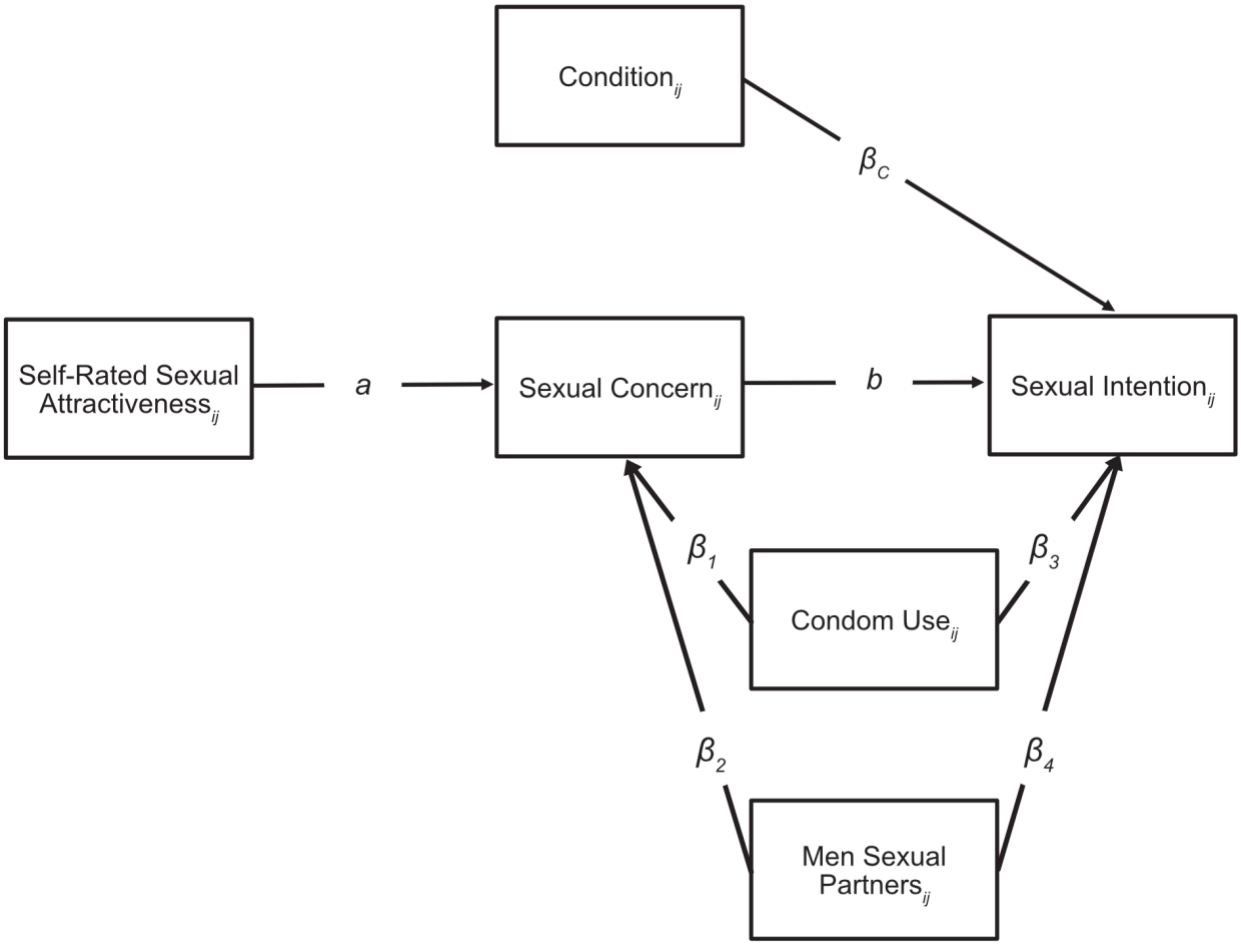
meaningfully from zero. The pooled estimates, and the uncertainty around those estimates, were also smaller than the results from Studies 1, 2, and 3.

Multilevel Mediation Model

My results consistently indicated that self-rated sexual attractiveness did not moderate partner attractiveness on sexual intention, and that partner attractiveness did not influence participants' concern over rejecting condomless sex. I hypothesized based on these results and the correlation between sexual concern and sexual intention (see Table 12), that sexual concern might mediate a link between self-rated sexual attractiveness and sexual intention. I tested this relationship using the model displayed in Figure 10.

Figure 10

Hypothesized Model Testing the Indirect Effect of Self-Rated Sexual Attractiveness on Sexual Intention via Sexual Concern



Note. The effect of sexual attractiveness on sexual concern is given by *a*, and the effect of sexual concern on sexual intention is given by *b*. Subscripts denote the value of the relevant variable for each person (*i*) in each sample (*j*). Condition is binary (0 = unattractive, 1 = attractive).

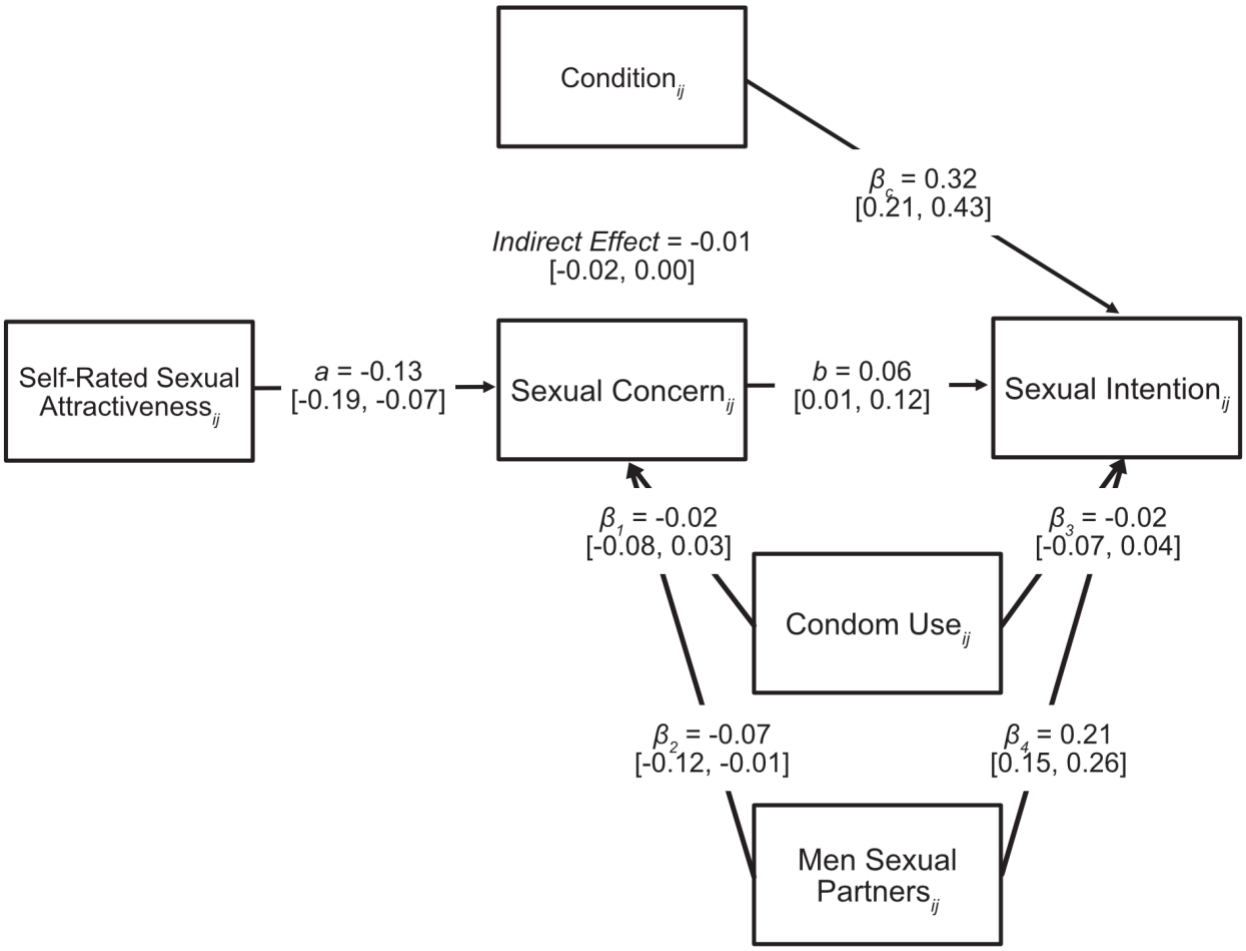
In addition to testing this indirect effect, I also modelled the relationship between condition on sexual intention and controlled for participants prior condom use and the number of men sexual partners they reported in the preceding six months on sexual intention and sexual

