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"It's All Lateral Violence": How Sexual Minority Men Cope With Appearance Discrimination

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"IT'S ALL LATERAL VIOLENCE": HOW SEXUAL MINORITY MEN COPE WITH
APPEARANCE DISCRIMINATION

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DISSERTATION
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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
College of Education
at the University of Kentucky

By
Matthew T. Richardson

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Sharon Rostosky, Professor of Counseling Psychology

Lexington, Kentucky

2023

ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

"IT'S ALL LATERAL VIOLENCE": HOW SEXUAL MINORITY MEN COPE WITH APPEARANCE DISCRIMINATION

Sexual minority men experience higher rates of body dissatisfaction (BD) than heterosexual men (Frederick & Essayli, 2016). BD is associated with negative health outcomes in this population, including eating disorders (Yean et al., 2013), depression (Blashill et al., 2016), suicidality (Grunewald, Calzo, et al., 2021), and risky sexual behavior (Goedel et al., 2017). Sexual minority men who use dating apps may be at greater risk of experiencing BD via exposure to appearance-based discrimination (Tran et al., 2020), sexual objectification, and weight stigma (Filice et al., 2019). Little is known about sexual minority men's experiences of appearance discrimination on dating apps and how they cope with these negative experiences.

This experiential qualitative study addressed this gap in the literature using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2022). Fourteen sexual minority men shared their lived experiences with appearance discrimination on dating apps in semi-structured individual interviews. Findings were organized into four categories (context, type, coping strategies, and reflections) that collectively told a compelling story about how sexual minority men experience and cope with appearance discrimination on dating apps. The interviewees noted that appearance discrimination often focused on specific physical attributes like body hair, race and skin tone, and body weight and shape. Appearance discrimination evoked psychological distress and worsened their body image, but men felt that certain contextual factors like intention for dating app use, mental health struggles, and lived experience with minority stressors, influenced their perceptions, experiences, and coping. While some coping strategies (i.e., avoidance) were ultimately unhelpful, other strategies like boundary setting, positive reappraisal, social support seeking, and problem solving, were critical to supporting their psychological well-being and facilitate reflection.

Implications for future research, psychotherapy, and community-based intervention are discussed. In particular, clinicians should assist their clients in developing healthy, adaptive ways of coping such as setting firm boundaries, confronting perpetrators, taking breaks from dating apps when needed, and seeking social support. Clinicians should also help SMM clients find healthy and supportive activities within the gay male community that de-emphasize appearance and status.

Matthew Richardson

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January 22, 2023

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Date

"IT'S ALL LATERAL VIOLENCE": HOW SEXUAL MINORITY MEN COPE WITH
APPEARANCE DISCRIMINATION

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DEDICATION

For Jamey Rodemeyer (March 21, 1997 – September 18, 2011)
and Matthew Shepard (December 1, 1976 – October 12, 1998)

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CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW

Although the literature on body image concerns has historically focused on women, research indicates that 9.0 to 28.4% of men in the United States experience body dissatisfaction (BD; Fallon et al., 2014). When sexual orientation is considered, the evidence clearly indicates that sexual minority men (SMM) are significantly more likely than heterosexual men to experience BD (Dahlenburg et al., 2020; Frederick & Essayli, 2016; Yean et al., 2013). Given that BD among SMM has been linked to body image and eating disorders (Yean et al., 2013), depression (Blashill et al., 2016), and suicidality (Grunewald, Calzo, et al., 2021), additional research is needed to explore this phenomenon in the daily lives of SMM.

The minority stress model (Brooks, 1981; Meyer, 2003) is often used to conceptualize the heightened risk of BD among SMM (Filice et al., 2020; Convertino, Helm et al., 2021). This model proposes that sexual minority individuals are subject to distal and proximal stressors that can lead to adverse health outcomes. According to this theory, personal coping resources and group affiliation can buffer the effect of minority stress on mental health outcomes. However, recent research (e.g., Davids & Green, 2011; Davids et al., 2015) has found that gay community involvement can also be a source of stress for some sexual minorities. Intraminority gay community stress theory (Pachankis et al., 2020) posits that SMM face unique pressures stemming from status-based hierarchies (i.e., concerning wealth, masculinity, and physical attractiveness), which are exacerbated when SMM compare themselves to and compete for sexual and social relationships. These status-based pressures are more likely to

occur in spaces where SMM interact, such as dating apps (Green, 2014; Pachankis et al., 2020).

Recent evidence indicates that dating app use may be a significant contributor to BD (Griffiths et al., 2018a), which is concerning given their widespread popularity among SMM (Johnson et al., 2017; Landovitz et al., 2012). SMM use dating apps for a variety of purposes, such as finding dates, long-term relationships, casual sex/hookups, networking, and friends (Anderson et al., 2018; Grov et al., 2014; Smiley et al., 2020). The use of dating apps tends to vary by age and income (e.g., Badal et al., 2018), and numerous factors inherent in how dating apps are designed and used may be associated with BD among SMM. For instance, some scholars (e.g., Filice et al., 2019; Miller, 2020) have suggested that repeated exposure to semi-clothed pictures or offensive, body-centric messages may facilitate appearance comparison, especially for men who do not emulate the mesomorphic body ideal. Meanwhile a growing body of literature has shown that SMM who use dating apps are exposed to a wide array of harmful content via user profiles and private messages, including deception, bullying, harassment, sexual coercion (Lauckner et al., 2019), appearance-based discrimination (Tran et al., 2020), femmephobia (anti-effeminacy; Miller & Behm-Morawitz, 2016), sexual objectification, and weight stigma (Filice et al., 2019).

Only two studies have investigated appearance-based discrimination among SMM. Tran et al. (2020) conducted individual semi-structured interviews with a sample ($N = 30$) of racially diverse SMM and reported that some disclosed experiences of appearance-based discrimination in their interactions with other users on dating apps. In their discussion, however, Tran and colleagues (2020) called on future research that explores the impact of appearance-based discrimination on mental

health and use of coping mechanisms. In the second study, Grunewald et al. (2021) surveyed 200 SMM and found that 47% reported past experiences of appearance-based discrimination in their daily lives, which was significantly associated with binge eating.

The dearth of research on appearance-based discrimination is important because some scholars (e.g., Kaminski et al., 2005; Ridgeway & Tylka, 2005) have suggested that concerns about weight may be less relevant among men who strive for the mesomorphic body ideal, which prioritizes aesthetic appearance in the form of leanness and muscularity. As Grunewald and colleagues (2021) aptly point out, the existing literature may not fully account for SMM who have been discriminated against due to aspects of their body apart from or in addition to their body weight and shape (e.g., body hair, penis size). Given evidence indicating that appearance discrimination and weight discrimination are separate concerns among US adults (Grollman, 2014; Grunewald et al., 2021), more research is needed that explores SMM's lived experiences of appearance-based discrimination.

Several scholars (e.g., Breslow et al., 2020; Tran et al., 2020) have called for research to identify protective factors, such as coping mechanisms, that SMM use to mitigate the harmful effects of appearance-based stressors while using dating apps in their daily lives. Others (e.g., Convertino, Brady, et al., 2021; Davids et al., 2015; Gonzalez & Blashill, 2021) have expressed the need for scholarship that explores the relationship between gay community involvement and body image concerns among SMM. It may be most beneficial to explore how SMM experience appearance-based discrimination in specific contexts, such as dating apps, where physical appearance may be most salient (Green, 2014; Pachankis, 2020). The present study aimed to

address these critical gaps in the literature and offer a more nuanced understanding of SMM's lived experiences of dating app use, appearance discrimination, and coping with body image concerns.

Body Image and Body Dissatisfaction

Body image is a broad construct that refers to an individual's behaviors, feelings, thoughts, and perceptions relating to how they view their appearance (Cash et al., 2005; Gardner, 2012; Grogan, 2006). Body image is complex and shaped by many factors, including cultural socialization, social interaction, physical characteristics and development across the lifespan, personality, and coping mechanisms (Cash et al., 2005; Cash, 2012). Body dissatisfaction (BD) occurs when an individual internalizes negative perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about their body (Crowther & Ridolfi, 2012), and can include dissatisfaction with specific aspects of the body or overall physical appearance (Frederick, 2012). It is important to understand that BD in and of itself is not pathological; however, it is widely regarded within the literature as a significant risk factor for eating disorders, disordered weight and shape control behaviors, depression, and social anxiety (Cash, 2008; Hrabosky et al., 2009; Markey et al., 2020; Stice & Shaw, 2002).

Studies have consistently shown that women experience greater levels of BD, place more emphasis on their appearance, and are more likely to develop an eating disorder than men (e.g., Quittkat et al., 2019; Siever, 1994). Although the literature on body image concerns has historically focused on women, research has shown that many men experience BD throughout their lives (Fawkner, 2012). Fallon et al. (2014) reported that prevalence rates in the United States for BD ranged from 9.0% to 28.4% among men. The overall aspects of body composition most salient among men are

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muscularity, leanness, and height (Ridgeway & Tylka, 2005; Tylka et al., 2005). Studies have found that men tend to favor a mesomorphic body type, characterized by a v-shaped torso, flat and toned stomach, toned calves and buttocks, and defined upper-body muscles (Lanzieri & Cook, 2013; Pope et al., 2000; Ridgeway & Tylka, 2005; Saucier & Caron, 2008; Schwartz & Andsager, 2011). However, this body type is often unattainable for many men, which can lead to emotional distress, lowered self-esteem, BD, and disordered eating behaviors (Levesque & Vichesky, 2006; Tiggemann et al., 2007).

BD Among SMM

Evidence suggests that SMM are more likely than heterosexual men to experience BD (29% vs. 21%; Frederick & Essayli, 2016). An early meta-analysis of twenty-seven studies demonstrated that gay men reported greater BD than heterosexual men ($d = 0.29$, $p < .001$; Morrison et al., 2004). More recently, Dahlenburg et al. (2020) conducted a similar meta-analysis to investigate prevalence rates of body image disturbance (i.e., a term inclusive of body dissatisfaction, drive for thinness, low weight satisfaction, and poor body perception accuracy; Grogan, 2010). Comparing SMM and heterosexual men across thirty studies, they found that prevalence rates for body image disturbance were significantly greater among SMM ($g = 0.26\text{-}0.49$, $p < .001$; Dahlenburg et al., 2020). Taken together, these studies suggest that BD is a significant concern among SMM.

Although SMM and heterosexual men have endorsed similar ideal body weights (Kaminski et al., 2005; Swami & Tovée, 2008), SMM tend to weigh less, report greater weight preoccupation, and are more likely to describe themselves as overweight (Azagba et al., 2019; Kaminski et al., 2005; Peplau et al., 2009). Some

scholars (e.g., Grunewald et al., 2021; Kaminski et al., 2005; Ridgeway & Tylka, 2005) have suggested that concerns about weight may be less relevant among men who strive for the mesomorphic body ideal. Some men may intentionally gain weight to increase their muscle volume, whereas others may attempt to lose weight to remove excess body fat (Levesque & Vichesky, 2006; Ridgeway & Tylka, 2005).

Scholars have found that SMM report greater levels of body fat dissatisfaction (BFD) and drive for thinness, are more fearful of becoming fat, and prefer a thinner body type for themselves and potential partners (Kaminski et al., 2005; Smith et al., 2011; Tiggemann et al., 2007; Yelland & Tiggemann, 2003). There is some evidence indicating that SMM experience a higher drive for upper-body muscularity than their heterosexual counterparts (Calzo et al., 2013; Swami & Tovée, 2008; Yelland & Tiggemann, 2003). Furthermore, Martins and colleagues (2008) found that gay men wished to be taller, have more head hair, less body hair, and larger penises. Thus, SMM may be more concerned than heterosexual men with their body shape, physique, and aesthetic appearance (Blashill, 2010; Kaminski et al., 2005).

Predictors of BD Among SMM

Masculinity and Gender Nonconformity

Men in Western cultures are socialized to conform with rigid and sexist gender norms that equate masculinity with possessing a muscular physique (Duggan & McCreary, 2004; O'Neil, 1981), and tend to associate masculinity and muscularity with status (Kimmel & Mahalik, 2005; McCreary & Sasse, 2000). In qualitative studies, some SMM have stressed that masculinity is expressed through the physical outward appearance of their bodies (Filiault & Drummond, 2008; Filiault et al., 2014; Sánchez et al., 2009). Given stereotypes that portray gay men as weak and feminine, some

scholars have posited that SMM acquire a drive for muscularity to challenge these stereotypes and avoid discrimination (Kimmel & Mahalik, 2005; Wood, 2004). SMM may feel pressure to increase their muscularity to appear healthy and avoid the stereotype that associates them with HIV/AIDS (Drummond, 2005; Halkitis et al., 2008; Wood, 2004)**.**

Collectively, these findings suggest that SMM who are gender nonconforming may be at greater risk for experiencing BD. Some SMM may internalize cultural stereotypes equating homosexuality and body fat with femininity and become dissatisfied with their aesthetic appearance, resulting in body-change behaviors to counteract negative internal experiences (Brennan et al., 2012; Brewster et al., 2017) and "prove their worth" to others.

Emphasis on Physical Appearance

Scholars have found that physical appearance is highly valued within the gay male culture (Pope et al., 2000; Siever, 1994; Silberstein et al., 1989). Compared to heterosexual men, gay men consider physical appearance to be closely tied to their sense of self (Silberstein et al., 1989) and experience greater pressure to be physically attractive (Carper et al., 2010; Yelland & Tiggemann, 2003). Men also place a greater emphasis than women on physical attractiveness when seeking a partner (Legenbauer et al., 2009; Siever, 1994; Yelland & Tiggemann, 2003) and are more likely to be appearance- discriminating (Frederick & Essayli, 2016). Thus SMM, who seek to attract other men, may feel pressure to emulate the mesomorphic ideal to appear more desirable and avoid appearance discrimination.

Martins and colleagues (2007) investigated whether body image and appearance- focus differed by sexual orientation in two studies. Findings from their

cross-sectional survey demonstrated that gay men ($N = 98$) experienced greater levels of BD and body surveillance (i.e., habitual body monitoring) than heterosexual men ($N = 103$). In their experimental study, gay ($N = 134$) and heterosexual ($N = 119$) men were randomly assigned to wear either a Speedo or turtleneck sweater and examine their appearance in a mirror. Both groups reported heightened appearance-focus in the swimsuit condition, but only gay men reported higher levels of BD and body shame (Martins et al., 2007).

Status Hierarchy

A growing body of literature has documented the existence of a status-based hierarchy within the gay community that affords privileges (i.e., sexual and social capital) to those who emulate the dominant cultural standards of attractiveness (Han & Choi, 2018; Miller, 2015a; Paul et al., 2010). Elder and colleagues (2015) conducted individual semi-structured interviews with adult gay men ($N = 20$) to explore how they understood their sexual self-schemas. The participants described the salience of physical attractiveness and presenting as masculine within the gay community, how one's sexual capital diminished with age, and that finding a partner of similar sexual capital was a central factor in partner selection (Elder et al., 2015).

This status-based hierarchy appears to be steeped in ageism (e.g., preferring men who look younger), racism (e.g., rejecting men of color), and weightism (e.g., preferring men whose weight and shape conform with dominant ideals). Drummond (2005) conducted individual in-depth interviews with Australian gay men ($N =14$) between the ages of 18 and 25 to better understand the psychosocial factors that shaped how they viewed their bodies. The participants discussed the importance of presenting as masculine and muscular to increase their sexual attractiveness, highlighting the

importance of aesthetic appearance in impression management and desirability (Drummond, 2005). Similarly, Suen (2017) explored the experiences of British gay men ($N = 25$) over 50 years old via in-depth interviews and found that many of the men had internalized ageist values (concerning the idealization of younger bodies) propagated within the gay community. Many reported feeling that other men would not be sexually or romantically attracted to them, and some acknowledged offering money to younger men in exchange for their time and interest (Suen, 2017).

Other studies have found that racism contributes to BD among MSM (i.e., men who have sex with men) of color. For example, Bhambhani and colleagues (2019) administered a survey to a community-based sample of adult MSM of color ($N = 877$) and found that racism was associated with overall BD and muscularity-oriented dissatisfaction (MD; Bhambhani et al., 2019). Similarly, racially diverse SMM ($N = 61$) in focus groups and individual, semi-structured interviews described how their experiences with racism and the cultural pressure to emulate an unrealistic body ideal have resulted in disordered eating behaviors, steroid use, and feelings of insecurity regarding their body (Brennan et al., 2013).

Moreover, scholars have found evidence that weightism leads to BD among SMM. For instance, in a survey of adult gay men ($N = 215$), thirty-four percent disclosed past experiences of anti-fat bias (perpetrated by other gay men), and sixty-five percent reported directly witnessing other men experience anti-fat bias. Both experiencing and witnessing anti-fat bias were significantly associated with greater BD. Notably, the men who experienced rejection were more likely to be older and report a higher BMI, but seventeen percent reported a BMI in the normal or underweight range (Foster-Gimbel & Engeln, 2016).

Gay Community Involvement

Scholars have become increasingly interested in whether gay community involvement leads to worsened body image among some SMM. Due to inconsistencies in how researchers have defined and operationalized various aspects of gay community involvement, this body of literature can be confusing and seemingly contradictory (Davids et al., 2015; Kousari-Rad & McLaren, 2013). Gay community involvement is a broad construct inclusive of *community connectedness* (i.e., cognitive/affective sense of affiliation and solidarity) and *community participation* (i.e., behaviors such as attending pride events, going to gay bars, reading gay magazines, using gay-specific media outlets; Frost & Meyer, 2012)**.** Recent research has linked behavioral gay community involvement to BD (Davids & Green, 2011; Davids et al., 2015), drive for muscularity (Hunt et al., 2012), and disordered eating symptoms (Convertino, Brady et al., 2021; Davids & Green, 2011; Feldman & Meyer, 2007) in samples of gay men. Kousari-Rad and McLaren (2013) also found a positive correlation between sense of belonging to the gay community (i.e., a construct like connectedness) and BD.

Decades of research has demonstrated the utility of social support for individual psychological well-being (Cohen, 2004). Meyer (2003) proposed that community-level social support, or minority coping, can be an equally protective resource among minoritized communities. While this aspect of the minority stress model has been well-supported in the literature (e.g., McConnell et al., 2018), there is also a growing body of evidence indicating that the sexual minority male subculture may be an independent source of stress in some contexts (e.g., Brewster et al., 2017). Pachankis et al. (2020) coined the term intra-minority gay community stress, which refers to the status-based pressures to present as masculine, wealthy, and physically attractive, that some SMM

experience in romantic, sexual, and some social contexts. Taken together, these two models may help explain why gay community involvement appears to worsen SMM's body image. I will delve further into these theories later in this chapter.

The Media

Evidence from the empirical literature indicates that media consumption is associated with BD among SMM (Kaminski et al., 2005; Levesque & Vichesky, 2006; Strong, 2000). Pope and colleagues (2000) have pointed out that depictions of the male body in various media outlets have become increasingly muscular over time, and others have posited that viewing images of the idealized body may lead SMM to engage in body-change behaviors (Duggan & McCreary, 2004). Indeed, several content analyses of popular gay magazines have documented the frequent depiction of a mesomorphic body type, characterized by a v-shaped torso, flat stomach, slim waist, and defined upper-body muscles (Lanzieri & Cook, 2013; Pope et al., 2000; Saucier & Caron, 2008; Schwartz & Andsager, 2011). One of these studies examined images of the male body printed in issues of *The Advocate* and *Out* magazines between 1967 and 2008, finding that the bodies being depicted had become more muscular and thinner over time (Schwartz & Andsager, 2011). Further, researchers have found that SMM experience pressure from the media to emulate the mesomorphic ideal (Drummond, 2005; Fawkner & McMurray, 2002; Hospers & Jansen, 2005; Tran et al., 2020; Tylka & Andorka, 2012).

Three studies have found pressure from the media to be more salient among gay men than straight men (Blashill et al., 2010; Carper et al., 2010; McArdle & Hill, 2009), but one study did not find a significant difference based on sexual orientation (Kaminski et al., 2005). Among SMM, media influence has also been found to be directly related to

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BD (McArdle & Hill, 2009) and a mediating variable in the relationship between BD and eating concerns (Carper et al., 2010). Further, a large community-based sample consisting predominantly of gay-identified Australian men ($N = 2,733$) found a weak association between watching pornography and dissatisfaction with height, body fat, and muscularity, suggesting that SMM may be comparing their bodies to those of pornographic actors and finding a discrepancy, which in turn may lead to BD (Griffiths et al., 2018a). While many of these studies are limited by their reliance on predominantly White samples (e.g., Kaminski et al., 2005; McArdle & Hill, 2009), the findings collectively indicate that the media is a strong predictor of body image concerns among SMM.

Outcomes of BD Among SMM

Weight and Shape Control Behaviors

Many studies have linked BD to weight and shape control behaviors. For example, in cross-sectional surveys of college-based (Smith et al., 2011) and community- based (Blashill, 2010; Gigi et al., 2016; Russell & Keel, 2002) MSM, body fat dissatisfaction was associated with greater eating disorder symptoms. Indeed, research has shown that prevalence rates for purging (i.e., self-induced vomiting and laxative use for weight loss) are higher among SMM than heterosexual men (e.g., *OR*, 3.96-3.54; Matthews-Ewald et al., 2014). Similarly, muscularity dissatisfaction was associated with an increase in compensatory muscularity enhancement behaviors (Chaney, 2008; Tylka & Andorka, 2012). For instance, studies have found that the risk of anabolic steroid misuse is higher among gay men than heterosexual men (Blashill & Safren, 2014; Blashill et al., 2017; Gonzalez & Blashill, 2021).

Importantly, findings from a cross-sectional survey demonstrated that gay men (*N*

= 346) concurrently engage in muscularity enhancement and disordered eating behaviors; however, gay men with higher levels of body fat dissatisfaction were less likely to engage in compensatory behaviors to increase their muscularity (Tylka & Andorka, 2012). The authors drew from earlier research (e.g., Wood, 2004) to suggest that SMM who experience higher levels of body fat dissatisfaction may be fearful of gaining additional weight or tend to avoid public spaces (i.e., gyms) where they could be negatively judged by other men (Tylka & Andorka, 2012). These findings appear to coincide with research suggesting that body fat dissatisfaction may be more harmful than muscularity dissatisfaction to men's well-being (Bergeron & Tylka, 2007).

Psychosexual Health

In addition to weight and shape control behaviors, researchers have linked BD to adverse psychosexual outcomes among SMM. For instance, findings from a two-panel questionnaire of SMM adults ($N = 131$) demonstrated that BD significantly predicted higher levels of sex-related anxiety and decreased sexual self-efficacy (Blashill et al., 2016). Across two studies, Frederick and Essayli (2016) found that gay men were twice as likely as heterosexual men to conceal specific body parts (e.g., stomach) while having sex (39% vs. 20%) and to report that BD negatively impacted the quality of their sex lives (42% vs. 22%; Peplau et al., 2009). They also found that gay men with BD were more likely than heterosexual men to avoid having sex ($OR = 2.89$) and conceal specific body parts during sex ($OR = 6.28$; Frederick & Essayli, 2016). Finally, BD was linked to risky sexual behaviors (e.g., condomless sex) in several cross-sectional surveys of community-based MSM (Allensworth-Davies et al., 2008; Brennan et al., 2015; Wilton,

2009). Taken together, these findings indicate that BD is associated with poorer

psychosexual outcomes among SMM.

Psychological Health

BD among SMM has also been connected to poorer psychological health. Cross-

sectional studies have linked overall BD to greater symptoms of depression (Blashill et

al., 2016), increased social sensitivity (Gigi et al., 2016), and lower self-esteem

(Kousari- Rad & McLaren, 2013; Levesque & Vichesky, 2006; McArdle & Hill, 2009;

Tiggemann et al., 2007). Additionally, BFD and MD have been linked to higher levels of

depression and social sensitivity and lower self-esteem in cross-sectional (Blashill, 2010;

Brennan et al., 2012; Tiggemann et al., 2007) and longitudinal (Blashill et al., 2016)

studies of community based MSM. Similar findings have been reported in qualitative

research.

Fawkner and McMurray (2002) conducted separate, semi-structured focus groups

with younger ($N = 8$) and older ($N = 5$) gay men to explore their perceptions of how

exposure to media images impacted their mental health. Most men from both groups

reported a tendency to compare themselves to images of men who personified the

mesomorphic ideal and disclosed subsequent concerns ranging from feelings of

insecurity to suicidal ideation (Fawkner & McMurray, 2002). However, this study was

conducted nearly twenty years ago and did not collect demographic data beyond sexual

orientation and age. Taken together, it may be important to examine how intersecting

identities (i.e., age, geographic region, sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity) shape

SMM's body image.

SMM and Dating Apps

The use of dating apps has become common among sexual minorities. One cross-sectional survey ($N = 4,860$) found that SM adults were twice as likely as heterosexual adults to have used a dating app at some point in their life (55% vs. 28%; Pew Research Center, 2020). Johnson and colleagues (2017) also found that SM adults were significantly more likely than heterosexual adults to have used a dating app (29.8% vs. 10.5%). Similar findings have been reported in studies of SMM and MSM. For example, Lehmiller and Ioerger (2014) found that 54% of MSM reported having at least one dating app on their phone, which they used an average of three times per day and for thirteen minutes in each instance. In another cross-sectional study of SMM ($N =375$), 61% reported logging on to a dating app at least five times per day (Landovitz et al., 2012). Moreover, the relevance of dating apps in the lives of SMM was perhaps best articulated by a participant in one qualitative study who characterized apps as the "modern-day gay bar" (Miller, 2015b, p. 479).

Some scholars have identified demographic variables associated with dating app usage among SMM. Badal and colleagues (2018) investigated the frequency of dating app usage among adult MSM ($N = 3,105$) residing in the United States and Puerto Rico and found significant differences based on age and income. More specifically, men in the 18-24 (58.9%) and 25-34 (57.7%) age brackets were more likely than those in the 45-64 (46.3%) age bracket to report frequent use of dating apps. Men who reported an income under $30,000 (57.3%) and between $30,000 and $50,000 (57.8%) were more likely than those who reported an income greater than $50,000 (51.2%) to frequently use dating apps (Badal et al., 2018). Similar research has found that younger MSM are likely to use dating apps (Paul et al., 2010), as well as those living in rural, suburban, and

urban areas (Grosskopf et al., 2014; Mustanski et al., 2011). Taken together, these findings suggest that dating app use varies by age, income, and geographic region.

Some dating platforms (e.g., OkCupid, Plenty of Fish) are primarily browser-based but have since developed mobile apps, though most are mobile-based apps exclusive to those with smartphones and cellular service/internet access (Grov et al., 2014). Most dating apps are open to everyone regardless of demographics or preferences (e.g., Tinder, Bumble, Hinge, and OkCupid), but some have been developed for sexual minorities (e.g., Grindr, Hornet, Scruff, and Jack'd). Still others are community-specific and intended for individuals with specific demographics, preferences, or interests. For example, Growlr and Grizzly are popular among men connected to the gay bear community; 3Fun is tailored for those interested in polyamory or threesomes; and Scruff is intended for older men and those interested in facial/body hair (Badal et al., 2018; Grov et al., 2014; Miller & Behm-Morawitz, 2016).

Users are prompted to fill out a personal profile after joining a dating app. Across platforms, users are typically given the option of uploading several pictures, writing a small self-description, and answering questions about their demographics (e.g., education, employment status, relationship status, gender, pronouns, height, weight, body type) and preferences (e.g., type of connection sought [friends, dating, relationship, networking, or casual sex], sexual position, serostatus). Most apps give users the flexibility to include as much information about themselves as they feel comfortable sharing; thus, it is not uncommon to encounter blank profiles that contain little to no information (Anderson et al., 2018; Miller, 2015b).

When it comes to facilitating connections between users, there are important differences in how platforms operate. For example, some (e.g., Grindr, Hornet) will

display the profile pictures of nearby men in a grid, sorted by real-time distance from the user and enable the user to view profiles and send direct private messages. Other services (e.g., Tinder, Bumble, Hinge) will not allow users to interact unless they have expressed mutual interest, indicated via swiping left or right on someone's profile based on their pictures, small biography, demographics, preferences, and interests. When two users swipe right (i.e., express interest), they are "matched" and allowed to exchange private messages. When an individual swipes left on someone (i.e., rejects them), they are not allowed to interact (Strübel & Petrie, 2017).

On most dating apps, direct messages between users are like texting; even if users are offline, they are still able to receive text-based messages (and pictures in some cases) and have the option of responding at their convenience or not at all. These exchanges are private and not moderated, although most apps give users the option to report someone who is violating the app's terms of service or making them feel uncomfortable. Most apps offer a premium version of their services that include exclusive features such as the ability to view other profiles anonymously, receive alerts when a direct message is viewed, access to more users, and the ability to filter out individuals by demographics and preferences (Chan et al., 2018; Conner, 2019; Miller, 2015a).

Motivations for Dating App Use

SMM use dating apps for a variety of purposes, such as finding dates, long-term relationships, casual sex/hookups, networking, and friends (Anderson et al., 2018; Grov et al., 2014; Smiley et al., 2020). Studies have found that 60-80% of SMM met their romantic partner online (Prestage et al., 2015; Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). However, most of the research in this area has focused on casual sex, specifically risky sexual

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behaviors, and HIV/AIDS (e.g., Landovitz et al., 2012; Macapagal et al., 2018; Smiley et al., 2020; Winetrobe et al., 2014). Many SMM use dating apps to find sexual partners. For example, 75% of SMM ($N = 195$) in one study reported that they had recently hooked-up with a partner they met on Grindr (Rice et al., 2012). Another cross-sectional study found that SMM who reported a greater intensity of dating app usage were more likely to be seeking a sexual encounter (Chan, 2017). Qualitative research may help illuminate SMM's perspective on casual sex. In individual semi-structured interviews, Elder and colleagues (2015) found that some SMM engage in casual sex to avoid emotional vulnerability and alleviate feelings of loneliness and low self-worth. In another study, gay men ($N = 76$) in six focus groups discussed the value of gay-specific platforms where sex and sex-seeking are normalized, and the ability to satiate sexual needs via a brief encounter with someone nearby (Gudelunas, 2012).

Dating apps may be popular among SMM because they offer a unique context that comes with notable advantages, such as increased safety, privacy, convenience, control, and accessibility (Miller, 2015b). For example, the use of dating apps would allow a closeted gay man living in a rural county to discretely interact with other men from the safety of his own apartment at any time of day or night, either nearby or in a specified geographic area, and retain agency over his degree of anonymity. This individual would also have the option of changing his public profile to specify the type of connection he was looking for in any given moment (Miller, 2015b). SMM often have multiple reasons for using dating apps, and their motivations may fluctuate across hours, days, or weeks. Blackwell and colleagues (2015) conducted individual semi-structured interviews with ($N = 36$) gay men to explore how men present themselves and communicate their intentions on Grindr. Their participants reported that profile

indicators expressing specific goals (i.e., friends) can be interpreted in different ways, which can lead to frustration and conflict. They also discussed how many app users send mixed messages about their intentions, such as indicating one preference in their profile and expressing another in private messages (Blackwell et al., 2015). Thus, it can often be difficult to ascertain SMM's reasons for app use.

Some dating apps have acquired reputations for being associated with specific goals. Grindr, for example, is known for facilitating casual sex (Gudelunas, 2012). Individuals who violate the norms of a particular dating app may be subject to ostracization by other users, which may lead some to simply conform with the sex-seeking norm (Jaspal, 2017). In other cases, MSM may sense that dating apps cannot fulfill their needs and choose to leave. For example, men ($N = 16$) in semi-structured interviews reported frustration with the sexualized environment and the constant distraction as reasons they chose to leave Grindr (Brubaker et al., 2014). Still other evidence suggests that MSM continue to use dating apps despite their dislike for them (Miller, 2020), indicating that an individual's motivations for using dating apps may be influenced by the interplay of various intrapersonal and interpersonal factors, as well as dominant cultural norms. Additional qualitative research may be useful for understanding factors that shape SMM's motivations for using apps, and for understanding the lived experiences of SMM who use apps for reasons beyond casual sex-seeking.

Benefits of Dating App Use

In other research, Black gay and bisexual men ($N = 23$) in semi-structured interviews discussed how dating apps simplify the process of finding a partner and shield users from violent or uncomfortable encounters (Smiley et al., 2020). Others have

reported that the ability to change one's profile picture, description, and interests enables fluidity in how they construct and present their identity to others. Such behavior could reflect a desire to avoid stigmatization, experiment with different identities, solicit attention, or signal a change in what one is seeking on an app (Jaspal, 2017, p. 194-195). Many MSM indicate they appreciate the GPS feature on some apps that allows them to search for partners within or outside their vicinity (Jaspal, 2017; Miller, 2015b; Smiley et al., 2020).

The literature is less clear about the association between gay community involvement and dating app use, which may be explained by variation in how researchers define and operationalize gay community involvement (Kousari-Rad et al., 2016). Some studies have reported that internet users experience less attachment to the community (Grov, 2011; Grov et al., 2014b), but more recent research has demonstrated a positive correlation between app use and community connectedness (Card et al., 2020). Newer generations may prefer to engage with the gay community through online platforms due to the convenience, simplicity, and mobility it provides (Card et al., 2020; Miller, 2015b). Online dating may have become a normalized fixture of the gay community, as many online platforms have been well-established for more than a decade; although recent findings indicate that most users still visit physical gay spaces such as bars, clubs, and community centers (Horvath et al., 2008; Kerr et al., 2015).

Dating Apps and BD

The literature examining the relationship between dating app use and BD among SMM is still relatively small, although scholars have identified some key factors that may offer a more nuanced understanding of how dating app use can lead to BD among SMM. One of these variables is app usage. For example, Miller and Behm-Morawitz

(2020) examined the relationship between dating app use, self-perceived masculinity, and body image in a cross-sectional, anonymous online survey of 322 MSM. Their findings demonstrated that men (particularly older men) who reported more frequent app use also reported lower levels of BD, suggesting that men become habituated to the sexualized nature of dating apps or that men with higher levels of BD avoid using apps (Miller & Behm-Morawitz, 2020). They also found that greater usage was associated with increased levels of IH and lower self-perceived masculinity, which could be explained by exposure to rigid status-based pressures within the gay male community (Miller & Behm- Morawitz, 2020). Other studies have suggested a positive association between frequency of app use and BD (Anderson et al., 2020; Griffiths et al., 2018a). Individuals who use a greater number of dating apps increase their exposure to sexualized and body-centric environments (Breslow et al., 2020; Filice et al. 2019), and thus may experience more appearance-based pressures and engage in more appearance comparisons, ultimately leading to BD.

Another important factor to consider is how SMM interact with one another on dating apps. For example, racially diverse SMM ($N = 30$) in semi-structured individual interviews described past experiences of explicit (through direct messages) or implicit (via blocking or being ignored) experiences of racism, colorism, and appearance-based discrimination in their interactions with other SMM (Tran et al., 2020). Similarly, SMM ($N = 13$) described experiences of sexual objectification (i.e., being treated like a sexual object) and appearance-based discrimination via direct messages from other users (Filice et al., 2019). Other studies have found that SMM have experienced deception, bullying, harassment, sexual coercion (Lauckner et al., 2019), and femmephobia (Miller & Behm-Morawitz, 2016) via direct messages from other dating app users.