concern. Like the mega-analysis, I used a multilevel model, standardizing the variables within-sample.

The results of the mediation model are shown in Figure 11. I found that sexual attractiveness negatively predicted sexual concern, which positively predicted sexual intention. That is, participants who saw themselves as less sexually attractive were more likely to feel concern about rejecting condomless sex, and that those who felt greater concern showed greater intention to have condomless sex.

Figure 11

Results for Path Model Testing the Indirect Effect of Sexual Attractiveness on Sexual Intention via Sexual Concern



Note. All parameters are standardized within-sample. The indirect effect is the product of the relationship between sexual attractiveness and sexual concern and the relationship between sexual concern and sexual intention. Subscripts denote the value of the relevant variable for each person (*i*) in each sample (*j*). Condition is binary (0 = unattractive, 1 = attractive). Bracket values represent 97% credible intervals.

I found a trivial mediation (i.e., indirect) effect. The indirect effect was very small and should be interpreted as tentative, weak evidence for the hypothesized mechanism of self-rated sexual attractiveness on sexual intention via sexual concern. If such a relationship exists, as my data provides limited support for, it is likely very small. The psychological variables that influence sexual intention (i.e., self-rated sexual attractiveness and sexual concern) are also dwarfed by the social (i.e., partner attractiveness) and behavioral (e.g., number of men sexual partners). My data suggest that whether one's sexual partner is attractive or unattractive and one's prior sexual behavior are more substantive contributors to future sexual behavior than are psychological factors such as one's view of themselves as sexually attractive or how concerned one is about rejecting condomless sex.

General Discussion

I aimed to investigate the influence of partner attractiveness on sexual intention and concerns about condomless sex, and whether self-rated sexual attractiveness might moderate that effect. My results partially support my hypotheses: participants who saw an attractive man reported greater intention to have condomless sex than did participants who saw an unattractive man, yet I did not find an experimental effect for sexual concern, nor did I find that self-rated sexual attractiveness moderated these relationships. I found that participants who rated themselves as less sexually attractive felt greater sexual concerns: if one sees themselves as less

sexually attractive, they feel more anxious about rejecting a partner who wants to have condomless sex.

Implications

Attractive potential sexual partners may be better able to negotiate for condomless sex, a finding consistent across each of my studies. This suggests attractiveness is a social factor that influences the consistency of condom use. Where previous research has focused on participants (especially adolescents) ability to communicate with sexual partners (Widman et al., 2014), or their view of condoms as effective (Santos et al., 2024), they have neglected the social forces that might influence condom use. Whether or not one's sexual partner is attractive also impacts this decision: attractive partners may be able to use their attractiveness to negotiate for condomless sex. Sex education around the impact attractiveness can have on condom use may be an important addition to sexual health initiatives aiming to curtail unintended pregnancy, STI incidences, and HIV seroconversion. Future research should also look at the role partner and self-rated attractiveness has in other sexual behavior and sexual health decisions.

Whether or not participants felt sexually attractive did not appear to moderate the effect of their partners' attractiveness on either outcome, but did predict their concerns around rejecting condomless sex. Partner and self-rated sexual attractiveness appear to have discrepant influences: partner attractiveness influences one's intended behavior, whereas self-rated sexual attractiveness influences one's concern around that behavior. With reference to the opening quotation from Green (2008b), I distinguish between the social and psychological effects of sexual capital: greater sexual capital may provide freer access to others' bodies ("if a hot guy came up to me and wanted to have sex without condoms, I'd probably say I don't want to jeopardize this"; p. 41), while less sexual capital may make sex more precarious, increasing

one's distress about declining problematic or unwanted sex ("this guy is doing me a favor by sleeping with me", p. 42).

My finding that men are more likely than women to intend to have condomless sex has several implications for sexual health. The risk of unintended pregnancy may be a greater deterrent to condomless sex than the risk of HIV seroconversion or STIs. If was not, we would expect that men and women who have sex with men would not differ in their baseline intention to have condomless sex. This may also be indicative of the relative risk condomless sex poses to pregnancy versus HIV seroconversion. Condomless vaginal sex (in the absence of other contraceptive methods) has an average probability of .10 to .33 of resulting in conception (Wilcox et al., 1995), while the probability of HIV seroconversion following unprotected sex among men who have sex with men ranges from .0018 to .01 (D. K. Smith et al., 2015). The relative unlikeliness of HIV, coupled with effective preventative methods such as PrEP, may render it an increasingly tractable barrier to condomless sex for men who have sex with men (Callander et al., 2023; Medland et al., 2024). Yet the continued risk posed by STIs may be especially problematic for men who have sex with men (Traeger et al., 2022). My data suggest the ongoing need to understand and meet the sexual health needs of men who have sex with men may be particularly important.

Future Directions

An alternative explanation for my findings is that participants assigned to the attractive condition may have seen their sexual partner as posing less risk to their sexual health. As prior work looking at PrEP and STI incidences suggests (Traeger et al., 2022), when the risk of (especially incurable) infections is lessened, so too are be perceived risks of condomless sex. As it relates to sexual partners, Klebl and colleagues (2021) found that ugliness (i.e.,

unattractiveness) may indicate the presence of disease. Beautiful (i.e., attractive) faces, conversely, are associated with purity, indicating the absence of disease (Klebl et al., 2022; Klebl, Rhee, et al., 2021). As Warner and colleagues (2006) observed "condom can prevent transmission of STI only among persons exposed to an infected partner" (p. 37). If attractive sexual partners are seen as being less likely to have an infection (including STIs or HIV), they may by extension be seen as posing less risk to sexual health, resulting in condom use being seen as less urgent or necessary. This alternative explanation ought to be investigated in future work.