Still another factor to consider is how SMM present themselves and express their partner preferences in their personal profile. Several studies have shown that many SMM on community-specific dating apps use shirtless or semi-nude pictures as their primary or secondary photo (Anderson et al., 2018; Conner, 2019; Filice et al., 2019; Miller & Behm-Morawitz, 2020; Tran et al., 2020). Consequently, these pictures are often the first thing that SMM see when they open grid-based apps like Grindr, Jack'd, or Hornet. Some scholars (e.g., Filice et al., 2019; Miller, 2020) have suggested that repeated exposure to semi-clothed pictures may facilitate appearance comparisons with those users, particularly if they perceive themselves to be of lower status. This would be consistent with similar research (e.g., Duggan & McCreary, 2004; Griffiths et al., 2018b) that has suggested viewing pornography and fitness magazines may have negative effects on SMMs' body image, although these findings may not be generalizable beyond White gay men.

Findings from other studies suggest SMM are exposed to appearance-based pressures via written text in the profiles of other users. In a content analysis of user profiles on MSM-specific dating apps, researchers found that 20.5% of men included language about masculinity, the body, or fitness in the text of their profiles (Miller, 2018). Similar studies have found that SMM express their preference for masculine men (Miller, 2015b; Miller, 2018; Rodriguez et al., 2016), men of certain racial and ethnic groups (Callander et al., 2012; Paul et al., 2010), and men with mesomorphic body types (Lauckner et al., 2019; Miller, 2015b; Rodriques, 2016). Many SMM have been shown to utilize stigmatizing language to express specific preferences and/or insult those they deem unattractive. In fact, the phrase 'no fats, no fems, no Asians" has become a common refrain among app users to express their preferences (Filice et al., 2020). These

studies collectively suggest that frequency/type/duration of dating app usage and exposure to harmful messages via direct private messages and user profiles may have negative consequences for SMM's body image. However, no studies have thoroughly investigated the type of harmful messages SMM receive, the impact these messages have on body image, and the ways SMM attempt to cope with their negative experiences.

Minority Stress Model

The Minority Stress Model (Brooks, 1981; Meyer, 2003) may be a useful framework for understanding the heightened risk of BD among SMM. This model suggests that individuals who belong to stigmatized groups in society are vulnerable to minority stress that arises from conflicts with the dominant culture, social structures, and societal norms. Applied to sexual minorities, minority stress is conceptualized as being distinct from general life stressors. Within this theory are four types of minority stressors that range on a continuum from distal (i.e., objective) to proximal (i.e., subjective): heterosexist discrimination, which refers to frequent experiences of antigay rejection, harassment, or violence; chronic expectations of rejection or discrimination; concealment of sexual orientation; and internalized heterosexism (IH), the internalization of social stigma concerning sexual minorities. Furthermore, it is proposed that sexual minorities develop personal and group-level coping strategies as means of responding to these four minority stressors (Meyer, 2003).

The Minority Stress Model (Meyer, 2003) has been used in numerous quantitative studies to conceptualize the body image concerns of SMM. For instance, there is evidence indicating that internalized heterosexism (IH) is associated with BD. Kimmel and Mahalik (2005) administered a cross-sectional survey to a community-based sample ($N = 357$) of gay men to investigate the relationship between IH and BD.

They found a significant positive relationship between the two variables and posited that SMM with higher levels of IH may strive for a mesomorphic body to reduce negative feelings (e.g., shame, guilt, inferiority) or to protect themselves from antigay violence (Kimmel & Mahalik, 2005). This finding has since been replicated in cross-sectional samples of racially diverse young men who have sex with men (MSM; Siconolfi et al., 2016) and predominantly White community based SMM (Brewster et al., 2017).

More recent findings from a meta-analysis of twelve studies demonstrated that IH had a significant positive association with BD (e.g., muscularity-oriented and thinness-oriented), body surveillance (i.e., habitual monitoring of appearance), body-related distress, and body shame (Badenes-Rivera et al., 2018). Similarly, IH was indirectly associated with greater eating disorder symptoms via body shame (Wiseman & Moradi, 2010) and positively correlated with internalized standards of attractiveness (Brewster et al., 2017). Apart from IH, Kimmel and Mahalik (2005) found that both expectations of rejection and experienced physical violence were associated with body dissatisfaction and masculine body ideal distress. Wang and Borders (2017) found discrimination and concealment were associated with disordered eating. Taken together, these findings support the utility of this theory for understanding BD among SMM.

Intraminority Gay Community Stress Theory

Intraminority Gay Community Stress Theory (Pachankis et al., 2020) may be a useful framework for understanding the etiology of appearance-based pressures experienced by SMM, how these pressures are implicitly and explicitly reinforced on dating apps, and how such pressures can lead to BD. Intraminority stress theory proposes that SMM are uniquely exposed to pervasive, status-based pressures that stem from their social and sexual interactions with each other and can have an adverse impact

on their mental health (Pachankis et al., 2020). Drawing from an evolutionary perspective, this theory assumes the presence of a status-based hierarchy within the gay community as a function of competition among men for sexual and social gain. Within this hierarchy, SMM who present as masculine, wealthy, and physically attractive are considered more desirable partners. Given that SMM share the same sex as their desired partners, it is further posited that SMM critically evaluate their own status as it compares to their potential sexual and romantic partners. Thus, SMM are vulnerable to intraminority stress (i.e., stress derived from perceiving the dominant gay community's focus on status, sex, competition, and exclusion of diversity), negative self-evaluation, and perceptions of exclusion and rejection, which may result in adverse mental and physical health outcomes (Pachankis et al., 2020).

Pachankis and colleagues (2020) tested the tenets of their theory in several studies. Importantly, intraminority stress is a significant predictor of mental health concerns among SMM, above-and-beyond minority stressors and general life stress. However, SMM of a particular status (e.g., lower level of educational attainment, lower income, single) or identity (e.g., gay men, queer men, and Hispanic men) may be at risk of experiencing higher levels of intraminority stress (Pachankis et al., 2020). Additional evidence from experimental research indicates that lower-status SMM are more likely to report feelings of exclusion following rejection from gay men; that SMM's feelings of exclusion are more likely in cases where the rejection was from a high-status gay man; and finally, that SMM who disclosed a lower status prior to rejection were more likely to feel excluded (Pachankis et al., 2020).

At first glance, this theory contradicts the positive effects of social support via gay community involvement proposed in the Minority Stress Model (Meyer, 2003), and supported in

numerous studies (e.g., Frost & Meyer, 2012; Frost et al., 2016; Kertzner et al., 2009; Kim et al., 2017; Riggle et al., 2008; Vale & Bisconti, 2020). Pachankis and colleagues (2020) acknowledge the benefits of gay community involvement and posit that intraminority stress and minority stress operate through different stress pathways to impact SMM's mental health. This theory may also help explain findings regarding the unique appearance-based pressures and status-based hierarchy reported by SMM (Cascalheira & Smith, 2020).

Researchers have started using Intraminority Stress theory to investigate SMM's body image concerns (e.g., Convertino, Brady et al., 2021) and coping with intraminority group discrimination (e.g., MacCarthy et al., 2021). Convertino, Brady et al. (2021) administered an online survey to a sample of ($N = 479$) SMM to investigate the association between gay community involvement and body image concerns. Their findings showed that SMM who reported greater levels of community involvement were more likely to misuse appearance- and performance-enhancing drugs (APEDS) and to report more eating disorder and body dysmorphia symptoms (Convertino, Brady et al., 2021). Similarly, MacCarthy and colleagues (2021) qualitatively examined experiences of interpersonal discrimination and coping responses in semi-structured individual interviews with ($N = 30$) HIV-positive Latino SMM. Their participants described a variety of coping strategies employed in response to various forms of general discrimination, such as escape avoidance (through engagement in enjoyed activities), positive reappraisal (using humor and positive reframing), confrontation (making official complaints or reports), planful problem-solving (selective disclosure of identities, self- presentation), and seeking social support. Taken together, these studies suggest that Intraminority Stress theory may be a useful framework for conceptualizing threats to body image and coping strategies among SMM.

Transactional Model of Stress and Coping

As I have discussed, SMM are vulnerable to BD, which appears to be in part the function of dating app use and their interactions with other SMM. Some scholars (e.g., Breslow et al., 2020; Grunewald et al., 2021; Tran et al., 2020) have called for research investigating protective factors (i.e., coping) that mitigate the harmful effects of appearance-based stressors among SMM who use dating apps, which is the aim of the present study. The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) may be a useful framework for conceptualizing how SMM perceive, interpret, and respond to appearance-based discrimination in an online dating context.

A central component of stress is the reciprocity of the person-environment relationship; environmental demands can influence individual appraisal and choices, and vice versa (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Individuals respond to stress via coping (Folkman et al., 1986a). How individuals cope with a stressful situation is dependent upon their primary and secondary appraisal of the situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In primary appraisal, the individual ascertains the relevance and potential threat of a situation to their well-being; a situation may be deemed irrelevant (i.e., no threat to well-being), benign- positive (i.e., potentially helpful to well-being), or stressful (i.e., harmful, threatening, or challenging to well-being; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 32). Secondary appraisal occurs when an individual has determined that a situation is stressful and involves taking stock of what coping options are available, if they will be helpful, and whether they can be effectively applied (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 35).

Moreover, it is important to recognize that coping is a dynamic process that changes as the person-environment relationship evolves (Lazarus, 1993). For example, how someone copes in the moment with a disparaging comment made about their body

may differ from how they cope in the aftermath of their encounter with that person. Thus, when exploring how individuals cope with a stressful situation, it is important to be cognizant that situations evolve over time and that an individual's primary and secondary appraisals of the situation will also evolve to reflect the immediate context (Lazarus, 1993).

Coping Strategies

The Transactional Model identifies two main types of coping strategies: Problem-focused coping and Emotion-focused coping. Research has shown that individuals tend to use both forms of coping in almost every stressful situation, though individuals may use some strategies more consistently across situations (Folkman et al., 1986b; Lazarus, 1993) Problem-focused coping involves efforts to alter the person-environment relationship (either by modifying some aspect of the self or the environment), and is typically employed when an individual appraises the situation as capable of being changed (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988; Lazarus, 1993). Examples of problem-focused coping include confrontation (i.e., asserting oneself in interpersonal situations) and planful problem-solving (i.e., cognitive assessment of the problem and direct action to resolve it; Folkman & Lazarus, 1988).

On the other hand, individuals will typically employ emotion-focused coping (regulation of emotion) in situations they appraise as static or unchangeable (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988). This occurs either by changing one's relationship with the environment or altering the subjective meaning of the stressful situation (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988; Lazarus, 1993). Examples of emotion-focused coping include distancing (i.e., emotional detachment), escape-avoidance (i.e., avoidance of a problem through wishful thinking or behaviors such as sleeping, drinking, and eating), exercising self-control (i.e., self-

regulation of emotional or behavioral impulses), positive reappraisal (i.e., efforts to adopt a more positive perspective of the situation), seeking social support, and accepting responsibility (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

The extent to which specific forms of coping are helpful (adaptive) or harmful (maladaptive) to an individual is highly dependent upon contextual factors such as individual characteristics, the stressful situation, length of time, and the specific outcome in question (Lazarus, 1993, p. 235). Although some research (e.g., Talley & Bettencourt, 2011) has suggested that specific emotion-focused strategies related to avoidance (e.g., distancing, escape-avoidance) are associated with adverse mental health outcomes, it would be inaccurate to conclude that avoidance strategies are purely maladaptive. Folkman and Lazarus (1988) note that avoidance coping is very common and can be a helpful way for dealing with stress, such as when individuals plan a vacation or engage in hobbies. Thus, how one classifies a particular coping strategy is dependent upon contextual factors and a thorough understanding of the individual's thought process and appraisal of the stressful situation (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988; Lazarus, 1993).

SMM and Coping

Much of the coping literature among SMM has focused on the use of avoidance-based strategies such as risky sexual behavior (e.g., Folkman et al., 1992; Han et al., 2015; Martin & Alessi, 2010; Martin et al., 2005) to manage experiences of stress. Some research has found an association between BD and risky sexual behavior among SMM, suggesting that those who are dissatisfied with their physical appearance may be less likely to negotiate safe-sex practices (Blashill & Safren, 2015; Goedel et al., 2017).

Additional research has used qualitative methods to explore how SMM cope with stressors. For example, Bogart and colleagues (2017) conducted semi-structured

individual interviews with ($N = 27$) HIV-positive Black MSM to explore how they coped with discrimination based on race, sexual orientation, and HIV-serostatus. Avoidance- based strategies were the most common, with participants reporting efforts to avoid specific situations or people and selectively disclose their serostatus. Other participants reported efforts to exercise self-control, seek social support, or confront the perpetrator after discriminatory events (Bogart et al., 2017). Similarly, SM Latinx adults ($N = 18$) in individual semi-structured interviews discussed their experiences of minority stress and coping strategies they employed in response, such as seeking social support and using distancing strategies to ensure safety or preserve meaningful relationships (Noyola et al., 2020).

There may be sexual orientation-based differences in how individuals cope with stressors. For instance, a large survey of Dutch adults ($N = 9,684$) found that gay men were more likely than heterosexual men to use emotion-focused and avoidant coping strategies (Sandfort et al., 2009). It is possible that such differences may be partially explained by SMM's degree of outness. Some scholars (e.g., Pachankis et al., 2007; Talley & Bettencourt, 2011) have found positive correlations between disclosure of a stigmatized identity and problem-focused coping, and between concealment and avoidance coping. Therefore, it may be that SMM who actively conceal their sexual orientation miss the opportunity to access group-level coping mechanisms (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Meyer, 2003; Pachankis et al., 2007).

Coping with Appearance-Based Stressors

Few studies have explored how SMM experience and cope with appearance-based stressors (Grunewald et al., 2021). Three studies have found a positive association between stigmatization and coping-motivated eating among SMM (Floyd & Bakeman,

2012; Katz-Wise et al., 2015; Puhl et al., 2019). Other scholars have suggested that SMM may use disordered weight and shape control behaviors (e.g., compulsive exercise, fasting) to cope with appearance-based stressors (Calzo et al., 2015; Grunewald et al., 2021; Kimmel & Mahalik, 2005). Collectively, these studies suggest that some individuals may appraise both appearance-based stressors and BD as threatening to their well-being and turn to emotion-focused strategies such as escape-avoidance to regulate internal feelings of distress.

Filice and colleagues (2019) conducted semi-structured interviews with a racially diverse sample of Canadian SMM ($N = 13$) to explore the relationships between Grindr use, BD, and weight and shape control behaviors. Most participants reported that Grindr negatively impacted their body image via social comparison, weight stigma, and sexual objectification, though findings from some participants suggested that self-esteem, resilience, and social support may be important protective factors that mitigate the harmful effects of negative interactions with other men on Grindr (Filice et al., 2019). Although this study identified several important appearance-related stressors that SMM can experience while using dating apps, their methodology did not allow for an in-depth exploration of the cognitive-affective processes underlying SMM's experiences or the coping mechanisms they use in response to such stressors. This represents a critical gap in our understanding of the process by which SMM develop BD, which is a significant risk factor for more serious mental health concerns such as body image and eating disorders, depression, and suicidality (Blashill et al., 2016; Grunewald, Calzo, et al., 2021; Yean et al., 2013).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I thoroughly reviewed the literature on the prevalence, scope, processes, and outcomes of BD among SMM. While researchers have demonstrated that SMM are exposed to harmful status-based pressures on dating apps (e.g., Filice et al., 2019; Tran et al., 2020), we still lack a comprehensive understanding of how SMM experience appearance discrimination on dating apps and the impact these experiences have on their well-being and body image (Grunewald et al., 2021). Research is also needed that identifies protective factors, such as coping strategies that SMM use to mitigate the harmful effects of appearance discrimination (Breslow et al., 2020; Tran et al., 2020). It may be most beneficial to explore how SMM experience this phenomenon in specific contexts, such as dating apps, where physical appearance may be most salient (Green, 2014; Pachankis, 2020). I conducted this study with the aim of providing a more nuanced understanding of SMMs' experience on dating apps as a specific context for appearance-based discrimination, a significant risk factor for BD, which may further lead to eating disorders and other mental health concerns (e.g., Blashill et al., 2016; Yean et al., 2013). This knowledge may have important implications for research, psychotherapy, and community-based interventions.

CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY

This study used an experiential qualitative framework to learn how SMM experience and cope with appearance discrimination in their interactions on dating apps. Experiential qualitative research focuses on how individuals interpret, understand, and make sense of their lived experiences and perspectives, and views language as critical for understanding their unique realities (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This approach is well suited to qualitative research focusing on participants' narratives about their experiences, behaviors, and perceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2013), and directly aligns with my research question.

Reflexive thematic analysis (TA; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2022) was used to systematically code and analyze the data. Reflexive TA was the best choice for this project because it was an approach I was familiar with and felt most comfortable using; it offered a clearly delineated analytic process with room for flexibility to meet the needs of the project; it prioritizes reflexivity as an essential analytic resources, which I knew would be important given my relationship with the research topic; and it is suited for experiential qualitative research, which I had already identified as the theoretical framework for this study (Braun & Clarke, 2020). In the sections that follow, I discuss my adopted theoretical lens, reflexivity, participant recruitment procedures, data collection procedures, data analytic procedures, and methodological integrity.