The vignette improved my method's ecological validity over prior research on attractiveness and condom use intention (e.g., in cis straight men and women; Eleftheriou et al., 2016, 2019), yet my findings applicability to participants' *in situ* decisions to use condoms remains limited. For example, I did not account for my participants' unique sexual desires.[14] Regardless of whether participants were assigned to see an unattractive or attractive face, some simply may not have been attracted to the man depicted. There is likely no ethical experimental method which accounts entirely for individual differences in sexual desire. Instead, future work should use intensive longitudinal designs (e.g., experience sampling and daily diary) to describe the relationship between real-world partner attractiveness on actual (rather than intended) condom use, among other sexual health decisions.

Conclusion

Condoms are an effective preventative measure against unintended pregnancies, STIs incidences, HIV seroconversion, but only if their use is "correct and consistent" (World Health Organization, 2022, p. 28). Whether a potential sexual partner is attractive or not appears to

[14] After their participation, one respondent put this limitation to us: "First I was shown Alex … I wouldn't have sex with [him] even if he was the last person on the planet… However if I was there with some drop dead gorgeous 70 yo with silver hair, while I would ask him if he was safe… [sic] I wouldn't worry too much about a condom."

influence the consistency of use. People who have sex with men are less likely to intend to use condoms if an attractive (versus unattractive) potential sexual partner negotiates for condomless sex. People who see themselves as less sexually attractive will also feel more concerned about rejecting condomless sexual. Both findings suggest that attractiveness is a social influence on sexual health, insofar as it influences one's anticipated use of condoms. Future work should assess the role attractiveness plays in actual condom use. Understanding attractiveness as a social determinant of condom use, and tailoring sex education towards mitigating its effect, is an important avenue to promoting their consistent use.

Chapter 7: General Discussion

I began this thesis by suggesting that sexual desirability is the precursor to sexual desire. Because it relates to the object of one's sexual desire, I proposed that it is the location where sexuality is socially organized. Where previous work has focused on the process of sex as a purely physiological, neurological, or psychological phenomenon (e.g., Chivers & Brotto, 2017), or on the organization of sexual actors (e.g., Wade, 2021), the research I have presented here straddles the psychological and social, providing a systematic account of sexual desirability. I aimed to examine how men who have sex with men define and construct sexual desirability, as well as some of the consequences that sexual (un)desirability has on their psychological and sexual health. I addressed how sexual desirability was defined by men who have sex with men in Chapter 2, and that sexual desirability is socially constructed, rather than innate, in Chapters 2 and 3. In Chapters 4, 5, and 6, I asked what the consequences of sexual desirability are, and what effect being relegated to a higher or lower sexual status has on men who have sex with men, taking body image, gender expression, and condom use as examples.

In this final chapter, I summarize the empirical findings from my thesis and provide two overall theoretical implications: sexual desirability is performative, and sexual desirability's role in dehumanization. I conclude with two directions for future research.

Summary of Findings

I addressed how sexual desirability is defined by men who have sex with men in Chapter 2: sexual desirability is composed of interlocking dimensions of appearance, affect, and behavior. How one looks, which emotions one displays, and what one does all bear upon whether one is (or feels) sexy. Appearance, despite being assumed as synonymous with sexual attractiveness (Pazhoohi et al., 2024; Sidari et al., 2021; Tran et al., 2020), is only one element of

sexual desirability. Relational factors, how individual sexual actors interface with one another, and contextual factors, cultural and situational differences between different social and sexual fields, modulate not only what kinds of appearance, affect, and behavior are seen as desirable, but their relative importance for sexual desire. These comprise the "quality and quantity of attributes … which elicit an erotic response in another" (A. I. Green, 2008b, p. 29).

In Chapters 2 and 3, I investigated how specific norms of sexual desirability are constructed. In Chapter 2, I found normative sexual desirability becomes embedded in sexual fields as well as individual sexual actors' sexual desires through distal and proximal influences, a distinction drawn from minority stress theory (Frost & Meyer, 2023; Meyer, 2003). Distally, social and cultural processes position certain bodies as desirable or undesirable. Symbolic violence discursively positions some people, bodies, and attributes as desirable, representing them as the legitimate or natural object of individual men who have sex with men's sexual desires (Bourdieu, 2007). Others are represented either as unattractive, as objects of sexual fetish, or are elided from representation completely. Men who have sex with men frequently identify visual media's role in shaping desirability: social media, cinema, television, art, and porn all present the White, muscular, and masculine male body as the sexual default. Others beyond these narrow parameters are excluded from hegemonic desirability.

Distal influences on sexual desire take the form of discrimination – both systemic and interpersonal. I identified three in Chapter 2: sexual racism, sexual orientalism, and sexual anti-fat bias. Discrimination against sexually undesirable bodies is produced through increasingly informal, rather than formal, social structures. For example, while Grindr has removed the ability to screen users by race, unspoken social norms continue to play a role in rendering men of color as undesirable (Hammack et al., 2022; Jordens & Griffiths, 2022). Men of color face overt

racism less often, but continue to enjoy less sexual interest from others, receive fewer responses to messages, and are sidelined, both literally and virtually, within the sexual fields available to them.

Distal discrimination is both overt and covert. Taking sexual racism as an example, men of color experience overt instances of discrimination that White men do not, such as racist diatribe and racialized fetishization (Stacey & Forbes, 2022). But sexual racism is also covert: it functions through an absence of experiences, from the withdrawal or foreclosure of certain connections, and from systematically ignoring (e.g., 'ghosting') men of color. Both forms of sexual racism function to confirm men of colors' lower sexual status relative to White men, and to render their access to sexual desire, intimacy, and pleasure more precarious.

These processes are embedded in sexual fields at an international level. While not universal (men of color report a number of sexual fields available to them that invert White-centric sexual logic), their regularity suggests that sexual fields are as much a product of the culture that they are embedded in as they are the sexual desires of the individual sexual actors which frequent them. Echoing Smith and colleagues (2018), I propose that a systemic perspective is necessary to understand the distribution of sexual capital, and the ways in which hegemonic sexual desirability becomes embedded across sexual fields. These distal systems are then reproduced at the level of the individual person through both societal and interpersonal level discrimination.

Proximally, individual men who have sex with men internalize the representations presented to them in media. Which groups of people are represented in film, television, magazines, social media, and porn, among other sources, are informed by hegemonic sexual desirability: White, muscular, and masculine men are internalized as the sexual default.

Individual men's sexual desires come under sway of this normative form of desirability. By seeing particular bodies so often, one is invited or expected to eroticize those bodies and internalize them as archetypally desirable. Other bodies are elided, left unrepresented, or else represented in ways which mark sexual desire for them as deviant. This is a process of learning: one is conditioned to see some, and not others, as sexually desirable (Ågmo & Laan, 2023; Toates, 2009). One also learns the parameters by which otherwise undesirable bodies may become desirable: while White men can be desirable across contexts, East Asian men's desirability is predicated on their expected, compelled submissiveness. These systemic representations underpin men who have sex with men's sexual desires, orienting them towards hegemonic objects of desire.

This proximal shaping of sexual desirability is then reinforced by experiences of discrimination. Fat men who have sex with men report violent rejection, which reinforces the internalization that fat is undesirable. In Chapter 2, I gave the example of John, a fat man, who recalled an experience he had on Grindr: "Some bloke just decided to randomly message me and called me a fat fuck and that I should probably kill myself. I hadn't tapped him, hadn't chatted, hadn't done anything … just random." When asked what effect the experience had on John, he said "[it] reaffirmed all the things that I had in my head … no one would want me because I'm a larger bloke and everyone wants buff blokes." The reported reaffirmation of fat's undesirability is important here: a distal influence, an instance of discrimination, reinforces particular beliefs about one's own and others' bodies.

Much like with systemic racism, systemic anti-fat bias transcends individual sexual fields. Sexual fields generally develop in contexts where the social devaluation of fat is ingrained and widespread (Austen et al., 2022; Gough & Flanders, 2009; Monaghan, 2005; Whitesel,

2014). Fatness is seen as undesirable on an international scale. This results in devaluation of fatness, and a replication of normative sexual anti-fat bias across most, but not all, sexual fields.

Yet men who have sex with men do not always capitulate to hegemonic sexual desirability. For example, fatness is not always undesirable. In certain sexual fields, it becomes a prerequisite for being sexy (Whitesel, 2014). In Chapter 3, I asked how normative sexual desirability is resisted and new forms are constructed. I proposed that individual sexual fields can make use of a spectacle of desire to reinscribe otherwise stigmatized and desexualized bodies as sexually desirable. In doing so, I presented a process which to explain how individual sexual desires can become collectivized, and vice versa. While sexual field theory proposes that sexual desire is agglomerated and externalized into a hierarchy of desirability, orienting individual sexual actors' desires towards particular objects, the process by which this collectivization occurs is unclear (A. I. Green, 2014; Hennen, 2014). Spectacles of desire bridge this theoretical gap.

By externalizing individual sexual actor's sexual desires onto particular bodies, those bodies come to be eroticized. In the case of the Melbourne bear community, the bear body is radically unveiled, and then ritualistically sexualized. I cited two examples: Mr Bear competitions, where bears' internal norms of desirability are challenged and, in some cases, expanded, and underbear dances, where sexual and social contact is porous, and the bear body can be seen not only as an object of desire, but an active participant in sex.

Individual sexual desires are externalized, applied to particular objects, and collectivized through the shared experience of engaging in the spectacle of desire. The spectacle and spectator form a dialogic relationship whereby the spectator, by engaging in the spectacle (e.g., in the case of Mr Bear competitions, by cheering, laughing, and whistling at competitors on stage) becomes

part of the spectacle itself. In this way, spectators can internalize new sexual desires, and have inequitable desires challenged or changed.

The precarity of non-hegemonic sexual desirability is revealed by the incursion of normative sexual desires into stigmatized communities such as bears. Despite focusing on the sexual desirability of the fat, hairy, and older male body, bear communities are still inflected by normative anti-fat bias. Some bears (e.g., Mass, 2001) express their concern for the effect of fatness among bears, replicating a normative belief that fatness is unhealthy, portends fat people's death, and reflects harmful behaviors, all of which act to render the fat body as sexually repulsive. While communities of resistant norms of sexual desirability push against these forces, it is not universally effective. The force of hegemonic sexual desirability, and the ubiquity of spectacles which inscribe the fat body as undesirable, are still at work despite insular communities which reject them within the confines of their particular sexual fields.

The hegemonic status of sexual undesirability produces regularity across sexual fields which relegate some to a higher or lower sexual status in general. In Chapters 4, 5, and 6, I investigated three consequences that this relegation might have. In Chapter 4, I asked how sexual desirability influences Grindr users' satisfaction with their body. I found that both in general and moment-to-moment, men who have sex with men who felt more sexually undesirable felt less satisfied with their bodies (and vice versa). In Chapter 5, I extended this to masculinity and femininity and found that feeling more sexually desirable on average and moment-to-moment makes men who have sex with men feel more masculine. In Chapter 6, I found that how sexually desirable one feels they are does not bear upon one's ability to advocate for condom use. Rather, how sexually desirable a partner is – whether one's partner has a higher or lower sexual status – affects one's intentions to agree to condomless sex; one is more likely to intend to have

condomless sex if one's partner is attractive. Here, the effect of desirability is external to the self – we allow certain sexual boundaries to be transgressed because someone else is sexually desirable.

Sexual Desirability is Performative

In Chapters 2 and 3, I argue for a contextual basis of sexual desirability, a view that aligns with previous, especially ethnographic, research (A. I. Green, 2008b; Hennen, 2008; Humphreys, 1970; M. P. Levine & Kimmel, 1998; Whitesel, 2014). Sexual desirability cannot be said to precede the social contexts that structure sexual desire and orient it toward certain people and attributes. Rather, particular bodies within particular contexts are assigned the quality of desirability (Hennen, 2014). In Chapter 3, I showed how bears are rendered sexually undesirable in normative contexts, much like other fat men who have sex with men. In bear contexts, the bear body becomes desirable. The disconnect is readily noticed by bears themselves: the shift from contexts that desexualize them to ones where they are the center of sexuality is marked.

Because undesirable bodies may be redefined as sexually desirable based on their exposure and action within particular contexts, the existence of a natural, prediscursive, original desire for particular bodies is questionable. Certain bodies – muscular, lean, White, and so on – cannot be said to be 'naturally' desirable. Desirability becomes associated with certain attributes through discursive processes. For example, Strings (2019), in her analysis of the Black body in Western art, showed that discourses of racial difference were played out in art which variously depicted Black people as exotic, erotic, or repulsive. Black bodies, per Strings, took on types of sexual meaning because of the cultural representations circulated about them. Contemporary sexual politics are informed by these, among other, discourses. Desirability appears contingent

upon the political, social, and cultural forces which precede us, imbue our bodies with meaning, and so define us as attractive or unattractive.

Sexual field theory offers little suggestion for why this marked difference between contexts occurs. Green (2014, p. 39) contended that "those who are initially deemed desirable become more so, and, conversely, those deemed less desirable become even less so." In this sense, sexual desirability is an intensification of already existing discourses. How are some bodies radically reconfigured as desirable, contrary to the sexual logics undergirding most sexual fields they chart?

In Chapter 3, I suggested that desirability is performative, a point that I return to bridge the theorize the relationship between the individual sexual actor, the sexual field, and the reproduction of sexual desirability. Austin (1962) defined performatives as utterances which do certain things, contrasting them with utterances which describe certain aspects of the world (constatives). The utterance "I sentence you to death" does not report on the world, it produces an effect – someone is killed (Butler, 1997). Yet the utterance is not reducible to only the words spoken: a performative is the "uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances … appropriate for the invocation" (Austin, 1962, pp. 14–15). "I sentence you to death" must not only be uttered: it must be uttered by someone empowered to sentence someone else with a crime (a magistrate, judge, justice, etc.), in a context appropriate for the act (a courtroom), and in a political system which allows capital punishment. If any element of the performative is incorrect or unconventional, it fails: a judge cannot sentence someone to death on a street corner.