Epistemological and Ontological Orientation

My approach to this study was informed by a contextualist epistemology and critical realist ontology. Contextualism posits the existence of multiple realities, and that all knowledge is provisional, context-dependent, and subjective (Madill et al.,

2000). It rejects the idea that any single method can arrive at the truth, and holds that knowledge is situated and cannot be invalidated by alternative findings (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Madill et al., 2000; Tebes, 2005). Critical realism holds that there are multiple perspectives on reality, all of which are valid, steeped in and mediated by cultural concepts, and "expressed in language" (Maxwell, 2012, p. 9). Such perspectives and mental states are considered part of the real world, even though it can only be partially accessed by the researcher (Madill et al., 2000; Maxwell, 2012). Reflexive TA is congruent with contextualism (Madill et al., 2000) and critical realism (Maxwell, 2012) because of their shared positioning within a "fully qualitative" paradigm, which is characterized by a focus on situated meaning, the existence of multiple realities or perspectives on reality, and the value of researcher subjectivity in the analytic process (Braun et al., 2019, p. 848).

I view each participants' description of their experiences, sense making, and coping behaviors as real and valid, and hold that their descriptions and use of language are grounded in their unique perspectives, beliefs, and social locations. I also acknowledge that my understanding and interpretation of participants' accounts is informed by my own cultural, historical, social, and personal contexts; thus, my analysis is inter-subjective, context-bound, situated, and positioned (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Participant Recruitment Procedures

This study received approval by the University of Kentucky Institutional Review Board for ethical research on October 1, 2021 (Protocol #72865 2019). Participants were recruited using convenience and snowball sampling, which are both common approaches in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). While it would

have made sense to recruit participants directly from dating apps, most platforms have

verbiage in their terms of service that explicitly prohibit unsolicited distribution of

surveys or requests for research participation. Instead, participants were recruited via

LGBTQ-specific Facebook groups, twitter, and Instagram over a 40-day period

(October 1, 2021, to November 7,

2021). I created a recruitment flyer via photoshop for this study that displayed the

topic, eligibility criteria, a QR code linked to an anonymous eligibility survey, and the

UK logo. This flyer, which was approved by the director of Research Communications

and IRB, can be found in Appendix B. Each advertisement was accompanied by an

active link to the eligibility survey.

      Many of the Facebook groups were private and required screening; where

applicable, I disclosed that I was seeking membership to advertise my study. After

being granted membership, I contacted an administrator or moderator to request their

written permission to advertise my study on their page. I provided IRB with a three-

page document containing screenshots of these conversations as proof that I was

reaching out to group administrators for approval. This document only included

screenshots of conversations that took place prior to IRB submission. Some

administrators never responded and additional groups were added midway through

participant recruitment. In cases where I was granted membership but never heard back

from an administrator, I posted my advertisement on the page but included a note

indicating who I contacted for approval.

      As recommended by my committee, I created a multi-tiered recruitment plan to

regulate the number of responses I received from prospective participants. This plan

can be found in Appendix C. Earlier tiers focused on cities/metropolitan areas with

greater racial and ethnic diversity, determined using population data published by the

U.S. Census Bureau (2011), to increase the likelihood of recruiting a racially diverse

sample of SMM. This proved more difficult in practice because some of these

Facebook groups were relatively inactive, and others were so active that my

recruitment flyer quickly got lost in the deluge of posts. Where permitted, I made

weekly posts to specific groups on specific days of the week and at specific times based

on my observations about when the flyer would receive the most attention. I also

expanded the number of groups on my recruitment list to include greater geographic

diversity and maximize the circulation of my flyer. These actions proved necessary to

adjust to the lack of response to my email invitations.

Prospective participants were invited to complete an anonymous eligibility

survey online via Qualtrics, which can be found in Appendix D. The first page included

information about informed consent and the eligibility criterion. After acknowledging

the informed consent, the prospective participant was asked to answer several questions

to help determine whether they were eligible to participate in the study. Individuals

deemed ineligible were redirected to the end of the survey. Individuals deemed eligible

were asked to provide their name, email, and demographic information. After

completing the survey, prospective participants were shown a message stating that I

would follow-up with them via email within 24 hours.

Prospective participants were deemed eligible for this study if they (a) were

between the ages of 18 and 35; (b) self-identified as a SMM; (c) self-reported past

experiences of appearance-based discrimination while using a dating app; and (d) self-

reported present or past dissatisfaction with their physical appearance. I based

decisions about eligibility criteria on the existing literature and on alignment with the

purpose of the research study. Given research indicating that SMM between the ages of 18-35 are significantly more likely to use dating apps (e.g., Badal et al., 2018), individuals outside of this age bracket were excluded from the present study. The decision to limit participation to individuals who endorsed past or present BD was based on evidence from the literature suggesting that such individuals may be more vulnerable to experiences of appearance discrimination (Miller, 2020). I reasoned that such individuals would be more likely to have lived experiences that were relevant to my research question and would be able to describe them in rich detail.

I used purposive sampling to select participants who could provide rich and detailed descriptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018) of appearance-based discrimination on dating apps. There were 43 individuals who completed the entire survey with responses that indicated they would be eligible to participate in the study. I contacted each person via email with an invitation to participate in the study and to schedule a 60–90-minute Zoom interview. This email included an attached PDF copy of the study consent form, which can be found in Appendix E. Prospective participants were asked to respond within 5 business days to prevent undue delay of the project and equal opportunity for others to participate.

Of the 43 individuals contacted via email, 15 responded and scheduled an interview with me via Zoom. There were 28 individuals who were invited but never enrolled: 2 declined after learning that no stipend would be offered for participation, 1 no-showed twice, 1 started the interview but ended after 10 minutes due to a poor connection and never rescheduled, and 24 never responded to the invitation. Early in the recruitment phase, I was informed by a prospective participant that my emails were sent to their spam folder and stumbled upon by chance. This was an unanticipated

barrier that may explain lack of response from some individuals that I contacted. After

the first week of recruitment, I amended the closing message of the Qualtrics eligibility

survey to include a statement encouraging individuals to check their spam and junk

folders.

Sample Size

In some qualitative approaches, researchers use the concept of saturation (i.e.,

information redundancy) to determine when participant recruitment and data collection

can conclude (Braun et al., 2019). This practice assumes that patterns of meaning are

apparent during data collection and independent of researcher subjectivity, which is

inconsistent with reflexive TA (Braun & Clarke, 2019; see also Braun & Clarke,

2021). There are no definitive rules about what constitutes an adequate sample size in

reflexive TA (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and it is often a pragmatic decision based on

time constraints, norms concerning best practices, editorial preferences, and what is

needed to adequately address the research question (Braun et al., 2019). After careful

review of the transcripts and generated codes, my faculty advisor and I determined that

14 interviews had generated enough quality data to sufficiently address the research

question.

Participants

The initial sample comprised 15 individuals who completed an individual

interview. One participant who did not identify as a SMM was removed from the

dataset, resulting in a final sample of ($N = 14$) participants between the ages of 26 and

35 ($M = 29$; $SD = 2.8$). The demographic information for these individuals can be

found in Table

1. Most participants self-identified as a cisgender man (85.7%; $N = 12$); one

participant self-identified as a transgender man (7.1%; $N = 1$) and another self-

identified as a cisgender man/two spirit/sipinq (7.1%; $N = 1$). Participants reported

their sexual identity as gay (64.2; $N = 9$), bisexual (14.2%; $N = 2$), bisexual/queer

(7.1%; $N = 1$), gay/queer (7.1%; $N = 1$), and bisexual/pansexual (7.1%; $N = 1$).

Participants reported their racial identity as follows: White (50%; $N = 7$);

Black/African American (28.5%; $N = 4$); AAPI/White (7.1%; $N = 1$); Hispanic/Latino

(7.1%; $N = 1$); and Alaska Native (7.1%; N

$= 1$).

Table 1, Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Racial Identity	Age	Gender Identity	Sexual Orientation	State
Luke	White	27	Cisgender Man	Gay	FL
Anton	Black	24	Cisgender Man	Bisexual	TN
Skylar	Black	31	Cisgender Man	Gay	OH
Blake	White	31	Cisgender Man	Gay	DE
Derek	White	26	Transgender Man	Bisexual & Pansexual	PA
Gavin	White	35	Cisgender Man	Gay	NC
Austin	AAPI & White	29	Cisgender Man	Gay	TX
Evan	Black	30	Cisgender Man	Gay & Queer	TX
Theodore	Black	29	Cisgender Man	Gay	PA
Patrick	White	29	Cisgender Man	Gay	KY
Hunter	Hispanic/Latino	29	Cisgender Man	Gay	MA
Jasper	Alaska Native	33	Cisgender Man & Two Spirit & Siping	Bisexual & Queer	AK
Tyler	White	28	Cisgender Man	Bisexual	WI
Emmett	White	31	Cisgender Man	Gay	KY

Interview Protocol Development

I determined early in the project planning phase that semi-structured in-depth

individual interviews would be the most suitable approach for developing a rich

understanding of how SMM experience and cope with appearance discrimination on

dating apps. My use of the verb *developing* as opposed to *acquiring* is intentional and

reflective of the theoretical paradigm that I described at the beginning of this chapter. I wanted an approach to data collection that would allow me to make contextual decisions in moments of confusion, lack of clarity, or sheer curiosity (Braun et al., 2019). It was also important to me that my participants were afforded this same flexibility to maximize their felt sense of safety, space to reflect and process, and agency to help guide the interview to places they felt were relevant or salient to articulating their experiences (Charmaz, 2014). This approach allowed the interviews to take on a more conversational tone, which from my perspective made it easier to establish a rapport with each participant and glean a more nuanced understanding of who they are and how they see

their world. Of course, this perspective and my understanding of their experiences – which you will read about in the coming chapters – are and will always be inter-subjective, context-bound, situated, and positioned (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

The interview questions developed for this study were based on my review of the existing empirical literature on body image, interpersonal discrimination, and coping (e.g., Bogart et al., 2017; Filice et al., 2019; Noyola et al., 2020; Watson et al., 2012). I pilot tested the interview protocol with three SMM who use dating apps and had experienced discrimination or negative encounters with other app users. The first individual was a former member of my research lab who has experience with conducting qualitative interviews for psychological research. The other two individuals were acquaintances of mine who agreed to be interviewed and provide verbal feedback. All three individuals provided helpful input on question phrasing, order, length, and utility, which I incorporated into revisions ahead of my proposal meeting. Members of my dissertation committee provided additional feedback during the

proposal meeting and in email correspondence that informed subsequent revisions to the protocol. The final version, which incorporated feedback from these sources, was approved by my faculty advisor and can be found in Appendix F.

I decided to open the interview with a question borrowed from Hook et al. (2013) which asked the participants to talk about aspects of their cultural background that they deemed central or important to their identity. As I hoped to speak with a diverse group of SMM, it felt paramount to get a deeper sense of how each person identified and consider how their experiences may have been shaped by intersecting identities and accompanying positions of privilege and marginalization. The next few questions centered around how the participants viewed and thought about their bodies, and their take on how this had shifted over the course of their lives. I felt that these questions would help me understand the value they placed on appearance, where and how it mattered, and the extent to which this was and continued to be shaped by experiences of appearance discrimination on dating apps.

These initial questions helped the participants get comfortable and ease into a focused reflective state as we moved toward specific questions about their lived experiences (Charmaz, 2014). The use of specific prompts related to context, thoughts, feelings, sense-making, and decision making were used intentionally to help me understand what was happening for the participant in those moments. I was very intentional about reflecting what I was hearing to the participants to ensure that I was understanding their meaning, which had the added benefits of strengthening rapport and prompting the participants to elaborate further, provide additional context, or make corrections to my understanding. Given the potential for emotional distress inherent in sharing about painful experiences, I included a series of wrap-up questions at the end

of the protocol that were intended to help ease the interview back to a lighter tone (Charmaz, 2014). These questions were helpful for catching additional details or context that the participants had not mentioned previously or for emphasizing key takeaways.

Data Collection Procedures

Prior to starting the interview, I reiterated the purpose of the research project and invited each participant to voice any questions or concerns. I then obtained verbal informed consent and administered the interview protocol. The interviews followed a semi-structured format with a duration of 60 to 90 minutes. This project was not funded; participants were informed that there would be no financial compensation offered in exchange for their participation in the study. At the end of each interview, I thanked the participant for volunteering their time and allowing me to sit with them in a deeply vulnerable and personal space. I reminded them that the study was being conducted in partial fulfillment of my doctoral degree, that it will likely be submitted for publication in the future, and that I would send them a digital copy of the completed dissertation manuscript via email.

Interviews were conducted online in October and November of 2021 using Zoom, a HIPAA-compliant video conferencing platform. Zoom has a built-in recording feature that allows users to save recordings of the meeting. It also has a feature that will generate a text-based transcript of the meeting. Interviews were audio recorded and downloaded to my personal computer. I was the only person who heard the audio recordings. After verifying the sound quality of the audio recordings, I generated text-based transcripts for the initial review. This process involved listening to the audio recording and correcting errors, omissions, and formatting issues. Audio files were

deleted when this process was completed, and the transcripts were uploaded to a secure Dropbox folder that could only be accessed by members of the research team.

Data Analysis

I used reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2022) to systematically code and analyze the data. Researchers are advised to use a single coder when using reflexive TA, but multiple coders can be used for "developing richer and more complex insights into the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 55). Given my limited perspective as a White cisgender man, extensive efforts were made to recruit a racially and sexually diverse coding team that could help me see beyond my blind spots and biases. This recruitment process entailed contacting multiple professors who run research labs that focus on qualitative methods, psychological research, and research with gender and sexual minorities to solicit undergraduate or graduate volunteers. I also reached out to my graduate student network and asked them to disseminate my recruitment flyer.

Unfortunately, it proved very difficult to find individuals who could take on another research commitment and diversify the research team. Two coders withdrew before the process began due to time constraints and a third withdrew during the first phase of the analytic process because of mental health concerns. After multiple meetings with my faculty advisor to troubleshoot, we decided to proceed with one coder in addition to myself. My faculty advisor identifies as a White bisexual cisgender woman and my coder identifies as a White gay transgender man.

The two-person coding team met for an initial orientation that included a review of the research question, theories, analytic process, and familiarization notes. When using reflexive TA, researchers write familiarization notes to capture thoughts,

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reactions, assumptions, early impressions of connections across interviews and to the existing literature, and notations about what data seem most relevant to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Terry et al., 2017). These notes are also a place for researchers to engage in reflexivity by reflecting on their cognitive and emotional processes, and how their identities, social locations, lived experiences, personal interest in the topic, and knowledge of the existing literature are influencing their initial interpretations of the data (Braun et al., 2019; Terry et al., 2017).

The coding team began the phase one of the analytic process by independently reading each transcript twice and writing familiarization notes. I found myself reflecting on how my thought process and reactions to specific data points had evolved since data collection; there were some important points that I had overlooked in prior readthroughs, and others that initially evoked strong personal reactions but became more contextualized upon reading the full data corpus. We met after the second read-through to process our personal reactions and early analytic impressions and agreed that we felt ready to proceed with code generation.

In phase two, we independently coded the transcripts over a six-week period. During this time, we met three times to reflexively process and to discuss our evolving codes. Both deductive and inductive approaches were used to systematically code each transcript (Terry et al., 2017), though a deductive approach was ultimately favored. A deductive approach was used to draw upon pre-existing theory (i.e., minority stress model, intraminority stress theory, transactional model of stress and coping) to explicate and contextualize participants' implicit meanings, and an inductive orientation was used to remain close to participants' language and explicit meaning. I conducted a second round of systematic coding in a different order to refresh my

perspective, add additional codes that I missed before, and ensure consistency across the transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2022). I then took some time to reflect on the analytic process, write additional familiarization notes, and review the literature on reflexive TA. After my faculty advisor conducted a close review of the transcripts and generated codes, we met to debrief, process my early impressions of the developing story, and discuss next steps.

In the third phase, I transferred the codes into an excel spreadsheet with their relevant quotes and began organizing them into clusters based on their similarity. This was a recursive process that involved frequently returning to the transcripts, refining the code labels, and developing my candidate themes. Once I felt confident that these themes addressed the research question and represented the data well, I sent the documents to my faculty advisor for review. We then met again to discuss the candidate themes and agreed that I was ready to proceed to the next analytic phase.

In the fourth phase, I compared the candidate themes against the coded data and the entire data set. I also started writing the manuscript during this phase upon my faculty advisor's recommendation. This phase helped me ascertain whether each theme was distinct enough to highlight something important about the data and contributed to a comprehensive story about the data set that speaks directly to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2022). As the writing progressed, my advisor and I discussed the categorical nature of my themes and whether this was consistent with reflexive TA (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2022).

In phase five, I developed names and a brief definition for each category and then contacted racial and gender diverse participants to ask for a member check. This quality assurance technique is often discouraged in reflexive TA – particularly when

using a combined semantic (i.e., explicit meaning) and latent coding (i.e., implicit meaning) approach – because "the analysis does not seek to [exclusively] capture participant perspectives" and may be unrecognizable to participants (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 278). However, the use of such techniques may be warranted when researchers are not a member of the group they are studying (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Given the racial homogeneity of my research team, I felt an ethical imperative to solicit feedback from participants with diverging identities to enrich my understanding and interpretation of their experiences, behaviors, and perceptions. I sought to remain paradigmatically consistent by conceptualizing this technique as "an additional source of information which enriches the analysis but is itself subject to critical reflection as much as the original data" (King & Brooks, 2018, p. 223). The final version of my categories, which incorporated feedback from one racial and gender diverse participant, was approved by my faculty advisor. This written manuscript represents the phase six of the analytic process. Of note, I followed reporting standards for qualitative research as outlined by Levitt et al. (2018) and Braun and Clark (2022).

Researcher Reflexivity

Qualitative researchers make countless decisions and interpretations throughout the research process that are influenced to varying degrees by their identities, social locations, personal opinions, biases, lived experiences, contexts, and relationships (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Due to widespread confusion, misapplication, and problematic assumptions about TA (see Braun & Clarke, 2020), I have conducted a thorough review of the literature to ensure that I am using the most recent guidance (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2022) on what constitutes rigorous and systematic reflexive TA. The strength and quality of analysis in reflexive TA is

measured by the extent to which the researcher has reflected upon and explicitly discussed how their identities, positioning, and lived experiences have shaped their theoretical decisions, procedures, and data analysis and interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2020). I will describe my reflexive process in this section.

Just like my participants, I am an imperfect human with my own unique story. I am both marginalized as a gay, single, endomorph-bodied, non-Christian, temporarily low SES, neurodivergent person and hold privilege as a White, post-secondary educated, currently able-bodied, cisgender man. I am also first-generation college student and currently in my sixth year of graduate school, which is a central part of my personal and professional context. In my capacity as a graduate student, I have two research publications (e.g., Rostosky et al., 2021; Riggle et al., 2021) that focused on LGBTQ+ well-being; one of these publications was a qualitative study that utilized reflexive TA (Braun & Clarke, 2006) as the analytic framework. I acknowledge that my familiarity with conducting qualitative using reflexive TA shaped the research question for the present study.

I also acknowledge that my motivation for conducting this study was heavily influenced by my lived experience with the research topic. I have a vivid recollection of the first time I experienced body dissatisfaction, down to the faded jeans and green sweatshirt that I was wearing that day. At fifteen, I had a cringeworthy fashion sense and was clueless when it came to skincare routines or hair styling. It was a chilly day in mid- October; the sun was out, and the leaves had started to change color. I recall heading to lunch after English – my favorite subject at the time – and sitting down to eat with a few classmates at a table close to the back wall. I was a loner and mainly sat with them because they would let me, but like many teenage boys we had a cutting

banter that could sometimes become cruel. The specifics of our conversation have faded away with time, but I will never forget hearing the words, "shut up Matt, you're fat." It was an off-the- cuff remark, delivered with laughter and quickly lost in the rowdy dynamic at the table. I know there was no malicious intent behind the words and that the person who said them would never intentionally hurt someone; I even laughed it off and delivered a few stinging remarks of my own. But I will never forget the uncomfortable lurch of my stomach, the hot wave of shame and embarrassment that washed over me, or the stunning realization that other people saw me as a fat person. I was never a thin kid growing up and would occasionally be teased by family members for my ravenous appetite, but this was the inflection point that sparked years of intense body dissatisfaction, body shame, weight cycling, and disordered eating behaviors.

Things became significantly worse for me when I left for college and discovered dating apps. I have used dating apps for approximately ten years, with some interruptions due to romantic relationships or voluntary technology breaks. I used to spend hours on dating apps every day, but now I only use them a few hours a week because I am busy. Despite my negative personal experiences and the aims of this project, I want to acknowledge that most of my interactions with other SMM on dating apps are positive. I think that dating apps are useful – and for rural or closeted SMM, necessary – platforms that can facilitate different types of connections and a sense of community. All my romantic relationships and some fantastic friendships started with a conversation online. With that said, I have experienced appearance discrimination, sexual objectification, bullying, ghosting, and more in some of my interactions with other SMM on apps. I have noticed that these negative interactions occurred more frequently, were crueler, and had a more significant impact during periods of my life

when I lived in a larger body, had more facial acne, and/or publicly disclosed my identity as a student in a profile description. Nonetheless, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge that I have never experienced appearance discrimination based on skin color, racial and ethnic identity, or gender presentation. Most of my own experiences have induced a mixture of anger, shame, embarrassment, sadness, and shock. Many of these interactions have led to alterations in how I think about myself and others, and they triggered numerous unhealthy behaviors that compromised my physical and psychological well-being.

As I became more involved with the gay community (virtually and in-person) and started disclosing some of my negative interactions with other SMM, I discovered that experiences like mine are common on dating apps. In fact, I have found that most SMM can either share a personal experience or know someone with a personal experience. It is hard to describe the mixture of relief, validation, and comradery that I have felt when talking about this phenomenon and the broader interpersonal dynamics among SMM. I have found that this topic is often treated as taboo and only found in anecdotal accounts, though there seems to be a shift happening within the community and more research on these topics has become available in recent years. I am hopeful that this project will be an important contribution to these conversations and the cultural shift that is occurring.

With that said, I want to acknowledge a few assumptions that shaped my approach to the present study. I used reflexive journaling throughout this project to reflect upon these assumptions and how they were shaping my decision-making processes and evolving understanding and interpretation of the data. I assumed that many SMM are exposed to a myriad of external and internal stressors that influence

how they view their bodies, that these stressors can lead to BD, and that SMM engage in a variety of coping mechanisms to mitigate the impact of these stressors. I assumed that some of these coping mechanisms unintentionally contribute to worsened body image and other adverse health outcomes. I assumed that appearance discrimination is one type of external stressor that SMM are exposed to in their daily lives and that this occurs in numerous contexts and situations, including dating apps. I also assumed that I would be able to recruit 12-15 SMM who have experienced appearance discrimination on dating apps, that this was a contributor to worsened body image, and that these individuals would be willing to talk in-depth about their experiences with me in an individual interview. I assumed that participants would be able to sufficiently describe their experiences with appearance discrimination on dating apps, how they made sense of these experiences, how they coped with these experiences, and the impact these experiences had on their body image and overall wellbeing.

I also assumed that there would be some variation in how participants understood the meaning of appearance discrimination and coping, but that their experiences would nonetheless be valid, relevant, and sufficiently described to answer the research question. I assumed that participants with identities and positionalities different from my own would feel comfortable enough with me to disclose painful experiences, and that what they chose to share would be important and directly relevant to the research question. Finally, I assumed that I would never be able to fully access or represent the totality of my participants' experiences due to our different subjectivities, identities, positionality, and lived experiences, but that my interpretation and representation of their experiences would be real, valid, and offer an important contribution to the empirical literature.

I have engaged in a lot of personal and professional healing to unlearn some of the messages I internalized because of my interactions on dating apps. This healing, while an ongoing endeavor, was a prerequisite for conducting this research study. I recognized the value in having lived experiences similar to my participants that could help me understand their contexts but also saw the dangers of over-identification, being retraumatized, or making unchecked assumptions about participants' meaning. I sought to avoid these pitfalls by engaging in self-care, asking participants to elaborate on their experiences, using reflexive journaling to document and reflect upon my reactions, and processing my evolving understanding, interpretation, and personal reactions with my research team during scheduled meetings.

When interviewing participants with identities and experiences different from mine, I found it helpful to reflect what I was hearing back to the participant. Sometimes this involved offering a tentative label (e.g., racial stereotyping, fetishism) for something that the participant implied or briefly touched upon. This is a technique used by therapists to check for understanding, encourage elaboration, and strengthen rapport. Participants seemed to respond positively to this approach; they were quick to correct me or offer clarification when they felt that I was missing the mark, and when my reflections were accurate, they expressed verbal (e.g., "Yeah, exactly!") and nonverbal (e.g., smiling, nodding) agreement. I also prioritized reflexive journaling and conversations with my research team during the analytic process to unpack factors (i.e., cultural background, context, positionality) that shaped my evolving understanding and interpretation of participants' experiences. While I reject the notion that I could ever completely understand, analyze, and describe another person's unique lived experience

with total accuracy, I felt that it was still important to get as close as possible so that my participants would feel understood and recognize their experiences in the written report.

I want to acknowledge the power differential that was present in each interview, given my titles (i.e., doctoral student, principal investigator, researcher), the situational context, and the privileges I hold as a White cisgender man (Helms, 1984). It also feels important to acknowledge that the field of psychology has an extensive history of perpetuating harm against marginalized groups – particularly the LGBTQ+ community and people of color – which may have turned away prospective participants and influenced how much information participants were willing to share with me. Sometimes it was difficult to find the right balance of professionalism and transparency when deciding how much personal information to disclose to participants; they varied in their curiosity about me, and I wanted to respect personal and ethical boundaries. However, I felt that it would be important to model the vulnerability I was seeking from my participants and communicate that our interview would be a safe space for them to disclose information at their level of comfort. I was also keenly aware of the fact that participants were generously volunteering their time for an unpaid interview with a stranger who looks like many of the psychologists who have perpetuated harm against marginalized communities. I generally opted for increased transparency about my own cultural background and relationship to the topic, and I am hopeful that this made participants feel more comfortable and willing to share their stories with me.

With that said, I was intentional about remaining within the boundaries of my role as a researcher during this process. During the few times that an interview

approached a more clinical tone, I found it helpful to validate what the participant was sharing and disclose some of my internal reactions before redirecting them back to the protocol. This approach had the dual benefit of strengthening rapport by expressing empathy and gently reminding the participant that the interview could not become a therapy session. I employed a similar approach in moments when an interview shifted temporarily into a more casual conversation. This typically occurred when I got curious about something a participant shared and we got off-topic or when they asked me about my experiences. Broadly, participants seemed to respond well to redirection and demonstrated sufficient understanding of the interview's purpose and scope.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I described my use of reflexive thematic analysis to learn how SMM experience and cope with appearance discrimination in their interactions on dating apps. My hope in conducting this study is to provide a more nuanced understanding of SMM's negative experience on dating apps and how these experiences can lead to BD, a significant risk factor for eating disorders and other mental health concerns (e.g., Blashill et al., 2016; Yean et al., 2013). In the next chapter, I will use an integrative approach that connects my analytic narrative with existing research.

CHAPTER THREE: FINDINGS

The mens' collective lived experiences of appearance discrimination on dating apps are organized into four categories (context, type, coping strategies, and reflections) that capture the systematic coding of the interviews. I generated these categories using a primarily deductive (with the exception of the appearance discrimination category, which leans inductive and semantic) version of reflexive thematic analysis (TA) to address the research question: How do sexual minority men experience and cope with appearance discrimination on dating apps?

The exclusion of frequencies from the presentation of findings is intentional. Quantifying is inconsistent with the foundational assumptions of qualitative methodology and "buys into a [quantitative] logic where more is better" rather than using the "interactive…subjective and situational" nature of individual interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 142) to understand patterns, commonalities, and distinctions in lived experience. The context of dating app use, the type of appearance discrimination, the coping strategies used, and the retrospective reflections and realization the men had about their experiences are discussed in relation to existing literature, although I save the overall summary, limitations, future directions, and practice implications for the final chapter.

The Context of App Use

Several contextual factors influenced how the men appraised and coped with appearance discrimination on dating apps. The contextual factors that were most relevant were past or present struggles with mental health, their intentions for using dating apps, and lived experience with minority stressors in their daily lives.

Mental Health

The men talked about past or present struggles with their mental health, which they felt made them vulnerable to experiences of appearance discrimination on apps. For instance, Emmett expressed a preference for meeting other SMM on dating apps because public venues like gay bars trigger his social anxiety. He explained: "I've struggled in the past with social anxiety, so in my mind, I'm thinking a normal person can go to a bar and meet someone. But I have to speak with them first [on an app]." Emmett's struggles with anxiety were often intensified by his negative experiences online, and because dating apps were his preferred way of meeting men, this was often unavoidable.

Unsurprisingly, disordered eating and body image concerns were the most discussed. Hunter talked about the heavy emphasis placed on aesthetic appearance in his native country – Brazil – and how he later dealt with appearance discrimination, sexual objectification, and racism within the predominantly White gay communities of California and Massachusetts. He explained that these experiences led to ongoing issues with body dysmorphia.

> In Brazil, the body, image, skin, fat – all these things are important…The expectation towards your body is always that you're skinny with a bubble ass and good skin… But coming here, I just became the immigrant Latino Brazilian – hypersexualized…I don't see myself as ugly; that's not the thing. But when I look in the mirror, I focus on those issues, and I don't see me as hot.

Hunter's narrative offers a compelling illustration of objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Wiseman & Moradi, 2010), which suggests that prolonged exposure to cultural appearance standards can cause a person to internalize those standards, engage in self-other comparison, and develop BD and eating concerns. Latino/as are often

stereotyped as hypersexual, exotic, and immigrants in U.S. society (Jiménez, 2007), and adoption of American beauty ideals can contribute to body image and eating concerns among racially and ethnically minoritized groups (Perez et al., 2016). That Hunter described objectification from society-at-large and within the gay community suggests the confluence of distinct stressors – intraminority stress and minority stress – that can have adverse impacts on mental health, particularly for SMM of color (Pachankis et al., 2020).

Intentions For App Use

The men spoke at length about their dating app use – more specifically, which apps they used and the types of connections they sought on each platform. This context was helpful for understanding how appearance discrimination manifests on apps and why SMM continue to use them despite the negative interactions they had with other users. The men identified a variety of reasons for using dating apps: hookups/casual sex- seeking, dating, friendships, conversation, drug-seeking, external validation (through hookups or exchanging nude pictures), and alleviation of boredom. In addition, Derek used dating apps to make connections with individuals from specific subgroups within the LGBTQ+ community: "OkCupid tends to have a larger proportion of polyamorous and kinky individuals…so it's easier to find people within that community when I'm looking for those kinds of connections."

Most men reported using multiple apps simultaneously; however, the type of connection they sought on specific platforms often corresponded with prevailing community norms (e.g., Grindr and Scruff for hookups, Bumble and Hinge for romantic relationships or friendships). Most men were flexible and open-ended in their choice of dating app depending on their goal at the moment. The mens' intentions were

often subject to change throughout the day depending on contextual factors such as mood or availability. For example, Gavin stated:

> I work a lot in the evening, so they'll [men on Grindr] message me then and typically more people are on. But they'll be looking for right now [a hookup] and I'm like, "Well, I'm at work. I'll save you and me time – I'm at work and I'm not looking." And they'll get shitty with me like, "Well, why are you online if you're not looking?" Sort of pressuring me to meet up.

While Gavin did not state his reason for using an app while working, it can be inferred from this interaction that he did not update his profile to accurately reflect his status and intentions – that is, working, intermittently available, and seeking casual conversation that could evolve to something more substantial. The other man's response suggests frustration with this discrepancy and an underlying belief that Grindr should only be used by those actively seeking casual sex. This example illustrates a paradox that frequently leads to frustration and conflict among some SMM app users. Although Grindr is commonly viewed within the community as a hookup app (Chan, 2018), sex-seeking is not a requirement and SMM use it for a variety of purposes.

Some users, such as the disgruntled man in this example, attempt to police the community and reinforce perceived dominant norms about how specific apps should be used (Jaspal, 2017). Perhaps as a result, SMM tend to be ambiguous or misleading in how they present their intentions on apps – if they do at all – and there is often a discrepancy between an individual's stated intentions and their actual behavior (Blackwell et al., 2015; Chan, 2018). This "mismatch" puts people like Gavin in a difficult position: while he might have avoided this interaction by updating his profile,

doing so could have drawn the ire of another man for seeking casual chatting on what many consider a hookup app. That is assuming, of course, that both men took the time to read his profile and believed it to be accurate.

Intentions for dating app use also seemed to vary according to the size of the mens' community (i.e., urban vs. rural). Patrick and Jasper – who grew up in Eastern Kentucky and Alaska, respectively – explained that in rural areas, there are often few men nearby and most will practice discretion to conceal their identity. Patrick suggested that many SMM will not exchange pictures of their faces on dating apps because they are "trying to hide from their families or their friends; they don't want them to know that they are participating in homosexual activities." As Jasper explained, the result is that apps are often used "almost exclusively for hookups…to meet men outside of the gay scene…[or] to meet people who are brand new to town." As rural communities tend to be more conservative and often lack LGBTQ+ resources, dating apps may be the only way for SMM to find community and potential partners (Lauckner et al., 2019). However, Jasper and Patrick's experiences suggest that one can login to a dating app with the intention of finding a specific type of connection and few opportunities. External factors beyond their control, such as a scarcity of nearby users, may help explain why some SMM modify their intentions for app use or choose to stop using dating apps.

In contrast, men living in metropolitan areas shared that dating apps contained a higher concentration of men from diverse cultural backgrounds. Evan talked about his experience on apps while living in Brooklyn: "The apps were how I would…get drugs, sex, and validation…and even though I had run-ins with racist White guys, there were just like way more Black and Latino 20- and 30-year-olds on apps than there are [in

Dallas]." The men believed that dating apps were designed to be used excessively, which may offer insight to why some SMM who experience appearance discrimination continue to use the apps. Evan drew from his professional background in digital advertising to offer an interesting perspective:

> I know that [apps are] designed to give you hits of dopamine. But it's addictive […] Any app is designed to draw you in and waste your time. And I also think for millennials and even more so for generation Z, when you grow up doing so much of your socializing on apps and the internet, it makes it so easy to slip into a digital addiction.

Evan touches on a couple of important points here. First, he notes that the emergence of more sophisticated technology within the last two decades has transformed social interaction and engagement with the gay community. This is particularly relevant to younger generations who have never experienced life without access to the internet or a smartphone; he believes that such individuals will naturally gravitate to online forms of communication, but that such habituation can make it harder to distinguish between normative and excessive use.

Second, Evan notes that dating apps are designed with human behavior and brain chemistry in mind to maximize user engagement. This could help explain why some men, like Anton, were willing to devote a significant amount of their free time for the simple chance of a positive interaction:

> It's weird, because there are moments where I just want to hear [affirmations] because I'm in a really low spot. I'll download Grindr and hookup with someone […] but then I'm doing all the unhealthy things that I didn't want to do before.

And so, I'm putting myself back into this place of allowing myself to be either

fetishized or rejected [...] And it's weird because the tradeoff isn't great. I go

through like 100 rejections before I get one person who's like actually into me,

and so I will pay more attention to those hundred rejections than the one person

that's like actually into me.