A performative's success relies on context. For Austin (1962), the success of speech as well as physical movements and bodily acts to do what they purport to do depends on the context

they are uttered (Barrett, 2017). Butler (1990, 1993, 1997) gives an example of this when they suggest that, while gender is assumed to be based on natural, biological, differences between men and women, it functions as a product of citational practices which instantiates gender in individual bodies through repeated gender-acts. Taking the example of drag queens, Butler (1993, p. 248) argued that "drag is not a secondary imitation that presupposes a prior and original gender, but that hegemonic heterosexuality is itself a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations." Gender is constituted by the act of gender. Drag reveals the discursivity of gender by contrast: acts that constitute gender in cisheterosexual bodies are parodic when enacted by the 'incorrect' bodies. The invocation of gender fails, and in failing it reveals how normative gender relies on its supporting context. For Butler, gender's success relies on hegemonic cisheterosexuality. Becoming a man or woman means that one not only acts like one or the other, but also that one takes on a specific sexual relationship to the 'opposite' gender, and participate in reproductive heterosexuality and the social, political, and economic domination of men over women (Connell, 2005).

Gender is produced through its enactment, through the taking up of gender by certain persons within supporting contexts. While it congeals into an internalized sense of gender, this internalization is an effect of the routinized practice of gender. Per Butler (1990, p. 33), "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results." As I have suggested throughout this thesis, sexual desirability is similarly constituted: certain bodies are allowed, through the production of particular contexts, to become sexually desirable. One's sense of oneself as sexy is an internalization of a performatively constituted desirability. No individual body is naturally

sexy: being sexy is a product of the inscription of particular bodies within particular contexts which allows them to assume the quality of sexiness.

By suggesting sexual desirability is performative, I am not arguing that it has no relationship with organic, physical bodies. Rather, I mean to suggest that the body is never presented to us without discourses which define what kind of body it is (Martin & George, 2006; Rubin, 1984; Textor, 1999). The production of desirability is in fact indissociable from the physical: fat men are relegated to the sexual margins because their body is manifestly fat (Whitesel, 2014); Black men are fetishized because they inhabit Black bodies (Stacey & Forbes, 2022).

The discursive construction of hegemonic forms of desirability is revealed in the contexts where those ideals are subverted. While Whiteness garners sexual capital in hegemonic sexual fields, these sexual fields are a Western construction, organized around Western beliefs about who is and is not sexy. Recall in Chapter 2 how Cain contrasted his experiences of sexual desirability in Australia versus an Asian context: in Australia, White men garnered the most desirability, while Asian men did not. The reverse was true in an Asian context. Whiteness only assumes hegemonic status because it is positioned as such within a Western, White supremacist culture (Hammack et al., 2022; Jordens & Griffiths, 2022; Thai et al., 2025). In Chapter 3, I showed this was the case for the Melbourne bear community. Bears were rendered sexually undesirable in hegemonic contexts but were radically reconfigured as sexy in contexts where fat was positioned as attractive.

The performativity of desirability bridges the gap between sexual field and individual sexual actors by showing that the two operate in dialogue. A sexual field does not only intensify an existing quantity of sexual desirability. It provides the context where desirability may be

performatively taken up by individual people. As well, a body does not simply assume the status of desirable because it is located in a particular sexual field. Desirability requires sexual agents to enact it through their participation in a sexual field. In this way, certain people are able to act in certain, sexy ways within sexual fields that allow the act of being sexy to succeed.

One rebuttal to a theory of performative desirability is that there are regularities across cultures about who and what is seen as sexually desirable (Kleisner et al., 2024; Pazhoohi et al., 2024). If desirability is constructed through the congealment of social discourses at the level of individual people, there ought to be distinctiveness across sexual fields. While there are distinct sexual fields, which exhibit hierarchies of desirability orthogonal to other fields as well as hegemonic standards of desirability (Edmonds & Zieff, 2015; Monaghan, 2005; Whitesel, 2014), these are exceptions. This shows again how sexual field theory's cannot account for systematic patterns of desirability which transcend the individual sexual field, and inculcate normative desirability across a number of sexual fields way (A. I. Green, 2008a, 2008b; Ruppel, 2022; Wade, 2022).

As well, the regularity of desirability across cultures is attributable to modern social technologies that have proliferated transnational standards of desirability (Hammack & Manago, 2024). In this sense, sexual desirability may be similar across cultures because the contexts within which it is performatively constituted are becoming increasingly homogenous. For instance, Kowal and colleagues (2022) found that, over and above a number of ecological factors emergent in specific countries, social media use was among the strongest predictors of participants' attempted beautification. Social media homogenizes desirability across cultural contexts, reproducing homogeneity of desirability across wide geographical areas. This is not new: particular bodies have long been represented as more or less desirable, with such

representations being transferred between cultures, leading to a proliferation of hegemonic forms of desirability (Strings, 2019).

Standards of desirability also transcend the limits of individual sexual fields because they are inscribed psychologically on the individual person. As with gender, sexual desirability is 'taken up' by individual people, internalized, and becomes an engrained. I have called this the congealed effect of sexual desirability. Like gender, this taking up of sexual desirability instantiates particular relationships to the self. People who see themselves as desirable also feel better about their bodies, they take on different gendered self-beliefs, as I showed in Chapters 4 and 5, respectively. The congealed effect of sexual desirability informs our beliefs about our own and other peoples' bodies. Social relations are informed and coordinated by these beliefs; in Chapter 6, I showed that people considered generally attractive are better able to negotiate for condomless sex. Here, the congealed effect of desirability produces sexual actors who can cross others' sexual boundaries more easily. Attractiveness imbues individual men with the ability to influence others' sexual health decisions. In aggregate, desirability influences whether a body is seen as worthwhile, and so whether particular lives are seen as livable.

Sexual Desire, Sexual Desirability, and Dehumanization

Desexualization, the foreclosure of sexual desire and desirability in relation to particular bodies, is often concatenated with dehumanization. Whitesel (2014, p. 60) suggests that fat men who have sex with men sexualized one another as "a reaction to forms of dehumanization and desexualization." One of Whitesel's informants[15] discussed how

[15] Mr Bear 2025, mentioned in Chapter 3, reiterated this point in a published interview which quoted him as saying: "In this world of dad bods and chunky cubs, plenty of big guys are left to the side. Don't just feithsise them or leave them alone, find an in-between. If you want to get to know me that way, you should want to get to know me as a person too."

> When you're gay and big, the discrimination is horrible. People won't talk to you because you're big. I mean you don't want to go to bed with me, you might not be attracted to me, but my God, I'm a human being and you can't treat me like one? Just because you don't want to go to bed with somebody doesn't mean you can't talk to them? (p. 41)

Sexual desirability appears, in some way, to relate to the extent to which an individual is seen as a human being, as worthy of sexual as well as social regard. By being seen as an illegitimate object of sexual desire, fat men are treated as less human. Recall Fantasy in Chapter 3. Because Fantasy was a fat man, he was rendered an illegitimate object of desire when he reported a date that was over before it had begun: upon seeing Fantasy, his date returned to his car, left, and told Fantasy to go home. I argued that this desexualization of fatness also suggested that fat people were less deserving of social intimacy. This included experience which were negative, such as direct rejection. Whitesel's informant echoes this sentiment: just because someone does not want to have sex with a fat man, the possibility of treating him as fully human is foreclosed.