Although Anton knew that using dating apps came with exposure to appearance

discrimination, the need to feel affirmed via sexual gratification made him willing to

endure those negative aspects until he found a sexual partner. In the end, the

culmination of all those rejections wound up making him feel worse than he started –

even though he got the momentary reward. But like Evan noted, every new interaction

is like a hit of dopamine and the possibility of what could emerge from that

conversation can feel addicting – leading to greater frequency of app use. For other

men, experiences of appearance discrimination led them to reconsider how much time

they spent using dating apps, which specific apps they used, and the type of

connections they sought.

Past Experiences of Minority Stress

The men reported past experiences of discrimination, rejection, or violence that

later influenced how they experienced discrimination on dating apps. As Anton

described: "When I was in high school […] or middle school and stuff, I got pretty

bullied […] I would get called ugly like literally every single day." Anton later

elaborated that these experiences caused him to feel unattractive and to expect rejection

on dating apps because of his skin color or smaller frame.

Others acknowledged the role that internalized racism played in their

experiences and how they viewed their physical appearance. For example, Evan

described self- consciously comparing himself to other men on Grindr who embodied conventional (White) beauty standards:

> What if I was thinner? What if I had more muscles? […] Just the way people talk to me […] the validation of whether they say they like me or they don't […] I mean, honestly, I think I had internalized racism going on. Even though I am a proud Black man, there's just no way that I didn't have some of that going on.

These accounts are consistent with previous research findings that lived experience with minority stressors increases vulnerability to body dissatisfaction (BD; e.g., Kimmel & Mahalik, 2005) and, by extension, appearance discrimination. More specifically, the men appeared to experience alterations in their thought patterns and a greater sensitivity to rejection, which is also consistent with other findings about rejection sensitivity (Feinstein et al., 2012; Pachankis et al., 2015). Viewed through the lens of intraminority stress theory (Pachankis et al., 2020), these men appear to be experiencing additional stress that stems from not measuring up to hegemonic beauty standards within the gay community as a whole.

Hunter reflected on his experience with growing up in a Christian Protestant household that considered his sexual identity to be a manifestation of the devil:

> I've been through three exorcisms up until the age of 14. All three of them were in different churches – two here in America […] they really believed I had a demon in me […] It is a very difficult topic for my family. My dad actively tried to kill me once; he threatened me multiple times throughout the years.

While this example of minority stress is not directly about appearance discrimination, it illustrates the background or context of stigma and stigma-related stress that is already compromising some SMM's psychosocial health and well-being. Appearance-based discrimination from other SMM likely exacerbates pre-existing vulnerabilities.

Types of Appearance Discrimination

The men experienced several types of appearance discrimination in their private interactions with other men on dating apps. These experiences, which are categorized based on the specific physical attribute that was targeted, include discrimination based on body weight and shape, body hair, and race and skin color. Of note, this category is unique in that it was constructed using an inductive and semantic orientation to stay closer to the participants' language and meaning rather than rely on theory (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

Body Weight and Shape

The men reported receiving discriminatory messages about their weight or shape. Tyler said the following about his experience with appearance discrimination on OkCupid:

> We [Tyler and his partner] were messaging with this guy who was very attractive and seemed to be very sweet […] and right before we like went to leave we got a message saying something along the lines of like, "Lol I can't believe you think I would ever fuck you two cows. It would break the bed. The thought that anybody would ever have sex with you is disgusting." Like this viscerally horrid shit.

Body Hair

The men described experiences where they were discriminated against because of their body hair. Emmett recounted experiences of discrimination on Grindr after sending body pictures to a potential hookup partner:

His first response was, "gross" and his second response was, "If I wanted to fuck an animal, I would go find a dog," and then he blocked me. And I read that as, you know, the body hair – the fur.

Another man described a similar experience on Grindr from his teenage years that has stayed with him for over a decade: "This one guy was like, 'Oh, you're way too young to have that much hair. You should shave it off." (Luke)

Race and Skin Color

Men of color reported experiences of appearance discrimination based on skin color, which ranged from explicit rejection to racial stereotyping to fetishization. The men reported instances where they initiated a conversation and were immediately rejected with statements such as, "I'm only into White men" (Evan) or "Not into Asians – sorry." (Austin) Others reported that they intentionally excluded pictures and identifying information from their profiles but received similar responses immediately after exchanging pictures.

The men reported being subjected to racial stereotypes in conversations on dating apps. For example, Austin stated that other men are often surprised and excited by the length of his penis because it contradicts the racist stereotype about Asian men having small penises.

I've also had people be like, "Well, you're Asian, so where does the penis come from?" And I'd be like, "I'm half White and part of that's Italian and part of

that's Irish. I don't really know." And then they would be like, "It's the Italian sausage."

Austin reported that these types of interactions, which typically occurred on Grindr, made him realize the salience of race in others' view of him. Other men of color described experiencing similar remarks about their buttocks, muscularity, lips, and sexual position, which were situated within racialized assumptions about how they should look or behave. The men of color reported being regarded as exotic or as a sexual fetish, wherein White SMM would express interest in having sex with them specifically because they are a person of color. For example, Skylar reflected on two common types of messages that he has received on apps like Grindr:

> There would be times where people would say, "I've never been with a Black guy before" […] And then we have somebody who's like, "I love Black men. I absolutely love Black men." […] It's very much like we're a commodity. And I think that instills this generational trauma of we've always been commodities, at least in our interactions with White people. (Skylar)

Coping Strategies

This category illustrates how the men appraised and coped with experiences of appearance discrimination on dating apps. The coping strategies used by the men include avoidance, problem solving, confrontation, positive reappraisal, boundary setting, and social support seeking.

Avoidance

The men described efforts to escape, avoid, or suppress the negative thoughts and feelings associated with their experiences of appearance discrimination on apps.

The most common behavioral strategies identified by the men were sex-seeking and engaging in disordered eating behaviors such as binge-eating. As Theodore recalled:

> I threw my phone on my bed. Um…I sat there and just like replayed the situation in my head several times. And I lived across the street from a grocery store, so once I was able to collect myself um I went over there and just bought a bunch of stuff that I did not need to buy, like donuts, a lot of sweets, and a bunch of lunchables…and yeah, unfortunately, just like pigged out for a couple hours. And in those times, I would eat until I was uncomfortably full.

While he reported that binge eating helped take his mind off the incident for a brief time, he felt that it was not a helpful long-term coping strategy because it did not help him process his emotions or affirm his self-worth. Theodore's lived experience is consistent with evidence from a recent national survey of adult men in the United States that showed a positive correlation between experienced weight stigma and coping via binge eating (Himmelstein et al., 2019). While their study did not survey participants about coping self-efficacy, qualitative findings from the present study suggest that avoidance coping may be used because it offers an immediate (albeit temporary) escape from a distressing situation.

The men who used sex to avoid thinking about a negative experience specified that this was a strategy they used more frequently when they were younger. For instance, Blake described his mindset in his late teens and early twenties in the following way: "My immediate response was sex – and the faster I could get it, the better." The men recounted being so upset in the aftermath of a negative interaction that they expressed a willingness to engage in risky sexual behaviors. Among them was Luke, who recalled his efforts to negotiate with someone who had just rejected him on

Grindr: "Because if I'm too hairy, what if I allow you and your friend to have sex with me? Will that be better? Or like what can I do to push the envelope so that you will be interested?" Similar to binge-eating, the men who coped via sex-seeking seemed to be motivated by a desire to quickly escape from their distress. These findings support earlier research (e.g.,Calzavara et al, 2012; Martin & Alessi, 2010) on SMM's use of sex as a form of avoidance coping.

Problem-Solving

The men described their use of problem-focused coping strategies after experiencing appearance discrimination on dating apps. Luke and Emmett both recounted feeling self-conscious after receiving hurtful comments on Grindr about their body hair and shaved, taking direct action to conform to appearance standards. However, both men described shaving as a physically and emotionally painful experience and vowed to never use that strategy again.

> I remember one time shaving my entire chest and stomach and again feeling that shame afterwards, like…this sucks. And it feels terrible coming back in…the scratchiness of it and there would be razor bumps and everything. That was my senior year in high school when I did that and I'm like, "I'm never doing that again." (Luke)

The men sought to change their appearance via dieting and exercise. Among those was Evan, "I ended up, in some very unhealthy ways, dropping a ton of weight…I dropped so much weight so fast that my hair started falling out." Viewed through a theoretical lens (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Meyer, 2003), these men were subjected to a distal stressor (i.e., appearance-based discrimination) which they appraised as a threat to their self- esteem and chances for attracting a partner. After identifying the cause of the

problem – the 'unattractive' physical characteristics that elicited discrimination – they selected a problem-focused coping strategy (i.e., body change behaviors) that they believed would make them more aesthetically pleasing and prevent similar experiences of discrimination in the future.

Confrontation

The men described feeling angry or disrespected after experiencing appearance discrimination and chose to handle the situation by confronting the perpetrator. Theodore described his experiences with confronting men on Grindr who have discriminated against him because of his skin color:

In the beginning, when I would get these sorts of things, um I would be super offended and [say things] like, "I don't understand what you mean by that," and "I'm not a science experiment; you don't just try me and throw me away just to see how it is."

Theodore was able to express his anger and establish firm boundaries in these situations, but he shared that he rarely got a response back from the perpetrators. These situations were often difficult for the men to handle – particularly when they occurred frequently – because they could be emotionally draining and leave them feeling worse than before.

While most men who used confrontive coping reported that the perpetrator either blocked them or stopped responding, some experienced a positive outcome. For example, Tyler shared: "There were some people who were very apologetic and shit. I don't know; maybe I extended more grace than they deserved, but it felt like...okay, not everybody is a ghoul." These experiences were meaningful for Tyler because it affirmed his right to be treated with respect and stand up for himself. He also

discovered that some people were open to corrective feedback, despite his negative

beliefs and expectations about SMM who use dating apps. Another man described how

he confronted a younger man on Grindr who labeled him the 'daddy type:'

> I was like, "What the hell does that mean?" […] It made me feel…totally and
>
> utterly disgusting. […] I think that I was trying to get more information from
>
> him […] getting him to think fully through it and articulate why he might feel
>
> that way, and for me to sort of digest what he was saying. Because at that
>
> moment, I was not able to process it. (Emmett)

In this situation, Emmett used confrontive coping both to assert himself and gather

sufficient information so that he could process the encounter and move on – indicating

that confrontive coping can be helpful regardless of the perpetrator's response (Levy,

1993).

Positive Reappraisal

The men described coping via adopting a different perspective that changed

how they felt about the negative interaction. For example, Skylar talked about

recognizing the systems of oppression (i.e., racism, heterosexism, classism) inherent in

some of his experiences on dating apps: "I think really connecting with history gives

me that validation […] it's not something new […] and that takes the sting and hurt out

of it.

Like, okay, this is very tired." Others reported being able to move on from a hurtful

experience after they recognized that the perpetrator wanted them to express

discomfort. Theodore explained: "I was able to realize he gets the enjoyment because

he wants to be the master. He wants to see the person squirm and get uncomfortable

with those sorts of things." Patrick described reappraising his experience in a similar

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way, "I just think of them as like…I think that's their fetish, honestly, to get a rise out of somebody, attack them, call them names." These reappraisals helped the men separate themselves from discriminatory experiences – either by highlighting their own strength and resilience or by shifting the blame back on the perpetrator. These findings are aligned with recent research that identified positive reappraisal as instrumental in posttraumatic growth among gay men who experienced antigay stigma (Cárdenas et al., 2018).

Boundary Setting

The men described reaching a "tipping point" after enduring either a series of discriminatory messages from different men or one that was particularly hurtful. At this juncture, they appraised the situation as unamenable to change and opted to distance themselves emotionally from the harmful content. These men distanced themselves by disengaging from the conversation, blocking/unmatching with the perpetrator, or deleting dating apps from their phone. Hunter described his rationale for distancing in the following way: "I don't even respond anymore. I just block. There was a time that I tried to deal with it and actively educate […] nowadays, I just don't want to put the time to it." Tyler shared a similar perspective:

> I kind of realized that it was going to be a fucking fool's errand […] trying to figure out why it happened. This is not personal. I don't need to understand them. I'm just gonna set boundaries on this and move on.

The men who were able to set boundaries perceived that this strategy helped them to stop thinking about the negative experience and go about their daily activities without significant distraction. Externalizing, rather than internalizing, these negative experiences was also helpful in attaining self-acceptance rather than self-blame.

Social Support Seeking

Several men reported reaching out to their support systems after a negative interaction. Tyler explained, "I talked to my colleagues about it […] and had a conversation about like discrimination […] it ended up being a really meaningful and supportive thing." Alternatively, Jasper reflected that seeking social support was not always helpful for him because his friends did not join him in actively addressing the larger problem of how some SMM treat each other within the community and specifically on dating apps:

> A lot of [my friends] are totally willing and accepting of me talking about my problems, but when it comes to larger problems in the queer community, they don't do anything. If I need someone to talk to, they are there, but if it's anything more than that, it's not worth it to bring it up.

Research has long documented the psychological and social benefits of receiving social support from family, friends, and significant others (Cohen, 2004). These benefits may even be crucial for sexual minorities who are experiencing minority stressors (McConnell et al., 2018). The differing experiences among the men in the present study can likely be explained, at least in part, by their *perception* of social support – a known mediator in the relationship between experienced discrimination and mental health (Kondrat et al., 2018).

It is notable that none of the men discussed seeking support from within the community, despite Meyer's (2003) suggestion that minority coping may be an invaluable resource for mitigating the effects of stigma. Given that other SMM were the perpetrators in this specific context, it may be that the participants felt safer seeking support from individuals outside of the gay male community (Pachankis et al., 2020).

Reflections and Realizations

This subcategory explores a number of important realizations that the men made in relation to their experiences of appearance discrimination on dating apps. These reflections added a critical nuance that became important for understanding their lived experiences, and included realizations that appearance mattered more when they were younger, that their relationship with dating apps needed to change, and that the dynamic among SMM is problematic.

Appearance Mattered More When Younger

The men described how they placed more emphasis on physical appearance when they were in their late teens and early twenties. Blake described a younger version of himself:

> I was probably one of the worst gays you could meet. I was the kind that would sit there, and someone had to [come up] and talk to me. If he didn't fit inside this teeny tiny level that was about an inch big – nothing. I'd snub you and turn around. But I was really shy and quiet, so it was kind of really messed up that I had that mentality […] I was also very focused on [wearing clothes that were] very form fitting to show everything off. I had to ensure that I was keeping in decent shape so that when I got to the club and took my shirt off, I attracted the attention…because at that point, I was looking for all the wrong things.

Luke explained the importance of physical appearance among young SMM.

> When you're 17, you don't have much to go off; your body is a big part of it because that's all you have […] It has become less important as I've gotten older. Other things have become more important […] The only realm that I really think about [my body] is the realm of dating and sex.

Younger SMM, who are still developing an identity and working towards financial independence, have relatively few assets to leverage when seeking a partner – particularly if they hope to attract an older, more established man. Having an attractive physique, therefore, became a promising way to attract attention and validation. But this perspective shifted as the men got older and acquired some experience with dating:

> Maybe this is just a part of being older and going to a lot of therapy, but now I'm just really working on accepting my body as it is and not for how people view it
>
> or what social currency it buys me […] It's so clear, I think, on Grindr because the stakes are so high, because it's like…how men are proving that they have value is by being sexually desirable to other men. And the more attractive the men that are interested in [you], the more value [you] have. (Austin)

These excerpts highlight how proximity to hegemonic appearance standards are viewed as a form of capital – or currency, as Austin aptly described it – that some SMM use to their advantage as they compete with one another for sexual and romantic relationships (Pachankis et al., 2020).

Relationship With Apps Needs to Change

The men described reaching a point where they started to notice a shift in how they approached online dating. This shift was often predicated by a personal realization about themselves or the cyclical interpersonal patterns they had observed on dating apps over the course of several years. For example, Blake described coming to the realization that he will never be universally desired by other men: "It did take me a while, but I did eventually learn that [I'm not] everyone's type […] There's people out

there who will not talk to you, or they will treat you any kind of way." While the catalyst varied across participants, the changes in perspective and behavior that followed were remarkably similar: finding a way to accept that appearance discrimination is an inevitable consequence of using dating apps, utilizing adaptive coping skills to mitigate the effect of negative interactions, and redirecting their focus to things within their control.

Most often, taking control involved at least one hiatus from some or all dating apps. As Derek described: "I've been frustrated […] for a while and just like have stopped using all platforms as of recent. I'll probably go back on again because I think it's fun sometimes, [but] other times it's just detrimental to my mental health." Others, such as Jasper, made permanent changes to their relationship with dating apps:

> To just login and have nobody…you know, message 10 people in a day and hear back from none. Because I would go to gay events and meet no one. Get online
>
> and no one would talk to me. It was just a whole lot of me putting out energy and getting nothing back, and that made my depression worse. So, I just stopped using them because it was like what's the point?

Although appearance discrimination was clearly distressing for the men to experience, being ignored – and appraising the rejection as being the result of their appearance – had similar consequences for their mental health, even among those who did not endorse any pre-existing body image or mental health concerns. As a result, the men realized that they needed to change their relationship with dating apps and practice self- acceptance.

While this study focused specifically on appearance discrimination, it is worth noting that the men also reported positive interactions they had on dating apps. For example, Austin shared: "I met my current boyfriend on Grindr via a hookup so it's like…I really did figure out a lot more how to get authentic good relationships out of out of it." Another participant, Tyler, described his use of dating apps following a difficult breakup and how it led to a positive sexual experience:

And I've had a number of very affirming experiences, I think, especially like the week after my partner and I separated. I had my first like solo encounter with another cis man, and it was exactly what I needed. The person was incredibly sweet and supportive and lovely. And it was very much a clear thing like this was going to be one-time thing; it was very visceral and very…oriented towards sex, let's say, and still it was so meaningful.

Such findings are consistent with prior research (e.g., Miller, 2015b; Owens et al., 2021) indicating that some SMM do find dating apps useful and have positive feelings about their use of dating apps. Moreover, these findings suggest that some SMM may think dialectically about their experiences on dating apps, such that they may be able to identify the nuances within their varied experiences and arrive at a balanced perspective on the utility of using dating apps.

The Dynamic Among SMM is Problematic

In discussing what they learned from their negative experiences on dating apps, the men described their perceptions of what SMM value and how that informs their interpersonal interactions – both within and outside sexual contexts. The men felt that the aesthetic and behavioral expectations that SMM place upon each other negatively impacted their body image and overall well-being. For example, Evan described how

his formative interactions with other SMM ultimately led to a shift in his sexual identity:

> I consider myself a gay person, but like I also very much consider myself queer and separate from […] frankly, White/Eurocentric, upper-middle and upper-class gay culture…The conventions I'm bucking are concerns about masc vs. fem and concerns about class image […] There's very much a concern of like…even among men who are not wealthy, kind of almost appearing wealthy and appearing to have the nicer things in life.

Evan references the explicit and implicit social pressures that he experienced over time in his interactions with other SMM. As other men shared, these social pressures involved conforming to very rigid standards of appearance and behavior that were rooted in racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, and classism. The men who failed or were unable to conform often experienced feelings of exclusion, low self-worth, and explicit exclusion in the form of appearance discrimination. For Evan, nonconformity became an adaptive strategy to protect his own well-being and challenge the social pressures that he experienced within the community.

However, Jasper explained that it can be challenging for many people – especially multiply marginalized folks within the gay community – to challenge these social pressures.

> The gay natives who are most welcomed by the cliquey White gays, they got there by ignoring issues of racism or downplaying them and by not demanding racial accountability […] We're all pretty down low, so [the gay natives] do whatever they can to get above me so they're not on the bottom. It's a lot of

lateral violence to maintain positions of hierarchy […] The gay scene is

vicious and racist and does a lot of personal attacks.

Here Jasper is describing how exclusion of diversity operates within his local gay community. The individuals with the most positional privilege are White SMM who embody the conventional (White) beauty aesthetic; these individuals benefit from a White Supremacist culture and perpetuate racism by openly excluding people of color. Some Alaska Native SMM are tolerated (but not considered attractive) and granted a higher position within the hierarchy, but only if they help reinforce the system by shunning those who attempt to disrupt it. In this way, there is less of an incentive for multiply marginalized folks to challenge the status quo.

It is important to remember that status-based pressures are especially relevant in sexual and dating contexts where SMM are attempting to attract a partner (Greene et al., 2014; Pachankis et al., 2020). Viewed through the lens of intraminority stress theory (Pachankis et al., 2020), Evan and Jasper's experiences reflect the exclusion of diversity component of intraminority stress in that hegemonic appearance standards are perpetuated within the mainstream gay culture and particularly in sexual contexts.

The men used the term "meat market" to describe the environment on dating apps like Grindr, where they felt that the majority of men were attempting to present themselves as sexually desirable. Gavin described his perception of how SMM interact:

I think some of it is male competitiveness […] It's sort of all athletic, super

competitive people from early 20s to upper 30s. I feel like how it was when we

were younger…going out to a club, seeing who could get the hottest hookup for

the night. So, I think some of it is trying to one-up everyone else.

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These findings are consistent with research linking intrasexual competition cues to worsened body image and disordered eating attitudes among gay men (Li et al., 2010). When a SM man is presented with dozens of profiles depicting attractive men on a dating app, and relatively few of those people express interest in him, adverse psychological and physical health outcomes may follow.

CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION

In chapter 3, I discussed this study's findings in relation to the existing literature. This chapter will offer a more global summary that will include the current study's strengths, limitations, future research directions, and implications for psychotherapy.

Summary

Most of the existing literature has focused on weight stigma and coping in samples of White heterosexual cisgender women (Panza et al., 2020). Previous studies with samples of White women have found a relationship between experienced weight stigma and exercise avoidance (e.g., Himmelstein et al., 2018), binge eating, self-blame, disengagement (Puhl & Brownell, 2006), and experiential avoidance (Lillis et al., 2011) to name a few. Researchers in one study looked for race-based differences among women in coping with weight stigma and found that Black women were more likely to ignore the situation and White women tended to utilize positive self-statements and self-love (Fettich & Chen, 2012).

Research examining the experiences and coping responses of men - particularly those who hold multiple marginalized identities - is scarce and represents a significant limitation of the stigma and coping literature, as these individuals may be more prone to chronic stress and may utilize coping behaviors (e.g., disordered eating) that in and of themselves have adverse impacts on physical and psychological health (Breslow et al., 2020; Mason et al., 2019; Panza et al., 2020). Three studies have found a positive association between stigmatization and coping-motivated eating among SMM (Floyd & Bakeman, 2012; Katz-Wise et al., 2015; Puhl et al., 2019). Other scholars have suggested that SMM may use disordered weight and shape control behaviors (e.g., compulsive exercise, fasting) to cope with appearance-based stressors (Calzo et al.,

2015; Grunewald et al., 2021; Kimmel & Mahalik, 2005). More recent findings suggest that some SMM seek social support to manage these stressors (Filice et al., 2019).

Scholars have called for research that explores the relationship between gay community involvement and body image concerns among SMM (e.g., Convertino, Brady et al., 2021; Davids et al., 2015; Gonzalez & Blashill, 2021), particularly in appearance- focused contexts such as dating apps (Greene, 2014; Pachankis et al., 2020). Several scholars (e.g., Breslow et al., 2020; Tran et al., 2020) have called for research that identified protective factors, such as coping mechanisms, that SMM use to mitigate the harmful effects of appearance-based stressors while using dating apps. This study's focus on appearance-based discrimination in a sample of racially diverse SMM addressed this limitation and expanded the lens to include other aspects of appearance that may be relevant to SMM (Grunewald et al., 2020).

The present study contributes to a growing literature base that has documented the harmful effects of dating apps on body image for some SMM (Filice et al., 2019; Lauckner et al., 2019; Miller & Behm-Morawitz, 2020; Tran et al., 2020), with a unique focus on how SMM experience and cope with appearance-based discrimination in their private interactions with other men on dating apps. It is noteworthy that most of the experiences reported by the men in this study took place on Grindr, an app well-known for casual sex seeking. This finding is congruent with intraminority stress theory, which suggests that status-based pressures are amplified in sexual fields where men compete with one another for sexual opportunities (Pachankis et al., 2020).

This study's findings regarding discrimination based on race and skin tone are consistent with research on sexual racism, a term used to describe racism in romantic and sexual contexts (Callander et al., 2015). While my findings in this regard are not

novel, they bolster theory in demonstrating that many SMM of color experience unique stressors from within the community due to exclusion of diversity, fear of potential rejection based on their race and ethnicity, and exposure to racist sexual scripts that fetishize, objectify, and stereotype men of color (Han & Choi, 2018; Pachankis et al., 2020; Wade & Harper, 2020). Conversely, this study's findings regarding discrimination based on body hair offer a novel contribution to the literature. While prior research has found that minimal body hair is a dominant ideal among many SMM (e.g., Filiault et al., 2014; Martins et al., 2008), the extent to which SMM perpetuate this ideal in sexual and social contexts was unclear (Grunewald et al., 2021). Findings from this study suggest that this phenomenon does occur and can be a harmful stressor for some SMM.

This study's findings showed how appearance discrimination can evoke psychological distress in some SMM and lead to worsened body image. Findings suggest that discriminatory messages that the men received were rooted in hegemonic body ideals (White, mesomorphic, minimal body hair) that seek to exclude men with other marginalized identities or characteristics (men of color, gender-nonconforming folks, and men living in larger bodies). The men in this sample felt that certain contextual factors like intention for dating app use, mental health struggles, and lived experience with minority stressors, influenced their perceptions, experiences, and coping, which is consistent with theory in that contextual factors and lived experiences are thought to shape how individuals ultimately cope with stressors (Folkman and Lazarus, 1984). My findings also suggest that avoidance strategies were ultimately unhelpful, which is consistent with previous research that has examined how SMM cope with stigma more broadly (e.g., Sandfort et al., 2009). The men in this sample also identified a number of strategies such as positive reappraisal, social support seeking, boundary setting, and

problem-solving, that they indicated were helpful for coping with appearance

discrimination in this context.

Strengths

To my knowledge, this study was the first to examine how some SMM

experience and cope with appearance discrimination in their interactions on dating apps.

The findings can serve as a foundation for future research and be used to enhance

psychotherapeutic work with SMM. The decision to interview SMM with a lifetime

history of BD was an important strength of this study because these individuals were

best positioned to provide detailed accounts that were relevant to the topic and could be

used to answer the research question. As previously discussed, public health and safety

guidelines associated with the Covid-19 pandemic necessitated a virtual interview

format. This decision proved to be advantageous for recruiting a racially and

geographically diverse sample and increasing flexibility in scheduling interviews. I also

suspect that the virtual format may have incentivized some men to participate because

the camera only showed our heads and shoulders. Were these interviews conducted in-

person, body shape and size would have undoubtedly been an important stimulus value

that influenced the participants' level of comfort and what was shared or withheld.

This study was further strengthened by the use of an experiential qualitative

design, which allowed me to obtain a complex and nuanced understanding of how the

men perceived their lived experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The use of a semi-

structured interview format provided the flexibility to make contextual decisions, such

as asking follow-up questions and exploring topics that the men perceived as being

relevant to their experiences. This format was a crucial aspect of the research design that

greatly enhanced the depth and quality of the data and led to important insights that might have been overlooked in a more structured interview format.

Furthermore, the use of intraminority stress theory (Pachankis et al., 2020) proved to be helpful framework for understanding the unique stressors faced by SMM in the context of body image in sexual contexts such as dating apps. The transactional theory of stress and coping (Folkman and Lazarus, 1984) was also a helpful framework for ordering and conceptualizing the men's appraisal and coping processes after being exposed to appearance stigma in this context. It should be noted that my findings regarding boundary setting were not part of the theory but may be worth exploring in future research as a potential expansion of Lazarus and Folkman's work.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While the findings of this exploratory study contribute new knowledge about SMM experience of appearance discrimination on dating apps, the contributions of intraminority gay community stress remain limited. Future studies with more diverse samples are needed to build upon the findings discussed here and broaden our understanding. Enrollment in the study was limited to SMM between the ages of 18 and 35 who identified as cisgender and self-reported a lifetime history of BD and past experiences of appearance discrimination while using a dating app. Consequently, SMM who had relevant experiences but did not meet all the inclusion criteria or lacked the means to participate in a virtual interview were excluded and their experiences are not reflected in the study's findings. It is also worth noting that the sample skewed older; similar qualitative research with SMM in emerging adulthood (i.e., ages 18 to 26), middle adulthood (i.e., ages 36 to 55), and older adulthood (i.e., over age 56) is warranted.

Another key limitation of the present study is the lack of individuals in the sample who have never experienced BD or appearance discrimination on dating apps. For example, it is conceivable that men who emulate the hegemonic standard (i.e., White, gender conforming, mesomorphic) would report more positive and affirming interactions on dating apps and be satisfied with their physical appearance (Filice et al., 2019). The gay community is also comprised of subgroups (e.g., bears, otters, twinks) where different body compositions are valued, and members of such groups may be similarly satisfied with their physical appearance and value different body compositions (Joy & Numer, 2018). Future studies should aim to sample members of different subgroups to better understand their experiences on dating apps.

Researchers could build upon this study's findings by conducting focus groups with different age cohorts to explore self-perceptions of body image, prevailing experiences of appearance discrimination on dating apps (or in other social contexts), cognitive appraisal, and coping behaviors. It may also be interesting to follow different age cohorts of SMM who use dating apps and track their level of stress and psychological distress through daily diary studies. Quantitative research could build on current findings by examining associations among risk factors such as high levels of minority stress, patterns of dating app use, and body image. Given that the interview protocol may have led to a positive self-presentation bias, future research in this area may benefit from a more neutral examination of coping mechanisms for mitigating appearance stigma. Finally, most but not all of the experiences reported by the men in this study took place on Grindr. Future studies that explore how frequently discriminatory experiences occur on a variety of dating apps may increase our understanding of this phenomenon.

The absence of interview questions pertaining to interviewer-participant process may be another important study limitation. More specifically, it may have been helpful to know how the participants felt as they shared their experiences and the extent to which differences or similarities in interviewer-interviewee cultural background may have influenced responses. It is notable, for instance, that all seven men of color shared very personal details about their negative experiences of racism and colorism with a White interviewer. It would have been helpful to identify specific aspects about me or the interview process that influenced their level of comfort, as this knowledge could have informed my reflexive process, interpretation of the data, and implications for future research and clinical practice.

Finally, several of the men in this study reported being mental health clinicians and talked about the lack of awareness and training among their colleagues regarding body image and the culture on dating apps among SMM. Future research should explore clinician and supervisors' competency in addressing these issues, perceptions of graduate training on issues pertaining to sexual minorities, and how clinicians with extensive training and experience are conducting their work. Similar research from the client's perspective would also be helpful. For instance, qualitative researchers might seek to understand the experience of SMM therapy clients in addressing body image concerns and experiences of appearance discrimination. The current study draws attention to issues that are often neglected in therapy with SMM and that could be integrated into counselor training programs and continuing education seminars and workshops.

Implications for Psychotherapy

Research has found that 9.0 to 28.4% of men in the United States experience BD (Fallon et al., 2014), with evidence suggesting that SMM are more likely than

heterosexual men to experience BD (29% vs. 21%; Frederick & Essayli, 2016). These statistics, along with the qualitative findings discussed in the present study, suggest that many mental health clinicians are working with SMM who may be actively struggling with their body image and coping maladaptively. In this section, I will discuss recommendations for mental health clinicians that are based on the present study's findings and my own clinical experience in working with this population.

Findings from the present study suggest that clinicians should assess for exposure to distal stressors (including appearance discrimination and gay community stress) both in the client's daily life and specifically as they use mobile- or web-based dating apps. While many of the experiences that the men discussed occurred on sex-seeking apps like Grindr, the present findings suggest that equally harmful experiences can occur on any platform that enables private messaging between users. Clinicians should expand their assessment to include the client's use of social media more broadly and the amount of time they spend interacting with body-focused content.

The men in this study identified a number of coping strategies that helped them navigate experiences of appearance discrimination on dating apps. Among these were externalizing the problem (not taking discriminatory experiences personally and internalizing rejection), setting firm boundaries, taking breaks from dating apps when needed, confronting perpetrators, and seeking social support. Clinicians may find it helpful to introduce some of these strategies in therapy and encourage clients to find healthy, adaptive ways of coping with negative thoughts and emotions related to appearance discrimination and body image concerns.

Findings from the present study indicate that it may also be helpful for clinicians to assess the client's support system. Who does the client reach out to when they are

distressed, what kind of support is offered, and to what extent does social support typically alleviate their distress? Parents, friends, and significant others can exacerbate body image concerns (often unintentionally and with good intentions) through appearance-based teasing, diet- and food-related talk, and pressure to change their weight or shape on the basis of health (Ata et al., 2007). Clinicians can assist their clients with problematic social support networks by providing psychoeducation about diet culture and body liberation through a social justice lens (Kinavey & Cool, 2019) and using CBT- based interventions like assertiveness training (Speed et al., 2018).

In cases of insufficient support, as we saw with some men in the present study, it may be helpful to explore how the client typically asks for support from others. Clear expectations and direct communication are necessary when seeking social support, as they help both parties understand what type of support is needed and removes any ambiguity that could lead to failed bids for connection, resentment, and unresolved pain (Anders & Tucker, 2000). Clients without an existing social support network may benefit from more foundational interventions such as social skills training or values clarification. Clinicians should also be mindful of barriers that could interfere with a client's progress (e.g., poverty, living in a conservative rural area) and be prepared to assist them with circumventing these challenges by connecting them with ancillary services.

Finally, the findings from this study underscore the need to assess SMM clients' sense of belonging to and participation in the gay community. Existing research has demonstrated that gay men who are involved with the gay community are more likely to experience BD (Davids & Green, 2011) and disordered eating (Convertino, Brady et al., 2021), which may be mediated by exposure to gay community stressors regarding status,

sex, competition, and exclusion of diversity (Pachankis et al., 2020). Clinicians should explore how often and through what means (i.e., virtual or in-person) their SMM clients are engaging with the gay community. Does the client feel valued and included when they enter these spaces, and if not, what is their sense of the community? It would also be important to know if the client has experienced any pressure to conform to specific aesthetic or behavioral standards and what impact, if any, these pressures have had on their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Clinicians are advised to use evidence-based treatments that have demonstrated efficacy in the treatment of body image concerns. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is used to help clients change the function of negative thoughts and enhance interoceptive awareness. Mindfulness, a central component of ACT, may be helpful for SMM who have experienced internalized self-stigma (Chan & Leung, 2021) and interpersonal stigma (Lyons, 2016). Clinicians should also help SMM clients find healthy and supportive activities within the gay male community that de-emphasize appearance and status, such as book clubs, support groups, drag shows, mentoring opportunities, and social justice-related organizations. Such forms of positive community involvement can increase opportunities for social support and buffer the adverse impact of minority stressors (Meyer, 2003). Clinicians can also engage in systems-level change by partnering with local gay community leaders and other key stakeholders to develop educational campaigns, events, and initiatives, with the intent of challenging negative aspects of gay community "climates" (Pachankis et al., 2020), providing psychoeducation about the links between dating app use and psychological distress, and fostering greater appreciation and acceptance of diversity.