But this is only part of the effect that sexual desirability may have in producing particular kinds of relationships to particular bodies. Recall in Chapter 2 how Jack, an Asian Australian man, described a previous sexual experience:

> It was a hook-up. And like, race never played into it. … I thought they were just into me but then when I went there [to his hook-up's house], there was porn on. And it was raced-based porn of a White guy with a lot of Asians being subservient. But then, getting into the act, he just assumed I would be really submissive. And then, I guess, spoke, I don't want to say derogatory, but then spoke like he was using me. But I never consent to this. I never thought that this would be okay. And you [his hook-up] never asked me, "Is this okay?"

In this case, Jack was not desexualized because he was Asian. Rather, his desirability was predicated on his race, which was seen to confer a set of expectations; he was expected to act like the Asian men in the porn he was (nonconsensually) exposed to. His willingness and comfort were not taken into account. Jack was hypersexualized: his purpose within the relationship between himself and his sexual partner was one defined by sex.

There seems to be a sense in which sexual desirability is a precondition for whether one is treated as a fully human subject. Beautiful people are imbued with greater moral and social standing (Dion et al., 1972). Beauty renders individual people more worthy of social protection, and they are seen as more morally pure (Klebl et al., 2022; Klebl, Rhee, et al., 2021). Where attractive people are not associated with a socially devalued trait such as vanity, they having a greater moral standing than their unattractive counterparts (D. E. Han & Laurent, 2023). Whether one is seen as a sexually desirable person appears to relate to the degree to which they are seen as fully human, and the degree to which we extend them moral concern (Crimston et al., 2016).

The relationship is assumed to be linear: desirable people are humanized; undesirable people are dehumanized. But, as I have shown, there are points where dehumanization functions through excessive sexualization: because individual people are seen as sexually desirable for specific reasons, because of their race, body size, or some other dimension, they come to inhabit a not-quite-human status.

Black scholars have outlined hypersexualization's role in the dehumanization of Black people (Harrison, 2021; J. G. Smith et al., 2018; Stacey & Forbes, 2022; Strings, 2019). Other races are similarly dehumanized, often through processes which place parameters around their desirability (C. S. Han & Choi, 2018; Jordens & Griffiths, 2022). Srinivasan (2021, p. 12) suggested as much when she wrote how "brown and black women in places of white domination

have often been considered, owing to their supposed hypersexuality, unrapeable." Through a concomitant process, Black men are hypersexualized and positioned as rapists, their libido assumed to be uncontainable (a construction at play in White men who have sex with men's sexual imaginations as well; A. I. Green, 2008b). Srinivasan suggested how hypersexualization functions to dehumanize:

> The bodies of brown and black women – especially when they belong to women who are also poor, incarcerated or undocumented – are in an important sense supremely fuckable, much more so than the bodies of white women. For these bodies can be violated with impunity and without consequence. Black women's bodies are coded as hypersexual, inviting and demanding men's sexual attention, while conferring on the men who have access to them less social status than they gain by having access to the supposedly chaste and innocent bodies of white women. (pp. 103-104)

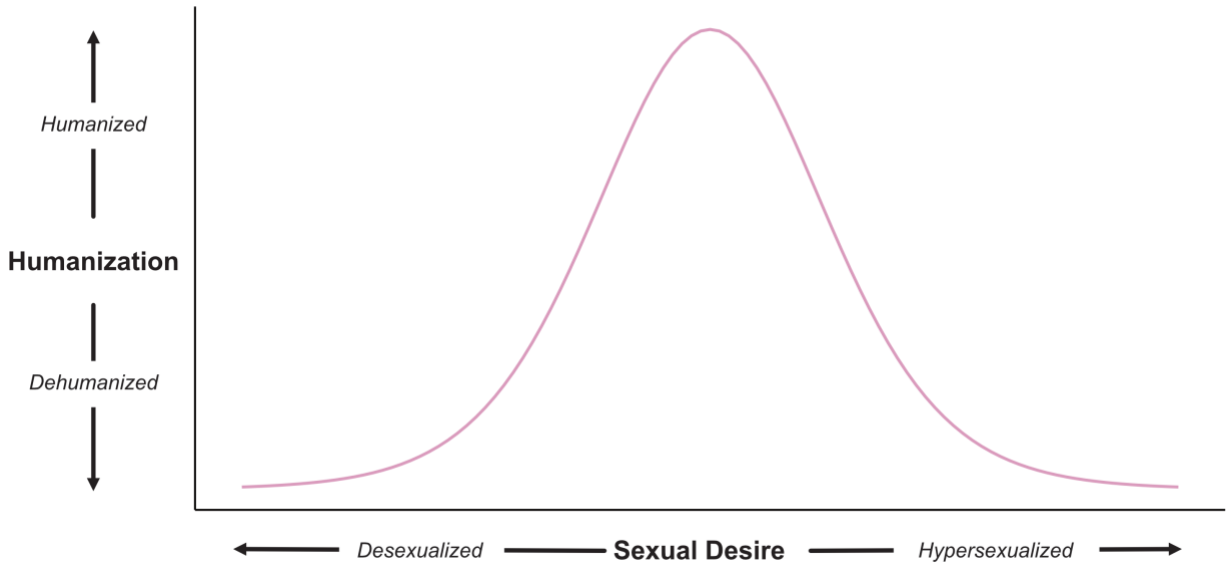
Echoing Jack, alongside other men of color in Chapter 2, bodies that are hypersexualized, which are marked by fetishistic norms, are rendered more vulnerable to violation. While Srinivasan writes about racialized heterosexual politics, there is a similar relationship between men who have sex with men. East Asian men are figured as sexual subordinates; they accrue little sexual capital and are expected to conform to sexual desires structured by a White, sexual orientalist, imagination. Like the bodies of Black and Brown women, men of color who have sex with men have their sexual boundaries violated with impunity because they are hypersexualized and assigned as the status of sexual object. Hypersexualization, like desexualization, relegates one to a not-quite-human status.

Sexual desirability is a condition by which we are seen as human. The extremes of sexual desire, its absence as well as its hyperabundance, both presage forms of dehumanization. The

former excludes a person from the realm of sexuality because of a particular quality. The latter reduces a person's access to sexuality to a particular quality (skin color, body weight, transness, and so on). I hypothesize there is a continuous, curvilinear relationship between sexualization and humanization, as I have graphed in Figure 12 below. Desexualization and hypersexualization exist on a continuum of sexual desire, with either extreme resulting in dehumanization. In the middle is where sexual desirability occurs without being yoked to the presence of a particular trait – where sexual desire is, as I argued in Chapter 2, consensual, pleasurable, and non-fungible.