Conclusion

Experiences of appearance discrimination on dating apps is painful and stressful for SMM. These experiences may cause or exacerbate psychosocial distress and compromise health and well-being. Further research is needed to document the effects of appearance discrimination. Meanwhile, clinical practitioners and community leaders can help address the problem of appearance discrimination on dating apps by assessing, educating, and intervening.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: DEFINITION OF TERMS

Body Dissatisfaction
Body dissatisfaction (BD) can be defined as the negative self-appraisal of one's physical body and appearance, and it involves cognitive and affective processes that can influence the onset of body-change behaviors such as dieting, purging, and the use of diuretics (Bergeron & Tylka, 2007; Cash & Pruzinsky, 1990).

Coping
Coping refers to "cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage (reduce, minimize, master, or tolerate) the internal and external demands of the person-environment transaction that is appraised as taxing or exceeding the person's resources" (Folkman et al., 1986a, p. 572).

Men Who Have Sex with Men
Men who have sex with men (MSM) is a broad categorical term that is often used in research across disciplines to refer to SMM and/or those who do not self-identify as a sexual minority but nonetheless have had sexual encounters with other men (Rutledge et al., 2018). Public health researchers who study risky sexual behaviors use this term to recruit racially minoritized participants (e.g., Black and Latino men) who may be less likely to self-identify as a sexual minority (DeBlaere et al., 2010). This term will only be used when I reference studies that specifically use this term to describe their sample.

Physical Appearance-Based Discrimination
Physical appearance-based discrimination, referred to in the present study as appearance discrimination, is the unfair treatment of an individual based on inherent physical characteristics (e.g., skin color, height, nose shape); body weight, size, or shape; or manner of dress and grooming (Puhl & DePierre, 2012).

Stress
Stress refers to the "relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 19).

Stressors
Stressors refer to "events and conditions that cause change and that require that the individual adapt to the new situation or life circumstance" (Meyer, 2003, p. 675). To be consistent with Meyer's definition, I conceptualize appearance discrimination as one type of stressor that an individual can experience.

APPENDIX C: RECRUITMENT PLAN

Phase One
1. 215 Philly Black, Gay, Bi, Trans, and lesbians and the friends and family
2. LGBTQ of South Florida
3. LGBT Friends of Tampa/St Pete/Gulfport/Sarasota
4. New Mexico LGBTQIA Community
5. LGBT Bay Area Events
6. Seattle LGBTQ Community
7. LGBTQ Atlanta Georgia
8. Sioux Falls LGBT Community
9. LGBTQ Latino NJ & NY
10. Boston LGBT Events
11. LGBTQ+ of the DC Metro Area
12. LGBTQ+ Kentucky
13. Hawaii Big Island LGBT Group
14. Maryland LGBT Community Forum
15. Queer Ph.D. Network
16. MA & RI LGBTQ Community

Phase Two
1. Columbus LGBTQ+ Nightlife, Events, and Community
2. LGBTQ Community of Pittsburgh
3. Greensboro LGBT+ Community
4. Baltimore Gay - Maryland
5. Gay in Alabama
6. LGBT- In Connecticut
7. Tuscon LGBT and friends
8. LGBTQIA+ Nebraska
9. LGBT Central Arkansas Community
10. LGBTQA+ of the Carolinas
11. Philly LGBTQIA + Events
12. LGBT Nightlife - New Orleans
13. Kentucky LGBTQ
14. Mid Atlantic Region LGBTQ Events
15. New England Area LGBTQ+
16. LGBTQ+ AZ Vibes
17. AlberQueerque
18. LGBTQ+ Happenings Las Vegas

Phase Three
1. InterWaco-LGBTQ
2. The Official Nashville LGBT Social Club
3. LGBT Corpus Christi Texas

4. Magic Valley LGBTQ+
5. Delaware LGBTQ Social
6. Queer Chicago Community
7. Southern Kentucky LGBTQIA Community
8. Keep it LGBTQ+ - San Antonio Business Connection
9. Western Kentucky LGBTQ+ Community
10. Louisville LGBT Networking
11. Orlando LGBTQ Forum
12. Queer Happenings Alaska
13. New York LGBTQ Events and Nightlife
14. Topeka LGBTQ social group
15. Austin Queer Events
16. Casper Wyoming LGBTQ Community
17. Detroit's LGBT Promoter's Parties and Events!!!
18. Idaho Treature Valley LGBTQ+
19. Queer Wisconsin (LGBTQ+)
20. Minnesota LGBTQ+
21. LGBT of Houston
22. Houston Texas LGBT
23. Gay Miami and Fort Lauderdale

APPENDIX D: ELIGIBILITY SURVEY

Thank you for your interest in my dissertation study. I want to talk to adult sexual minority men (gay, bisexual) who have experienced appearance discrimination on a dating app. By appearance discrimination, I am referring to unfair treatment based on physical characteristics (e.g., height, nose shape, penis size); body weight, size, or shape; or manner of dress and grooming. I would like to hear about your experiences on dating apps, how they have impacted you, and how you coped with them.

This confidential survey will help determine if you are eligible to participate in a 1–2-hour individual interview over Zoom. If you are eligible, you will be asked to provide your contact information and answer some basic demographic questions.

Please answer the following questions to determine if this is the right study for you:

Are you between the ages of 18 and 35? (yes/no)
Have you ever experienced appearance discrimination while using a dating app? (yes/no)
Are you currently or have you ever been dissatisfied with your physical appearance? (yes/no)

Contact Information
What is your first name? What is your email address?

Demographic Questions
- Which of the following best describes your racial identity? (Check all that apply)
- African American/Black
- American Indian/Native American
- Arab American/Middle Eastern
- Asian American/Pacific Islander
- Hispanic/Latino
- White
- Not Listed (please specify)

Which of the following best describes your sexual orientation? (Check all that apply)
- Gay
- Bisexual
- Queer
- Questioning
- Heterosexual
- Not Listed (Please specify)

Which of the following best describes your gender identity?
- Agender
- Genderqueer or genderfluid
- Cisgender man
- Non-binary
- Questioning or unsure

- Trans Man
- Two-spirit
- Not listed (Please specify)

What state do you currently live in? How old are you?

Thank you for taking the time to answer these questions! If you are selected to participate in this study, I will reach out to you by email to discuss next steps. If you have any questions or comments, you can contact me at <u>mrichardson@uky.edu</u>

APPENDIX E: CONSENT FORM

KEY INFORMATION FOR SEXUAL MINORITY MEN'S LIVED EXPERIENCES OF COPING WITH APPEARANCE DISCRIMINATION

We are asking you to choose whether or not to volunteer for a research study about your experiences with appearance discrimination in your interactions with other men on dating apps. We are asking you because you have indicated that you are a sexual minority man between the ages of 18 and 35 who has experienced appearance discrimination while using a dating app and dissatisfaction with your physical appearance. This page is to give you key information to help you decide whether to participate in this interview. We have included detailed information after this page. Ask the research team questions. If you have questions later, the contact information for the research investigator in charge of the study is below.

WHAT IS THE STUDY ABOUT AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?
By doing this study, we hope to learn more about how you experienced, understood, and coped with appearance discrimination in your interactions with other men on dating apps. You will be asked questions about how you understand the meaning of appearance discrimination and coping, your experiences with appearance discrimination while using dating apps and how you coped with these experiences, and the feelings, thoughts, and perceptions underlying your experience. You will also be asked about aspects of your cultural background that are important to you, and how these aspects of your background may have shaped your experiences. Your participation in this research will last between sixty and ninety minutes. All interviews will be recorded by the principal investigator and be kept in a password protected folder that only he has access to.

WHAT ARE KEY REASONS YOU MIGHT CHOOSE TO VOLUNTEER FOR THIS STUDY?
You should participate in this study if you wish to tell us about your experiences with appearance discrimination in your interactions with other men on dating apps. You may find benefit from reflecting on this experience and sharing your story to better help us understand more about what it was like to cope with your experiences. Your interview may aid professional psychological service providers to better assist sexual minority men experiencing appearance discrimination in the future. For a complete description of benefits and/or rewards, refer to the Detailed Consent.

WHAT ARE KEY REASONS YOU MIGHT CHOOSE NOT TO VOLUNTEER FOR THIS STUDY?
You might choose not to volunteer for this study if personal time constraints may prevent you from scheduling and completing a sixty to ninety-minute interview over Zoom. You might also experience some discomfort with talking about your experiences with appearance discrimination, which may be another reason to choose not to volunteer. For a complete description of risks, refer to the Detailed Consent.

DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?
If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you really want to volunteer. You will not lose any services, benefits, or rights you would normally have if you choose not to volunteer.

WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS, SUGGESTIONS OR CONCERNS?
If you have questions, suggestions, or concerns regarding this study or you want to withdraw from the study, please contact Matthew Richardson of the University of Kentucky, Department of Education, School, and Counseling Psychology, via email at mrichardson@uky.edu. He is being supervised by Dr. Sharon Rostosky of the University of Kentucky, Department of Educational, School, and Counseling Psychology.

If you have any concerns or questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact staff in the University of Kentucky (UK) Office of Research Integrity (ORI) between the business hours of 8am and 5pm EST, Monday-Friday at 859-257-9428 or toll free at 1-866-400-9428.

DETAILED CONSENT:

ARE THERE REASONS WHY YOU WOULD NOT QUALIFY FOR THIS STUDY?
You should not take part in this study are if you are not between the ages of 18 and 35, do not identify as a sexual minority male, if you are not/have not been dissatisfied with your physical appearance, if you have not experienced appearance discrimination in a private interaction with another man on a dating app, or if you do not wish to talk about your experiences in an interview.

WHERE WILL THE STUDY TAKE PLACE AND WHAT IS THE TOTAL AMOUNT OF TIME INVOLVED?
The interview will be conducted using Zoom video conferencing software. You will need to participate in one interview that is expected to last between sixty to ninety minutes.

WHAT WILL YOU BE ASKED TO DO?
This interview protocol consists of questions about how you understand the meaning of appearance discrimination and coping, your experiences with appearance discrimination while using dating apps and how you coped with these experiences, and the feelings, thoughts, and perceptions underlying your experiences. You will also be asked about aspects of your cultural background that are important to you and how these aspects of your background shaped your experiences. We will ask you to provide as much detail as you possibly can, as it will likely be new information to better help us understand how sexual minority men experience and cope with appearance discrimination in the context of dating apps.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?
To our knowledge, there are no known risks to participating in this individual interview. You could possibly feel some discomfort answering questions related to your experiences with appearance discrimination while using dating apps or recalling how you coped with these

experiences. In addition to risks described in this consent, you may experience a previously unknown risk or side effect.

WILL YOU BENEFIT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?
We do not know if you will get any benefit from taking part in this study. However, some people have experienced relief or insight when getting to talk about their experiences with appearance discrimination while using dating apps. Additionally, if you take part in this study, information learned may help professional psychological service providers who work with sexual minority men who have experienced appearance discrimination.

IF YOU DON'T WANT TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY, ARE THERE OTHER CHOICES?
If you do not want to be in the study, there are no other choices except not to take part in the study.

WHAT WILL IT COST YOU TO PARTICIPATE?
There are no costs associated with taking part in this study.

WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION THAT YOU GIVE?
When we write about or share the results from the study, we will write about the combined information we receive from participants. We will keep your name and other identifying information private.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information, or what that information is. All individual interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. All audio files and interview transcriptions will be stored in a password protected file with all identifying information removed.
You should know that in some cases we may have to show your information to other people because you talk about harming yourself, harming another person, or if you disclose any child, elder, or dependent adult being abused.

To ensure the study is conducted properly, officials at the University of Kentucky may look at or copy pertinent portions of records that identify you.

We will make every effort to safeguard your data, but as with anything online, we cannot guarantee the security of data obtained via the Internet. Third-party applications used in this study may have Terms of Service and Privacy policies outside of the control of the University of Kentucky.

CAN YOU CHOOSE TO WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY EARLY?
You can choose to leave the study at any time. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in the study. If you choose to leave the study early, data collected until that point will remain in the study database and may not be removed.

The investigators conducting the study may need to remove you from the study. This may occur for several reasons. You may be removed from the study if you are not able to discuss in detail your experiences of appearance discrimination on dating apps and how you coped with

these experiences, or if we find that your participation in the study is more risk than benefit to you.

WILL YOU RECEIVE ANY REWARDS FOR TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?
You will not receive any rewards or payment for taking part in the study.

WHAT ELSE DO YOU NEED TO KNOW?
If you volunteer to take part in this study, you will be one of about 15 people to do so.

The principal investigator, Matthew Richardson, is conducting this dissertation research project to fulfill requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Counseling Psychology at the University of Kentucky. He is being guided in this research by Dr. Sharon Rostosky, who can be reached via email at srostosky@uky.edu. There may be other people on the research team assisting at different times during the study.

WILL YOUR INFORMATION BE USED FOR FUTURE RESEARCH?
Your information collected for this study will NOT be used or shared for future research studies, even if we remove the identifiable information such as your name or state of residence.

Warm-Up Questions
1. Could you tell me a bit about yourself?
2. What led you to agree to participate in this study?
3. There are several different aspects of one's cultural background that may be important to a person, including (but not limited to) race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, age, socioeconomic status, religion, disability or ability status, and body size and shape. Some things may be more central or important to one's identity as a person, whereas other things may be less central. What aspects of your cultural background are most central or important to you?
4. Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

Physical Appearance and Discrimination
1. Could you please describe your thoughts about your physical appearance?
   a. *If struggling:* What are some things that you <u>like</u> about your physical appearance?
   b. *If struggling:* What are some things that you <u>dislike</u> about your physical appearance?
2. How much does what you look like matter to you?
   a. *Restate to enhance depth of response.*
   b. *Follow-up:* How has this changed over time?
3. What does 'appearance discrimination' mean to you?
4. Please describe a specific interaction you had with another man on a dating app that had something to do with appearance discrimination. (Prompt for multiple specific interactions if time allows)
   a. *Follow-up:* Which dating app did this happen on? How often were you using this app at the time?
   b. *Follow-up:* What <u>thoughts</u> went through your mind during this interaction?
   c. *Follow-up:* How did you <u>feel</u> during this interaction?
   d. *If struggling:* If you had to pick an emotion or feeling word, what word(s) would best describe your experience?
   e. *If still struggling: Share screen and display an emotion wheel, repeat above.*
   f. *Follow-up:* Earlier you talked about aspects of your cultural background that are important to you. How did these [salient identities] shape your thoughts and feelings during this interaction?
5. How has [specific interaction] impacted your thoughts and feelings about your physical appearance?

Coping Questions
1. What does 'coping' mean to you?
2. Thinking back to [specific interaction], could you describe some of the ways you tried to cope with [participant's stated thoughts/feelings]?
   a. *If struggling:* How do you think another person would cope with [specific interaction]? Does that seem like your experience?
   b. *If still struggling:* Who or what did you turn to for support after [specific interaction]?

      c. *Follow-up:* What, if anything, led you to use [coping mechanism]?

      d. *Follow-up:* How did you feel after [coping mechanism]?

3. How helpful do you think [coping mechanism(s)] was for you?
4. How did [salient identities] shape the way(s) you coped with [specific interaction]?
5. Looking back, is there anything you would do differently if you could?

Wrap-Up Questions
1. What have you learned about yourself through your interactions with other men on dating apps?
2. What advice would you give to another gay man who has experienced appearance discrimination on a dating app?
3. Is there anything we haven't talked about today that you think would be helpful for me to know?
4. Do you have any questions for me?

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have sex with men. *Psychology & Sexuality*, *1*(1-2), 88–102.

https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2019.1684354

VITA

EDUCATION

2016 – 2018   MS in Counseling Psychology
Salem State University, Salem, MA
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2012 – 2016   BA in Psychology, Minor in Political Science
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PEER-REVIEWED PUBLICATIONS

Rostosky, S. S., Richardson, M. T., McCurry, S. K., & Riggle, E. D. B. (2022). LGBTQ individuals' lived experiences of hypervigilance. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity, 9*(3), 358–369. https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000474

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PEER-REVIEWED PRESENTATIONS

Ryser-Oatman, T., Richardson, M. T., McCurry, S., Rostosky, S., Riggle, E. D. B. (2020, accepted). *Finding the strength to heal: Sexual minority men's narratives about seeking psychological help for intimate partner violence.* Poster accepted for presentation at the 128th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association. Washington, DC.

Dschaak, Z. A., Hammer, J. H., Hargons, C. N., & Richardson, M. T. (2020, accepted). *Black collegians mental help seeking: Testing twelve top factors.* Poster accepted for presentation at the 128th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association. Washington, DC.

Richardson, M. T., Rostosky, S. S., Riggle, E. D. B., McCurry, S. (2019, August). *LGBTQ-identified individuals' lived experiences of hypervigilance.* Poster presented at the 127th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, Chicago, IL.

CLINICAL EXPERIENCE

2020 – Present Pre-Doctoral Intern
The Ohio State University's Counseling and Consultative Service, Columbus, OH

2021 – 2022   Advanced Practicum Student
Clarity Counseling, Lexington, KY

2020 – 2021   Advanced Practicum Student

Eastern State Hospital, Lexington, KY

2019 – 2020   Intermediate Practicum Student
Bluegrass Family Consultants, Lexington, KY

2018 – 2019   Beginning Practicum Student
University of Kentucky Counseling Center, Lexington, KY

2017 – 2018   Masters-Level Intern
Advocates Community Counseling, Marlborough, MA

WORK EXPERIENCE

2018 – 2022   Graduate Teaching Assistant
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2017 – 2018   Direct Care Worker
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2016 – 2017   Family Engagement Specialist
Spectrum Health Systems, Westborough, MA