Figure 12

A Hypothesized Relationship Between Sexual Desire and Humanization



Sexual desire at either extreme appears to render life less liveable. Recall how John, quoted in Chapter 2, recalled being told that he's "a fat fuck" and that he "should kill [him]self." Fatness was seen to exclude John from the realm of desirability (a belief that this experience reinforced for him), and that this exclusion was the grounds for which John's life was seen as not worth living. This represents another way in which desirability is performative. As in the

example of a judge sentencing someone to death, being called a fat fuck and told to that kill oneself triggers a set of consequences that conclude with the devaluation of life (Austin, 1962; Butler, 1997). The lives of fat men are seen as less liveable; their deaths are seen as less important (Butler, 2004).

Each empirical chapter of this thesis has highlighted that hegemonic desirability creates social and psychological precarity for those that it marginalizes. Desexualized men who have sex with men are excluded from social as well as sexual intimacy, they find no sexual interest in the majority of sexual fields available to them, and, at the extremes, they are told to kill themselves. Hypersexualized men who have sex with men are pigeonholed into sexual roles, their access to sex predicated on prescriptive norms, their bodies considered more open to sexual contact regardless of their consent. These discourses coalesce to normalize and produce violence around groups of people, making their lives less tolerable by virtue of whether their seen as legitimately desirable. As Butler (2004, p. 33) wrote:

> It is one thing to argue that first, on the level of discourse, certain lives are not considered lives at all, they cannot be humanized, that they fit no dominant frame for the human, and that their dehumanization occurs first, at this level, and that this level then gives rise to a physical violence that in some sense delivers the message of dehumanization that is already at work in the culture.

The effect of dehumanization is a form of violence, which produces the conditions for further violence, and simultaneously renders recourse to redress that violence less accessible. Sexual dehumanization is enacted in the ways that perpetuate symbolic, physical, sexual, and psychological violence. These forms of violence make living life in an undesirable body more precarious, less tolerable, and so increasingly unliveable. This effect is continuous, rather than

binary: liveability is not just a case of who lives and who dies (Mbembe, 2019), but whose lives are more or less enjoyable to live.

I have shown three ways in which life is made less liveable by undesirability. In chapter 4, I showed how undesirability effects one relationship with their body: Grindr users who are feel less sexually desirable on average and moment-to-moment are less satisfied with their bodies, which becomes a source of psychological stress, as well as social and sexual exclusion (Pachankis et al., 2020).

Undesirability makes Grindr users feel less masculine, reinforcing the association between desirability and anti-effeminacy. Those who are undesirable take on the status of failed sexual subjects (Hennen, 2008, 2023). As a result of their perceived emasculation, men who have sex with men seek to attain and reinforce their masculinity (Sánchez & Vilain, 2012), and its pursuant sexual cache. The pursuit of masculinity, and hence sexual desirability, also serves a protective function: masculinity insulates men who have sex with men from other forms of social and physical violence which respond to and punish effeminacy (Hoskin et al., 2024).

Undesirability may also render sexual boundaries more porous, making some less likely to advocate for their sexual health. Feeling sexually undesirable is associated with feeling greater concern about rejecting a partner who insists on condomless sex, regardless of how sexually attractive they are. In contrast, more sexually attractive partners have easier access to others' bodies and can insist on their condomless sex, regardless of their sexual partners' attractiveness. Where the association with undesirability renders some bodies more open to sexual violence (Srinivasan, 2021), my findings suggest that undesirability also functions to render day-to-day sexual health more precarious by influencing condom use.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 present three attempts to establish the effect that sexual desirability has on individual psychological and sexual health but are by no means intended to be comprehensive. Work that investigates how sexual desirability influences how moral concern is extended to others, how self-perceived sexual desirability may influence engagement in beautification such as exercise, dieting, or cosmetic surgery, among other outcomes, will extend the start I have made here.

Future Directions

Intersectional Desirability

Numerous interlocking systems bear on sexual desirability. I have pointed to a number of these throughout this thesis: sexual racism, orientalism, and anti-fat bias, for example. Desirability is best considered as an intersectional product of these systems. Hegemonic forms of sexual desirability are not just desire for White, cis, muscular, or masculine bodies, but for bodies that amalgamate these disparate physical and social characteristics. Undesirability, its pursuant dehumanization, should be considered similarly. Throughout this thesis, I have highlighted how the experiences of men who have sex with men who fall outside of the normative standards of desirability are affected. Yet my analysis has focused on deviations on only one dimension at a time: the experiences of fat men and men of color. These participants experience of their race and body shape and size, and the effects produced by the systems that render some bodies desirable and some undesirable, and not separable.

If the lives of men of color are rendered less liveable by not fitting the White mold, and those of fat men by not fitting the lean and muscular mold, how might the lives of fat men of color be affected? How might fat men of color resist their normative de- or hyper-sexualization in ways similar to White fat men or to straight-sized men of color? While I outline how bears

resist their desexualization in Chapter 3, my informants noted how this was specifically racialized. Bears of color enjoyed less frequent access to the spectacle and so enjoyed less opportunities to have their bodies resexualized. Future work, especially ethnographic work with communities of multiply marginalized men, such as fat men of color who have sex with men, is called for to outline the role intersectional forms of undesirability play, and how these forms are resisted.

Extensions to Sexual Field Theory

While I identified a number of processes by which sexual desirability is constructed, the causative relationship between sexual desirability and its undergirding sexual fields remains underexplored. How do sexual fields develop? How is their developmental influenced by hegemonic desirability? How can they resist this influence? By studying the Melbourne bear community, I sought to show how sexual desirability was socially constructed. Because bears, as a community of fat men who have sex with men, facilitate sexual desire for otherwise desexualized bodies, I argued that they were fertile ground to study the process by which sexual desirability was constructed. While my analysis suggested processes by which hegemonic sexual desirability is resisted, how bear sexual fields arose to displace normative sexual desire in the first place remains unclear.

A key feature of sexual field theory is the indivisibility between individual and collective sexual desire (A. I. Green, 2014): individual people's sexual desire becomes collectivized, externalized into a sexual field, which orients its participants towards specific sexual objects. How sexual fields develop, the processes by which sexual desire first becomes collectivized, remains unclear. Bears use the spectacle of desire to construct sexual desirability for the bear body, allowing individual sexual actors who enter the sexual field of the bears to orient their

sexual desires according to the underlying sexual logic. When I entered the Melbourne bear's sexual fields, I entered into an arena where sexual desires were already oriented toward bears. But how particular sexual desires are chosen, how new sexual fields form to facilitate those desires, should be the target for future research. Internet research, where a record of the development of a sexual field is produced through the action of the sexual field itself, may be well placed to investigate how sexual fields are constructed (Hammack & Manago, 2024). Understanding how new sexual fields are produced is necessary to understanding how sexual desirability is constructed.

Measuring Sexual Desirability as a Multidimensional Construct

In Chapter 2, I found that men who have sex with men construct sexual desirability as composed of interlocking dimensions of appearance (how one looks), affect (one's emotional displays), and behavior (what one does). In Chapter 6, I created and validated a scale to measure how sexual desirable one feels, based on existing measurements (e.g., Amos & McCabe, 2015) and theoretical considerations (e.g., Srinivasan, 2021). In doing so, I showed that the extent to which one feel sexually desirable is measurable, and relates to a number of behavioral variables, such as how many sexual partners one reports in the preceding six months. A similar validation process is called for to test whether sexual desirability is reflected by the tripartite formulation I outlined in Chapter 2: appearance, affect, and behavior. Future research should assess whether (and to what extent) each component is necessary for sexual desirability as a psychological construct. Based on the findings from each chapter (save Chapter 6), I provide some example items in Table 14, derived from my interviewees in Chapters 2 and 3, my observations in Chapter 3, and my results in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, for use in future work to test my proposed definition of sexual desirability.

Table 14

Potential Scale Items to Test the Multidimensionality of Sexual Desirability

Dimension	Chapter	Item
Affect	2	I feel sexy when I am playing hard to get
	2	I find it desirable when a sex partner acts confident
	4	When I feel good about my body, I feel sexy
	5	I am attractive when I feel masculine
	5	Feeling unmanly makes me feel less desirable
Appearance	2	Muscles are desirable
	2	I am sexy when I wear nice clothes
	4	When I look good, I feel desirable
	4	I need to look good to be attractive
	5	When I look manly, I feel sexually desirable
Behavior	2	Having sex makes me feel desirable
	2	Acting sexy make me feel sexy
	2	I can do things that make me feel sexually attractive
	2	When I exercise, I feel attractive
	3	Being shirtless makes me feel desirable
	5	I am hot when I do manly things

Understanding sexual desirability's multidimensionality is important because it reveals the various loci upon which systems of power, dominance, and discrimination exert an influence on sexual desirability. Systems such as sexual anti-fat bias work, in part, by modulating what a particular appearance (fatness) represents (undesirability). But other groups are rendered

undesirable through the effects of such discourses on other dimensions of desirability. Twinks, both historically as gym-buffed form (Wright, 1997b) and contemporaneously as waifish (Fogarty & Walker, 2022), cannot be said to be undesirable because of their appearance: thinness is not necessarily undesirable in men. Rather, emasculated affect, the way twinks present themselves as unmasculine, or, indeed, as gay (Hennen, 2023; Silva, 2022), renders them less desirable (Bailey et al., 1997; Gerrard et al., 2022; Sánchez & Vilain, 2012).

The unique effect that systems of power might have on sexual desirability is differentiated by which dimension it acts upon. While sexual racism acts to generally render men of color less sexually desirable than White men (Cascalheira & Smith, 2020), they may draw on other dimensions to recoup sexual capital within certain sexual fields. Green (2008b) suggests that Black men affect an exaggerated masculinity, presenting themselves as 'thugs' to garner the sexual attentions of White men, who are typically seen as having a higher sexual status than themselves. While Blackness as an appearance is rendered undesirable, Black masculinity, a particular affectation, is rendered very desirable. Both are a product of White supremacist logics being reproduced on sexual desirability, but each bear upon different dimensions. The interlocking aspects of each are displayed in general preferences for different types of men. For example, Thai and colleagues (2025) found that Grindr users who prefer masculine sexual partners expressed a sexual preference for Latino, Middle Eastern, and Black men, to the exclusion of Asian men. In contrast, users who prefer feminine sexual partners preferred Asian men. Whiteness retained its sexual capital regardless of whether users preferred masculine or feminine men.

Differentiating how the different dimensions of sexual desirability are involved in the development of both collective and individual sexual desires is necessary. Research which

focuses on only appearance risks ignoring or reinforcing the effects discrimination has on sexual desirability through affect and behavior, and so recapitulating normative assumptions about who is and is not desirable. One such example is biosocial role research (M. F. Braun & Bryan, 2006; Kowal et al., 2022; Pazhoohi et al., 2024), which contends that sexual desirability is based on sexual dimorphic physiology relevant to humanity's evolutionary past. In articulating a natural association between appearance and attractiveness, biosocial role research often reasserts misogynistic and cisheterosexist assumptions about who and what is sexually desirable. For example, such theorists speculate that muscularity is attractive in men, and thinness is attractive in women, because "men more often engaged in physically demanding tasks such as hunting and warfare, women more often engaged in less physically demanding tasks requiring care for others" (Frankenbach et al., 2022, p. 627). Sexual desirability is seen to simply reflect inherent biological differences between men and women. Men are assumed to be active and agentic; their desirability is based on their perceived capacity for violence. Women are assumed to be passive carers; their desirability reflects their perceived capacity for childrearing (Pazhoohi et al., 2024). Desirability, understood only as appearance, neglects how culture's effect on desirability also functions through encouraging normative behaviors and affects, reinforcing particular modes of sexual desires for some bodies over others (e.g., Kowal et al., 2022).

Conclusion

After a thousand mazes undergone,

At last, with sudden step, he came upon

A chamber, myrtle wall'd, embowered high

Full of light, incense, tender minstrelsy,

And more beautiful and strange beside:

For on a silken couch of rosy pride,

In midst of all, there lay a sleeping youth

Of fondest beauty; fonder, in fair sooth,

Than sighs could fathom, or contentment reach

–John Keats, *Endymion*, 1818

Why do we want what we want? I offer a tentative answer: because we internalize the sexual logics produce by the systems of power, dominance, and discrimination that structure our day-to-day lives. Focusing on men who have sex with men, I found that these systems shape sexual desire, rendering some sexually desirable and others sexually undesirable. Political subjugation is imposed on to our more sensitive and vulnerable experience, during our pursuit of sex, pleasure, companionship, and intimacy. The effect can be psychologically catastrophic. Systemic discrimination functioning through sexual desire and desirability can expose us to physical, social, and symbolic violence, and make our social, psychological, and sexual health more precarious. Relegation to particular sexual statuses produces a suite of effects: undesirability renders men who have sex with men less happy with their bodies, less masculine, and less willing to assert sexual boundaries.

In this thesis, I have advanced sexual field theory by providing a definition of sexual desirability. By showing that desirability has a tripartite structure of appearance, affect, and behavior, I have identified pathways for future work to understand our sexual desires, and their relationship to power. Yet I also showed how sexual desirability need not simply recapitulate hegemonic desirability. Rather, we may resist normative forces which render some undesirable, and new forms of desirability that rehumanize otherwise sexually marginalized people.

My findings have both practical and theoretical implications. I have suggested that performativity as the mechanism by which individual people internalize their sexual status: sexual actors reproduce discourses of desirability in their social and physical realities through their utterances, speech, and bodily acts. If desirability is constituted performatively, then normative desirability and, as a result, normative desire may be critiqued and changed; other marginalized and dehumanized people may assume the social position as a legitimate object of sexual desire. Contesting hegemonic sexual undesirability, then, takes on an ethical dimension. If we accept that we reject the sexual desires furnished to us, we may also refuse to replicate social oppression within our sexual desires. By refusing simple answers to questions about sexual desire and desirability, I have suggested that our sexual desires are contingent. Who we want is a product of history and subject to challenge and change. In challenge our desires, we might sever threads which keep power, subjugation, and violence bound to our most intimate and vulnerable experiences.

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